

# A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects

Mary Wollstonecraft

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—If this work gets you interested in its author, read Claire Tomalin’s fine *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1974).

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## Glossary

**accomplishment:** That is a kind of sneer-word when MW uses it writing about the ‘accomplishments’ that women are trained to have. To ‘accomplish’ something can be to complete or finish it; a few decades ago some young women were sent to a ‘finishing school’ before being launched into society.

**address:** skill, elegance, dexterity; usually thought of (by MW at least) as something learned, practised, contrived—not natural. See page 58.

**amuse:** In MW’s time ‘amuse’ had a central meaning which it now has only at the margins: to ‘amuse oneself by. . .’ was to pass the time by. . . . A child who is ‘amusing herself’ by dressing her doll (page 29) needn’t be taking much pleasure in this.

**animal spirits:** These figured in a theory, popularised by Descartes: they were supposed to be an extremely fine-divided liquid or gas—much less lumpy than water or air—that could move with great speed and get in anywhere; among their roles was to transmit causal influences from the sense-organs to the brain, almost instantaneously.

**brute, brutal:** A brute is a lower or non-human animal. A brutal or brutish way of behaving is one that falls below a minimum standard for being human—e.g. the ‘brutal’ behaviour of a mother [on page 89] who indulges her child without thinking about the effects of her conduct on the child’s later development or on •other people.

**docile:** Strictly and originally this meant ‘able to learn’ and/or ‘willing to learn’. In MW’s usage, as in ours today, a ‘docile’ person is one who is easy to manage, persuade, manipulate, etc. One who is biddable.

**education:** In MW’s time this word had a wider meaning than it tends to have today. It wouldn’t be far wrong to replace most occurrences of it by ‘upbringing’. See MW’s discussion of ‘education’ starting on page 14.

**genius:** In the present work this means something like ‘extremely high-level intellect’; similar to the word’s present meaning, but not as strong.

**he or she:** MW never uses ‘he or she’, ‘his or hers’ or the like. These occur in the present version to avoid the discomfort we feel in her use of ‘it’, as when she says ‘every being’ can become virtuous by the exercise of ‘its own reason’.

**(im)mortal:** MW ties •being immortal to •having reason and to •being answerable to God.

**mistress:** In this work, a ‘mistress of a family is in charge of a family; and a ‘mistress of a man is a sexual partner of a man. The word is not used here except in those two kinds of context.

**person:** When MW refers to a woman’s ‘person’ she is always referring to the woman herself considered as sexually attractive. A man’s interest in a woman’s ‘person’ is his sexual interest in her body, though clothing and jewellery may also come into it.

**prescription:** In several important places MW uses ‘prescription’ in its sense as a legal term, now obsolete, referring to something’s being accepted or unchallenged etc. *because it has been in place for so long.*

**sceptre:** An ornamental rod held in the hand of a monarch as a symbol of royal authority. MW uses the word several times, always as a metaphor for power or authority: ‘beauty

is woman's sceptre' means that beauty is woman's source of power.

**sense:** MW speaks of 'a man of sense' she means 'a fairly intelligent man' or, in her terms, 'a man with a fairly enlarged understanding'.

**sensibility:** Capacity for refined emotion, readiness to feel compassion for suffering, or the quality of being strongly affected by emotional influences. MW uses the adjective 'sensible'—e.g. on page 63—in pretty much our sense of it.

**sentimental:** This meant 'having to do with feelings'; the implication of shallow and unworthy feelings came after MW's time. On page 1 'sentimental lust' presumably means 'intense hankering for various kinds of feelings'.

**sex:** For MW 'sex' is a classificatory term—e.g. 'I speak for my sex' meaning 'I speak for all women'. (The use of 'sex' as short for 'copulation' is of more recent vintage.) See the striking example on page 36. MW uses phrases about 'giving a sex to X' meaning (page 6) treating X as though it related to only one of the sexes, or (pages 24, 29 and 41) treating X as though there were one version of it for females and a

different one for males.

**subtlety:** In MW's usage this means something close to 'address' (see above).

**vice, vicious:** For an 18th century writer vice is simply wrong conduct, with no necessary implication of anything sexual (except perhaps on page 55); and a vicious person is simply someone who often acts wrongly, with no necessary implication of anything like savage cruelty.

**virtue:** On a few occasions in this work MW uses 'virtue' with some of its older sense of 'power'. One example is on page 36. On page 65 MW personifies virtue as feminine.

**voluptuous:** Having to do with sexual pleasure.

**vulgar:** In MW's day 'vulgar' as applied to people meant 'common, ordinary, not much educated, not very thoughtful'. More generally, 'vulgar x' meant 'the kind of x that would be associated with vulgar people'.

**woman:** This version follows MW exactly in her uses of 'woman', 'women', 'lady', 'female' and 'feminine', and in her use of the masculine counterparts of these.

## Dedicatory Letter

[This work appeared in 1792, when Talleyrand—as he is usually called today—was active in the higher levels of the developing French revolution. A Constitution establishing France as a constitutional monarchy had been established in 1791. The infamous ‘reign of terror’ was still a year away. Two years earlier, MW had published a defence of the revolution against Burke, entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*.]

### To M. Talleyrand-Périgord former Bishop of Autun

Sir:

Having read with great pleasure a pamphlet on National Education that you recently published, I dedicate this volume to you, to induce you to reconsider the subject and maturely weigh what I shall say about the rights of woman and national education; and I’m calling with the firm tone of humanity. [‘National education’ is the topic of the penultimate chapter, starting on page 93.] In these arguments, sir, I am not trying to get anything for myself; I plead not for myself but for my for my sex. My own personal wants, anyway, amount to very little. For many years I have regarded *independence* as the great blessing of life, the basis of every virtue; and even if I end up living on a barren heath, I will always guarantee my independence by contracting my wants.

So it is my affection for the whole human race that makes my pen speed along to support what I believe to be the cause of virtue, and leads me to long to see woman’s place in the world enable her to advance the progress of the glorious principles that give a substance to morality, rather than holding them back. My opinion about the rights and duties of woman seems to flow so naturally from those simple principles that it seems almost inevitable that some of the enlarged minds who formed your admirable constitution will agree with me.

[In this next paragraph, ‘essence’ is used not in the customary philosophical sense, but in the sense involved in ‘essence of lavender’. A ‘voluptuary’ is someone devoted to the pursuit of luxury and sensual pleasure.]

Knowledge is spread more widely in France than in any other part of Europe; and I attribute this in large measure to the social intercourse there has long been in France between the sexes. It is true (I’m going to speak freely) that in France the very essence of sensuality has been extracted for the pleasure of the voluptuary, and a kind of sentimental lust [see Glossary] has prevailed. This, together with the system of deceptiveness that the whole spirit of their political and civil government taught, have given a sinister sort of knowingness to the French character. . . .and a polish of manners that injures the substance by driving sincerity out of society. And modesty—the fairest garb of virtue—has been more grossly insulted in France than even in England; the minimal attention to decency that even brutes instinctively observe is regarded by French women as *prudish!*

Manners and morals are so closely related that they have often been confused with one another; but although manners *should* be only the natural reflection of morals, when various causes have produced unnatural and corrupt manners that infect even the young, morality becomes an empty name. Personal restraint and respect for cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life are the graceful pillars of modesty, but French women almost despise them. If the pure flame of patriotism has reached their hearts, they should work

to improve the morals of their fellow-citizens by teaching men not only •to respect modesty in women but •to become modest themselves, as the only way to deserve women's respect.

Fighting for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle: *If woman isn't fitted by education to become man's companion, she will stop the progress of knowledge*, because truth must be common to all; if it isn't it won't be able to influence how people in general behave. And how can woman be expected to cooperate if she doesn't know *why* she ought to be virtuous? if freedom doesn't strengthen her reason until she understands her •duty and sees how it is connected with her real •good? If children are to be brought up to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly sequence of virtues arises, can be produced only by attending to the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the upbringing and situation of woman at present shuts her out from such investigations.

In this work I have produced many arguments that I found conclusive, showing that the prevailing notion of 'the female character' is subversive of morality. I have contended that to make the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail; and that chastity will never be respected in the male world until *the person of a woman* is not virtually idolized while *the woman* has little virtue or sense. [see Glossary on 'person']. . . .

Consider these remarks dispassionately, Sir, for you seemed to have a glimpse of this truth when you said that 'to see one half of the human race excluded by the other half from all participation of government is a political phenomenon that can't possibly be explained according to abstract principles'. If that is so, what does your constitution rest on? If the abstract rights of man can stand discussion

and explanation, those of woman—by a parity of reasoning—won't shrink from the same test: though a different view prevails in this country, built on the very arguments that you use to justify the oppression of woman—prescription [see Glossary].

I address you as a legislator: When men fight for their freedom, fight to be allowed to judge for themselves concerning their own happiness, isn't it inconsistent and unjust to hold women down? I know that you firmly believe you are acting in the manner most likely to promote women's happiness; but who made *man* the exclusive judge •of that• if woman shares with him the gift of reason?

Tyrants of every kind, from the weak king to the weak father of a family, use this same argument •that 'It is in your own best interests'•. They are all eager to crush reason, but they always say that they usurp reason's throne only to be useful. Isn't that what you are doing when you *force* all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain walled in by their families and groping in the dark? Surely, sir, you won't say that a duty can be binding without being founded on reason! Arguments •for civil and political rights can be drawn •from reason; and with that splendid support, the more understanding women acquire the more they will be attached to their duty, *understanding* it. Unless they understand it—unless their morals are based on the same immutable principles as those of man—no authority can make them act virtuously. They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.

If you are going to exclude women, without consulting them, from sharing in the natural rights of mankind, then defend yourself against accusations of injustice and inconsistency by proving that *women don't have reason*. If you don't do that, then this flaw in your *New Constitution*—the first

constitution based on reason—will show for all times that man must in some way act like a tyrant, and that tyranny, in whatever part of society it raises its arrogant head, will always undermine morality.

I have produced what seemed to me to be irrefutable arguments, drawn from matters of fact, to prove my often-repeated assertion that women cannot by force be confined to domestic concerns. However ignorant they are, they *will* get involved in more weighty affairs, neglecting private duties only to disturb by cunning tricks the orderly plans of reason that rise above their comprehension.

Also, while women are only made to acquire personal accomplishments [see Glossary], men will seek pleasure in variety, and faithless husbands will make faithless wives. Indeed, such ignorant beings as wives are in such a system will be very excusable when, not having been taught to respect public good or allowed any civil rights, they try to make things more fair by *retaliation*.

When the box of mischief has been thus opened in society, what is to preserve private virtue, the only security of public freedom and universal happiness?

The answer is: Let there be no coercion established in society—no laws that *force* people into this or that social role or situation. When that is achieved, the common law of gravity will hold sway and the sexes will fall into their proper places. With fairer laws forming your citizens, marriage can

become more sacred; your young men can choose wives from motives of affection, and your maidens can allow love to root out vanity.

The father of a family won't weaken his constitution and debase his sentiments by visiting prostitutes; he won't in obeying the call of sexual appetite forget the purpose for which it was implanted in him; and the mother won't neglect her children to practise the arts of teasing and flirting when sense and modesty secure her the friendship of her husband.

But until men become attentive to the duty of a father, you can't expect women to spend in their nursery the time that they . . . choose to spend at their mirror; for this exercise in cunning is only a natural instinct to enable them to obtain indirectly a little of the power of which they are unjustly denied a share. If women aren't permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will seek illicit privileges in ways that make both men and themselves vicious [see Glossary].

I wish, sir, to get some investigations of this kind going in France. If they lead to a confirmation of my principles, then when your constitution is revised the rights of woman may be respected, if it has been fully proved that reason calls for this respect and loudly demands *justice* for one half of the human race.

I am, sir,

Yours respectfully,

M. W.

## Introduction

After thinking about the sweep of history and viewing the present world with anxious care, I find my spirits depressed by the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation. I have had to admit, sadly, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the world is not yet anywhere near to being fully civilized. I have looked into various books on education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but all this has given me is a deep conviction that •the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the main source of the misery I deplore, and that •women in particular are made weak and wretched by a number of co-operating causes, originating from one hasty conclusion [MW's phrase]. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, show clearly that their minds are not in a healthy state; as with flowers planted in soil that is too rich, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flamboyant leaves, after giving pleasure to viewers, fade on the stalk, disregarded, long before it was the time for them to reach maturity. This barren blooming is caused partly by a false system of education, gathered from the books on the subject by men. These writers, regarding females as women rather than as human creatures, have been more concerned to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and this homage to women's attractions has distorted their understanding to such an extent that almost all the civilized women of the present century are anxious only to inspire •love, when they ought to have the nobler aim of getting •respect for their abilities and virtues.

In a book on female rights and manners, therefore, the works written specifically for their improvement mustn't be

overlooked; especially when the book says explicitly •that women's minds are weakened by false refinement, •that the books of instruction written by men of genius [see Glossary] have been as likely to do harm as more frivolous productions; and •that—when improvable *reason* is regarded as the dignity that raises men above the lower animal and puts a natural sceptre [see Glossary] in a feeble hand—those 'instructive' works regard woman (in true Moslem fashion) as beings of a subordinate kind and not as a part of the human species.

But don't think that because I am a woman I mean stir up violently the debated question about the equality and inferiority of the ·female· sex; but that topic does lie across my path, and if I sidle past it I'll subject my main line of reasoning to misunderstanding. So I shall pause here in order to give a brief statement of my opinion about it. In the government of the physical world—as distinct from the governments of the social or political world—it is observable that the female is, so far as strength is concerned, inferior to the male.

This is the law of nature; and it doesn't seem to be suspended or repealed in favour of woman. This physical superiority can't be denied—and it is a noble privilege! But men, not content with this natural pre-eminence, try to sink us lower still, so as to make us merely alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration that men (under the influence of their senses) pay them, don't try to achieve a permanently important place in men's feelings, or to become the *friends* of the fellow creatures who find amusement [see Glossary] in their society.



I am aware of an obvious inference: from every direction I have heard protests against 'masculine women', but where are they to be found? If men are using this label in criticism of women's ardour in hunting, shooting, and gambling, I shall gladly join in; but if their target is

the imitation of manly virtues, or (more accurately) the achieving of the talents and virtues that ennoble the human character and raise females in the scale of animal being when they are brought under the comprehensive label 'mankind',

all those who view women with a philosophical eye must, I should think, join me in wanting women to grow more and more 'masculine' every day.

This discussion naturally divides the subject. I shall first consider women as **human creatures** who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to develop their abilities; and then I shall attend to the implications of the more specific label **women**.

I want to steer clear of an error that many writers have fallen into, namely giving *women* instruction that has been appropriate for *ladies*. . . . I shall address my sex in a firmer tone, focussing particularly on those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state. As for the upper classes: Perhaps the 'great' have *always* scattered seeds of false refinement, immorality, and vanity! Weak, artificial beings who have been prematurely and unnaturally raised above the ordinary wants and feelings of mankind undermine the very foundation of virtue and spread corruption through the whole mass of society! They have a stronger claim to pity than any other class of mankind. The upbringing of the rich tends to make them vain and helpless, and their unfolding minds are not strengthened by the practice of the duties that dignify the human character. They live only to amuse [see Glossary] themselves, and—by a

law that also operates in nature—they soon come to have nothing to offer except barren amusement.

That is enough about that for the present: I plan to take the different ranks of society separately, and discuss the moral character of women in each. I have mentioned the subject of class-differences here only because I think that the essential task of an Introduction is to give a sketchy account of the contents of the work it introduces.

I hope my own sex will excuse me if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood and unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out what true dignity and human happiness consist in; I want to persuade women to aim at strength of mind and body, and to convince them

'susceptibility of heart'

'delicacy of sentiment', and

'refinement of taste'

are almost synonymous with expressions indicating weakness, and that creatures who are the objects only of pity and the kind of love that has been called 'pity's sister' will soon become objects of contempt.

So I dismiss those pretty feminine phrases that the men condescendingly use to make our slavish dependence easier for us, and I despise the weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility [see Glossary] of manners that are supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker sex. I want to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the most praiseworthy ambition is to obtain a character as a *human being*, whether male or female, and that lesser ambitions should be tested against that one.

That is a rough sketch of my plan; and I offer now three remarks about how I aim to carry it out. (1) I shall refrain from pruning my phrases and polishing my style, because

it is important to me to affect the thoughts and actions of my readers, and I'll do that better if I sometimes express my conviction with the energetic emotions that I feel. **(2)** I shan't waste time elegantly shaping my sentences, or fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings that come from the head and therefore never reach the heart; because I want to persuade by the force of my arguments rather than to dazzle by the elegance of my language. **(3)** I shall try to avoid the flowery diction that has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation; because I'll be dealing with things, not words! In all this I'll be anxious to turn my sex into members of society who are more worthy of respect..

These pretty nothings (these caricatures of the *real* beauty of sensibility) drop glibly from the tongue, spoil one's sense of taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth. [She means 'delicacy' in the sense of pickiness, choosiness; readiness to push things to the edge of one's plate.] A deluge of false sentiments and over-stretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, make *insipid* the domestic pleasures that ought to sweeten the exercise of the severe duties that prepare a rational and immortal [see Glossary] being for a nobler field of action. [The adjective 'immortal' suggests that the 'nobler field of action' that MW had in mind is life after death.]

The education [see Glossary] of women has been attended to more in recent years than formerly; but they're still regarded as a frivolous sex, and are ridiculed or pitied by writers who try to improve them by satire or instruction. It is acknowledged that they spend many of their earliest years acquiring a smattering of accomplishments [see Glossary], but strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire to get themselves settled by marriage—the only way women can rise in the world.

This desire makes mere animals of them, and when they marry they act as such children can be expected to act: they dress, they paint, they give nicknames to God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for the seraglio! [= the women's quarters a Turkish palace; she is implying that women are kept there purely for sexual purposes.] Can they govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

The present conduct of the ·female· sex, its prevalent fondness for pleasure in place of ambition and the nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul, are evidence that the instruction that women have received, with help from the constitution of civil society, has only tended to turn them into insignificant objects of desire, mere propagators of fools!

If it can be proved that

men, in aiming to bring women to perfection without cultivating their understandings, take them out of their sphere of ·real· duties and make them ridiculous and useless when the brief bloom of beauty is over, I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for trying to persuade them [i.e. women] to become more masculine and worthy of respect.

Indeed the word 'masculine' is only a pointless scare-word: there's little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude, because their visible inferiority in bodily strength must make them to some extent dependent on men in the various relations of life; but why should that dependence be increased by prejudices that •give a sex to virtue [see Glossary] and •can't distinguish simple truths from sensual daydreams?

Women are so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence that this artificial weakness produces in them a tendency to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning—

the natural opponent of strength—which leads them to exploit those contemptible infantile airs that undermine esteem even while they excite desire. Let men become more chaste and modest, and if women don't become correspondingly wiser it will be clear that they have weaker understandings.

I hardly need to explain that I am talking about the

·female· sex in general. Many individual women have more sense than their male relatives; some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern. Where there's a constant struggle for an equilibrium, nothing will swing the scales its way unless it naturally has greater weight.

## Chapter 1: Human rights and the duties they involve

In the present state of society it seems that we have to go back to first principles in search of the simplest truths, and to fight against some prevailing prejudice for every inch of ground. Let me clear my way by asking some plain questions: the answers to them will probably appear to be as obviously right as the axioms on which reasoning is based; but when they are entangled with various motives of action they are flatly contradicted by men's words or their conduct.

•What does man's pre-eminence over the lower animals consist in? The answer is as clear as 'A half is less than the whole'; it consists in *reason*.

•What acquirement raises one being above another? We spontaneously reply: *virtue*.

•For what purpose were we given passions? Experience whispers the answer: *so that man by struggling with his passions might achieve a degree of knowledge that the lower animals can't have*.

So the perfection of our nature and capacity for happiness must be measured by the degree of reason, virtue, and

knowledge that •distinguish the individual and •direct the laws that bind society; and it is equally undeniable that, taking mankind as a whole, knowledge and virtue naturally flow from the exercise of reason.

With the rights and duties of man thus simplified, it seems hardly necessary to illustrate truths that seem so incontrovertible. But such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason, and such spurious qualities have taken the name of 'virtues', that it is necessary to track the course of reason as it has been tangled in error. . . .so that we can set the simple axiom alongside the deviations from it that circumstances bring.

Men generally seem to employ their reason to •justify prejudices that they have taken in they can't tell how, rather than to •root them out. Only a strong mind can resolutely form its own principles; for a kind of intellectual cowardice prevails, making many men shrink from the task or do it only by halves. Yet the imperfect conclusions that are drawn in this way are often very plausible, because they are built

on partial experience, on views that are correct ·as far as they go· but narrow.

Going back to first principles, vice [see Glossary] in all its native ugliness slinks away from close investigation; but shallow reasoners are always exclaiming that these arguments ·from first principles· ‘prove too much’, and that a given course of conduct is ‘expedient’ even if it is rotten at the core. Thus •expediency is continually contrasted with •simple principles, until truth is lost in a mist of words, virtue is lost in forms [= ‘in mechanical rules of conduct’], and the tempting prejudices that claim the title ‘knowledge’ suppress real knowledge.

*The most wisely formed society is the one whose constitution is based on the nature of man*—that statement, in the abstract, strikes every thinking being so forcibly that it looks like presumption to try to prove it; but we *do* need to prove it, or reason will never be able to make prescription [see Glossary] relax its grip. And yet urging prescription as an argument to justify depriving men (or women) of their natural rights is one of the absurd sophisms that daily insult common sense.

The bulk of the people of Europe are only very partially civilized. Indeed, it’s an open question whether they have acquired *any* virtues in exchange for the innocence ·they have lost·, comparable with the misery produced by the vices that have been plastered over unsightly ignorance, and the freedom that has been traded away in exchange for glittering slavery. The desire to dazzle by riches (the surest route to pre-eminence!), the pleasure of commanding flattering yes-men, and many other complicated low calculations of stupid self-love, have all joined forces in overwhelming the mass of mankind and making ‘liberty’ a convenient label for mock patriotism.

For while rank and titles are held to be of the utmost importance, before which genius ‘must hide its diminished

head’ [quoted from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*], it is almost always disastrous for a nation when an able man without rank or property pushes himself into the limelight. When such a scheming obscure adventurer works to get a cardinal’s hat, longing to be ranked with princes—or above them, by seizing the triple crown ·worn by Popes·—the events involved in this bring unheard-of misery to thousands of people.

So much wretchedness has flowed from hereditary honours, riches, and monarchy, that men of lively sensibility have been reduced almost to blasphemy in their attempts to justify God’s management of the world. They have represented man as •independent of his Maker or as •a lawless planet darting from its orbit to steal the celestial fire of reason; and the vengeance of heaven. . . .punished his boldness by introducing evil into the world.

Impressed by this view of the misery and disorder that pervaded society, and weary from contending with artificial fools, Rousseau fell in love with solitude; and in his optimism he worked with uncommon eloquence to prove that man is naturally a solitary animal. Misled by his respect for the goodness of God, who certainly—for what man of sense [see Glossary] and feeling can doubt it?—gave life only in order to give happiness, he considered evil as. . . .the work of man; not aware that he was exalting one ·divine· attribute at the expense of another that is equally necessary to divine perfection. [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, mentioned many times in his work, had died fourteen years before the present work appeared.]

Constructed on the basis of a false hypothesis, Rousseau’s arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible; but they are unsound, because the assertion that a state of nature is preferable to the most perfect civilization there could be is in effect a charge against supreme wisdom. The paradoxical exclamation:

- God has made all things right, and
- evil has been introduced by the creature whom God formed, knowing what he was forming

is as unphilosophical as it is impious.

The wise Being who created us and placed us here. . . .allowed it to be the case—and thus willed it to be the case—that our passions should help our reason to develop, because he could see that present evil would produce future good. Could the helpless creature whom God created out of nothing break loose from his providence and boldly learn to *know good by practising evil* without his permission? No. How could ·Rousseau·, that energetic advocate for immortality, argue so inconsistently? If mankind had remained for ever in the brutal state of nature, which even Rousseau's magic pen can't paint as a state in which a single virtue took root, it would have been clear. . . .that man was born to run the circle of life and death, and adorn God's garden for some purpose that couldn't easily be reconciled with his [= God's] attributes.

But if the whole divine plan was to be crowned by rational creatures who would be allowed to rise in excellence through the use of powers given to them for that purpose; if God in his goodness thought fit to bring into existence a creature above the brutes,<sup>1</sup> one who could think and improve himself; why should that incalculable •gift be openly called a •curse?

(A gift? Man was enabled to rise above the state in which sensations gave him the sort of comfort that lower animals are capable of; *of course* it was a gift!)

It might be regarded as a curse if our time in this world was the whole span of our existence; for why should the gracious fountain of life give us passions and the power of reflecting, only to embitter our days and inspire us with mistaken notions of dignity? Why would God lead us from love of ourselves to the sublime emotions aroused by the discovery of his wisdom and goodness, if these feelings weren't launched so as to improve our nature (of which they are a part)<sup>2</sup> and enable us to enjoy a more godlike portion of happiness? Firmly convinced that no evil exists in the world that God didn't intend to occur, I build my belief on the perfection of God.

Rousseau strains to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors argues that all *is* now right; and I claim that all *will be* right.

True to his first position which is nearly a state of nature, Rousseau celebrates barbarism, and in his praise of Fabricius [said to be one of the founders of ancient Rome] he forgets that the Romans in conquering the world didn't dream of establishing their own liberty on a firm basis, or of extending the reign of virtue. Eager to support his system, he condemns as vicious [see Glossary] every effort of

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the opinion of the anatomists, who argue by analogy from the formation of the teeth, stomach, and intestines, Rousseau denies that man is a carnivorous animal. And, carried away from nature by a love of system, he questions whether man is a gregarious animal, though the long and helpless state of infancy seems to point him out as especially forced to *pair*, which is the first step towards *herding*.

<sup>2</sup> Suppose that

- you asked a mechanic to make a watch that would point out the hour of the day, and
- to show his ingenuity he added wheels and springs to make it a repeater, as a result of which the mechanism malfunctioned, and
- you complained, and
- he replied in self-defence 'If you hadn't touched *that* spring you wouldn't have known that I had varied the plan; I would have been amusing myself by making an experiment without doing you any harm',

what would you say? Wouldn't you respond, fairly, 'If you hadn't added those needless wheels and springs, the accident couldn't have happened?'

genius; and in praising savage virtues to the skies he raises to demigod status people who were scarcely human—the brutal Spartans, who in defiance of justice and gratitude sacrificed in cold blood the slaves who had served them well. [In 424 BCE the Spartans murdered two thousand helots, i.e. slaves serving as soldiers in the Spartan army. Thucydides wrote: ‘The helots were invited to select those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves against the enemy, so that they could be freed. The object was to test them, thinking that the first to claim freedom would be the most apt to rebel. About two thousand were selected and rejoiced in their new freedom; but the Spartans secretly killed each of them.’]

Disgusted with artificial manners and virtues, Rousseau didn’t sift through the subject but simply threw away the wheat with the chaff, not pausing to consider whether the evils that his ardent soul indignantly rejected were •consequences of civilization or •vestiges of barbarism. He saw vice trampling on virtue, and seeming-goodness taking the place of the real thing; he saw talents bent by power to sinister purposes; and he never thought of tracing the gigantic harm back to •*arbitrary power*, back to •the *hereditary* distinctions that clash with the mental superiority that *naturally* raises a man above his fellows. He didn’t see that it takes only a few generations for royal power to introduce idiotism into the noble family line, and that it holds out baits to make thousands idle and vicious. [MW adds harsh words about the crimes that bring people to royal status, and about the feeble passiveness of ‘millions of men’ who have let the royal criminals get away with it. She continues:]

When the chief director of a society is instructed only in how to invent crimes, or in the stupid routine of childish ceremonies, how can it *not* be the case that the society has a poisonous fog hovering over it? [MW’s ‘instructed in’ is ambiguous: she may mean that that’s all he is taught, or that it is all he knows.] . . .

In circumstances as good as they could possibly be, it would still be impossible for *any* man to acquire enough knowledge and strength of mind to perform the duties of a king who has been entrusted with uncontrolled power. Think how knowledge and strength of mind must be violated when •the sheer fact that the man does become a king poses an insuperable bar to his acquiring either wisdom or virtue, when •all his feelings are stifled by flattery, and when •thoughtfulness is shut out by pleasure! Surely it is madness to make the fate of thousands depend on the whims of a weak fellow creature whose very position in life puts him *necessarily* below the poorest of his subjects! But one power should not be thrown down in order to raise up another. Man is weak, and all power intoxicates him; and the way power is misused proves that the more equality there is among men—and thus the less power of men over men—the more virtue and happiness will reign in society. But this. . . raises an outcry: ‘If we don’t have absolute faith in the wisdom of antiquity, the church is in danger’ or ‘. . . the state is in danger’. Those who are roused by the sight of human calamity to be so bold as to attack human authority are reviled as despisers of God and enemies of man. These are bitter libels, yet they were levelled at one of the best of men (Dr. Price), whose ashes still preach peace, and whose memory demands a respectful pause when subjects that lay so near his heart are discussed. [Richard Price, who died a year or so before the present work was published, had greatly influenced Mary Wollstonecraft. He had been reviled for his writings on the French Revolution. His *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* is on the website from which the present text came.]

Now that I have attacked the ‘sacred’ majesty of kings, you won’t be surprised when I add my firm conviction that every profession whose power depends on large differences of rank is highly injurious to morality.

A standing army, for instance, is incompatible with freedom because strictness and rank are the very sinews of military discipline; and despotism is necessary to give vigour to enterprises that have one person in charge. A spirit inspired by romantic notions of honour—a kind of morality based on the fashion of the times—can be felt by only a few officers, while the main body must be moved by command, like the waves of the sea; for the strong wind of authority pushes the crowd of subalterns forward, they scarcely know or care why, with headlong fury. [Then as now, ‘subaltern’ mainly meant ‘junior officer’, so the ‘main body’ presumably refers to the main body of the officers. The rank and file are not being talked about here.]

·And armies are harmful in another way·. Nothing can damage the morals of the inhabitants of country towns as much as the occasional residence of a set of idle superficial young men whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners make vice more dangerous by concealing its ugliness under gay ornamental drapery. An air of *fashion*, which is really a badge of slavery, showing that the soul doesn’t have a strong individual character, awes simple country people into imitating the vices when they can’t catch the slippery graces of social polish. Every military body is a chain of despots who obey and give commands without using their reason, and become dead weights of vice and folly on the community. A man of rank or fortune whose connections guarantee that he will rise has nothing to do but to pursue some extravagant whim; while the needy *gentleman* who has to rise ‘by his merit’, as they say, becomes a servile parasite or a vile pander [= ‘pimp’, or perhaps merely ‘person whose job it is to satisfy his superiors’ desires’.]

Sailors, the gentlemen of the navy, can be described in similar terms, except that their vices [see Glossary] are different and grosser. They are more positively indolent [= ‘wholly idle’, ‘idly idle’] when they aren’t performing the ceremonials

required by their rank, whereas the insignificant fluttering of soldiers could be called ‘active idleness’. More confined to the society of men, sailors acquire a fondness for humour and mischievous tricks; while soldiers, who are often in the company of well-bred women, are infected with a ‘sensitive’ whiny way of speaking. But whether someone indulges in ‘the sailor’s’ horse-laugh or ‘the soldier’s’ polite simper, *mind* is equally out of the question.

[This next paragraph refers to the Anglican church, of which MW was a member. A **patron** was a person, not himself a cleric, who had sole control over who became the well-paid **rector** or senior parson of a parish; and a **curate** was a junior parson who did most of the parish work and received a tiny fraction of the rector’s income.]

Let me extend the comparison to a profession where there is certainly more *mind* to be found—the clergy. They have better opportunities for improvement, but *rank* almost equally cramps their faculties. The blind submission to forms of belief that is imposed at college serves as a training for the curate who most obsequiously respects the opinion of his rector or patron—or he does if he means to rise in his profession. There can hardly be a more striking contrast than between •the servile, dependent manner of a poor curate and •the top-of-the-world manner of a bishop. And

**MW’s next phrase:** the respect and contempt

**perhaps meaning:** the little respect and great contempt

they inspire makes the work they do in their separate functions equally useless.

It is important to understand that every man’s character is to some extent formed by his profession. A man with a good mind may reflect his profession only in superficial ways that wear off as you trace his individuality; while weak, common men have hardly any character except what belongs to their profession. . . .

As society becomes more enlightened, therefore, it should be very careful not to establish bodies of men who are bound to be made foolish or vicious by the very constitution of their profession.

In society's infancy when men were just emerging out of barbarism, chiefs and priests must have had unlimited influence because they tapped into the most powerful springs of savage conduct—hope and fear. **Aristocracy** is of course, naturally the first form of government. But clashing interests soon get out of balance, there is a confusion of ambitious struggles, and what emerges is a **monarchy** and hierarchy. . . . This appears to be the origin of monarchical and priestly power, and the dawn of civilization. But such combustible materials can't be held down for long; and foreign wars and uprisings at home give the ·common· people a chance to acquire some power, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a show of right. Thus as wars, agriculture, commerce, and literature expand the mind, despots are forced to use •hidden corruption to keep

the power that was initially snatched by open force.<sup>3</sup> And this •lurking gangrene is spread most quickly by luxury and superstition, the sure dregs of ambition. The idle puppet of a ·royal· court first becomes a luxurious monster or fastidious pleasure-seeker, and the contagion that his unnatural state spreads becomes the instrument of tyranny. [In this context, 'luxury' and its cognates refer to *extreme and dissipated* pursuit and enjoyment of sensual pleasures.]

It is the plague-carrying purple ·of royalty· that makes the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding until men of good sense doubt whether the expansion of intellect will bring more happiness or more misery. But the nature of the poison points out the antidote; if Rousseau had climbed one step higher in his investigation—or if his eye could have pierced the foggy atmosphere that he was hardly willing to breathe—his active mind would have darted forward to contemplate •the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization, instead of taking his ferocious flight back to •the night of sensual ignorance.

## Chapter 2: The prevailing opinion about sexual differences

To explain and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been presented to prove that in the acquiring of virtue the two sexes ought to have very different aims; or, to put it bluntly, women aren't thought to have enough

strength of mind to acquire virtue properly so-called. But it would seem that if they have souls there is only one way appointed by God to lead *markind* to virtue or to happiness.

<sup>3</sup> Men of abilities scatter seeds that grow and have a great influence on the development of •public opinion; and once •that gets the intellectual upper hand through the exertion of reason, the overthrow of arbitrary power is not very distant.



If then women are not a swarm of insignificant ephemera [inserts like mayflies, that live for only one day], why should they be kept in ignorance under the pretty label ‘innocence’? Men complain, with reason, about the follies and whims of our sex, except when they sharply satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. I would answer: Behold the natural effect of ignorance! A mind that has only prejudices to rest on will always be unstable, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by their mothers’ example, that

- a little knowledge of human weakness (properly called ‘cunning’),
- softness of temperament,
- outward* obedience, and
- scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety,

will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that’s all they need for at least twenty years.

That is how Milton describes our first frail mother, ‘Eve’; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace I don’t understand him unless in true Moslem fashion he means to deprive us of souls, insinuating that all we were designed for was to use sweet attractive grace and docile blind obedience to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation.

Those who advise us only to turn ourselves into gentle domestic animals—how grossly they insult us! For instance, the ‘winning softness’ that is so warmly and frequently recommended, that ‘governs by obeying’—what childish expressions! And a being who will sink to the level of governing by such underhand methods—what an insignificant being that must be! Can it be an immortal one? ‘Certainly,’ says Lord Bacon, ‘man is of kin to the beasts by his body: and

if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature!’ Men, indeed, seem to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by keeping them always in a state of childhood. Rousseau was more consistent when he wanted to stop the progress of reason in both sexes; for if men eat ‘fruit’ of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste, but the imperfect cultivation that their understandings now receive will give them only a knowledge of evil.

Children, I agree, should be innocent; but when ‘innocent’ is applied to men or women it is merely a polite word for ‘weak’. If it is granted that women were destined by Providence [= ‘God’] to acquire human virtues, and to use their understandings to achieve the stability of character that is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes on, then they must be permitted to look to the fountain of light (‘God’) and not forced to steer by the twinkling of a mere satellite (‘man’). Milton was of a very different opinion. . . ., but it would be hard to make consistent two passages that I am now going to contrast. But then great men often led by their senses into such inconsistencies. [In these lines Eve is speaking to Adam.]

To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorned:  
My author and disposer, what thou bidst  
Unargued I obey; so God ordains,  
God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more  
Is woman’s happiest knowledge and her praise.

These are *exactly* the arguments I have used to children! But then I have added: ‘Your reason is now gaining strength. Until it arrives at some degree of maturity, you must look up to me for advice; but when it does arrive there, you ought to *think*, and rely only on God.’

Yet, in these next lines, Milton seems to agree with me, when he makes Adam protest to his Maker like this:

Hast thou not made me here thy substitute,  
 And these inferior far beneath me set?  
 Among unequals what society  
 Can sort, what harmony or delight?  
 Which must be mutual, in proportion due  
 Given and received; but in disparity  
 The one intense, the other still remiss  
 Cannot well suit with either, but soon prove  
 Tedious alike: of fellowship I speak  
 Such as I seek, fit to participate  
 All rational delight. . . .

In discussing the manners of women, therefore, let us set aside sensual arguments and work out what we should try to make women in order to co-operate, if the expression isn't too bold, with God.

The sense of the word 'education' isn't precisely defined, so I should explain: by 'individual education' I mean

The kind of attention to a child that will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temperament, regulate the passions as they begin to bubble up, and set the understanding to work before the body reaches maturity; so that the ·fully mature· man will only have to •continue the important task of learning to think and reason, rather than .having to •start it.

I don't believe that a private education can work the wonders that some optimistic writers have attributed to it. [This topic will be extensively discussed in chapter 12.] Men and women must be educated to a large extent by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried everything along with it, giving to that age a family character, so to speak. So it's reasonable to conclude that until society is differently constituted, not much can be expected from education. All

I need for my present purpose, however, is this: Whatever effect circumstances have on people's abilities, everyone *can* become virtuous by the exercise of his or her [see Glossary] own reason; for if just one being was *created* with vicious inclinations—i.e. was created positively bad—what could save us from atheism? or if we worshipped a god, wouldn't we be worshipping a devil?

So the most perfect education, in my opinion, is the use of the understanding in the way that is most likely to strengthen the body and form the heart—i.e. to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render him or her independent. To describe as 'virtuous' anyone whose virtues don't result from the exercise of his or her own reason is a farce. This was Rousseau's opinion regarding men: I extend it to women. . . . Still, the royal homage that •women receive is so intoxicating that, until manners in general come to be formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince •them that

- the illegitimate power that they get by degrading themselves is a *curse*, and that
- if they want to enjoy the peaceful satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart, they must return to nature and equality.

But for the present age we must wait until kings and nobles, enlightened by reason and preferring the real dignity of man to ·their present· childish state, throw off their gaudy hereditary trappings. If that happens and women still don't resign the arbitrary power of beauty, they'll be showing that they have *less* mind than man. At the risk of seeming arrogant, I must declare my firm belief that

Everyone who has have written about female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, has helped to make women •more artificial, weaker characters than they would otherwise have been; and

consequently •more useless members of society.

I could have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but that would have been an insincere whine and not the faithful expression of my feelings—of the clear conclusion that experience and reflection have led me to draw. When I come to the right place for that I'll discuss the passages that I especially disapprove of in the works of the authors I have just mentioned [chapter 5]; but *this* is the right place to remark that I object ·not just to isolated passages but· to the whole purport of those books, which I think tend to degrade one half of the human species, and make women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.

Reasoning on Rousseau's premises, we could say this:

If man did achieve a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper—so as to make a man and his wife *one*—that she should rely entirely on his understanding. Then the graceful ·female· ivy, clasping the ·male· oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous.

But alas! husbands as well as their wives are often only overgrown children; indeed, thanks to early debauchery they are hardly grown men in their outward form. We don't need a messenger angel from heaven to tell us what happens when the blind lead the blind.

In the present corrupt state of society many causes collaborate to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses. One that silently does more harm than all the rest, perhaps, is their disregard of order.

*Do everything in an orderly manner* is a most important precept, but women, who in general; receive only a disorderly kind of education [see the account of education on page 14], seldom attend to it with as much exactness as men do, because men are from their infancy are broken into method. This negligent

kind of guesswork prevents women from generalizing matters of fact [the meaning of this will become clear in the next paragraph], so what they did yesterday they do again today, merely because they did it yesterday. Guesswork? Well, isn't that the right word for the random exertions of a sort of instinctive common sense, never brought to the test of reason?

This off-hand neglect of the understanding in early life has worse consequences than is commonly supposed. The little knowledge acquired by women with strong minds is, for various reasons, more random and episodic than the knowledge of men; it is acquired more by •sheer observations of real life than from •relating individual observations to the results of experience generalized by theorizing. . . . What women learn they learn by snatches; and—because learning for them is in general only a secondary thing—they don't pursue any one branch ·of learning· with the persevering eagerness that is needed to give vigour to the faculties and clarity to the judgment. In the present state of society, a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman; and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of ·intellectual· discipline. But in the education of women the development of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquiring of some physical accomplishment; [and yet, MW continues, on the physical side women don't acquire the best kind of grace and beauty, being barred from it by 'confinement and false notions of modesty'. She seems to be thinking of something like the grace and beauty of an accomplished female athlete.]. . . . Having no serious scientific study, if women have natural soundness of judgment it is turned too soon onto life and manners. They dwell on effects. . . .without tracing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behaviour are a weak substitute for simple principles.

As a proof that education gives females this appearance of weakness, consider the example of military men, who are

(as women are) sent into the world before their minds have been stored with knowledge or strengthened by principles. The results are similar:

Soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation; and by continually mixing with society they gain what is termed 'knowledge of the world'.

(This acquaintance with manners and customs has often been confused with •knowledge of the human heart. But that •honourable label can't be deserved by the crude fruit of casual observation, never brought to the test of judgment based on combining experience with theory.) When the education has been the same, where is the difference between the sexes? The only difference I can see comes from the fact that soldiers are free to see more of life than women are. . . .

Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men; they may be well disciplined machines but they will seldom contain men moved by strong passions or with very vigorous faculties. And depth of understanding isn't found in an army more often than it is found among women; and the cause is the same. Furthermore, officers are also particularly attentive to their persons [see Glossary], and fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and mockery. As with the 'fair' sex, the business of their lives is *gallantry*. They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they. . . .are still regarded as superior to women, though it is hard to discover what their superiority consists in other than what I have just mentioned.

The great misfortune is that they both acquire •manners before •morals, and •a knowledge of life before reflection gives them •an acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature. It naturally follows that they, satisfied with common nature, become a prey to prejudices, and blindly submit to authority, simply believing what they are told. If

they have any sense, it is a kind of instinctive fast uptake of social situations; but this fails when opinions are to be analysed or arguments are to be pursued below the surface.

. . . .Riches and hereditary honours have made cyphers of women. . . .and idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism in society, which leads men who are slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. . . . Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it and that will bring an end to blind obedience; but because blind obedience is always sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are right to try to keep women in the dark: the tyrants only want slaves, and the sensualists only want toys. In fact, sensualists have been the most dangerous tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes are by their ministers, while dreaming that they reigned over them!

I am principally thinking of Rousseau, •and specifically of his work on education entitled *Émile*•. His character Sophie •in that book• is a captivating one, no doubt, though it strikes me as grossly unnatural; but what I am planning to attack is not the superstructure but the foundation of her character, the principles on which her education was built. Warmly as I admire the genius [see Glossary] of that able writer. . . ., indignation always takes place of admiration when I read his voluptuous [see Glossary] day-dreams. Is *this* the man who in his ardour for virtue wants to banish all the soft arts of peace and almost carry us back to Spartan discipline? Is *this* the man who loves to portray the useful struggles of passion, the triumphs of good dispositions, and the heroic flights that carry the glowing soul out of itself? How are these mighty sentiments lowered when he describes the prettyfoot and enticing airs of his little favourite! [That sentence is verbatim MW.] But I'll set that aside for just now, and. . . .merely remark that whoever has cast a benevolent eye on society must

often have been gratified by the sight of humble mutual love, not dignified by sentiment or strengthened by a union in intellectual pursuits. The domestic trifles of the day have provided material for cheerful conversation, and innocent caresses have softened toils which didn't require great exercise of mind or stretch of thought. But hasn't the sight of this middling happiness aroused more tenderness than respect? It is an emotion like what we feel when we see children are playing;<sup>4</sup> whereas the contemplation of the noble struggles of suffering merit has created admiration and carried our thoughts to that world where sensation will give place to reason.

So women are to be considered either as •moral beings or as •so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men.

Let us examine this question. Rousseau declares that a woman should never for a moment feel herself to be independent, that she should be •governed by fear to exercise her 'natural' cunning, and •made a coquettish slave in order to make her a more alluring object of desire, a 'sweeter' companion to man whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries his arguments (which he claims to infer from the indications of *nature*) still further, and indicates that truth and fortitude—the corner-stones of all human virtue—should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because with respect to the female character obedience is the great lesson which ought to be impressed •on the woman• with unrelenting rigour.

What nonsense! When will a great man arise with enough strength of mind to puff away the fumes that pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject? If women are by nature *inferior* to men, their virtues must be •comparable

with men's, meaning that they must be the same in quality if not in degree. . . .; so their conduct should be based on the same principles as men's conduct, and should have the same aim.

Connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, the moral character of women may be judged by how they fulfill those simple duties; but the great *end* of their exertions should be to develop their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue. They may try to make their road pleasant; but they should never forget, as men do, that *life* doesn't yield the happiness that can satisfy an immortal soul. I don't mean to imply that either sex should be so lost in abstract reflections or distant views as to forget the affections and duties that •lie before them and •are indeed the means appointed to produce the fruit of life; on the contrary, I warmly recommend them even while I say that they give most satisfaction when they are considered in their true subordinate light. [These 'affections and duties' are presumably ones relating to sexual intercourse, the 'appointed means' to continuing the species.]

The dominant opinion that woman was created for man may have been inferred from Moses's poetical story; but presumably very few who have *thought* about the subject ever believed that Eve was literally one of Adam's ribs; so that inference must be dropped—or be admitted only as proving from the remotest antiquity man found it convenient to exert •his strength to subjugate his companion, and •his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke because she as well as the lower animals was created to do his pleasure.

Don't think I that I want to invert the order of things. I have already conceded that the constitution of men's bodies

<sup>4</sup> Milton's pleasing picture of •paradisiacal happiness has always raised similar feelings in me; but instead of envying the lovely pair, I have with conscious dignity (or satanic pride!) turned to •hell for more sublime things to think about. . . .

(I'm speaking collectively of the whole sex) seem to indicate that God designed them to attain a greater degree of virtue [see Glossary] than women. But I don't see the faintest reason to conclude that their virtues are different *in kind* from women's. How *could* they be, if virtue has only one eternal standard? If I am to be consistent in my reasoning, therefore, I must put as much energy into maintaining with regard to male virtue and female virtue that they have the same simple direction as I put into maintaining that there is a God.

It follows from this that I mustn't set up a contrast between

- female cunning and male wisdom,
- little female cares and great male exertions, or
- insipid female softness (varnished over with the label 'gentleness') and the male fortitude that can only be inspired by grand views.

I shall be told that if women aimed at the same virtues as men, woman would then lose many of her special graces; and the line I am taking here might be attacked by quoting from a well-known poet—Alexander Pope, who has said on behalf of the whole male sex:

Yet ne'er so sure our passions to create,  
As when she touch'd the brink of all we hate.

I'll leave it to you to decide in what light this joke places men and women; and in the meanwhile I'll content myself with remarking that I can't discover why females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust, unless they are mortal [see Glossary].

Yes, yes—speaking disrespectfully of love is committing high treason against sentiment and fine feelings! But I want to speak the simple language of truth, addressing the head rather than the heart. To try to reason love out of the

world would be pointless and contrary to common sense; but it appears less wild to try—as I shall—to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it shouldn't be allowed to dethrone superior powers or grab the sceptre [see Glossary] that should always be wielded, coolly, by the understanding.

Youth is the season for love in both sexes; but in those days of thoughtless enjoyment one should prepare for the more important years of life when reflection takes place of sensation. [MW was 33 years old when this was published.] But Rousseau and most of his male followers have strongly maintained that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed towards one goal—to make women pleasing.

If you support that opinion, let me reason with you. Do you imagine that marriage can eradicate the habits of life? The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sun-beams, and that they can't have much effect on her husband's heart when he sees them every day and when the summer of her physical beauty is past and gone. When that happens, she may

have enough energy to look into herself for comfort,  
and cultivate the faculties she has idled;

or she may instead

try to please other men, and try in the emotions raised  
by the expectation of new conquests to forget how her  
love or pride has been humiliated.

Which do you think is more likely? When the husband has stopped being a lover—and that time will inevitably come—her desire to please will weaken, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps the least durable of all the passions, will give place to jealousy or vanity.

Now think about women who are restrained by principle or prejudice. *They* would shrink from an intrigue [= 'an

extra-marital affair'] with real abhorrence, but play with the idea because they want to be convinced by the homage of gallantry that they are cruelly neglected by their husbands; or they spend days and weeks dreaming of the happiness enjoyed by souls in harmony, until their health is undermined and their spirits broken by discontent. If that is right, then how can it have been so necessary for them to study the great art of pleasing? It is useful only to a mistress; the chaste wife and serious mother should regard her power to please as merely the polish of her virtues, and the affection of her husband as merely one of the comforts that make her task less difficult and her life happier. But whether she is loved or neglected, her first wish should be to make herself worthy of respect, and not rely for all her happiness on a being who is subject to infirmities like her own!

The amiable Dr. Gregory fell into a similar error. I respect his heart, but entirely disapprove of his celebrated *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*.

He advises them to develop a fondness for dress, because this, he says, is 'natural' to them. I can't understand what he or Rousseau mean in their frequent uses of the vague word 'natural'. If they told us that the soul before birth was fond of dress and brought this inclination with it into a new body, I would listen to them with a half smile, as I often do when I hear someone pontificating about 'innate elegance'. But if Gregory meant to say only that using one's faculties will give one this fondness for dress, I deny it. It is not natural: it arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power.

[MW reports and scornfully rejects Gregory's recommendation to his daughters that they be careful to hold down any feeling that might lead them to be too vigorous in dancing, because that might give men a wrong impression. She concludes:] I hope that no sensible mother will restrain

the natural frankness of youth by instilling such indecent cautions. . . .

Women ought to try to purify their hearts; but can they do so when their undeveloped understandings make them entirely dependent on their senses for occupation and amusement [see Glossary], when no noble undertaking raises them above the day's little vanities or enables them to curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed over which every passing breeze has power?

To gain the affections of a virtuous man, is affectation necessary? [In that sentence 'affectation' means 'pretence about what one's actual feelings are'.] Nature has given woman a weaker body than man; but to ensure her husband's affections must a wife lower herself to pretending to be sickly and delicate, in order to secure her husband's affection? It very often really is pretending, on the part of a wife who, by the exercise of her mind and body while she was discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, and mother, has allowed her constitution to retain its natural strength and her nerves a healthy tone.

Weakness may excite tenderness, and gratify the arrogant pride of man; but the lordly caresses of a protector won't please a noble mind that is panting for respect and deserves to have it. Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship!

In a seraglio, I admit, all these arts are necessary [and she develops this thought through a paragraph that doesn't add to the content of the chapter. It repeats that someone who could settle for such a life cannot be one who 'has an immortal soul'.]

Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent, of her husband; and if she deserves his respect by having such solid qualities, she won't find that she needs to conceal her affection or pretend to an unnatural coldness

of constitution [meaning 'pretend to have little interest in sex'] to excite her husband's passions. Look at history and you'll find that the women who have distinguished themselves haven't been the most beautiful or the most gentle of their sex.

Nature—or, to speak more accurately, God—has made all things right; but man has devised many inventions to spoil God's work. I'm referring to the part of Dr. Gregory's book where he advises a wife never to let her husband know the extent of her sensibility or affection. . . . That is as ineffectual as it is absurd! By its very nature love must be transitory. Searching for a secret that would make it constant is as wild as searching for the philosopher's stone ·that can turn lead into gold· or the grand panacea [that can cure every disease]; and if the search succeeded ·and something was discovered that would make love constant·, that would be useless, or rather *pernicious*, to mankind. The most holy tie of society is friendship. The shrewd satirist ·La Rochefoucauld· was right when he said that 'rare as true love is, true friendship is still rarer'.

This is an obvious truth, and the reason for it is easy to find, because it doesn't lie deep.

Love, the common passion, in which  
 chance replaces choice, and  
 sensation replaces reason,  
 is felt to some degree by everyone. (I am not talking here about emotions that rise above love, or ones that sink below it.) This passion, naturally increased by suspense and difficulties, draws the mind out of its usual state and exalts the affections; but the fever of love is allowed to subside by the security of marriage—its release from the kinds of suspense and difficulties that occur in a love affair·. The only people who find a healthy temperature insipid are ones who don't have enough intellect to substitute

- the calm tenderness of friendship for blind admiration, and
- the confidence of respect for the emotions of foolish sensuality.

This is the course of nature; it *has* to be; love is inevitably followed by either friendship or indifference. And this state of affairs seems to harmonize perfectly with the how things go generally in the moral world. Passions are spurs to action, and open the mind; but when the object has been gained and the satisfied mind relaxes in enjoyment, the passions sink to the level of mere appetites, a matter of momentary personal gratification. The man who had some virtue while he was struggling for a crown often becomes a voluptuous tyrant when he is wearing it; and when the lover continues to exist in the husband the result is a foolish old man who

- is a prey to childish whims and foolish jealousies, and
- neglects the serious duties of life, and by whom
- the caresses that should arouse confidence in his children are lavished on the overgrown child, his wife.

In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments that form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean that they ought not to indulge emotions that disturb the order of society and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed. A mind that has never been absorbed by one object lacks vigour; a mind that can be thus obsessed for a long time is ·downright· weak.

. . . I haven't the faintest thought of producing a paradox when I say: An unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and a neglected wife is in general the best mother. This would almost always be the case if the female mind were more enlarged; ·let me explain why·.



God's plans seem to have ruled that, in most cases, what we gain in present enjoyment is to be deducted from our experience, which is the true treasure of life; and that when we are gathering the flowers of the day and revelling in pleasure, the solid fruit of toil and wisdom is not to be caught at the same time. The road forks here; we must go to the right or to the left; and someone who spends his life bounding from one pleasure to another mustn't complain if he acquires neither wisdom nor a character worthy of respect.

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[The preparer of this version is defeated by the following paragraph—not by its individual episodes but by how it meant to hang together. So it is passed on to you exactly as Mary Wollstonecraft wrote it. Good Luck!]

Supposing, for a moment, that the soul is not immortal, and that man was only created for the present scene,—I think we should have reason to complain that love, infantine fondness, ever grew insipid and palled upon the sense. Let us eat, drink, and love, for to-morrow we die, would be, in fact, the language of reason, the morality of life; and who but a fool would part with a reality for a fleeting shadow? But, if awed by observing the improvable powers of the mind, we disdain to confine our wishes or thoughts to such a comparatively mean field of action, that only appears grand and important, as it is connected with a boundless prospect and sublime hopes, what necessity is there for falsehood in conduct, and why must the sacred majesty of truth be violated to detain a deceitful good that saps the very foundation of virtue? Why must the female mind be tainted by coquettish arts to gratify the sensualist, and prevent love from subsiding into friendship, or compassionate tenderness, when there are not qualities on which friendship can be built? Let the honest heart show itself, and *reason* teach passion to submit to

necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather embitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm not talking about the romantic passion that is the concomitant of genius. Who can clip its wings? But that grand passion is out of proportion to the little enjoyments of life; what it is true to is only *itself*, what it feeds on is only itself. The passions that have been celebrated for their durability have always been unfortunate. They have been strengthened by absence and by constitutional melancholy. The imagination has hovered round a dimly seen form of beauty; familiarity with it might have turned admiration into disgust—or at least into indifference—and freed the imagination to start fresh game [= 'flush out new foxes or deer or hares to hunt']. According to this view of things, it is perfectly proper for Rousseau to make the heroine of his novel *Julie* love her tutor when life was fading before her; but this is no proof of the immortality of the passion.

Of the same sort is Gregory's advice regarding delicacy of sentiment. He advises a woman not to acquire sentiment if she intends to marry. This intention is perfectly consistent with his former advice, but here he calls sentiment 'indelicate' and earnestly persuades his daughters to conceal it even if it governs their conduct—as if it were *indelicate* to have the common appetites of human nature!

Noble morality! and consistent with the cautious prudence of a little soul that can't look further than the present tiny fraction of our existence [i.e. the part that concerns life before death, whose extent is tiny compared with the eternal life that awaits us after death]. •If all the faculties of woman's mind are to be cultivated only with respect to her dependence on man; if

when she gets a husband she has reached her goal and. . . is satisfied with such a trivial crown, let her contentedly grovel in the dirt, scarcely raised by her employments above the lower animals. But •if she is struggling for the prize of her high calling [presumably meaning God's giving her the task of becoming as virtuous as possible], let her look beyond the present scene, let her develop her understanding without stopping to consider what the husband she is going to marry will be like. If she resolves to acquire the qualities that ennoble a rational being, without being too anxious about present happiness, a rough, inelegant husband may shock her taste but he won't destroy her peace of mind. She will model her soul not •to make it fit with her companion's frailties but • to enable it to put up with them. His character may be a trial, but it won't be an impediment to virtue.

If Gregory meant to be talking only about romantic expectations of constant love and congenial feelings, he should have remembered that •such expectations exist only when the imagination is kept alive at the expense of reason, that •advice can never make them go away, but that •experience can do so.

I admit that many women who have developed in themselves a romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling have wasted their lives in *imagining* how happy they would have been with a husband who could love them with intense and increasing affection all day every day. But they might as well lament married as lament single; they wouldn't be a jot more unhappy with a bad husband than they are longing for a good one. I agree that a proper education—or, more accurately, a well-stocked mind—would enable a woman to live unmarried with dignity; but what if she avoids cultivating her taste in case her future husband if she comes to have one should occasionally shock it? That is quitting a substance for a shadow! The fact is that I don't know what use an improved

taste is if it's not to make the individual more independent of life's disasters, and to open up new sources of enjoyment that depend only on the solitary operations of the mind.

People of taste (whether married or single, it makes no difference) will always be disgusted by various things that have no effect on less observant minds; but that fact on its own mustn't be allowed to disqualify taste. The question is: *in the whole sum of enjoyment* is taste to be counted as a blessing? Does taste procure more pain or more pleasure? The answer will settle whether Gregory's advice was good, and will show how absurd and tyrannical it is to lay down a system of slavery as he does, or to try to educate moral beings by any rules other than those deduced from pure reason, which apply to the whole species.

Gentleness of manners, forbearance, and long-suffering are such lovable godlike qualities that high-flying poetry has attributed them to God; and there may be no representation of his goodness that fastens on the human affections as strongly as those that represent him abundant in mercy and willing to pardon. Looked at this point of view, gentleness has all the marks of grandeur combined with the winning graces of kindness towards subordinates; but how different gentleness looks when it is the submissive manner of a dependent, the support of weakness that loves because it needs protection, and is forbearing because it must silently endure injuries, smiling under the lash at which it doesn't dare to snarl! This picture of degradation is the portrait of an accomplished [see Glossary] woman, according to the received opinion of female excellence as something different. . . from human excellence. Or they (for example Rousseau and Swedenborg) kindly give Adam back his rib, making one moral being of a man and woman, and not forgetting to give her all the 'submissive charms' [that is a phrase from Milton].

We aren't told how women are to exist in a state of affairs where there is no marriage. Moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, but they are unanimous in advising *woman* to provide only for the present. Gentleness, docility [see Glossary], and spaniel-like affection are consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and one writer. . . has declared that it is 'masculine' for a woman to be sad. She was created to be the man's toy, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever he dismisses reason and chooses to be amused.

It is absolutely correct to recommend gentleness in a general way. A frail being—and all humans *are* frail—should try to be gentle. But when forbearance confuses right with wrong, it stops being a virtue. It may be found agreeable in a companion, but that companion will always be regarded as an inferior, and will inspire only a flat and lifeless tenderness which easily degenerates into contempt. Still, if advice really could make gentle a being to whom such a fine polish isn't natural, that would move things on a little in the direction of true morality; but it's easy to show that what such advice actually produces is affectation, pretence, which puts a stumbling block in the way of personal improvement, so that the *female* sex gets little benefit from sacrificing solid virtues to the acquiring of superficial graces, even if for a few years these graces give the individual a great deal of power.

As a philosopher, I read with indignation the nice-sounding descriptions that men use to soften their insults; and as a moralist, I ask what they mean by such oxymorons as 'fair defects', 'amiable weaknesses' and so on. [In *Paradise Lost* Eve is called a 'fair defect'.] If there is only one criterion of morals for men, only one model for them to follow, women seem to be suspended by destiny. . . .: they don't have the

unerring instinct of the lower animals, but nor are they allowed to fix the eye of reason on a perfect model. They were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as 'masculine'.

Look at this topic now from a different angle. Do passive idle women make the best wives? Never mind the after-life just now; let us confine our discussion to the present moment of existence, and ask: How well do such weak creatures perform their part? Do the women who by attaining a few superficial accomplishments have strengthened the common prejudice regarding women contribute only to the happiness of their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to entertain themselves? And do women who were brought up on notions of passive obedience have enough character to manage a family or educate children? So far from it that after surveying the history of woman I can't help agreeing with the severest satirist who regards the *female* sex as the weaker as well as the more oppressed half of the species. What does history reveal except marks of inferiority? How many women have freed themselves from the humiliating yoke of sovereign man? So few that the exceptions remind me of the ingenious conjecture that Newton was probably a being of a superior order, accidentally caged in a human body! Following that line of thought I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in various directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex were *male* spirits confined by mistake in a female body. But if it isn't philosophical to think of sex when the *soul* is mentioned, the inferiority of women must depend on the organs, or else the heavenly fire that makes the clay develop isn't distributed in equal portions.

I am continuing to avoid any direct comparison between the two sexes collectively; I do frankly acknowledge the inferiority of woman according to the present appearance of

things. And I insist that men have increased that inferiority until women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and *then* determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale. But don't forget that for a small number of distinguished women I do not ask for a place [= 'a place on that scale'].

It's hard for us dim-sighted mortals to say what height human discoveries and improvements may arrive at when we are freed from the gloom of despotism that makes us stumble at every step. But there's one prediction I am willing to make without being gifted with a prophetic spirit: it is that when morality is settled on a more solid basis, woman will be either man's friend or his slave. There will be no question, as there is now, as to whether she is a moral agent or ·rather· the link that unites man with the lower animals. And if it does then turn out that like the lower animals women were principally created for the use of man, he will let them patiently bite the bridle [= 'leave them to *put up with* their servitude] and not mock them with empty praise; and if ·on the other hand· their rationality comes to be proved, man won't impede their improvement merely to gratify his sensual appetites. He won't use all the graces of rhetoric to persuade them to submit their understandings uncritically to the guidance of man. He won't, when discussing the education of women, assert that they ought never to have the free use of reason. . . .

Surely there can be only one rule of right, if morality has an eternal foundation; and whoever sacrifices virtue—strictly so-called—to present convenience. . . . lives only for the passing day and can't be an accountable [= 'morally responsible'] creature.

·If that is the category into which women belong·, then the poet ·Matthew Prior· should have dropped his sneer when

he wrote 'If weak women go astray, / The stars are more in fault than they.' Why? Because ·if women are like that, then what he says about them is simply *true* and not a fit topic for sneering sarcasm·. If it comes to be proved that women will never

- exercise their own reason,
- be independent,
- rise above opinion,
- feel the dignity of a rational will that •bows only to God and •often forgets that the universe contains any being but itself and God

then quite certainly they *are* bound by the unbreakable chain of destiny. [Let it be confessed that the final 'God' in the above indented passage replaces 'the model of perfection to which its ardent gaze is turned, to adore attributes that, softened into virtues, may be imitated in kind, though the degree overwhelms the enraptured mind'.]

I am proceeding by argument. I'm not willing to impress by rhetoric when reason offers her sober light. [This is the first time in this work that MW has treated reason as female. There are two others, on pages 32 and 65.] If women are really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves, or like lower animals who depend on the reason of man when they associate with him. Instead, develop their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of *principle*, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling that they depend only on God. Teach them in common with man to submit to necessity, instead of trying to make them more pleasing by giving a sex [see Glossary] to morals.

And if it turns out that they can't reach the same degree of strength of mind, perseverance and fortitude ·as men can·, let their virtues be the same in •kind ·as men's· although they can't be the same in degree. And man's superiority will be equally clear, if not clearer; and truth. . . . would be common to both. This wouldn't invert the order of society

as it is now. because woman would then have only the rank that reason assigned to her, and she couldn't employ her skills to level the balance, let alone to make it swing the other way.

These may be called 'utopian' dreams, but I shan't be deterred by that. I give thanks to the Being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me enough strength of mind to dare to employ my own reason until—becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue—I view with indignation the mistaken notions that enslave my sex.

I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre doesn't reign over me unless I owe homage to the reason of an individual; and even if I do, what I am submitting to is reason, not to man. In fact, the behaviour of a morally accountable being must be regulated by the operations of his or her own reason—if that is wrong, what foundation does the throne of God rest on?

It seems to me that I have to dwell on these obvious truths because females have been insulted, as it were; stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked out with artificial graces that enable them to be tyrants for a little time. Because in them love takes the place every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be beautiful, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire—like the servility in absolute monarchies—destroys

all strength of character. Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women are slaves by their very constitution, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must always languish like exotics, and be regarded as beautiful flaws in nature.

The argument about the subjection in which the sex has always been held can be turned back on man. [She means the argument from 'prescription'; see Glossary, and see also the end of this paragraph.] The many have always been subject to the few; and monsters who have shown almost no perception of human excellence, have tyrannized over thousands of their fellow creatures. Why have men with superior gifts submitted to such degradation? Doesn't everyone know that kings, taken as a whole, have always been inferior in abilities and virtue to the same number of men taken from the common mass of mankind? Yet haven't they been—and aren't they still—treated with a degree of reverence that is an insult to reason? China isn't the only country where a living man has been made a God. *Men* have submitted to superior strength so as to enjoy with impunity the pleasure of the moment, and *women* have only done the same. Therefore until it is proved that the courtier who servilely gives up his birthright as a man is not a moral agent, it can't be argued that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated. . . .