

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Women were ill-prepared for their duties as social beings and imprisoned in a web of false expectations that would inevitably make them miserable. She wanted women to be transformed into rational and independent beings whose sense of worth came, not from their appearance, but from their inner perception of self-command and knowledge. Women had to be educated; their minds and bodies had to be trained. This would make them good companions, wives, mothers and citizens. Above all it would make them fully human, that is, beings ruled by reason and characterized by self-command

Her works contain many social and political proposals which range from a detailed outline of necessary changes in school curriculum to the suggestion that women be granted not only civil and political rights, but have elected representatives of their own. It argues that women should be taught skills so as to be able to support themselves and their children in widowhood, and never have to marry or remarry out of financial necessity. It seeks to reclaim midwifery for women, against the encroachment of men into this profession, and contends that women could be physicians just as well as nurses. It urges women to extend their interests to encompass politics and the concerns of the whole of humanity. It also contains advice on how to make marriages last. In Wollstonecraft's view, marriages ought to have friendship rather than physical attraction as their basis. Husbands and wives ought not, moreover, to be overly intimate and should maintain a degree of reserve towards each other.



Wollstonecraft wanted women to aspire to full citizenship, to be worthy of it, and this necessitated the development of reason. Rational women would perceive their real duties. They would forgo the world of mere appearances, the world of insatiable needs on which eighteenth-century society was based

She came to think that the tyranny of commercial wealth might be worse than that of rank and privilege.

Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society and then proceeds to redefine that position, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate its children and because they could be "companions" to their husbands rather than mere wives. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men

Wollstonecraft advocates educating children into the emerging middle-class ethos: self-discipline, honesty, frugality, and social contentment

While Wollstonecraft does call for equality between the sexes in particular areas of life, such as morality, she does not explicitly state that men and women are equal. What she does claim is that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. However, such claims of equality stand in contrast to her statements respecting the superiority of masculine strength and valor. Wollstonecraft famously and ambiguously writes: "Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex; but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God."

She condemned marriages of convenience together with late marriages: both fostered immorality in her view. Indeed, from her perspective, nearly every aspect of the prevailing culture had that consequence, for, in bringing girls up to be nothing but empty headed play-things, parents made for a morally bankrupt society. Such beings could never make dutiful mothers, as they took the horizon to be the eyes of the men they flirted with. The moral depravity of a society devoted to the acquisition of property and its conspicuous display rather than to the pursuit of reason and the protection of natural rights found the means of its reproduction in the family, she contended.

She argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She suggests that both men and women should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason.

Of the many disagreements between Price and Wollstonecraft, on the one hand, and Burke, on the other, one of the deepest was over their respective view of the nature of civil society and of political power in general. The two friends believed that government, the rule of law, and all human relations could be simplified, explicated, and rendered transparent, and both were convinced that this was the task ahead for all lovers of liberty. For Burke, on the contrary, civil society consisted of countless ineffable links between individuals. The latter's relationship to authority was for the most part no less ineffable; moreover, he believed sound political judgement to be the product of experience, and he cautioned prudence. To sweep away established practices and institutions and think of politics as a mere matter of administrating in accordance with a set of abstract rules or rights uninformed by the customs and culture, and hence the national character, of a people was, in his view, to demonstrate a crass disregard for the most obvious facts of human nature and history. Burke's argument led him to dwell on France's financial position in some detail, and he defended its royal family and its Church; he insisted, moreover, that it was already benefiting from a policy of gradual reform. The over-all effect he sought to achieve was to depict his opponent as theoretically confused, politically naive, generally misinformed, and, most damnable of all, his sermon on the *Love of our Country* with all its affirmation of feelings for humanity proved him to be unpatriotic. Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was the first of many replies. It is an interesting and rhetorically powerful work in its own right as well as a necessary introduction to the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It consists mostly of a sustained attack on Burke rather than a defence of the rights of man. This is partly because Wollstonecraft took for granted a Lockean conception of God-given rights discoverable by reason, except when the latter was warped by self-love. Wollstonecraft further believed that God made all things right and that the cause of all evil was man. In her view, Burke's *Reflections* showed its author to be blind to man-made poverty and injustice; this she attributed to his infatuation with rank, Queen Marie-Antoinette, and the English Constitution. Demonstrating her familiarity with Burke's other works and speeches, especially *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and the *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775), she also argued that he was inconsistent, if only because of the impossibility, as she saw it, of reconciling his sympathy for the American cause with his reaction to events in France. In this, Wollstonecraft was far from alone and many who had followed Burke's parliamentary career and heard his Speeches to the House of Commons were astonished by what they thought was a radical and inexplicable change of position.

That reason must rule supreme is a running theme of Wollstonecraft's works written prior to her sojourn in Revolutionary France and, all the more, prior to her travels through Scandinavia. It is stressed in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Other continuities between her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and the *Vindication* include her preference for an education conducted at home, and her insistence that girls and young women be made to acquire 'inner resources' so as to make them as psychologically independent as possible. The *Thoughts* also reveals Wollstonecraft's conviction that universal benevolence is the first virtue, as well as her faith in a providentially ordained universe. She enjoined her readers to prepare their children for 'the main business of our lives', namely, the acquisition of virtue, and, unsurprisingly given her own history, she urged parents to strengthen their children's characters so as to enhance their capacity to survive personal tragedies. Self-mastery was thus the aim of education and it was the duty of parents to ensure that their children received it

Wollstonecraft was very opposed to monarchical systems of government. She supported John Locke's theories of the social contract, which stated that humans have certain basic human rights (life, liberty, health and property) and that governments are only legitimate if they protect those rights

William Godwin, in his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, stated that "Her religion was, in reality, little allied to any system of forms... and her religion was almost entirely of her own creation" (quoted in Ferguson, 121). Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft viewed God as perfect and good, which equates to rational and wise. In her view, humanity is constantly attempting to improve itself to achieve a more God-like state. From this premise, she creates two arguments for equality. The first is that oppressed people (most notably the uneducated) are incapable of achieving complete perfection, and that society has a duty to provide the tools they need to improve themselves. The second argument is that society can not be perfect unless all its members are perfect, and is threatened by the immorality of the uneducated. Thus, assisting the oppressed is beneficial to everyone in society and true to God's wishes.

Wollstonecraft believed that all humans are essentially rational. She believed that the fully developed human (nearest to the perfection of God) learns to use reason to control or to channel his/her passions