

Wollstonecraft on
women's "slavery":
perspectives from the
enlightenment and
mode...



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Mary Wollstonecraft obviously wrote with the intention of raising awareness for women's rights. She did so unflinchingly and, at times, with language that's even shocking to us today. During Romanticism, her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* absolutely required attention. She was writing in response to the educational reforms of 1791 that only called for Enlightenment reforms to men's education (Mellor, 33). Wollstonecraft's comparison of the plight of women to slavery may sound exaggerated, until one looks at the facts of the time and can see how the rigid gender roles in society enslaved women to the men they were controlled by. Wollstonecraft was disgusted by the idea that the ideas of the Enlightenment were meant only for men to take advantage of. She felt that if the Western world was going to change its rhetoric to one of equal opportunity and dignity for all persons, women should be included in that category.

As Wollstonecraft states, "If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality...their conduct should be founded on the same principles and have the same aim." (Wollstonecraft, 91). She begs the question that even if women are inferior, why do they not have the same principles and virtues guiding some kind of inferior education?

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* doesn't just argue that women deserved education. It also argues that women were not naturally inferior, but that they had been forced into a kind of slavery, whether it be to marriage or to virtue, that had systematically made them weak and unintelligent. One of Wollstonecraft's first critiques is of the system of marriage in the 18th and 19th centuries. She is often quoted saying: "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 fulfill 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; in the same manner, I mean, to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another.”

(Wollstonecraft, 250). Wollstonecraft makes it clear that within the constructs of marriage, a woman has no independence or autonomy. She urges for a change in the way that women are chosen for marriage, and explains that if women are constantly focusing on making themselves physically desirable, they will have little time to focus on their education. A woman should choose a husband who is interested in a partnership, not a position of power. Wollstonecraft acknowledges that all women are oppressed in some way, but that they should not use their repression as a reason to be harsh towards their husbands and children. Wollstonecraft is not calling for any kind of harsh or violent revolution, rather, she's calling for a reform to society's oppressive structures.

Ann Mellor's book *Romanticism and Gender* paints a picture of how truly revolutionary Wollstonecraft's ideas on marriage were. When it came to choosing husbands, women often chose men whom they found physically desirable. Wollstonecraft is adamant about the importance of an “egalitarian marriage” and tells women that choosing marriage based on sexual desire is bound to end in an unhappy relationship (Mellor, 35). Wollstonecraft's own marriage was one of mutual respect, hence the extensive arguments she has on how oppressive a marriage can be without that. As a product of an equal partnership, Wollstonecraft understood that the arguments from the other

side were ill-advised, and she sought to educate young women with logic and reason, just as the Enlightenment had taught her to. A common counter-argument from the other side was that a woman in a relationship that did not force her to be submissive would be unvirtuous.

Mary Wollstonecraft's perspective on feminine virtue was unlike anything people had heard before. While most contemporary feminists would fight for sexual freedom, Wollstonecraft urged women to be modest. She knew that leading a life of sexual promiscuity was just another way for a man to enslave a woman; if she gets pregnant, then she's responsible for the child and does not have the opportunity to go to school and become an educated citizen (Mellor, 364). "...for that the unchaste man doubly defeats the purpose of nature, by rendering women barren, and destroying his own constitution, though he avoids the shame that pursues the crime in the other sex." (Wollstonecraft, 219). Wollstonecraft acknowledges that in situations that women are impregnated outside of marriage, the "shame" is only reflected on one party. She also recognizes that when women choose to act and dress in a seductive way, they give themselves up to the slavery that Wollstonecraft is so insistent about. Ann Mellor also breaks down Wollstonecraft's argument on sexuality and modesty in her essay "Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft". Mellor describes the "female psychological dependence" that Wollstonecraft has no problem labeling as slavery (Mellor, 364). The history of women using sexuality to gain power was well known, but what few people really understood was how easily those women were knocked from their pegs of power and forced into the years of enslavement that was single motherhood. These women dealt

with similar plights to the colonial African slaves of the time, being forced to bear children of the men who controlled them. However, Wollstonecraft's middle class has a way out, and that was through a reform of education.

The real reason that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was as a response to the misogynistic education reforms of 1791.

They focused entirely on the education of boys and the employment of Enlightenment ideals on that education. Wollstonecraft, an avid supporter of equal education, begins her vindication with the same Enlightenment ideals being kept from young women and girls. She utilizes logic and reason to explain that the only reason women appear to be "naturally" inferior has to do with the fact that men have been systematically weakening them in order to oppress them. "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, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives." (Wollstonecraft, 84). Wollstonecraft calls for a complete reform of this idea. She argues that women, just as much as men, need all kinds of education, both intellectual and physical. If the Enlightenment and its principles are going to be applied to British society, then they have to be applied to all citizens of that society, as is inherent in their makeup. If they were kept from those citizens who were by Wollstonecraft's new definition, not naturally inferior, the reasoning behind colonial slavery being acceptable, then those citizens were being wrongfully enslaved.

Though she was not the only person arguing for the rights of women, Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the very first to use the exact same rhetoric as those arguing against her. By proving the potential of women through her own skill at reforming and writing, she was the pinnacle of the kind of intelligent and involved citizen that her reforms planned to produce. All that was left for her opponents to say was that they were afraid to lose the power that they had to women, and in turn, admit that they were not actually followers of this new egalitarian philosophy that they had so widely supported. Part of Wollstonecraft's genius was her likening of the plight of women at the time to slavery, something done by plenty of Enlightenment thinkers and writers. By way of logic and reason, Wollstonecraft was able to pull the curtain on the horrors of female enslavement and oppression in the Romantic Age.

Works Cited

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