

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Mary Wollstonecraft is best remembered as a moral and political philosopher. She was the second of seven children. Though her family was not wealthy and her education was haphazard, she read widely in the Bible, ancient philosophers, Shakespeare, and Milton. Wollstonecraft, with her sisters Eliza and Everina, ran a short-lived girls' school near London, where she developed many of her ideas about female education, summed up in her earliest work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786). After a brief, unhappy stint as a governess, she became a reviewer and translator for the critical journal, *Analytical Review*—an unusual role for a woman at the time—and through this work became acquainted with an intellectual circle including American revolutionary Thomas Paine, philosopher William Godwin, and poet William Blake. In 1790, she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as part of the pamphlet war sparked by Edmund Burke's [Reflections on the Revolution in France](#). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she wrote in six weeks in 1792, was a sequel of sorts. While living alone in revolutionary Paris, she had a relationship with an American entrepreneur, Gilbert Imlay, which resulted in the birth of her first daughter, Fanny. Imlay was unfaithful, and after moving back to England, a heartbroken Wollstonecraft attempted suicide twice. By 1797, however, she had found happiness with William Godwin; they were married in March, and in August, she gave birth to Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. Tragically, she died eleven days after her daughter's birth, at just thirty-eight years old.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wollstonecraft was strongly influenced by the eighteenth-century philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment, which celebrated the primacy of human reason and critiqued monarchy and tradition in favor of political liberty and progress. Wollstonecraft also had an avid interest in the French Revolution of 1789, which, in accordance with many Enlightenment principles, overthrew the monarchy and established a republic. She even lived in France from 1792–1795, enduring some of the worst of Paris's upheaval in the post-Revolutionary Reign of Terror while she wrote *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. Later, she wrote her two *Vindication* texts as part of the so-called pamphlet war following the Revolution, touched off by Edmund Burke's defense of tradition and critique of perceived excesses in his [Reflections on the Revolution in France](#). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, she critiqued Burke's support of aristocracy,

championing republican government and middle-class virtue. Finally, Wollstonecraft was not the only female writer to respond to Talleyrand-Périgord's report rejecting the importance of women's education; a French playwright named Olympe de Gouges wrote her own *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* in 1791, but was executed during the Reign of Terror a few years later.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft critiques the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—especially *Emile, or On Education* (1762), which inspired new educational approaches during the French Revolution—and John Milton, particularly his characterization of the biblical Eve, and hence of women in general, in [Paradise Lost](#) (1667). Some of Wollstonecraft's arguments about the dignity and potential of women were anticipated in the lesser-known treatise, *On Whether a Christian Woman Should Be Educated* (1648), by pioneering Dutch scholar Anna Maria van Schurman. Wollstonecraft also critiques the model of feminine virtue portrayed in Samuel Richardson's popular novel *Clarissa* (1748). Finally, though Jane Austen never names Wollstonecraft, readers have noted places, particularly in [Pride and Prejudice](#) (1813), where she appears to take up certain of Wollstonecraft's critiques of the education of both women and soldiers.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
- **When Written:** 1792
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1792
- **Literary Period:** Enlightenment
- **Genre:** Moral/political treatise, non-fiction

EXTRA CREDIT

Fictional Follow-Up. In the opening "Advertisement" of *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft mentions that she plans to write a second volume, focusing especially on "laws relative to women, and the consideration of their peculiar duties." Such a work was never published. However, her novel *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (published by William Godwin after her death) has been considered a "fictionalized sequel" of sorts.

Literary Legacy. Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Godwin Shelley, was the author of [Frankenstein](#).



PLOT SUMMARY

Mary Wollstonecraft writes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in response to French politician Talleyrand-Périgord's pamphlet on national education. Her argument is that if women are not "prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue." Wollstonecraft believes that the neglect of women's education has caused great misery. Women are taught that romance is the primary goal of their lives, and they are not encouraged to develop their reason or virtue.

In her critique of contemporary views of women's education, Wollstonecraft looks primarily at middle-class women and considers them first as "human creatures ... placed on this earth to unfold their faculties." She bases her argument on the belief that reason is what makes people human, that virtue is what distinguishes people from one another, and that virtue is attained through knowledge.

Wollstonecraft rejects the common argument that men and women should aim to acquire different virtues. She believes that although men and women generally have different duties in life, they should strive for identical virtues. But because women tend to be given a haphazard education, they are not given adequate opportunity to develop their reason and attain virtue. More often, they're taught to please men, preparing themselves for only a brief period of life—that is, courtship and early marriage. They aren't even prepared to build sustainable marriages or to care for their children effectively.

Because women are taught that pleasure is the overriding goal of their lives, they are never given the opportunity to struggle with adversity and thereby develop knowledge and virtue. Instead of learning to rely on reason, they're allowed to be driven by emotions and delicate sensibilities, which do not prepare women to be good wives and mothers. This neglectful education also leaves them especially vulnerable if widowed, or if seduced and "ruined" by a man—situations in which they are left without any means to support themselves financially.

Wollstonecraft specifically critiques several eighteenth-century writers on the subject of women's education. Her most detailed critique is of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argues that women only need to be educated inasmuch as it prepares them to serve men. She also dismisses Fordyce's sentimental sermons and Gregory's rules of decorum. She concludes that women have absorbed many of these oppressive standards because they haven't been taught to distinguish between reason and prevailing prejudices. She also addresses the importance of childhood impressions, the necessity of modesty for both sexes, and the distinction between external reputation and virtue.

Wollstonecraft sees duty—especially, for most women, the duties of motherhood and domestic life—as a vital building-

block for families and thus, ultimately, for society. Because society pressures women to care primarily about external beauty, they have no incentive to attend to the duties nature has given them, leading to unhappiness and malformed family bonds. Women deserve the protection of civil laws in order to support them in fulfilling their duties. They should also have the option of studying medicine, politics, and business in order to have more occupational doors open to them, allowing them to be of greater use to society at large.

Wollstonecraft concludes *A Vindication* with a proposal to establish free national schools for all children. Such schools—marked by strongly republican "jostlings of equality"—would focus on creating good citizens, nurturing the virtues that have taken root at home. She advocates coeducation at every stage, believing this will allow relations between the sexes to develop in more natural and healthy ways. Educating girls in such schools will not distract them from domestic duties; rather, it will awaken their minds and prepare them all the better to fulfill their duties, caring for their families based on reason and virtue rather than ill-informed prejudice and unruly feelings.

Finally, Wollstonecraft calls for a "revolution" for women, reiterating that their subordinate status is due to men's prejudices and not to any inherent weakness. This will be proven once women are free to develop their understanding and affections. As women are released from ignorance, they will enjoy greater independence befitting rational creatures with human souls, and society as a whole will only benefit.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mary Wollstonecraft – Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was a moral and political philosopher who also wrote novels, educational treatises, and reflections on the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft supported Enlightenment principles, a republican form of government, and women's rights. She wrote *A Vindication* in reply to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's own report on education, and throughout the work, she critiques other writers on women's education, including Rousseau, Gregory, and Fordyce.

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord – Talleyrand-Périgord (1754-1838) was a longstanding French diplomat and politician. In 1791, he submitted his *Rapport sur l'instruction publique* (Report on Public Education) to the French National Assembly as part of the process of revising the French constitution. The report only addresses public education for men; it recommends private (home) education as sufficient for women. Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in response and dedicated the work to Talleyrand-

Périgord.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – Rousseau (1712-1778) was a prominent Enlightenment philosopher whose writings influenced the French Revolution and had a longstanding impact on political thought in general, as well as modern views of human nature. His 1762 treatise, *Emile, or On Education*, shaped national education in France. Wollstonecraft interacts with this work throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, criticizing Rousseau's views on the subservience of women.

Dr. John Gregory – Gregory (1724-1773) was a Scottish Enlightenment physician and moralist. His book *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774) was written in honor of his late wife and was only intended for family use, but his son published the work after Gregory's death, and it became a bestseller in Britain and America. Wollstonecraft criticizes some of Gregory's positions on women's education and women's interactions with men.

James Fordyce – Fordyce (1720-1796) was a Scottish Presbyterian minister who was popular in London in the 1760s and 1770s, known especially for his rhetorical skill and emphasis on topics relevant to daily life. He is best known for the sermon collection published in 1766 as *Sermons for Young Women*, which Wollstonecraft scathingly attacks in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

MINOR CHARACTERS

John Milton – Milton (1608-1674) was an English poet best known for the epic *Paradise Lost* (1667). Wollstonecraft criticizes Milton's characterization of Eve in the poem and its implications about women in general.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



EDUCATION AND VIRTUE

In the late eighteenth-century treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft agrees with some of her contemporaries that women do not seem to attain the same level of virtue as their male counterparts. However, she determines that this deficit is not due to some inherent weakness in women, but rather to the inadequate system of education that most middle-class English girls are subjected to. Wollstonecraft argues that women are typically only taught to attract husbands, with the result that their mental and moral faculties are never fully developed—an

injustice that will only be rectified if girls are educated according to the same system and toward the same goals as boys.

Wollstonecraft demonstrates that insofar as women are educated at all, they are mostly taught to value maintaining beauty and securing a man's love above all else. These superficial goals have harmful consequences for women's minds; they are not trained to provide for themselves or to be resourceful. Wollstonecraft writes: "The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the **flowers** which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty." This "barren blooming" can be attributed, in part, to "a false system of education," due to which "the civilized women of the present century ... are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect." In other words, women are taught to care only about finding husbands, so it's no surprise that they don't earn any other kind of respect.

Because girls tend to "learn ... by snatches," and learning is secondary to external beauty in their upbringings, "they do not pursue any one branch with that persevering ardor necessary to give vigor to the faculties, and clearness to the judgment." That is, girls' education is never sufficiently deep to allow for mastery of subjects, or even the maturation of natural intellectual abilities.

Because of this inadequate education, women tend to stagnate, both intellectually and morally, early in life. Wollstonecraft argues that when marriage is the only option available to women for elevating themselves in the world, and they've only prepared themselves for securing a suitable marriage, it shouldn't be surprising that they act like children after marriage. And how, she wonders, can such an immature woman "be expected to govern a family with judgment?" Youth is a brief part of a woman's life, and once it has passed, many women discover that no "provision [has been] made for the more important years of life, when reflection takes place of sensation." At best, then, married women's lives become occupied with frivolous trifles, and at worst, some become mistresses, having only been taught the art of pleasing men.

The solution to this infantilizing and morally debilitating state of affairs, according to Wollstonecraft, is to develop higher aims for women's education. Women should be educated in such a way that they're able to develop enduring virtues and make their own judgments. Wollstonecraft claims that there is a common error of viewing education for both sexes as "only a preparation for life" and not as "the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection." In other words, education shouldn't just be concerned with one's employment or station in life, but with training one's soul with an eye toward eternity.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft argues that a large part of

training in virtue is having opportunities to struggle with adversity oneself. When girls are insulated from such challenges (and instead encouraged to make pleasure the primary occupation and goal of life), they never develop these capacities. Thus, little can be expected of them in later life.

Unless virtue is conditioned on sex—a notion Wollstonecraft dismisses as ridiculous—then girls should be educated according to the same foundational principles as boys. The “grand end” of women’s fulfillment of moral duties should be “to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue,” just as it is for men.

Wollstonecraft observes that women are often mocked for their limited capacities and poor choices, but that these sorry circumstances are often the results of inadequate early training. “Rendered gay and giddy by the whole tenor of their lives, the very aspect of wisdom, or the severe graces of virtue” hold little natural appeal for women who’ve been brought up this way. Wollstonecraft adds: “[T]ill women are led to exercise their understandings, they should not be satirized for their attachment to rakes [womanizing men]...when it appears to be the inevitable consequence of their education.” This claim leads into the *Vindication’s* next major theme, which directly concerns relations between men and women.



GENDER AND MARRIAGE

Throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft is often concerned with unequal relationships between men and women, including in marriage. Though she doesn’t ignore questions surrounding male virtue, she devotes more attention to the inadequate moral training which, she believes, leaves women ill-prepared to find worthy husbands and to build enduring marriages and families. What’s more, she argues that these weak families and unhappy marriages are in fact destructive for society as a whole.

Women are encouraged to make a virtue of weakness and use this as a power play to attract men—thereby establishing patterns that serve women poorly throughout their lives. Wollstonecraft notes that women are socialized to boast of their weakness in order to make themselves more appealing to suitors, writing: “Virtue is sacrificed to temporary gratifications, and the respectability of life to the triumph of an hour.” This custom has a negative effect on society as a whole, because it creates lifelong patterns of elevating gratification and romantic conquest over relationships founded on mutual respect.

Even if females *are* naturally weaker than males, Wollstonecraft argues, that doesn’t mean they should be allowed to become even weaker than nature intended. She critiques middle-class practices whereby girls aren’t allowed to play freely, but are instead weakened from a young age through sedentary indoor play. “How,” she asks, “can she be a good wife or mother, the

greater part of whose time is employed to guard against or endure sickness?” Sheltered girls, in other words, become sheltered and ineffectual women.

What’s more, if girls are taught to be preoccupied with physical beauty from a young age, it’s no surprise that they will be preoccupied with frivolous, external concerns as adults. Wollstonecraft writes: “Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming around its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.”

Wollstonecraft goes on to claim that not only does typical girls’ education have limited utility in later life, but it also sets them up for unhappiness in the marriages they’ve attained through such questionable means. That is, inadequate education makes women vulnerable if anything goes wrong in marriage, especially after the early passion of marriage fades.

Based on the principles instilled into women all their lives, it makes sense that many women agree to marry immoral men who know how to present themselves attractively—after all, they’ve been primed to fall for a sentimental picture of “bravery prostrate to beauty,” without much regard for internal virtues. Even if a woman is fortunate enough to secure a virtuous husband, a woman who’s never been taught to fend for herself is highly vulnerable if she’s left a widow and must act on behalf of dependent children as well; she’s easy prey to suitors who might take advantage of her.

In most marriages, youthful passion eventually gives way to more prosaic domestic life, but women who’ve been brought up to prize romance are unprepared for this eventuality, finding themselves unhappy well before middle age. Wollstonecraft points out that “were women more rationally educated, could they take a more comprehensive view of things, they would be contented to love but once in their lives; and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship.”

To guard against such potentially weak, unhappy, and even disastrous marriages, women should be prepared to be the lifelong companions of their husbands, not merely their lovers. Wollstonecraft argues that a virtuous man won’t be won through mere affectation. And “besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practicing various virtues, become the friend, and not merely the humble dependent of her husband.” All such “exercise” should be undertaken from earliest girlhood, preparing a woman not only to be a good wife, but a valuable contributor to her society as well.

In short, even if women have different duties than men do—Wollstonecraft never rejects the primacy of motherhood and domestic duties for most women—fundamentally “they are human duties, and the principles that regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same.” In other words, as she emphasizes elsewhere in *Vindication*, virtue isn’t reserved for men alone, and the earlier girls are trained in universal

virtues, the happier their future marriages are likely to be. And, in turn, the more useful these women will be in broader society, no matter their marital status.

In response to charges that she wished to overturn social order by undermining gender distinctions, Wollstonecraft responds that there should be no fear of social order being inverted by the education of women. After all, if women really *aren't* capable of attaining the same degree of virtue as men are, that will quickly become clear to everyone; there should be no risk in simply testing their mettle. And if they *do* prove themselves capable, both women and men—and society as a whole—have everything to gain from the more equal gender relations, happier marriages, and healthier families that will result.



THE PRIMACY OF REASON

Throughout her treatise, Wollstonecraft takes on caricatures of women that portray them as concerned only with trivial, external matters and therefore as unsuited to higher intellectual pursuits. To rebut this, she turns these common appraisals of women around, claiming instead that women generally aren't given the chance to develop their reason, but have traditionally been allowed to let their emotions master them—thereby limiting their appetite and capacity for anything but trivialities. Wollstonecraft argues that women, as rational creatures made in the image of God, must develop their reason in order to properly regulate their emotions and, ultimately, to become virtuous.

Education, Wollstonecraft states, is for the sake of elevating oneself as a human being. To this end, women as well as men should be encouraged to develop virtues, which are common to both sexes. Reason is what elevates humanity over animals, and virtue is what elevates one human being over another. However, Wollstonecraft argues, “women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue.” In fact, she notes that among women, superficial qualities like elegance and “chastity”—really just an obsession with external propriety—have become confused with genuine virtues.

“Many have argued that men and women should aim at different virtues,” Wollstonecraft says, but if we assume that women—created in the image of God—possess souls just as men do, then we must acknowledge that “there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead mankind to either virtue or happiness.” That is, women should develop their God-given capacity for reason toward the attainment of virtue, just like their male counterparts. There is no such thing as “male virtue” or “female virtue,” and any form of education that claims otherwise is inherently defective.

One of the chief obstacles in women's moral training is that they're taught to rely on sentiment and feeling instead of developing their reason. Wollstonecraft therefore seeks to

“address the head [rather] than the heart,” even though this is commonly considered to be “high treason against sentiment and fine feelings.” Wollstonecraft argues that women must be trained to “strengthen our minds by reflection, till our heads become a balance for our hearts.” If women are allowed to waste their minds on “the petty occurrences of the day” or “acquaintance with our lovers' or husbands' hearts,” then they will never develop the mental faculties necessary for higher virtues. They will be led by their emotions, to the detriment of their own moral development and the unhappiness of those around them. Instead, she asserts, the “practice of every duty [should] be subordinate to the grand one of improving our minds, and preparing our affections for a more exalted state!” All of life should be geared toward training the soul, in other words, but preoccupation with their feelings shortchanges women of this higher aim.

For an example of the ways that women are encouraged to wallow in emotion at the expense of reason, Wollstonecraft critiques popular reading material, especially sentimental novels, writing: “[C]onfined to trifling employments, [women] naturally imbibe opinions which the only kind of reading calculated to interest an innocent frivolous mind, inspires...is it surprising that they find the reading of history a very dry task, and disquisitions addressed to the understanding intolerably tedious?” That is, if women aren't given the opportunity to develop a taste for mental exercise, it's only to be expected that they will reject material that's aimed at the mind instead of the heart.

To ensure that girls receive the same training in reason and virtue that boys do, Wollstonecraft proposes that girls should receive the same vigorously intellectual education. In order for women to regulate their hearts according to reason, their understanding must be trained—“their lively senses will ever be at work to harden their hearts, and the emotions struck out of them will continue to be vivid and transitory, unless a proper education store their mind with knowledge.” In other words, if women don't have good raw material to work with in order to strengthen their minds, they will continually fall back upon simplistic emotions in order to make sense of the world.

Anticipating the criticism that through such education Wollstonecraft seeks to instill “masculine virtues” in young women, she argues that “it is not the enchantment of literary pursuits, or the steady investigation of scientific subjects, that leads women astray from duty. No, it is indolence, and vanity,” which are problems of unregulated emotion. She doesn't desire to make women more like men, but rather to promote more well-rounded human beings in general.

Wollstonecraft doesn't argue that emotion has no role in well-rounded people, but that until it's brought into harmony with reason, it will inevitably stunt understanding and moral development. To her, this is the main deficiency not just of education, but of the values encouraged for women throughout

their lives. These values consign women to narrow, sentimental concerns, and Wollstonecraft argues that a new emphasis on reason is necessary in order for women to claim their birthright as rational creatures inherently equal to men.



WOMEN'S ROLES IN SOCIETY

Wollstonecraft laments that, while men are generally prepared for professions, women “have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties,” and, in fact, they are encouraged throughout their lives to be “ever anxious about secondary things...instead of being occupied by duties.” Even those duties which society views as inherently feminine—like motherhood—suffer as a result of this attitude. To remedy this societal malaise, Wollstonecraft argues that women must be oriented toward meaningful things throughout their lives. This will let them acquire virtues suited to the rigors of motherhood, and even be educated for the sake of their own financial security and the overall betterment of society.

Motherhood, which Wollstonecraft argues is the calling of a majority of women, requires maturity. Maturity doesn't come naturally, but must instead be cultivated through continual attention to virtue and duty, which most middle-class women are unprepared for. Fulfilling domestic duties requires resolution and perseverance, not just untamed emotions. Generally speaking, however, “women of sensibility are the most unfit” for the task of shaping a child's character, because ever since their own infancy they've been allowed to be led by their own feelings and sensations. Wollstonecraft also argues that, by refusing to nurse their babies themselves, many middle-class women bypass one of the chief means of deepening natural affection into the mature sympathy that's critical for family bonding. By having their children raised by nurses, too, many women circumvent duty in favor of self-indulgent leisure.

Furthermore, it's not just motherhood that requires more of women. Wollstonecraft argues that in *all* areas of life, broader education reduces women's dependence on their husbands, expands their freedom, and enables them to be more engaged contributors to society. “Though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfill the duties of wives and mothers,” Wollstonecraft concedes, “I cannot help lamenting that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence.” For example, she encourages the study of medicine so that women will be better equipped to care for their families, as well as the reading of history in order that they might be more politically aware. She even envisions the possibility of direct political involvement, though admitting this might seem laughable in the eyes of society: “I may excite laughter, by dropping an hint, which I mean to pursue, some future time, for I really think that women ought to have [governmental] representatives...”

Additionally, Wollstonecraft argues that women should even be encouraged to develop basic business acumen. This, she argues, would reduce the likelihood that downtrodden women will resort to prostitution. What's more, she notes that *all* women should be financially independent, rather than needing to secure financial security through marriage—something that inevitably inhibits their freedom.

In her most progressive move, Wollstonecraft closes *Vindication* with an argument for state-sponsored coeducational schools. She argues that such schools, by mixing genders from an early age, would allow virtuous habits to develop more naturally, would prepare women to be companions rather than simply lovers to their husbands, and even give them tools to be able to earn their own money. These proposals reinforce her core goals of awakening women's capacity for reason; building up all of their faculties; and equipping them to be as resourceful as possible for the sake of their families, their society, and the good of their own souls.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FLOWERS

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft sometimes uses flowers, or plants, to symbolize the planting, nourishing, and blooming of human virtue—or the failure to achieve this. In the Introduction to the work, she compares women to “flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness...sacrificed to beauty...the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.” She uses this image to argue that when women's minds are not properly nourished in the “soil” of education, with attention lavished on external beauty instead, they will begin to fade and languish long before their prime, never having reached their full intellectual and moral potential. Later, discussing liberty as the condition for virtue, she warns that if women are “not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics [flowers], and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.” In other words, if women are not afforded the freedom made possible by education, they will never flourish beyond a short season of giving pleasure to onlookers. Similarly, she argues that “modesty...will ever remain a sickly hothouse plant” unless both men and women seek to foster it—that is, when only women are encouraged to be “modest” (really a superficial kind of propriety), modesty will never ripen into a fruitful virtue to the benefit of broader humanity, but will wither and die like an artificially cultivated species.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1996.

Introduction Quotes

☞ The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. — One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker), Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces the key arguments Wollstonecraft will present throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She contends that by examining women's behavior, we can see that they have not been planted in "soil" which enables them to thrive; rather, healthy longevity has been sacrificed to a temporary bloom that pleases the eye. Wollstonecraft returns to this organic comparison throughout the work; it supports her central claim that the weaknesses of women should not be taken as proof of inherent inferiority, but as a sign of careless nurture which has not permitted women to "blossom" as nature intended. In addition, Wollstonecraft forthrightly blames prominent male writers of the day—like central Enlightenment figure Rousseau— for reinforcing unfavorable conditions for women. In the rest of the work, she plans to critique such men, offering a better alternative—a "nobler ambition"—for women that respects

their rationality and calls upon them to develop it through a proper education.

☞ Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style; — I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for, wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart. — I shall be employed about things, not words! — and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Wollstonecraft offers a defense of the style she will employ in *A Vindication*, also giving a critique of prevalent styles that she finds not only unappealing, but insulting to reason. Later in the work, she frequently contrasts duty, which is based on reason, with affectation, which is based on emotion and serves no abiding purpose. This explains her eagerness to be "useful" and her vehement disdain for "elegance" and "bombast"—the former appeals to the head, drawing on reason; the latter appeals to emotion, feeding into the societal prejudice that traps women in the realm of sentiment. She sees "flowery diction" as a symptom of this attitude and later criticizes novels popular among women, which are filled with this kind of language and do nothing to elevate readers' tastes or engage their minds. Wollstonecraft intends that her own work will avoid this pitfall, modeling a more "respectable" way forward. Ultimately, style is not just an external feature; it's something that helps mold people's sensibilities and thus influences their character as well.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason.

What acquirement exalts one being above another? Virtue we spontaneously reply.

For what purpose were the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes; whispers Experience.

Consequently the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Wollstonecraft was a product and adherent of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that exalted human reason, individual liberty, and progress over tradition and monarchy. This quote makes her Enlightenment commitments especially transparent. The ability to reason, in her view, is what makes human beings. Equally obvious is the fact that humans are distinguished by their relative degrees of virtue. Finally, human beings struggle with passions in order to gain knowledge through experience and thus develop their virtue. These three assertions are the bedrock of Wollstonecraft's argument in *A Vindication*. She will argue that because women have been regarded first as female and only secondly as human, they have not been acknowledged as rational beings deserving of the chance to develop their reason. Because of this, their virtue and knowledge are likewise undeveloped. On this basis, Wollstonecraft will build a case for women to be educated to the same standards as men, for the sake of their own dignity as rational beings and for the sake of society's well-being as a whole.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives.

Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless ... he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker), John Milton

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

As she builds her argument for the reason-based education of women, Wollstonecraft critiques the sexist expectations that are placed on women from earliest girlhood. Typically, girls are taught that if they practice a kind of calculating insight into human nature, display an appealing mildness of temper, and outwardly adhere to societal expectations—and, of course, maintain their beauty—they will win a husband who will take care of them. Milton, in his popular epic poem *Paradise Lost*, gives a similar picture in his portrayal of the first woman, Eve, and her creation for Adam's sake. Wollstonecraft assails such expectations and portrayals as effectively denying women's rationality, making them playthings for men. One of the many problems with this view is that, if it serves women at all, it only accounts for a brief period of their lives, making no accommodation for more mature years. She will go on to argue that women's education must have a firmer basis—their endowment, alongside men, with rational souls in need of cultivation.

●● Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men; they may be well disciplined machines, but they will seldom contain men under the influence of strong passions, or with very vigorous faculties. And as for any depth of understanding, I will venture to affirm, that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women; and the cause, I maintain, is the same. It may be further observed, that officers are also particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule. Like the *fair sex*, the business of their lives is gallantry. — They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they do not lose their rank in the distinction of sexes, for they are still reckoned superior to women, though in what their superiority consists, beyond what I have just mentioned, it is difficult to discover.

The great misfortune is this, that they both acquire manners before morals, and a knowledge of life before they have, from reflection, any acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote Wollstonecraft draws a comparison between the societal position of women and that of peacetime soldiers in standing armies. Because such soldiers have not had their faculties tested in battle, they have never developed their character beyond being youthful playboys with too much leisure on their hands; they are effectively useless to society, except to entertain women in the villages where they are lodged. (Some readers of Jane Austen have proposed that Austen was thinking of Wollstonecraft's argument when she created the character of Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*.) Wollstonecraft argues that a similar dynamic is present among women—they may be attractive and able to display some superficial achievements, but their ultimate goal is only to flatter men. This being the case, even idle soldiers are valued more by society than women are. The danger with both women and soldiers, according to Wollstonecraft, is that they've been trained in shallow manners without any moral basis for their behavior—a combination that wastes their potential and has a weakening effect on society.

●● ...I cannot discover why, unless they are mortal, females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust.

To speak disrespectfully of love is, I know, high treason against sentiment and fine feelings; but I wish to speak the simple language of truth, and rather to address the head than the heart. To endeavor to reason love out of the world, would be to out Quixote Cervantes, and equally offend against common sense; but an endeavor to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers, or to usurp the scepter which the understanding should ever coolly wield, appears less wild.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

One of Wollstonecraft's chief complaints about women's status is that they are considered to be servants of men's lustful or romantic desire. Her argument is that, as human beings with immortal souls, they should be elevated to the same position as men, because the nature of the soul is to be rational—rationality is what, in her view, connects human beings to the God who created them.

Wollstonecraft sarcastically acknowledges that saying anything against love is considered to be “high treason,” but that her aim is to address the mind—something that isn't usually done when speaking to or about women. She assures her audience that she is not interested in getting rid of love altogether—this would be to “out Quixote” Cervantes, the author of the 1605 novel, *Don Quixote*, about a man who's obsessed with chivalric romance. In other words, trying to eliminate love would be an impossibly idealistic quest. However, love should not be permitted to displace reason, which is, in her opinion, the most important characteristic of a human being—reason should always “wield the scepter.” The subjugation of love to reason shows Wollstonecraft's Enlightenment priorities, as well as her concern to place women on an equal intellectual footing with men.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ I wish to sum up what I have said in a few words, for I here throw down my gauntlet, and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; yet the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience.

Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfil; but they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Here Wollstonecraft states one of the main arguments of *A Vindication*, which is that there is no such thing as “male virtues” or “female virtues”—including modesty, which, she will later argue, should be equally the concern of men and women, not just the responsibility of women. This claim goes against the grain of much contemporary writing on women’s behavior, including the characterizations of novelists, who come in for much criticism from Wollstonecraft. In these works, women are “fanciful,” not much concerned with truth or sincerity, and frivolous—existing mainly for the sake of men. In fact, any “virtues” displayed by women are understood in terms of their usefulness to men, shaped according to what’s convenient for men. Wollstonecraft resoundingly rejects this interpretation of virtue. It does not follow, she argues, that just because men’s and women’s duties are fundamentally different (a view she doesn’t question), that their virtues are correspondingly different. Women’s duties are human duties, all truth is human truth, and so virtue should be understood on the basis of truth. Only by first recognizing women’s humanity can they be encouraged to aspire to genuine virtue.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ Necessity has been proverbially termed the mother of invention — the aphorism may be extended to virtue. It is an acquirement, and an acquirement to which pleasure must be sacrificed — and who sacrifices pleasure when it is within the grasp, whose mind has not been opened and strengthened by adversity, or the pursuit of knowledge goaded on by necessity? — Happy is it when people have the cares of life to struggle with; for these struggles prevent their becoming a prey to enervating vices, merely from idleness! But, if from their birth men and women be placed in a torrid zone, with the meridian sun of pleasure darting directly upon them, how can they sufficiently brace their minds to discharge the duties of life, or even to relish the affections that carry them out of themselves?

Pleasure is the business of woman’s life, according to the present modification of society, and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

According to Wollstonecraft’s understanding of virtue, it isn’t something that human beings practice naturally. Virtue is something that must be acquired, most often by way of adversity—this is what she means by suggesting that “necessity” is “the mother” of virtue. The problem for women, however—especially middle-class women—is that they have been taught that pleasure is the main occupation of their lives, especially romantic pleasure. Because women are encouraged only to pursue pleasure—“placed in a torrid zone”—they are never given the incentive to rouse their minds and affections to seek anything higher. This argument is key to Wollstonecraft’s understanding of the situation of women; she believes that their environment and education have limited their achievements. So contemporary critiques of women—that they are idle and frivolous, for example—may have some basis in reality, in her view, but it’s because of how they’ve been trained by society, not because of inherent weakness. Until the goal of women’s lives becomes something loftier than romance and pleasure, however, they will not strive to become virtuous, or even desire to do so.

“Woman also thus ‘in herself complete,’ by possessing all these *frivolous* accomplishments, so changes the nature of things—

‘That what she wills to do or say
 ‘Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
 ‘All higher knowledge in her presence falls
 ‘Degraded. Wisdom in discourse with her
 ‘Loses discountenanc’d, and, like Folly, shows;
 ‘Authority and Reason on her wait.’

And all this is built on her loveliness!

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker), John Milton

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Here Wollstonecraft has been discussing the artificial pedestal that society places women upon—elevating them because of their “loveliness,” an untouchable characteristic that apparently leaves no room for the pursuit of any other virtue. To reinforce her point, she quotes a passage from John Milton’s influential seventeenth-century epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. Significantly, she chooses a passage in which Adam is praising his bride, Eve, saying that even higher knowledge and wisdom are “degraded” in the presence of her loveliness. The choice of this passage symbolizes ways that men in contemporary English society talk about and celebrate women. Wollstonecraft argues that this, and similar attitudes within society, are actually false praise, and in fact nonsense, “[changing] the nature of things.” If reason is the preeminent trait of a human being, how does it make sense for reason to “wait upon” an empty loveliness? Wollstonecraft goes on to argue that this attitude toward women is actually harmful, because it doesn’t do justice to women’s intellect and constrains them from seeking to develop other virtues.

“Still, highly as I respect marriage, as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind. It does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, ruined before they know the difference between virtue and vice: — and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalenes are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wollstonecraft continues talking about various societal attitudes toward women and their concrete implications in women’s lives. She generally upholds marriage as the ideal atmosphere for the flourishing of virtue. However, she is groundbreaking in her compassion for difficult situations in which women have traditionally been blamed. She argues that “unfortunate females” are sometimes ostracized by society for one “error,” which is very often not their fault—that is, naively being deceived by a man, or even being sexually assaulted. Often, these situations come about because women haven’t been taught to develop virtues and be discerning—they’ve been left vulnerable by their reliance on feelings. Such neglect prepares women “for infamy,” even leading some into prostitution because they’re shut out of respectable society. But instead of recognizing its complicity, society’s blame rests squarely on the suffering women. Wollstonecraft argues that asylums and “magdalenes”—refuges for prostitutes—are not the remedy for this situation: justice is. As elsewhere in *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft identifies the underlying educational deficits that have set women up to fail, turning traditional criticisms of women on their head.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“I particularly object to the lover-like phrases of pumped up passion, which are every where interspersed. If women be ever allowed to walk without leading-strings, why must they be cajoled into virtue by artful flattery and sexual compliments? — Speak to them the language of truth and soberness, and away with the lullaby strains of condescending endearment! Let them be taught to respect themselves as rational creatures, and not led to have a passion for their own insipid persons. It moves my gall to hear a preacher descanting on dress and needle-work; and still more, to hear him address *the British fair, the fairest of the fair*, as if they had only feelings.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker), James Fordyce

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this rather entertaining passage, Wollstonecraft aims palpable indignation at James Fordyce, a once-popular Scottish minister whose published sermons had been widely read a few decades earlier—and, as a reference in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* suggests, were still read long after Fordyce’s death (Mr. Collins was a fan). Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (published in 1766) include such titles as “On Modesty of Apparel,” “On Female Reserve,” and “On Female Virtue, With Domestic and Elegant Accomplishments.” It isn’t hard to guess why Wollstonecraft found the sermons galling. Besides her rejection of the notion of “female virtue” and an overemphasis on traits like elegance, she critiques the tendency of such works to appeal to the heart, instead of engaging women’s reason. She resents the way that Fordyce and similar authors try to flatter and compliment women toward virtue, through “lover-like phrases,” instead of encouraging them in self-respect and presenting the attractions of virtue in their own light. The enduring popularity of works like Fordyce’s sermons suggests that Wollstonecraft had her work cut out for her, though.

“The fact is, that men expect from education, what education cannot give. A sagacious parent or tutor may strengthen the body and sharpen the instruments by which the child is to gather knowledge; but the honey must be the reward of the individual’s own industry [...] The business of education in this case, is only to conduct the shooting tendrils to a proper pole; yet after laying precept upon precept, without allowing a child to acquire judgment itself, parents expect them to act in the same manner by this borrowed fallacious light, as if they had illuminated it themselves; and be, when they enter life, what their parents are at the close. They do not consider that the tree, and even the human body, does not strengthen its fibers till it has reached its full growth.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote Wollstonecraft introduces some of her principles for education, which will be further unpacked in the closing chapters of *A Vindication*. Surprisingly, she argues first that education cannot necessarily deliver what people expect from it. This is because most concepts of education are inherently faulty. Many parents and educators neglect the cultivation of a child’s own reasoning powers, expecting to impart wisdom directly without having awakened the capacity to receive it. Such parents then expect children to be able to live by a “borrowed fallacious light” and to act on a lifetime’s worth of accumulated knowledge while they are still young. Wollstonecraft argues, in contrast, that the primary task of education is to develop people’s intellectual faculties, enabling their judgment to mature, so that they can gather and apply wisdom for themselves. This is exactly what she finds lacking in most approaches to women’s education in particular; it imposes precepts without training (or even acknowledging the presence of) a capacity for reason.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ To render chastity the virtue from which unsophisticated modesty will naturally flow, the attention should be called away from employments which only exercise the sensibility; and the heart made to beat time to humanity, rather than to throb with love. The woman who has dedicated a considerable portion of her time to pursuits purely intellectual, and whose affections have been exercised by humane plans of usefulness, must have more purity of mind, as a natural consequence, than the ignorant beings whose time and thoughts have been occupied by gay pleasures or schemes to conquer hearts. The regulation of the behavior is not modesty, though those who study rules of decorum are, in general, termed modest women.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Wollstonecraft argues that modesty and chastity are two different things. Women have traditionally been expected to remain sexually chaste, but society also encourages them to pursue romance single-mindedly, scheming to capture men's hearts using whatever wiles they possess. She argues that this attitude of conquest is actually immodest. A truly "unsophisticated," or guileless modesty, in her view, must flow from reason instead of from relatively empty romantic sensibility. This is because Wollstonecraft understands modesty to be grounded in a rational understanding of oneself and other people. So a woman who has exercised her intellect and affections, seeking to be "humane" and "useful" and not occupied with frivolities, will naturally be more modest than one who is focused on what can be gained from another person. She further argues that merely adhering to societal expectations for external behavior is not "modest," even though that's the generally accepted definition.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ Weak minds are always fond of resting in the ceremonials of duty, but morality offers much simpler motives; and it were to be wished that superficial moralists had said less respecting behavior, and outward observances, for unless virtue, of any kind, be built on knowledge, it will only produce a kind of insipid decency. Respect for the opinion of the world, has, however, been termed the principal duty of woman in the most express words, for Rousseau declares, 'that reputation is no less indispensable than chastity. [...] as what is thought of her, is as important to her as what she really is. It follows hence, that the system of a woman's education should, in this respect, be directly contrary to that of ours. Opinion is the grave of virtue among the men; but its throne among women.'

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker), Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Having attacked common cultural views of modesty, Wollstonecraft takes up the related subject of reputation. Traditionally, she says, moralists have made it one of women's principal duties to preserve their reputation in the eyes of society. This is an especially key point for Enlightenment philosopher Rousseau, whose thought influenced Wollstonecraft but whose ideas on education she soundly rejects. Rousseau holds that women must tirelessly guard their reputation, because what people think of a woman—regardless of whether it's true of her character—will make or break her position in society. Therefore, the education of women should be oriented toward preserving reputation. Wollstonecraft dismisses this, as external observance of decencies doesn't necessarily have anything to do with internal character. All true virtue, by contrast, must be established on the basis of knowledge, rather than clinging to the artificial supports of outward behavior. This illustrates the sharp divide between Wollstonecraft and Rousseau on education; in her eyes, Rousseau's approach only serves to keep women in ignorance and servility to men.

Chapter 9 Quotes

●● Cold would be the heart of a husband ... who did not feel more delight at seeing his child suckled by its mother, than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise; yet this natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie, and twisting esteem with fonder recollections, wealth leads women to spurn. To preserve their beauty, and wear the flowery crown of the day, which gives them a kind of right to reign for a short time over the sex, they neglect to stamp impressions on their husbands' hearts, that would be remembered with more tenderness when the snow on the head began to chill the bosom, than even their virgin charms. The maternal solicitude of a reasonable affectionate woman is very interesting, and the chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his station, is not only a respectable, but a beautiful sight.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

This quote illustrates Wollstonecraft's interest in breastfeeding as an important duty for women. In contrast to many middle-class attitudes of the time, which rejected breastfeeding in favor of preserving a woman's youthful beauty for as long as possible, Wollstonecraft believes that nursing one's baby is vital not only for maternal bonding, but for marital bonding as well. She holds that nature has provided this means of cementing and deepening affection among families, but that women who are accustomed to idleness and indulgence are not inclined to take on this or any other familial duty, to their own further detriment. For all Wollstonecraft's disdain for "flowery" language, there's arguably a romantic note in her picture of "maternal solicitude." Still, it shows the close tie between duty and affection in her thinking. This quote also shows that in certain ways, Wollstonecraft's view of marriage and family remains fairly traditional. While she desires more avenues in which "exceptional" women can exercise their abilities, she still believes that most women have been intended by nature to fulfill domestic roles, and will be happiest when they live in accord with nature.

●● Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for a support, as men accept of places under government, and neglect the implied duties; nor would an attempt to earn their own subsistence, a most laudable one! sink them almost to the level of those poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution. For are not milliners and mantua-makers reckoned the next class? The few employments open to women, so far from being liberal, are menial; and when a superior education enables them to take charge of the education of children as governesses, they are not treated like the tutors of sons...

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Wollstonecraft has been discussing fields in which women might be suitably educated, including medicine, history, and politics. Here she proposes that even business can be an appropriate pursuit for women. Not only that, but business can afford greater financial independence for women, who are usually dependent on their husbands for survival. This option would therefore be very freeing for women who, like low-level government functionaries, accept marriage as a means of support and not with any intent to fulfill the duties or affections of that state. Even more, women on the margins of society would not have to resort to prostitution in order to get by, but would be able to both survive and claim a more respected position in society. Wollstonecraft also laments the low standing of governesses in society, no doubt drawing on her own unhappy experience—as a well-educated woman, teaching girls had been one of the few options open to her, but she found the lack of respect hard to endure. Overall, women need a broader spectrum of employment opportunities in order to be both independent and full contributors to society.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ I have already animadverted on the bad habits which females acquire when they are shut up together; and, I think, that the observation may fairly be extended to the other sex, till the natural inference is drawn which I have had in view throughout — that to improve both sexes they ought, not only in private families, but in public schools, to be educated together. If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men ... Nay, marriage will never be held sacred till women, by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions rather than their mistresses...

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 12 of *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft lays out her ideas for founding state-sponsored schools. One of the most progressive aspects of her plan is the integration of boys and girls at all ages. She believes that same-gender schooling actually tends to promote immodesty and vulgarity among both boys and girls. But even more importantly, because she maintains that marriage is “the cement of society,” it’s important for the sexes to begin mixing in childhood. Her reasoning is that, for one thing, men and women cannot enjoy “fellowship” on a truly equal basis unless they have pursued and developed the same virtues—thus they must be educated together. In addition, women won’t be good wives or citizens until they have sufficient independence to exercise their abilities, act as friends and not merely lovers, and even potentially support themselves. Wollstonecraft even goes so far as to suggest that marriage won’t be properly honored until women have attained this. This section is the pinnacle of the book, as Wollstonecraft moves from philosophizing about virtue in women to proposing how it might best be instilled by society.

☞ The weakness of the mother will be visited on the children! And whilst women are educated to rely on their husbands for judgment, this must ever be the consequence, for there is no improving an understanding by halves, nor can any being act wisely from imitation, because in every circumstance of life there is a kind of individuality, which requires an exertion of judgment to modify general rules ... In public schools women, to guard against the errors of ignorance, should be taught the elements of anatomy and medicine, not only to enable them to take proper care of their own health, but to make them rational nurses of their infants, parents, and husbands; for the bills of mortality are swelled by the blunders of self-willed old women, who give nostrums of their own without knowing any thing of the human frame. It is likewise proper only in a domestic view, to make women acquainted with the anatomy of the mind...

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

Wollstonecraft here presents additional reasons for the importance of educating women, pointing out that poor education has an intergenerational impact. She argues that motherhood requires more than partial understanding or imitation of others’ skills; it’s more than the application of hard-and-fast rules. Parents need to know how to modify general rules and act flexibly in particular situations—skills that can only be exercised on the basis of judgment. Therefore, until women strengthen their reasoning to the point that they can apply this kind of wisdom, families will suffer the consequences. She even remarks quite heatedly (though in keeping with her Enlightenment outlook) that “old wives’ tales” result in many deaths because they aren’t founded on real medical knowledge. To guard against such ignorance, women should be taught basic medical skills in school. Further, if it’s appropriate for them to learn physical anatomy, then human nature is a fitting subject as well—suggesting that liberal arts and politics should be the domain of women, too.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞☞ But, confined to trifling employments, they naturally imbibe opinions which the only kind of reading calculated to interest an innocent frivolous mind, inspires. Unable to grasp any thing great, is it surprising that they find the reading of history a very dry task, and disquisitions addressed to the understanding intolerably tedious, and almost unintelligible? Thus are they necessarily dependent on the novelist for amusement. Yet, when I exclaim against novels, I mean when contrasted with those works which exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination. — For any kind of reading I think better than leaving a blank still a blank, because the mind must receive a degree of enlargement and obtain a little strength by a slight exertion of its thinking powers...

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Wollstonecraft has been critiquing the common emphasis on “sensibility” which limits women’s tastes and reasoning faculties. Basically, because they absorb sentimental and sensationalized ideas and literature all their lives, women never develop a taste for more worthwhile material. Wollstonecraft has a fervent dislike for most of the reading material that’s available to women of her era—not only does it cater to women’s most superficial tastes, it’s also morally weakening, in that it doesn’t encourage them to aspire to anything better. Thus it’s not surprising that women aren’t interested in studying history or other substantial topics; this is a symptom of an underdeveloped intellect, not of an intrinsic female weakness. Wollstonecraft nevertheless concedes that reading frothy novels is better than reading nothing at all, even if it’s better to read works which “exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination”—ever favoring the importance of reason for the governance of one’s other faculties.

☞☞ Were not dissenters, for instance, a class of people, with strict truth, characterized as cunning? And may I not lay some stress on this fact to prove, that when any power but reason curbs the free spirit of man, dissimulation is practiced, and the various shifts of art are naturally called forth? Great attention to decorum, which was carried to a degree of scrupulosity, and all that puerile bustle about trifles and consequential solemnity ... shaped their persons as well as their minds in the mold of prim littleness. [...] Oppression thus formed many of the features of their character perfectly to coincide with that of the oppressed half of mankind; or is it not notorious that dissenters were, like women, fond of deliberating together, and asking advice of each other, till by a complication of little contrivances, some little end was brought about? A similar attention to preserve their reputation was conspicuous in the dissenting and female world, and was produced by a similar cause.

Related Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

“Dissenters” is an umbrella term for Christians who did not belong to England’s established (Anglican) church—ranging across a spectrum from relatively staunch and orthodox Methodists or Presbyterians, to free-thinking Unitarians and others of a decidedly radical stripe. Wollstonecraft spent time among Dissenters in her intellectual circles and sympathized with some of the more unorthodox ones. Here, however, she seems to have in mind the more “prim” sectarians within the dissenting world, and she draws an interesting comparison between the way dissenters are viewed by society and the way women are viewed. The main similarity, she argues, is that like women, dissenters have often been caricatured as rather cunning, narrow, and inclined to put on a false front. This has some basis in reality, she says, but these traits are really a function of the way that dissenters are confined to a marginal, politically disadvantaged subset without much recourse to broader society—very like what has historically happened to women. Whether her views of dissenters are accurate or not, her point seems to be that marginal groups are often blamed for characteristics that their situation forces on them, as their reason lies undeveloped, and they cling to whatever scrap of power they can get. The ultimate solution—as she argues in the book as a whole—is that such people should be granted broader freedoms, allowing reason to emerge as the guiding force of their lives. Wollstonecraft’s optimism about human nature is such that she believes that when arbitrary

constraints are removed, human potential will soon flourish

unobstructed.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

DEDICATION

Wollstonecraft dedicates her work to M. Talleyrand-Périgord, having read his recently published pamphlet. She hopes to “induce [him] to reconsider the subject” of women’s rights and national education. She explains that she considers independence to be “the basis of every virtue.”

Talleyrand-Périgord was a French politician who published a pamphlet titled Rapport sur l'instruction publique in 1791. In the pamphlet, he had recommended public education for men, since they live on the world stage, but private education for women, since they live more secluded lives. Wollstonecraft was quickly moved to respond. She grounds her rebuttal on the claim that only free people can be virtuous citizens, and freedom is achieved by means of education.



Wollstonecraft explains that she’s inspired to write out of “affection for the whole human race,” because she wants to see women in a position to advance humanity’s progress in virtue, not to slow it down. Her main argument is built on the principle “that if [woman] be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.”

Talleyrand-Périgord had submitted his report on education to France’s National Assembly as part of the process of revising the French constitution. Wollstonecraft is motivated to respond to the report because she believes that its recommendations on female education will be damaging to society as a whole—if women aren’t educated enough to function as equals of men, then men cannot become more knowledgeable or virtuous, either.



INTRODUCTION

After studying various books on education, Wollstonecraft has concluded that the neglect of women’s education has resulted in great misery. “The conduct and manners of women,” she argues, “prove that their minds are not in a healthy state.” The educational system looks at women more as females than as human beings, concerned to make them “alluring mistresses” instead of “affectionate wives and rational mothers.” As a result, women are more concerned about romance than about nurturing their abilities and virtues.

Wollstonecraft had previously worked as a governess and even ran a short-lived girls’ school along with her sisters, so she had given much thought to prevailing educational practices. The chief problem, in her eyes, is that women are viewed as women first and human beings second—preventing them from reaching their full potential and even undermining their effectiveness in traditionally feminine roles.



In tackling this subject, Wollstonecraft will deal with works that have been specifically written for women’s instruction; in some of which, she alleges, women are regarded as “subordinate beings” instead of rational creatures. She concedes that men are incontestably superior in physical strength, but that men “sink us still lower” by reducing women to objects of allure, and that women acquiesce to this status, rather than striving to become friends of men.

Other treatises on the education of girls were being circulated in the late 18th century, and Wollstonecraft will deal with some of them, like the writings of Rousseau and Fordyce, later in the work. Her common critique is that these works don’t respect women’s rational capacities and even objectify women.



In her discussion, Wollstonecraft will consider women first as “human creatures ... placed on this earth to unfold their faculties,” and second consider their situation more particularly as women. She will also focus on women in the middle class “because they appear to be in the most natural state.”

Wollstonecraft hopes that other women will excuse her if she treats them “like rational creatures” instead of as perpetual children. She wants to persuade women to “acquire strength, both of mind and body,” to show “that elegance is inferior to virtue,” and that their first ambition should be “to obtain a character as a human being.” In doing so, she hopes to avoid both artificial feelings and “flowery diction.”

Although writers pay more attention to women’s education than they once did, they still regard women as “frivolous,” taking a satiric or pitying attitude toward them. By focusing on marriage as “the only way women can rise in the world,” they “[make] mere animals” of women and infantilize them.

There should be no fear, Wollstonecraft says, that she is trying to make women “masculine.” Women are already physically dependent upon men, and there is no need to increase this dependence by “prejudices that give a sex to virtue.” In fact, women are likewise degraded by “mistaken notions of female excellence,” because this devotion to women’s “artificial weakness” inclines them to tyranny and cunning. The solution is for men to become “more chaste and modest,” and for women to become wiser.

CHAPTER 1

Wollstonecraft begins with some “plain questions.” She asks what humanity’s preeminence over creation consists in, and concludes that it is Reason. Then, “what acquirement exalts one being above another?” The answer is virtue. And why do people deal with passions? The purpose of passions is to bestow experience (knowledge) by means of struggle. Concluding all this, then, “the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge” that distinguishes each person; and from these three things, virtue “naturally [flows].”

Wollstonecraft’s argument is based on her belief that women’s purpose in the world is to fully realize their natural potential, something they have been denied the opportunity to do. Throughout the work, she will focus especially on the middle class, because she believes that both wealth and poverty are departures from an idealized middle station in life.



Wollstonecraft’s request for the pardon of her peers is, of course, tongue in cheek. She names some of the themes that will recur throughout the work—striving to better oneself; favoring internal qualities over external ones; and the priority of human virtues over “female” ones. She will also frequently critique “flowery” writing because she believes it appeals more to emotions than to reason.



Wollstonecraft lays out what she sees as the deficit in existing works about women’s education—most do not take women seriously as moral beings in their own right, limiting their prospects of advancement to marriage.



Wollstonecraft anticipates the likely criticism that she wants women to intrude on men’s turf. Rather, she wants women to regain their equal standing with men as people capable of virtue. Too often, she thinks, sexist views of women have been elevated into supposed virtues, and women have taken advantage of this to obtain power by the limited means available to them.



Wollstonecraft’s opening questions and answers reveal her debt to Enlightenment thought—“Reason” is elevated above all else. She also establishes the basis for her coming argument, which is that all human beings are capable of virtue, which is only attainable through knowledge.



While all this seems obvious, Wollstonecraft argues that reason has been clouded by prejudice to such a degree, and “such spurious qualities have assumed the name of virtues,” that it’s necessary to explore these opening assertions more deeply.

After arguing that the sacred right of kings is a belief that stifles virtue and happiness by destroying human equality, Wollstonecraft argues that any profession that involves subordination of rank “is highly injurious to morality.” For example, a standing army necessarily lacks rigor and must be kept in line through despotism, which is “incompatible with freedom.” Also, when soldiers take up residence in country towns, they lure locals into their own vices, under the guise of gallantry. The point is that every person’s character is shaped by their profession—something societies should keep in mind.

CHAPTER 2

Wollstonecraft argues that “to account for, and excuse the tyranny of man,” many have argued that men and women should aim to acquire different virtues. In fact, “women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire” real virtue. But Providence has appointed only one path to human virtue; so if women have immortal souls, there can be no secondary path to virtue.

Men complain of women’s folly, but, Wollstonecraft holds, folly is only the natural result of ignorance. Women are taught all their lives that cunning and outward propriety “will obtain for them the protection of man,” and that as long as they’re beautiful, they don’t need to worry about anything else for at least 20 years of their lives. Innocence in children is a good thing; but when applied to adults, it’s a synonym for weakness.

When Wollstonecraft argues for education, she means “such an attention...as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions...and set the understanding to work.” Though education can’t work miracles, she does believe that through this process, every person is capable of becoming virtuous. Such habits of virtue allow for personal independence.

Wollstonecraft admits that she might be considered arrogant for taking on writers on this subject from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, but she believes that all of these writers’ works have served only to make women weaker and less useful to society.

Wollstonecraft’s claims for the centrality of reason, virtue, and knowledge are no longer taken for granted by society, no matter how much it pays lip service to them; it’s therefore necessary to clear away prejudices from the truth in order to better understand the nature of virtue.



Wollstonecraft’s anti-monarchical, republican political commitments are obvious here; they are never far in the background of her arguments about individual and societal virtue. In fact, she holds that “despotism” lurks in any profession in which people must be kept in line by means of authority instead of reason, and this has poor consequences for people’s character. The idleness of soldiers in peacetime is a key example. In short, any defect in the structures of society has a corresponding effect on its constituents’ character.



Key to Wollstonecraft’s argument is the claim that there can be no such thing as “gendered” virtue. She believes that God has created human beings with souls capable of virtue, and there are not distinct, sex-differentiated tracks for attaining virtue.



Traditionally, women’s education is geared toward marriage, with no aims beyond that. But Wollstonecraft argues that this keeps women dependent and in an infantile state. At best, it only serves them during a brief period of life.



Wollstonecraft gives her definition of education, which is clearly based on Enlightenment principles of Reason’s reign over the senses, personality, and passions. Being educated with the goal of virtue leads to individual freedom, also underlining her political belief in liberty.



Wollstonecraft is bold in publicly critiquing prominent male writers—something that would not have been common in her time.



One of the things that has most served to limit women's education, Wollstonecraft says, is "disregard of order." The training of men tends to be methodical from birth; women's education, by contrast, is marked by a "negligent kind of guess-work." This indicates a "contempt of the understanding in early life," and leads to women picking up information in a piecemeal fashion throughout life, often by observation. Thus, women enter adulthood having learned "by snatches," as a secondary emphasis, and without sufficient rigor to master any subject or strengthen the overall judgment.

Wollstonecraft draws a comparison with military men. Like women, soldiers are given superficial knowledge, then sent out to mix with society, where they emulate manners, but gain no real understanding of humanity. They "practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness." She uses this as evidence that there is no fundamental sexual difference, where educational background has been so similar.

Women must be "considered either as moral beings," or as so weak "that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men." Rousseau takes the latter position, arguing that women therefore should not cultivate truth or fortitude ("the corner stones of all human virtue"), but obedience. Wollstonecraft counters that, even if women are naturally inferior to men, their virtues must still be the same in *quality*, and thus their conduct "should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim."

Women's moral character is important because of their duties to parents, husbands, and children; yet, more importantly, they should work "to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue."

Wollstonecraft argues that if women have immortal souls, there is no reason to make women constantly "subservient to love." She acknowledges that downgrading love is "high treason against sentiment," but that she wants to address the head rather than the heart. She doesn't mean to "reason love out of the world," but to prevent love from "[usurping] the scepter which the understanding should ever coolly wield."

Wollstonecraft begins explaining the factors that have contributed to inadequate education for women, beginning with its typically disorganized character. Training for men is purposeful, but women are taught without any apparent method or goal, leading them to devalue learning and leaving their reasoning faculties underdeveloped.



Poorly educated soldiers are a favorite example for Wollstonecraft. At this relatively peaceful time in British society, soldiers had little to occupy them except to develop rather superficial social graces. From this similarity in outcome between men and women, Wollstonecraft argues, we can conclude that women do not lack the capacity for virtue.



There is no middle ground, Wollstonecraft argues; either women are moral beings or are deservedly subjected to men as their superiors. Rousseau makes the latter case in his work Emile, an educational treatise written some 30 years before the present work. Wollstonecraft counters that, since there are no gender-distinct virtues, women should strive for the same virtues as men, even if it were to be demonstrated that they can't reach the same level of virtue as men.



Wollstonecraft consistently upholds traditionally feminine roles and duties to the family, but she goes beyond moral philosophers of her day in that she sees virtue as an end to be pursued for its own sake, not only for the sake of women's responsibilities to others.



It is degrading for women as human beings, Wollstonecraft argues, to be expected to live as if their concerns should rise no higher than romance. Her comment about "high treason" is heavily sarcastic, an indictment of the prevalence of emotion and sentiment in contemporary writings by and about women. While love has its place, she believes, it is secondary to all-important reason—her Enlightenment commitments once again shining through.



While love is an appropriate focus for both men and women in their youth, Wollstonecraft says, “in those days of thoughtless enjoyment provision should be made for the more important years of life, when reflection takes place of sensation.”

Unfortunately, Rousseau, and male writers like him, say that the entire goal of women’s lives is to please men.

Wollstonecraft argues that writers who argue as Rousseau does do not understand human nature. When the passion of youth passes, what are women to do then? Unless a woman is motivated to activate her “dormant faculties,” it’s likely that she will seek to please men besides her husband. The study of “pleasing” that’s pressed on women is, therefore, entirely inadequate; in fact, it’s “only useful to a mistress.” Women’s concern should be, instead, to “purify their heart,” but this is impossible when most women have been taught to amuse themselves with vanities and have never been encouraged to curb their emotions.

Wollstonecraft scorns writers like Dr. Gregory who urge women not to develop too much “delicacy of sentiment,” lest they be shocked by their husbands’ shortcomings in this regard. Women should rather “acquire the qualities that ennoble a rational being,” and not “model [their souls] to suit the frailties” of their spouses.

Women, Wollstonecraft charges, are only encouraged to develop the so-called virtues of “gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection,” to prepare themselves to be the toys of men in the present, but to make no preparations for the future state of their souls. The implication of most writers is that women were “made to be loved,” but “must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine.” But Wollstonecraft thinks it is questionable whether “passive indolent women make the best wives.” Do such women have “sufficient character to manage a family or educate children?”

There can be no direct comparison of men and women with regard to virtue, Wollstonecraft says, until women’s “faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength.” Even if it’s shown, in time, that women can’t attain the same *degree* of virtue as men, “let their virtues be the same in kind.” In short, let a woman strive for her God-given rank in the world, instead of artificially suppressing her.

Wollstonecraft reiterates that romance has a role in most people’s lives, but it is ultimately a minor and short-lived one. That’s why, contra Rousseau and his fellows, overemphasizing love does a disservice to women (and men) who will long outlive the most passionate season of life.



Wollstonecraft argues that when the usual educational path for women is followed to its logical conclusion, it sometimes leads to women becoming mistresses. This is because women aren’t taught to regulate their emotions appropriately and to pursue goals higher than romance. This is an example of an important undercurrent of Wollstonecraft’s thesis, which is that the dominant approach to women’s education undermines morality for society as a whole.



Typically, writers who limit women to the pursuit of love put a damper on the acquisition of all virtues, warning them not to surpass potential husbands in their attainments. Wollstonecraft argues that this is degrading for a rational human being, whose soul should be “ennobled” for its own sake.



The virtues women are typically encouraged to acquire have very limited utility; remaining fixated on the concerns of the present, they fail to do justice to women’s immortal souls. Wollstonecraft scathingly points out that desiring respect is viewed as “masculine” by her society. Ironically, too, the characters formed by traditional values don’t actually serve the needs of one’s husband or family well in the long run.



The arguments of writers who claim that women are inferior in virtue are premature, because women haven’t had sufficient opportunity to prove themselves. Anyway, Wollstonecraft contends that there is no risk in letting women strive for greater virtue, even if it’s proven that they are unequal to men in this way.



Wollstonecraft points out that kings have always been acknowledged to be inferior in virtue to the masses, yet they're treated with reverence; men submit to them in order to enjoy the benefits of their favor. This is analogous to what women have always done in submitting to men. If servile courtiers are moral agents, then "it cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated."

Wollstonecraft demonstrates the inadequacy of the argument that women must be inferior to men because they have traditionally been subjugated to men. The same could be said about those who submit to kings, but the moral status of such people has never been questioned. Here, again, Wollstonecraft makes an implicit critique of monarchy.



CHAPTER 3

Bodily strength has come to be regarded with contempt, especially for women, because it's seen to detract from grace and appealing weakness. Wollstonecraft argues that, with regard to women's weakness, an effect has been taken for a cause. She holds that "strength of mind" has most often "been accompanied by superior strength of body."

When "feminine" grace, weakness, and beauty are elevated above other values, women's physical health and strength suffer. Here, as elsewhere, Wollstonecraft sees a conflation of the effects of societal oppression (women's weakness) with their cause (limiting women's activity). She also sees a close link between the mind and the body.



While physical strength is rightly the boast of men, women are "infatuated" with physical weakness. Women use this weakness to gain sway over men, but in doing so, they "[sacrifice] virtue...to temporary gratifications." This degrades women's character and is correspondingly bad for society as a whole. In educating their daughters, therefore, parents should not allow girls "to imbibe the pernicious notion that a defect can...become an excellence."

Wollstonecraft thinks it's true that men are physically stronger than women, but women have been encouraged to weaken themselves deliberately and turn that weakness into a desirable attribute, chiefly because it allows them to attract and flatter men. But, she argues, it's nonsense to turn a negative thing into something praiseworthy in itself.



Even if women are naturally weaker than men, it doesn't follow that they should try to become even weaker. Wollstonecraft points out that young animals require continual exercise, but children, especially girls, are closely watched, kept dependent, and limited to sedentary indoor play. If girls are kept in such a cramping environment, then it's no wonder they show a preference for dolls, dresses, and idle chatter. But it is "unphilosophical" to draw the conclusion that these interests are somehow natural. In fact, it would be harmless for girls and boys to play together, if sex distinction weren't stressed at such a young age.

Wollstonecraft draws on evidence from the natural world to suggest that children, like other young creatures, require freedom in play for the sake of health and development. She denounces the illogical conclusion that just because girls prefer certain activities, it necessarily means that those preferences are somehow intrinsic to girls. She even makes the radical recommendation that children's play not be gender-segregated, arguing that if distinctions weren't heavily stressed at an early age, they would not become such a big deal.



"Dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind," and a sheltered woman who's constantly preoccupied with the threat of sickness won't make a good wife or mother. Such women are "slaves to their bodies," and what's worse, they "glory" in this. When women are taught from a young age to confine their concerns to beauty, their minds will "only [seek] to adorn" their prison.

Wollstonecraft again underlines the close connection between body and mind—arguing that if women constantly fear sickness and focus on their looks, they will seldom rise above bodily concerns, making them inadequate spouses and parents in the process.



If women are trained to be and treated as “viceregents” ruling a small household domain, then it’s not surprising that some will undertake a reign of terror; “having no fixed rules to square their conduct by,” they will behave according to the whim of the moment. And any woman, even one married to a sensible man, will find herself at a disadvantage if she is widowed; a woman who has “never thought, much less acted for herself,” will be hard pressed to educate and provide for her children, or to find another husband who will treat her justly.

If women are not given principles for behavior, they will have no consistent rules governing the way they treat their families—potentially leading to disaster. Moreover, no wife is guaranteed the lifelong protection of a husband; an uneducated widow finds herself and her children in a deeply vulnerable position.



Wollstonecraft sums up her argument by denying that there is such a thing as sex-specific virtues. But in her context, virtue for women has become relative and subjected to mere utility, which men shape to their convenience. Even if women generally must fulfill different duties in life than men do, these are still *human* duties, which should be regulated according to the same principles which govern the duties of men. Women must therefore learn to exercise their understanding, so that they can submit to reason, not human opinion.

The prevailing idea of “virtue” for women is primarily geared toward the desires of men, but Wollstonecraft rejects the idea that virtues can be different for women and men; different duties do not imply different virtues. The only way to undermine this prejudiced system is to enable women to exercise their mental faculties fully, allowing them to discern the difference between reason and mere opinion. Wollstonecraft’s confidence in Enlightenment principles is evident once more.



CHAPTER 4

Wollstonecraft argues that women are “degraded by the...propensity to enjoy the present moment” and therefore don’t struggle to attain greater freedom. She defines reason as “the simple power of improvement” which ties creature with Creator. But women’s souls are not acknowledged to be reasonable; they’re expected to take things through the mediation of men, simply on trust.

Addressing the argument that women don’t seem to want freedom, Wollstonecraft points out that nothing in the usual training of women inclines them to desire it. To desire improvement, they need to be taught to exercise their reason; but they are taught to entrust themselves to the reason of men instead.



A false view of education has contributed to this erroneous view of women. Rather than being seen as “the first step to form a being...towards perfection,” it is only viewed as “preparation for life.” This system has served as the foundation for a harmful view of female manners, which denies them understanding and muffles their instincts.

Wollstonecraft argues that the educational system in England fails both sexes by being too short-sighted; it looks no farther than one’s livelihood or future prospects and does not address the soul itself. This system has especially curtailed women’s development.



Knowledge is the ability to generalize ideas—to draw conclusions based on observation. Wollstonecraft points out some of the factors that deny women this ability. One of the prerequisites for acquiring virtue is struggling with adversity, which requires sacrificing pleasure. But because society views pleasure as the primary business of a woman’s life, little can be expected from women. They prefer to sacrifice liberty for the false honor of being fawned over for a season by men, trading short-lived adoration for lifelong respect.

Wollstonecraft sees knowledge as a matter of more than academic study; it demands real-life experiences in order for people to develop their reasoning faculties. For women, a particular obstacle is that pleasure, and pleasing men, has long been considered primary in their lives; so they are shortchanged of opportunities to wrestle with adversity and develop their reason.



Wollstonecraft makes the argument that in a certain way, women are born with privileges resembling those of the rich. Women, for example, are never to be publicly contradicted, they are never allowed to exert any strength, and they are generally expected to live by sentiment instead of logic. They occupy an arbitrary station in society due to their “loveliness.” Young noblemen, similarly, aren’t expected to earn public approval through accomplishments, but to be entitled to it by virtue of their ancestry.

Whereas men are prepared for professions throughout their lives, women are given no “scheme to sharpen their faculties,” because marriage, and marrying advantageously, is considered “the grand feature in their lives.” Pleasure, in fact, is the purpose of women’s existence. But, Wollstonecraft argues, we should no more question women’s humanity because of this than we should question that of French courtiers under despotic rule, who sacrificed liberty for vanity.

Because women receive a trifling education, their conduct reflects this throughout their lives; they care more about adventure than about duty. They have “acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit.” They “become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling.” Such things as novels, music, and poetry reinforce women’s reliance on sensation.

Wollstonecraft contends that if girls received the same education as boys, they would be much less dependent on men in adulthood, therefore more useful to society, and less subject to contempt. She quotes Rousseau’s line, “Educate women like men, and the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us.” This is exactly what she is arguing—she wants women to have power not over men, but over themselves.

Too often, sensibility (delicacy of sensation or perception) is put in the place of reason for women. But when the sensibility is overdeveloped—which romance tends to promote—women crave the attentions of men, seeking new lovers after their husbands cease to be interesting, or else pining in secret.

Wollstonecraft makes the interesting argument that women have an unearned “privilege” by virtue of being women—one that ultimately harms both them and society. Like those born into wealth, their status is not earned through the exercise of virtues, but granted on an arbitrary basis.



Wollstonecraft, having argued that women have the same faculties as men, now argues that they have no arena in which to exercise and develop those faculties. But just because women have not had the chance to publicly display their abilities, choosing vain pursuits instead, it does not follow that their humanity is unequal to men’s.



Superficial education shapes the kinds of things women take interest in throughout their lives and limits their usefulness to society. Because they’ve primarily trained their senses, not their reason, they occupy themselves with sensational literature and other arts. Wollstonecraft’s concern about “silly” books by and for women is recurrent throughout the work.



Rousseau’s point seems to have been that women will be less desirable to men if they are taught to cultivate so-called “masculine” virtues. Wollstonecraft rejects the premise that educating women makes them “masculine”; instead, education makes them masters of themselves, no threat to anyone else.



Wollstonecraft argues that “sensibility” is a poor substitute for reason. It further oppresses women by giving them little to strive for beyond love. This then threatens marriages as well.



Fulfilling domestic duties requires resolution and perseverance, not just emotion; but such things can't be expected from women who "from...infancy, [have] been made the weather-cock" of their sensations. Usefulness requires self-discipline, without which a person is susceptible to either tyranny or self-indulgence, neither of which mold a child's temper effectively.

Wollstonecraft dismisses polygamy as an argument for the inferiority of women. She nevertheless argues that when a man seduces a woman, he should be legally obligated to maintain her and her children, and she shouldn't be treated like a prostitute.

Wollstonecraft shows compassion for "those unfortunate females who are broken off from society...by one error." Often, she argues, it's not even a question of error, but of an innocent young girl being duped and "ruined" before she can distinguish between virtue and vice. Lacking any other means of support, such a girl often takes refuge in prostitution, with catastrophic effects on her character. Because of the deficiency of women's education, "her character...depends on the observance of one virtue."

Wollstonecraft argues that it's best for marriage to be founded on friendship rather than love, since these two forms of affection aren't ultimately compatible; friendship is based on principle and respect, whereas love, founded on passion, inclines toward vanity and jealousy.

Middle-class women's preoccupation with ornamental clothing, mimicking the fashions of the nobility, has a further narrowing effect on character, confining their thoughts to their bodies. Uneducated poor women, who have to strive to hold their families together, often display far better sense, persuading Wollstonecraft that "trifling employments have rendered woman a trifler." Overall, while there are exceptions, most women don't have the opportunity to exercise their understanding sufficiently to rise above their circumstances.

Wollstonecraft points out that family life—the lot of most women—requires hard work and discipline, something that most women are unprepared for. They are accustomed to pointing in whatever direction their emotions move them. This is especially problematic when it comes to teaching children to control their emotions. This reinforces Wollstonecraft's argument that suppressing women's abilities doesn't just harm them; it's detrimental to society as a whole.



While some of her contemporaries have argued that polygamy proves women's inferior status, Wollstonecraft suggests that inclination to practice polygamy is due to genetic abnormalities and is unnatural. She also argues that, given women's weak status in society, accommodations should be made for those who have been "seduced"; they shouldn't be treated as wives, but they should not be scorned and cast off, either.



Wollstonecraft offers an argument, progressive for her time, that "ruined" women do not deserve the ostracism and disgrace they typically experience; it's possible that such women, or girls, were incapable of making a morally informed choice in the matter. And since they can't provide for themselves, it only makes sense that such women will resort to morally degrading means of survival. Overall, it's a grievous disservice to women when their character is reduced to upholding a single so-called "virtue" (chastity), which they do not always have complete control over anyway.



Wollstonecraft, again showing her bias toward reason, doesn't see love as enduring, because it arises from the passions instead of from reason. Women must be equipped through education to fall back on lasting friendships with their husbands after initial passion subsides.



Wollstonecraft's bias toward republican virtues of simplicity comes through here—she idealizes the inherent good sense of poorer women who lack the demoralizing luxuries characteristic of better-off women. In a footnote, she offers a few examples of rare female intellectuals who have risen above societal prejudices, including ancient Greek poet Sappho, medieval thinker Heloise, and Russia's Catherine the Great.



CHAPTER 5

Wollstonecraft examines contemporary writers' objectionable claims about women, starting with Rousseau. In his book *Émile*, he argues that women were formed to be weak and passive, for the pleasure of men. Men, in turn, are to try to please women, to "obtain [their] consent that he should be strongest." She altogether rejects the idea that woman was created for man, calling the Genesis account "beautiful, poetical cosmogony."

Rousseau argues that since women are created differently from men in temperament and character, they ought to be educated differently. Because women are dependent on men, their education "should be always relative to the men"—to be useful to them, secure their love, take care of them, and make their lives easier. Little girls, he says, are naturally more interested in dress and personal ornamentation and should be encouraged in this. In response to these claims, Wollstonecraft argues that "the effect of habit is insisted upon as an undoubted indication of nature." When women are not allowed to develop their reason, they are naturally subjected to authority instead.

Wollstonecraft grants that men have superior physical strength, but argues that if women were allowed to develop their strength such that they could earn their own living—what she calls "the true definition of independence"—their minds would profit as well. Girls should therefore be allowed to enjoy the same exercise as boys, so it can be proven to what extent men's superiority extends—"for what...virtue can be expected from a creature when the seed-time of life is neglected?"

Wollstonecraft points out that all Rousseau's view of education achieves is to render a woman "beautiful, innocent, and silly," able to be little more than a "mistress" to a husband for a short time. She concludes that his educational method isn't even well suited to the ends he has in mind; is "the surest method to make a wife chaste...to teach her to practice the wanton arts of a mistress?"

Wollstonecraft sums up this discussion by stating that "the pernicious tendency" of such educational books "in which the writers insidiously degrade the sex whilst they are prostrate before their personal charms, cannot be too often or too severely exposed." She urges women to strengthen their minds "to become a balance for our hearts," subordinating every other duty to this, in order to prepare "our affections for a more exalted state." Women are not created "to flutter our hour out and die," concerned only with sensibility and pleasure.

Rousseau's argument is a prime example of the male-centered limitations on women's potential that Wollstonecraft rejects. She is even radical enough to question the traditional interpretation of the Bible's account of the creation of woman as man's helper.



Rousseau's argument is based on what he sees as women's natural, rightful subordination to men—since their primary goal in life is to please and serve men, why give them education that won't serve those ends? Wollstonecraft responds that this is, once again, a confusion between cause and effect; women are acting as they have been trained to do for a long time, but that doesn't mean their behavior is "natural." Given how long a view like Rousseau's has prevailed, she adds, it's not surprising that women often cling to men's authority instead of wishing to break free of it.



Because most of the claims about male superiority are based on unfounded assumptions about women, Wollstonecraft says that valid evidence is needed in order to determine to what degree men may be superior. Her call for women's financial independence is radical for the time, and something she sees as unlikely to be realized unless girls are nurtured toward independence from a very young age.



Wollstonecraft believes that Rousseau's view of women and marriage amounts to little more than a form of "virtuous coquetry," teaching women to attract men, but not equipping either man or woman with the virtue needed in order to build a lasting relationship founded on mutual respect.



*Wollstonecraft's denunciation of Rousseau's *Emile*, and books like it, is scathing. Such books fail to appeal to women's minds, much less their souls, and thus have a dehumanizing effect. Women must work to bring mind and heart into balance and rise above the inadequate models provided for them.*



Wollstonecraft next takes up James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*. She complains that that the writer's exhortations "[melt] every human quality into female meekness and artificial grace." She also heavily critiques his "lover-like phrases of pumped up passion," wondering, "why must [women] be cajoled into virtue?" If women were taught to respect themselves as rational creatures, then there would be no need for such flattery.

Dr. Gregory's *Legacy to His Daughters* is another offender. His remarks on female behavior, Wollstonecraft says, begin "at the wrong end," since a well-cultivated understanding and affections won't require "starved rules of decorum"; when someone's reason has been properly trained, external goads to behavior are not so necessary. She especially objects to Gregory's recommendation that women downplay whatever learning they have so as not to provoke jealousy; "where are rules of accommodation to stop?" She despises the "system of dissimulation" this creates.

Wollstonecraft argues that because man's authority rests on "a chaotic mass of prejudices" instead of on reason, there's no "sinning against the order of things" in going against it. But women are seldom able to do this, having been taught to submit to their own feelings, and thus being subjugated to the whims of others; they begin to "adopt the sentiments that brutalize them." She is convinced that once women are "sufficiently enlightened," they will give up the prerogatives of unequal love for "the calm satisfaction of friendship" and act reasonably both before and after marriage.

Wollstonecraft makes a few more general remarks on education, claiming that we tend to ask too much of instruction—"precepts are heaped upon precepts," requiring blind obedience, instead of expecting young people to acquire wisdom through the development of their own faculties. Part of the process of gaining wisdom takes place through disappointment and failure. It's better to let a young person struggle with unruly passions, even at the risk of sorrow, in order to grow in true knowledge and virtue.

Again, people "expect from education, what education cannot give." A parent or teacher can do what's within their power to sharpen a child's faculties, but "the honey must be the reward of the individual's own industry." One cannot become wise through the experience of another person, any more than the body can become strong through theoretical exercise. Expecting a child to attain wisdom by a "borrowed fallacious light," on the basis of authority rather than experience, is folly, in Wollstonecraft's view.

Wollstonecraft deals more briefly with the writings of Fordyce, a Scottish minister whose 1766 collection of sermons was very popular. She does not find the sermons worthy of much comment, criticizing their reductionistic treatment of virtue and their patronizing, romanticized appeal to women. She thinks that such sentimental works would not be appealing if women understood their self-worth.



Dr. John Gregory was a Scottish doctor and moralist whose instructions to his daughters were published and became popular after his death. Wollstonecraft argues that Gregory just imposes rules without acknowledging that women have any ability to reason for themselves. In fact, he advises women to conceal any learning they have so as not to scare off men—which is not only offensive, but establishes a pattern of deceit that's harmful to women and their relationships.



In keeping with her Enlightenment perspective, Wollstonecraft argues that prejudiced views are rightfully resisted, since they are not founded upon reason. However, most women are not yet in a position to resist, since they don't understand their own capacities or potential. By way of example, she briefly names a few women authors whose arguments support oppressive sentiments.



Wollstonecraft's vision for education involves more than classroom lectures based on instructors' authority. For her, the heart of learning is experiencing life for oneself, especially through struggle. If this were not true, then we really shouldn't seek anything but pleasure out of life. Students need to actively pursue and fight for virtue by exercising their reason; it can't be a passive process.



Wollstonecraft does not just critique the way girls are educated, but the educational system as a whole. In her view, wisdom has too often been regarded as something that can be gained secondhand. Her belief in the primacy of human reason and downgrading of traditional authority suffuses her approach to learning.



CHAPTER 6

Given that women are educated so inadequately, and occupy a subordinate state in society, is it any wonder, Wollstonecraft asks, “that women everywhere appear a defect in nature?” She argues that this has largely to do with the effect of “early associations of ideas...on the character.”

Habitual association of ideas has a significant effect on people’s moral character. “So ductile is the understanding” in childhood and youth, Wollstonecraft says, that the associations formed during these years “can seldom be disentangled by reason.” Women are more susceptible to “this habitual slavery to first impressions” because they aren’t given the chance to develop the mental rigor necessary to question first impressions.

Wollstonecraft critiques the “absurdity” of expecting women to be reasonable in their “likings” when their whole lives have not been oriented toward acquiring wisdom and virtue. Until they’re educated to use their minds, to love more discriminately, and to better moderate their passions, women shouldn’t be mocked for preferring “rakish” men.

Until that happens, however, women will “pine for a Lovelace”—and they can’t be blamed for “acting according to principles so constantly inculcated.” They’ve been trained to desire a brave protector “prostrate to [their] beauty.”

CHAPTER 7

Wollstonecraft next tackles the subject of modesty—“that soberness of mind which teaches a man not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think,” as distinguished from a self-abasing humility. She argues that the woman who has most developed her reason will be the most modest. A woman who has spent time in intellectual pursuits will have greater “purity of mind” than one who’s dedicated her time to the pursuit of pleasure or love.

While her contemporaries have argued that women’s subordinate status is due to their inferiority, Wollstonecraft turns these arguments on their head, arguing that women’s apparent inferiority is due to the failings of society. These failings begin to impact them in the earliest stages of life.



Wollstonecraft’s point is that what people learn when they’re very young can seldom be unlearned in later life, especially if they aren’t taught how to question it. For example, she mentions that women usually learn facts by rote when they’re children, and are socialized to favor dashing but unscrupulous men.



Women shouldn’t be mocked as adults for continuing to act according to patterns instilled in childhood. This is in keeping with Wollstonecraft’s belief in the crucial, moderating effect of reason on emotions; when that’s missing, there’s only so much that can be expected from behavior.



Wollstonecraft quotes Samuel Richardson’s novel Clarissa, which was immensely popular at the time. In the book, the selfish rake Lovelace is determined to undermine Clarissa’s virtue, ultimately kidnapping and raping her. Wollstonecraft has an extremely low opinion of this and similar novels, believing they exert a strong cultural influence on vulnerable women.



To Wollstonecraft, the connection between modesty and reason is that the modest person has the ability to realistically assess herself and the world. A woman who’s developed her mind can do this; one who’s dedicated herself to frivolous pursuits cannot.



Wollstonecraft draws a distinction between chastity and modesty. Although women are more chaste than men, she claims, chastity cannot of itself produce modesty; it can produce “propriety of conduct, which is merely a respect for the opinion of the world.” But she says it stands to reason that men ought to be more modest than women.

In reality, though, both men and women need to become more modest. Men need to bestow “the modest respect of humanity, and fellow-feeling—not the libidinous mockery of gallantry.” And women should not be expected to be more responsible for checking passion when they haven’t been taught how to moderate their own passions; self-denial should be mutual. In fact, “modesty must be equally cultivated by both sexes, or it will ever remain a sickly hothouse **plant**.”

Wollstonecraft argues that the “ridiculous falsities” told to children about reproduction, etc., tend only to undermine modesty, by allowing their passions to take the place of reason in the formation of their moral characters. She also encourages greater modesty among girls in boarding schools, where bawdy humor tends to reign.

Modesty must be founded on more than “worldly prudence,” or “a good reputation will be her only reward.” If women really desire to possess this virtue, they must seek sobriety of mind and knowledge, because “modesty, being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection.”

CHAPTER 8

Wollstonecraft expands on the subject of reputation. She holds that a preoccupation with reputation has encouraged artificial behavior among women: “it is reputation, not chastity...that they are employed to keep free from spot, not as a virtue, but to preserve their station in the world.” This way of “[confounding] virtue with reputation” leads to hypocrisy.

Wollstonecraft sees chastity—externally adhering to norms of appropriate behavior—as distinct from modesty because, even if someone refrains from outward scandal, they are not necessarily regarding themselves and others through the eyes of reason. Because she sees modesty as dependent on the exercise of the understanding, it makes sense that men, in her view, would excel women in this area.



True modesty can only blossom when men and women are capable of respecting one another, and women should not be held solely responsible for upholding chastity when they’ve been taught all their lives to live according to their passions.



Consistent with her earlier emphasis on the importance of childhood impressions, Wollstonecraft argues that children should receive more accurate information about sex; withholding it bypasses reason and inflames passion unnecessarily.



Wollstonecraft sees external chastity as only good for preserving one’s name, not genuinely respecting one’s own person. For women to become modest, they must first become thoughtful.



In Wollstonecraft’s opinion, preserving one’s position in society has little to do with exhibiting true virtue. She gives the example of a flirtatious married woman who treats a seduced young girl with contempt—the former is in the more socially approved position, yet is arguably living more immodestly.



Women, instead of being encouraged to develop intrinsic virtues, have been taught to garner respect for the opinion of the world—something that is only to be expected from “[beings] to whom reason has been denied.” When motives are pure, on the other hand, virtuous behavior will follow, without requiring obsession with mere outward ceremonies. It’s never enough to view ourselves through the eyes of others, but from the perspective of God’s justice.

Wollstonecraft also attacks male unchastity, a fault that serves to render women “systematically voluptuous” because women accommodate their behavior in order to obtain pleasure and power from men. This skewing of priorities leads them to “[sacrifice] to lasciviousness the parental affection,” either aborting or abandoning their offspring. “Surely nature,” she argues, “never intended that women, by satisfying an appetite, should frustrate the very purpose for which it was implanted?”—i.e., motherhood.

“The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other” when it comes to all the virtues. And especially when it comes to unchastity, both men and women “defeat the purpose of nature,” even though men are able to avoid “the shame that pursues the crime in the other sex.”

CHAPTER 9

Wollstonecraft sees the disparity between classes as a factor in the decline of virtue. Once a person gains property, they “procure the respect due only to talents and virtue” and begin to neglect their duties. Hereditary wealth produces habitual idleness. She argues that until more equality is present in society, “morality will never gain ground.”

Not only that, but virtue cannot be expected of women until they are independent of men. As long as they are dependent on their husbands, women will be selfish and cunning. As long as men live by their wealth and women live by their charms, “how can we expect them to discharge those ennobling duties which...require exertion and self-denial”? Wollstonecraft says that “society is not properly organized which does not compel men and women to discharge their respective duties.”

For another example of the elevation of reputation over virtue, Wollstonecraft mentions the well-known legend of Lucretia, an ancient Roman woman who stabbed herself after being raped. This is the kind of thing that happens when women are taught to put the world’s opinion before genuine modesty.



Wollstonecraft argues that women respond to men’s unchastity by lowering themselves accordingly, having been accustomed to gaining power from male lust. Unchastity in both sexes leads to abortion and abandonment of children—something Wollstonecraft argues is against nature. Sexual desire is meant to work in harmony with motherhood, she believes, not against it.



While Wollstonecraft maintains that men’s and women’s virtue is always intertwined, chastity is the most blatant example, because men’s behavior leads directly to the degradation of women’s. Not only that, but women end up bearing the shame of both parties, since men can get away with their outward reputation untouched; women often can’t.



A wealthy person doesn’t have the same attachment to duty as a person without wealth, Wollstonecraft believes; the wealthy can rely on reputation instead of virtue. Therefore societal inequality is bad for morality overall.



When dependent women seek to stay attached to men by whatever means necessary, their virtue is degraded. Wollstonecraft believes that virtue upholds duty, and duties uphold society. As long as men and women are connected by manipulation and passion instead of by the virtuous and reasonable fulfillment of duties, society is on a shaky footing.



By way of illustration, Wollstonecraft observes that when a woman is admired for her beauty, to the degree that she neglects her duties as a mother, she undermines her own happiness by failing to cultivate maternal affections. True happiness comes from “well regulated affections, and an affection includes a duty.” Men cause misery and vice when they incentivize women to focus on their beauty—they “make natural and artificial duties clash...when in nature they all harmonize.”

Wollstonecraft argues that breastfeeding is supposed to “[cement] the matrimonial tie,” but because wealthy women “spurn” the duty of nursing their children, this natural bonding does not occur. She envisions working-class families as being in the most natural and happiest state, because husband and wife are fully occupied in their respective duties—“equally necessary and independent of each other”—and thus regularly renewed in their affection for one another.

Wollstonecraft argues that distinctions in rank, by dividing the world between tyrants and dependents, “corrupt, almost equally, every class of people, because respectability is not attached” to duties, but to station. When duties aren’t fulfilled, “the affections cannot gain sufficient strength to fortify the virtue of which they are the natural reward.”

A good legislator, Wollstonecraft argues, tries to encourage each individual to be virtuous, because private virtue is “the cement of public happiness.” But women can’t strive for virtue if they are continually subject to mere propriety instead of to principles. So not only wealth but the lack of cultivation of reason denigrates women.

A person who discharges their duties is independent. Women’s first duty to themselves as rational beings and to society is that of being a mother. Wealthier stations, therefore, degrade women by dispensing with the duties of motherhood and rendering women “mere dolls.”

Wollstonecraft distinguishes affections from mere feelings. Affections are dispositions, shaped by reason, to fulfill one’s duties to society. When one’s affections are distorted, as when one strives to remain sexually desirable rather than paying attention to one’s children, it’s impossible to fulfill one’s duties. Wollstonecraft also believes that nature inclines us toward certain duties, pointing to her Enlightenment expectation that nature and reason are harmonious.



For Wollstonecraft, breastfeeding is the clearest example of the tie between nature and duty. It is meant to deepen the bond between women and their children and husbands, but when the duty is neglected, affections cannot grow as nature intends. Because of this, Wollstonecraft critiques those middle-class mothers who choose not to nurse their own babies. She idealizes working-class families who necessarily have to devote more time to their duties, and thus have more natural ties of affection in daily life.



The unhealthy dynamics prevalent between men and women reflect unhealthy societal divisions. Because society is obsessed with reputation instead of with duty, natural affections can’t flourish, and virtue isn’t reinforced. Wollstonecraft says that it’s “almost superhuman” for women, in particular, to circumvent this system.



Wollstonecraft draws a comparison between oppressed women and African slaves who are “subject to prejudices that brutalize them,” making virtue all but unattainable. The British slave trade and the growth of abolitionism would have been much discussed at this time.



Because Wollstonecraft believes that women are naturally disposed to be mothers, she holds that taking on the duties of motherhood, in harmony with reason, is actually the path to independence for most women. When wealthier women pass the duties of motherhood to nurses and live in leisure instead, they undercut their own virtue. They also do not have alternatives open to them to keep their faculties sharp, unlike men, who can turn to the military or politics.



In order to be really virtuous and useful in their domestic duties, women need the protection of civil laws. They must also not be entirely dependent on their husbands for support; after all, generosity is not possible for someone who has nothing, or virtue for someone who is not free.

Though Wollstonecraft holds that “women in the common walks of life are called to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason,” she laments that women “of a superior cast” don’t have avenues to pursue yet greater independence. She comments that, though it might incite laughter, she believes that women ought to have governmental representatives.

Wollstonecraft suggests that women could occupy themselves by studying medicine and be physicians as well as nurses and midwives. They might also study politics and history. The study of business might save women from resorting to both “common and legal prostitution.” As it stands, few employments are open to women, and even the role of governess tends to be degrading.

Wollstonecraft argues that any government is defective which is “unmindful of the happiness of one half of its members” and doesn’t provide for them by encouraging them to fill “respectable stations.” In order to “render their private virtue a public benefit, they must have a civil existence in the state,” no matter whether they are married or single; otherwise, women’s abilities will go undeveloped, and society will never benefit.

In short, as long as women are entrapped in a system that rewards them for wasting their lives, they won’t “willingly resign the privileges of rank and sex for the privileges of humanity.” Men must take the initiative to “snap [women’s] chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience.” Then women will have the ability to become not only better wives and mothers, but better citizens.

CHAPTER 10

Parental affection is sometimes a pretext to tyranny, Wollstonecraft says. In the current situation, since women are “a slave...to prejudice,” mothers are typically either neglectful or overindulgent. Since women are naturally caretakers of their children in their infancy, women’s understanding should be strengthened. Women who are guided chiefly by their own feelings, rather than by reason, will continually fall to one extreme or the other, failing in the formation of their children’s temperament.

Law should safeguard women’s rights, especially property rights, since dependence weakens virtue, which in turn weakens society as a whole.



Though Wollstonecraft believes that the majority of women are called to be mothers, she allows that some exceptional women need other avenues. She hints that political involvement might be one outlet for such women.



Wollstonecraft offers several examples of ways that women could become more useful and engaged in society. Her suggestion that the ability to start businesses would spare women from the degradation of prostitution (or a loveless marriage) is particularly groundbreaking. Her remarks on governesses reflect her own unhappy experience as a governess in Ireland.



Unless women enjoy full equality as citizens and their rights are protected by law, they will be prevented from benefiting society as a whole. Wollstonecraft believes that if society is structured properly, then women will be free to flourish—a view reflective of enlightenment progressivism and a high regard for human nature.



Wollstonecraft believes that it’s up to men to take the first steps in liberating women; under society’s present structure, there are few incentives for women to do this. In her view, once women are free to develop their reason, there will be no further obstacles to larger society’s benefit.



Since women are not taught to develop their reason, they aren’t equipped to be good mothers. They will either tend to overindulge or dominate their children, with harmful effects on children’s character. If for no other reason, then, women should be educated so as to become more effective caretakers for their children.



Good motherhood requires sense and independence of mind, which women who are dependent on their husbands lack. Unless she has a firmer command of her own temper, founded on reason, a mother can't manage her children properly. In fact, she hardly deserves the name of "mother," in Wollstonecraft's opinion, if she refuses to nurse her children. This duty is naturally intended to deepen affection.

Breastfeeding, with its clear link between affection and duty, continues to be a key issue for Wollstonecraft. She goes on to argue that those who hire others to nurse and nurture their children should not be surprised when their children's sense of duty to their parents is weak.



CHAPTER 11

Parents demand blind obedience, Wollstonecraft argues, because they don't discharge their duty on a reasonable basis, and "a mysterious sanctity" attaches to their arbitrary claims. Her view of the reciprocal duty between parent and child is simply that "The parent who pays proper attention to helpless infancy has a right to require the same attention when the feebleness of age comes upon him." No child should be subjugated to the mere will of a parent once he or she is old enough to answer for themselves.

Wollstonecraft's view of the relationship between parent and child is firmly founded on her Enlightenment perspective that only reason, not tradition and authority, can serve as the basis for truth. Most parents, however, resort to a kind of divinely-sanctioned blind authority to teach their children.



A parent who strives to form his child's heart and understanding merits the lifelong respect and friendship of the child. Most of the time, however, respect is demanded on the basis of a blind natural right. But the demand of implicit respect, Wollstonecraft holds, is unjust, because the reasonableness of moral demands should always be transparently clear to all.

Wollstonecraft's view of parenthood has parallels to her view of marriage. Both relationships must be founded on reason and respect for one another's status as rational beings, not on traditional views of relational hierarchy.



When a "slavish bondage to parents" prevails, girls are harmed more than boys, because they are "prepared for the slavery of marriage," or else they become "tyrants" in their own households. The parent who simply sets a good example and lets that example take effect, by contrast, will receive the rightful devotion of their child. The habit of submitting to reason should be instilled early, since it is simply "to submit to the nature of things," and to God.

Wollstonecraft argues that the expectation of slavish devotion is not only unreasonable, it creates a harmful precedent for girls, who are primed to submit to husbands in the same way and to tyrannize their own children. Rather, all children should be taught to rely on their reasoning faculties, in harmony with nature.



When women are taught from an early age to act on the basis of "mere whims and customs," it is difficult to undo the damage, because even if virtue is successfully instilled later in life, they look back and scorn their parents' folly. Children should not be put in the position of having to make excuses for their parents' failings; esteem for their parents' virtues, as well as natural affection, should ideally be blended from the start. However, Wollstonecraft fears that until society is better constituted, parents will continue to insist on obedience by divine right.

Wollstonecraft's republican leanings and Enlightenment influence are again evident here. She rejects any hint of hierarchy based on divine right, and she believes that a properly-structured society creates conditions suitable for virtue. As things stand now, however, children are in a difficult position; virtue instilled too late can cause them to be ashamed of their parents, which isn't good for societal stability.



CHAPTER 12

There is only so much good that private education can achieve, Wollstonecraft believes, until education becomes “a grand national concern.” Children need to associate with other children in order for their faculties to develop properly. For example, when children are only in the company of adults, even wise adults, they fall into the habit of asking questions and replying implicitly on the answers their elders give them. Being among their peers, by contrast, encourages young people to speak their minds.

Wollstonecraft admits that she has previously advocated for private education, but she has revised her opinion. She still holds that boarding-schools, as currently constituted, tend to be “hot-beds of vice and folly.” On the other hand, home education tends to coddle children and focus more on genteel accomplishments than on humane virtues. Therefore she supports some method of combining public and private education, allowing proper “domestic affections” to form while also allowing them to spend much time with their peers on terms of equality. Both these things are important to making good citizens.

Wollstonecraft disdains the practice of the “cathedral service” as a “childish routine” in which “a disgusting skeleton of the former state is still exhibited.” It associates religion in the minds of youth with mere external ceremony, thereby making it “ludicrous.”

As it stands now, public education tends to raise up a few great men in each generation, but it is not enough concerned with the work of “[forming] citizens.” Good citizenship arises from “the affections of a son and a brother,” and public virtues from private character, which is why children should not be isolated from their parents. The solution is to form national day-schools where teachers aren’t dependent on parents for their salaries and rival schools don’t have to compete for patronage.

Wollstonecraft believes that both boys and girls tend to acquire bad habits when they spend too much time in close proximity. She therefore believes that, for the benefit of both sexes, girls and boys should be educated together. Because marriage is “the cement of society,” both men and women must become enlightened citizens in order to fulfill their respective duties and enjoy proper fellowship with one another. If coeducation were the norm, then modesty between the sexes might arise more naturally than if it were instilled through mere “habitual propriety.”

Here Wollstonecraft shifts to the culmination of her book, and its most daring proposals. Because she holds that the structure of society is so important for the encouragement of virtue, it follows that national schools—created to instill virtuous habits in all children—fit within her worldview. Such schools also allow children to establish healthy patterns in relating to adults and to one another from an early age.



Wollstonecraft also goes into some detail on the benefits of country day schools compared to urban academies, showing her preference for rural settings and natural environments as friendlier to virtue (anticipating the dawning Romantic movement as well). She aims for a balance of influences, neither isolating children from their families nor preventing them from bonding with their peers.



Wollstonecraft also has scathing words for the English national church, which had a prominent role in most schools of the time. She believes that the church’s focus on externalities has a detrimental effect on children’s religious development.



In Wollstonecraft’s view, schools should have a more democratic influence, not just raising up a few “greats.” Character and citizenship begin at home, and national schools can help broaden and deepen the sentiments formed in childhood. Wollstonecraft also believes that national schools would be less beholden to parents’ whims, although she does not address any potential weaknesses or trade-offs of relying on national schools.



Radically, Wollstonecraft believes that early mixing between boys and girls is actually healthier than it is harmful—it would strip some of the artificiality from gender relationships and even prepare children to be better spouses in later life. Basically, she believes her method would allow oppressive gender relations to be cut off at the root.



Another advantage of women receiving the same education as men is that it will allow women to develop a better judgment as the foundation of taste. True taste is the result of understanding, but “the emotions struck out of [women’s hearts] will continue to be vivid and transitory, unless a proper education store their mind with knowledge.”

Wollstonecraft calls for the establishment of free day schools for children of both sexes and all classes. Alongside traditional subjects, she recommends plenty of open-air exercise, as well as teaching through socratic discussion. After age nine, she recommends that children divide into trade and liberal arts tracks, depending on ability and class. But sexes should still be educated together; Wollstonecraft even sees early marriage as a possible beneficial outcome, since marriages promote less selfish lifestyles and are thus more beneficial for society.

Wollstonecraft believes that this coeducational system would avoid the “early debaucheries” which tend to make men selfish and girls weak and frivolous, by establishing equality early in life and allowing friendship to flourish more readily. They would indeed be “schools of morality” which prepare citizens for a virtuous society.

Wollstonecraft reiterates that education, including political and moral subjects, should in no way distract girls from their domestic duties, because the self-respect and active mind instilled by study would make them embrace all their duties. Literary and scientific study don’t distract women from duty; “indolence and vanity” do that. Still less is it an attempt to “emulate masculine virtues.”

Wollstonecraft even suggests that her schools should leave discipline in the hands of students—allowing wrongdoers to be tried by their peers—in order to instill principles of justice.

Wollstonecraft sums up her “hints” on national education as follows: “I principally wish to enforce the necessity of educating the sexes together to perfect both, and of making children sleep at home that they may learn to love home; yet ... they should be sent to school to mix with a number of equals, for only by the jostlings of equality can we form a just opinion of ourselves.” Wollstonecraft reiterates that moral improvement must be mutual, for if men will not “improve women, they will deprave them,” and degrade their own virtue in the process.

Women’s judgment will always be stunted unless knowledge is instilled from a young age, allowing their emotions to be more balanced with reason.



Wollstonecraft continues to lay out her progressive educational program. One of its hallmarks would be open-ended, discussion-based (“socratic”) learning—a bold innovation in any classroom at the time, much less a children’s classroom. While there is still an allowance for class divisions—Wollstonecraft assumes that lower-class children will be more likely to pursue trades—gender integration is maintained throughout. Surprisingly, she advocates for early marriage (in contrast, presumably, to later, arranged marriages) as a potentially healthy progression for society.



Again, Wollstonecraft shows her belief that if the proper societal conditions are put into place, barriers to virtue, morality, and overall flourishing will be eliminated.



Wollstonecraft anticipates possible criticisms of educating girls, arguing that because study benefits the mind and reason above all, girls will be more inclined to duty (which she sees as an enactment of one’s reason), not drawn away from it.



This is perhaps the most radical example of Wollstonecraft’s republican sentiment, showing her powerful belief in the reliability of well-formed reason.



Wollstonecraft’s advocacy for coeducation is an expression of her belief in the mutually reinforcing potential of male and female virtue and vice. Her enthusiasm for the “jostlings of equality” is another clear nod to her politically radical stance. Overall, her educational theory is intended to allow the development of reason, for the betterment of relationships and society as a whole.



If for no other reason, the national education of women is vital in order to avoid further sacrifices to “that moloch prejudice.” Men’s selfishness keeps women from acquiring enough learning even to nurse their own children properly. And as a child grows, “the weakness of the mother will be visited on the children.” If women are taught to rely excessively on their husbands and not develop their reasoning ability, their children’s upbringing will suffer. Therefore women should be taught anatomy and medicine, not only to nurse their babies, but their husbands and parents as well. It only follows that women should be acquainted with “the anatomy of the mind” as well.

Moloch was an ancient Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice—a provocative reference meant to highlight the harm inflicted by inadequate education. The selfishness and suppressing behavior of men, according to Wollstonecraft, keeps women from developing their own reason such that they can become good mothers. Women should be taught relevant principles in school so that later generations will not continue to suffer from this state of affairs.



CHAPTER 13

Wollstonecraft wants to prove that the weakness of mind and body willfully perpetuated by men in women prevents them from discharging their particular duties, namely motherhood. One example of such weakness is ignorance, which unscrupulous cranks prey upon—such as those who tell horoscopes for money. A Christian woman, she argues, should not believe that a charlatan in disguise holds the secrets of the future. The same goes for belief in hypnotists, whose “hocus pocus tricks pretend to work a miracle.” She argues that while “it is easier to touch the body of a saint, or to be magnetized, than to restrain our appetites or govern our passions ... health of body or mind can only be recovered by these means.”

Wollstonecraft disdains certain hobbies popular among middle-class women that illustrate the sadly undeveloped state of their reason. No reasonable person would resort to fortune-tellers or hypnotists to guide their lives; virtue and duty should occupy that role. She believes that “rational religion” only submits to a being who is “reasonable”; charlatans make a mockery of that.



Another feminine weakness, the result of a narrow education, is “a romantic twist of the mind,” or sentimentality. Women who are taught to be overly reliant on their feelings often neglect their duties and fall into vice. Such women are “amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists.” When women aren’t allowed into the higher business of political life, “sentiments become events,” and they “imbibe opinions” which insipid reading inspires. “Unable to grasp anything great, is it surprising that they find...disquisitions addressed to the understanding intolerably tedious?” Nevertheless, she grants that even reading a silly novel is better than reading nothing.

Wollstonecraft is not dismissing the importance of literature with these remarks; rather, she was very concerned about the popularity of sensational, romantic novels among her peers, believing that they only reinforced women’s excessively sentimental tendencies. At the same time, she acknowledges that most women have not been educated so as to develop a taste for more sophisticated and beneficial reading material.



Wollstonecraft also argues that the excessive attention to dress is not actually a propensity of women, but is common to humanity. But the “immoderate fondness for dress, for pleasure, and for sway” shows women to be uncivilized. Their tendency toward exclusive affections, poured into their husbands, children, and pets, is likewise an indication of a confining education, not of genuine generosity of spirit.

Wollstonecraft identifies other behavior patterns that have traditionally been considered “natural” for women, arguing that these are actually signs that women have not had sufficient opportunity to develop their reason and virtue.



Wollstonecraft names a few more “follies” to which women are subject, such as neglecting or indulging their children. Wollstonecraft also argues that if women nursed their babies, childbirths would be spaced at wider intervals, preserving mothers’ health. And if they undertook a more rational system of managing the home, women would have more time to, for instance, read literature or cultivate a taste for fine arts. But greater domestic happiness will not be possible until women’s minds are preferred to their bodies.

Wollstonecraft sums up her argument that women must acquire more rational understandings and affections in order to be more useful to society. A “revolution” in female manners is needed. While Wollstonecraft has not tried to downplay female faults, she has sought to demonstrate that they are “the natural consequence of their education and station in society,” which means they will change when women are afforded their due freedoms. If this does not prove to be the case, then men should “not mark more severely what women do amiss” than mere animals do; “allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom ye deny the rights of reason, or ye will be worse than Egyptian task-masters, expecting virtue where nature has not given understanding!”

Wollstonecraft’s views about breastfeeding and household management accord with her belief that nature and reason ideally work in tandem. But these options are not readily available to most middle-class women because of the way society encourages them to focus their energies on physical beauty instead of on engaging their intellects.



Wollstonecraft uses the word “revolution” for the first time in the book, no longer letting her political sympathies remain implicit. In closing, she argues that if women are granted freedom and their lives fail to evolve as expected, then men should rightfully dominate over them (obviously, she does not believe this will happen). She ends with another provocative reference, this time to the Egyptian slaveholders who kept the biblical Hebrews in captivity. If indeed nature hasn’t granted women the capacity for understanding, then it’s better to treat them like irrational creatures than to expect impossible things from them. If society undertakes needful structural changes, however, women’s potential can be expected to shine forth more and more.





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