

John Protevi  
Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*  
<http://www.protevi.com/john/SN>

1. OVERVIEW. You can't tell the story of Wollstonecraft without that of the French Revolution. Whatever story you tell of the origins and progress of the French Revolution (and its relation to the Haitian Revolution – you really should read *The Black Jacobins* by CLR James some day), Wollstonecraft takes it as an occasion for remaking social relations on the basis of rational argument.

In her case there's a doubling effect: the rational argument is that we must allow women to develop their public, politically useful reason via public education. Wollstonecraft denies that any "natural" destiny produces feminine behavior in its flirtation, coquettishness, intrigue, and beauty obsession. These are in fact socially determined responses to women being confined to domesticity and made dependent on husbands for financial support. This situation is destructive for both men and women and needs to be replaced by public education and public reason.

2. TALLEYRAND. Wollstonecraft dedicates the second edition of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to Talleyrand, whose report to the (post-revolutionary) Assembly on the issue of national public education is included as an appendix of the Hackett edition we're using. In that report, Talleyrand proposes that a) women's best role in society is in the home; b) that this domesticity is natural; c) that female domesticity is one side of a "dual spheres" system (public for men, domestic for women) whose harmony leads to overall social benefit; and d) that masculinization is the effect of public education for women.

a) Talleyrand proposes that, insofar as the purpose of national public education is to be the happiness of the greatest number, women should be privately educated, in the paternal home. And the goal of that education is to be that of helping them fulfill their purpose, "supplying domestic happiness and [fulfilling] the duties of home life."

b) Domesticity for women is "the wishes of nature"; hence they should "never aspire to the exercise of political rights and functions." Domesticity is good for women as it fits "their delicate constitutions, their peaceful inclinations, and the many duties of motherhood."

c) Nature reveals that the "division of powers" (dual spheres: men in public, women in private) is a "source of harmony."

d) If there are exceptional women who excel in the public sphere, their existence shouldn't let us "upset nature's overall plan." These women need to admit that they are exceptions and that the vast majority of women are well served by feminine domesticity. The most that widespread public education of women would do is to produce "perhaps, in a century's time, a few more men."

3. DEDICATION LETTER. Wollstonecraft replies in her dedication letter that public education for women is the key to spreading "knowledge and virtue." The editors of the

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Hackett volume note that "virtue" here has public and private senses: public virtue means being a good citizen, informed and able to engage rational debates on political issues, while private virtue means good personal behavior. These two senses of virtue are interrelated; how they are related is one of W's major themes.

The argument goes something like this: unless you allow women to develop their reason and participate in public virtue by means of political engagement they will be forced to focus only on beauty and flirtation to catch a husband. (W doesn't really see how women could be financially independent by having a trade or occupation.) But beauty is short lived, and flirty, gossipy wives will drive their husbands to cheat on them, and the wives might as well follow suit. So private virtue falls if public virtue is prohibited to women. But if you allow women public education to develop their reason and engage in public virtue, then you can have genuine affection be the basis for marriage, which then occasions less cheating.

4. ROUSSEAU. Rousseau is a constant target for Wollstonecraft. In the excerpts from *Emile* in the Hackett book, we see that Rousseau is another dual spheres thinker: "In the union of the sexes each alike contributes to the common end, but in different ways."

But he thinks this works by a paradoxical (or "dialectical") war between the sexes in which women's physical weakness becomes her cultural / psychological strength and her means of triumph; women do this provoking men to discover their strength: "her strength is in her charms, by their means she should compel him to discover and use his strength."

For Rousseau, reason must follow nature in directing women to domesticity and fidelity; a cheating wife is worse than a cheating husband. A cheating wife makes her husband feel that a child might be that of another man, "a thief who is robbing his own children of their inheritance." So a wife must not only be faithful; she must make the husband believe in her fidelity, so guarding her reputation is essential.

Furthermore, the fact that some women don't have children doesn't mean maternity is not the proper calling for women, ordained by "the general laws of nature and morality."

Given all this, girls must be educated differently from boys. And they are, of their own accord. "What have men to do with the education of girls? What is there to hinder their mothers educating them as they please?" This domestic education is oriented to vanity and coquetry, but what can men do here? "Is it our fault that we are charmed by their beauty and delighted by their airs and graces?"

5. WOLLSTONECRAFT'S INTRODUCTION. In the Introduction, W focuses on a) education; b) physical strength; c) masculinization; d) class differences; e) sexual attractiveness and "Rousseau's dialectic."

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a. W doesn't like a lot of contemporary female behavior – vanity, flirtatiousness, orientation to being sexually attractive to (shallow) men – but places this squarely at the feet of bad education, not any kind of natural disposition. So she agrees with Rousseau's description but denies its naturalness.

b. Yes, women are naturally less physically strong than men, but that's no reason to deny them the chance to develop their public reason, which would shift the basis for the relation between the sexes from fleeting sexual attraction to "a durable interest in their hearts," and being "friends."

There are at least three things to say about physical strength. One, we have to look at distributions, not just averages: lots of women are stronger than lots of men. Two, we have to look at strength training differences, both amount and intensity. Third, we'd have to look at upper vs lower body strength; there's a lot less difference in body weight adjusted leg strength after intense training than upper body strength.

c. Enough with the "masculinization" business already! If men have taken human potential characteristics and made them their own by monopolizing training opportunities (public reason, physical strength), then by all means, let's have women become more "masculine," because that just means, "reach their human potentials." (Now if "masculinization" means "becoming a bro" ["ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming"] then you can keep that!)

d. W says that education that is supposedly for women is actually that for "ladies." What she wants is some good middle-class education for development of public reason, not the sort of thing that decadent aristocrats go in for: "the education of the rich tends to render them vain and helpless" because they have servants to do the work that would develop them if they did it themselves.

e. If you raise women to be "insignificant objects of desire" then you're setting them up for raising hell once "the short-lived bloom of beauty is over." And even while they are in the prime of youth you're asking for trouble as "artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength."

So W agrees with Rousseau as to the facts of contemporary feminine behavior but she denies it is "natural" and denies it is "charming." Instead it's degrading: "those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire."

Although of course not all women are flighty, vain, coquettes even if too many men are bros: "many individuals have more sense than their male relatives... some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern."

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## CHAPTER 1

In Ch 1, Wollstonecraft juxtaposes a hopeful narrative to Rousseau's decline narrative. She is equally horrified by current society, but holds hope for the future. "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors that all *is* now right; and I, that all will *be* right" (14).

In W's reading, R mistakes the cause of present-day evils. They are due to bad (hierarchical) social institutions ("vestiges of barbarism" [16]), not to civilization *tout court* coming to replace a state of nature of virtuous solitary individuals. If we could reform current institutions, W holds, we could improve humanity's lot. So the problem is that we haven't made enough progress in civilization, not that civilization represents a decline from the state of nature.

W attacks, in turn, monarchy, standing armies, and the Church. She then proposes a counter-narrative to Rousseau about the development of social structures.

W starts at the top: *monarchy*, by its concentration of power, calls forth vile intrigues to gain the top spot. Next, *standing armies* are bad because they are hierarchical, that is, they work by "despotism" or command rather than by reasoned discussion. It's not that you can have an army that doesn't work by command; the problem is *standing* armies that stifle reason, and that produce "a set of idle superficial young men, whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners render vice more dangerous, by concealing its deformity under gay ornamental drapery" (16). The *clergy* are stifled, albeit to a lesser degree, by the need to show dogmatic conformity to their patrons.

The conclusion is very important: "the character of every man is, in some degree, formed by his profession..." (17). This is an important "materialist" principle; humans are plastic so that "character" is "to some degree" a matter of habit formed by institutions. So enlightenment of society concentrates on reform of institutions, not on moralistic hectoring or encouragement of individual virtue.

Now on to W's counter-narrative of social stages. Chiefs and priests have power at the exit from "barbarism" (i.e., hunter-gatherer or early, non-state, mixed economies). Then aristocracy, then monarchy coming out of aristocratic power struggles. So we then have monarchical and priestly power early on. Then the people get some power, so rulers must "gloss over their oppression with a shew of right" (17). (Note that this is Rousseau's story in the *Essay on the Origin of Inequality* of the *factual* "social contract," which just cements in place inequality.) Thus it is monarchy, rather than "civilization" *tout court*, which is the source of current corruption; Rousseau thus misses the chance to see the possibility of the "perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization" (18).