

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

Mary Wollstonecraft

Copyright ©2010–2015 All rights reserved. Jonathan Bennett

[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).

First launched: April 2010

Contents

Dedicatory Letter	1
Introduction	4
Chapter 1: Human rights and the duties they involve	7
Chapter 2: The prevailing opinion about sexual differences	12
Chapter 3: The same subject continued	26
Chapter 4: The state of degradation to which woman is reduced by various causes	36

Chapter 5: Writers who have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt	53
Section 1: Rousseau	53
Section 2: Fordyce	61
Section 3: Gregory	62
Section 4: Some women	65
Section 5: Chesterfield	66
Chapter 6: The effect that an early association of ideas has on the character	71
Chapter 7: Modesty comprehensively considered and not as a sexual virtue	75
Chapter 8: Morality undermined by sexual notions of the importance of a good reputation	80
Chapter 9: The pernicious effects of the unnatural distinctions established in society	85
Chapter 10: Parental Affection	89
Chapter 11: Duty to Parents	91
Chapter 12: National education	93
Chapter 13: Examples of the harm done by women's ignorance	99
Section 1: Charlatans	99
Section 2: Novel-reading	101
Section 3: Dressing up	103
Section 4: Sensibility	103
Section 5: Ignorance about child-care	104
Section 6: Concluding thoughts	105

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.

Chapter 3: The same subject continued

Bodily strength, once the distinction of heroes, has sunk into such undeserved contempt that men as well as women seem to think it unnecessary: women because it detracts from their feminine graces and from that lovely weakness that is the source of their undue power; and men because it seems to conflict with the character of a gentleman. [MW is probably here using 'contempt' in a now obsolete sense, meaning merely that bodily strength has come to be regarded as negligible.]

It won't be hard to prove that the two sexes have both departed from one extreme and run into another; but before I come to that I should perhaps observe that a certain common error has come to have some acceptance, and this has given strength to a false conclusion in which an effect has been mistaken for a cause.

People of genius have very often impaired their constitutions by study, or by careless inattention to their health, and . . . superficial observers have inferred from this that men of genius have commonly weak—or to use a more fashionable term, *delicate*—constitutions. But the truth is the opposite of that, I believe. Diligent inquiry has led me to the conclusion that strength of mind has in most cases been accompanied by superior strength of body—natural soundness of constitution, I mean, not the robust tone of nerves and vigour of muscles that come from bodily labour when the mind is at work only in directing the hands.

Dr. Priestley has remarked. . . . that the majority of great men have lived beyond the age of 45. Now, think about a great scientist who carelessly lavishes his strength when investigating his favourite science, wasting the lamp of life, forgetful of the midnight hour;

or think about

a poet lost in dreams that his imagination has peopled, and his soul disturbed—until it shakes his constitution—by the passions that his meditation has raised; passions whose purely imaginary objects fade before his exhausted eye.

They must have had iron constitutions! Shakespeare himself didn't grasp the airy dagger with a nerveless hand, and Milton didn't tremble when he led Satan far from the confines of his dreary prison. [MW is referring here to Macbeth's having a vision of a dagger and saying 'Is this a dagger I see before me? Come, let me clutch thee!', and to this passage from *Paradise Lost*: 'Satan was now at hand, and from his seat / The Monster moving onward came as fast, / With horrid strides, Hell trembled as he strode.'] These were not the ravings of imbecility, the sickly effusions of unwell brains; but the exuberance of an imagination that wasn't continually reminded of its material shackles when it was wandering 'in a fine frenzy' [Shakespeare's phrase].

I am aware that this argument would carry me further than you may think I want to go; but I follow truth, and still adhering to my first position I will admit that bodily strength seems to give man a natural superiority over woman; and this is the only solid basis on which the superiority of the sex can be built. But I still insist that not only the *virtue* but also the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree; and that women, considered not only as moral but as rational creatures, should try to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of *half*-being, one of Rousseau's wild inventions.

·A LONG FOOTNOTE QUOTING ROUSSEAU·

Researches into abstract and speculative truths, the principles and axioms of sciences—in short, everything that tends to generalise our ideas—is not the proper province of women. Their studies should concern points of practice; it is for them to apply the principles that men have discovered, and to make observations that direct men to the establishment of general principles. All the ideas of women that aren't immediately relevant to points of duty should be directed to the study of men, and to the attainment of the pleasant accomplishments that have to do with taste. Works of genius are beyond the capacity of women, who don't have enough precision or power of attention to succeed in sciences that require accuracy; and physical knowledge belongs only to those who are most active, most inquiring, and understand the greatest variety of things—in short, it belongs to those who are best able to make judgments about how sensible beings relate to the laws of nature. A woman who is naturally weak and doesn't carry her ideas very far does know how to make judgments about (and form proper estimates of) the movements that she gets started in order to aid her weakness; these movements are the passions of men. The mechanism she employs is much more powerful than ours, for all her levers move the human heart. She must have the skill to incline us to do everything that she needs or wants and that her sex won't enable her to do herself. So she ought to study the mind of man thoroughly,

not abstractly the mind of man in general, but
·concretely· the dispositions of the men she is subject
to by the laws of her country or by the force of opinion.

She should learn to discover their real sentiments from their conversation, actions, looks and gestures. She should also work out how to communicate—by her own conversation, actions, looks, and gestures—the sentiments that are agree-

able to those men, without seeming to intend it. Men will argue more philosophically about the human heart, but women will read the heart of man better than they do. It is women's role to form an experimental morality, so to speak, and to reduce the study of man to a system. Women have more wit, men have more genius; women observe, men reason. The two together give us the clearest light and the most perfect knowledge that the human mind is capable of attaining unaided. In one word, from this source we acquire the most intimate acquaintance with ourselves and with others that we are capable of; and that is how art has a constant tendency to perfect the endowments that nature has bestowed. The world is the book of women. (from Rousseau's *Émile*)

·END OF ROUSSEAU FOOTNOTE·

I hope my readers still remember the comparison I made between women and officers.

But if bodily strength is (with some show of reason) something men boast of having, why are women so foolish as to be proud of ·weakness, which is· a defect? Rousseau has provided them with a plausible excuse that could only have occurred to a man whose imagination had been allowed to run wild in a search for ways of making impressions of the senses seem more refined—to give him a pretext for yielding to a natural appetite without violating a romantic sort of modesty that gratifies his pride and his libertinism.

Women, deluded by these sentiments, sometimes *boast* of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men, . . . and coming to have, like Turkish generals, more real power than their masters. But this involves sacrificing •virtue to •temporary gratifications, and sacrificing •a life worthy of respect to •the triumph of an hour.

[MW begins this next paragraph by saying, rather obscurely, that her objection is not to women's having this power over men but to how they obtain it, namely by a method that is degraded and harmful to society in general. Then:] So I will venture to assert that until women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge is bound to meet continual obstacles. If you accept that woman was not created merely to gratify the appetite of man, to be the upper servant who provides his meals and takes care of his linen, then you ought to grant also that

mothers or fathers who are serious about the education of females should have as their first concern: if not to strengthen the body, at least not to destroy the ·girl's physical· constitution by mistaken notions of beauty and female excellence; and girls should never be allowed to absorb the pernicious notion that some chemical process of reasoning can turn a defect into an excellence!

On this matter I am happy to find that the author of one of the most instructive books our country has produced for children thinks as I do. . . .

·QUOTATION FROM THOMAS DAY'S *Sandford and Merton*·

A respectable old man gives the following sensible account of how he went about educating his daughter Selene. 'I tried to give to both her mind and her body a degree of vigour that is seldom found in the female sex. As soon as she was strong enough to be capable of light work in the garden and around the farm, I employed her as my constant companion. Selene soon became dexterous in all these rustic jobs, which gave me equal amounts of pleasure and admiration. If women are in general feeble in body and mind, that arises less from nature than from education. We encourage a bad slackness and inactivity, which we falsely call "delicacy"; instead of

hardening their minds by the severer principles of reason and philosophy, we train them in useless arts that lead only to vanity and sensuality. In most of the countries I had visited, they are taught nothing of a higher nature than a few modulations of the voice or useless postures of the body; their time is taken in idleness or trifles, and trifles become the only pursuits capable of interesting them. We seem to forget that our own domestic ·comforts and the ·education of our children must depend on the qualities of the female sex. And what ·comforts or ·education can we expect from a race of beings who are corrupted from their infancy and know nothing of the duties of life? The only arts cultivated by women in most of the polished nations I had seen were touching a musical instrument with useless skill, exhibiting their natural or artificial graces to the eyes of idle and debauched young men, and wasting their husbands' wealth in riotous and unnecessary expenses. And the consequences are always just what you would expect to come from such polluted sources—private misery and public servitude.

'Selene's education was regulated by different views, and conducted on severer principles—if you can call "severe" something that opens the mind to a sense of moral and religious duties, and arms it most effectively against the inevitable evils of life.'

·END OF QUOTATION FROM *Sandford and Merton*, VOL. 3·

Suppose it were proved that woman is naturally weaker than man, how does it follow that it is natural for her to try to become even weaker than nature intended her to be? Arguments of this sort are an insult to common sense, and have a whiff of passion about them. I hope that in this enlightened age the divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, can be challenged without danger ·to the challenger·; and although conviction may not silence many boisterous disputants, still when any prevailing prejudice is

attacked the wise will *think about it* and leave thoughtless and noisy scolding to the narrow-minded.

A mother who wants to give her daughter true dignity of character must ignore the sneers of ignorance and proceed on a plan diametrically opposite to the one Rousseau has recommended with all the deluding charms of eloquence and philosophical trickery. His eloquence makes absurdities plausible, and when his dogmatic conclusions are considered by people who aren't able to refute them, they produce puzzlement but no conviction.

Throughout the whole animal kingdom every young creature requires almost continual exercise, and the infancy of children should similarly be spent in harmless play that exercises the feet and hands without requiring very precise direction from the head or the constant attention of a governess. In fact, the care necessary for self-preservation is the first natural exercise of the understanding, as inventive little pastimes stretch the imagination. But these wise designs of nature are counteracted by mistaken fondness or blind zeal. The child is not left for a moment to its own direction, particularly a girl, and is thus made dependent—and dependence is called *natural*.

To preserve personal beauty—woman's glory!—the girls' limbs and faculties are cramped with worse-than-Chinese bands; and the sedentary life they are condemned to live, while boys play in the open air, weakens their muscles and slackens their nerves. [MW is referring to the Chinese practice of binding girls' feet very tightly so as to keep them fashionably small, with the result that the adult woman could only hobble.] As for Rousseau's remarks, since echoed by many writers, that

girls have naturally, i.e. from their birth and independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking,

they are too puerile to merit a serious refutation. If a girl

is condemned to sit for hours listening to the idle chat of weak governesses or to be present at her mother's toilet, it is indeed very natural for her to •try to join the conversation, and •to imitate her mother or aunts and to amuse herself [see Glossary] by adorning her lifeless doll, as they amuse themselves in dressing her, poor innocent babe! Men of the greatest abilities have seldom been strong enough to rise above the surrounding atmosphere; and if the page of genius [see Glossary] has always been blurred by the prejudices of the times, some allowance should be made for the members of a sex who—like kings!—always see things through a false medium.

Thus, we can easily explain women's conspicuous fondness for dress without supposing it to come from a desire to please the members of the sex on which they are dependent. In short, the supposition that

a girl is naturally a coquette, and her behaviour expresses a desire connected with nature's impulse to propagate the species, even before an improper education has, by heating the imagination, created the desire prematurely

is *absurd*. It's so unphilosophical that such an intelligent observer as Rousseau wouldn't have adopted it if he hadn't been accustomed to pushing his desire for uniqueness ahead of reason, and pushing a favourite paradox ahead of truth.

To give a sex [see Glossary] to *mind* in this way was not very consistent with the principles of a man who argued so warmly and so well for the immortality of the soul. But truth is a weak barrier when it stands in the way of an hypothesis! Rousseau respected virtue—he almost adored it—and yet he allowed himself to love with sensual fondness. His imagination constantly prepared combustible fuel for his combustible senses; but, in order to reconcile his other views with his respect for self-denial, fortitude and those

heroic virtues that a mind like his could not coolly admire, he tries to invert the law of nature, and launches a doctrine that is pregnant with harm and derogatory to the character of God.

His ridiculous stories that aim to show that girls are *naturally* attentive to their persons. . . . are beneath contempt. [She quotes one such story and says that it belongs 'with the anecdotes of the learned pig'; this presumably refers to *The Story of the Learned Pig*, an anonymous work that had appeared not long before, questioning whether Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him. MW continues:]

I have probably had more opportunity to observe girls in their infancy than J. J. Rousseau has. I can recollect my own feelings, and I have looked steadily around me [for a while she had earned her living as a governess]; and far from sharing his view about the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to say that a girl whose spirits haven't been damped by inactivity, and whose innocence hasn't been tainted by false shame, will always be a romp [= 'a lively playful girl'], and the doll will never interest her unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys would play harmlessly together if the difference between the sexes hadn't been drilled into them long before nature makes any difference. Among the women I have known—this is a matter of plain objective fact—the ones who have acted like rational creatures, or shown some vigour of intellect, are ones who had this kind of freedom in their youth, or in the language of some of the elegant experts on the fair sex, had been 'allowed to run wild'.

The evils that flow from inattention to bodily health during infancy and youth extend further than is supposed; dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind, and how can someone be a good wife or mother if most of her time is spent guarding against or enduring sickness?

And it can't be expected that a woman will resolutely try to strengthen her constitution, abstaining from indulgences that would harm her health, if her motives of action were at an early age entangled with artificial notions of beauty and false descriptions of sensibility. Most men sometimes have to put up with bodily troubles, and occasionally to go out into bad weather; but genteel women are, literally speaking, *slaves to their bodies*—and they glory in their subjection.

I once knew a weak woman. . . . who was more than commonly proud of her delicacy and sensibility. [MW contemptuously gives details; she is clearly remembering a real case; the details don't add to the content of the work as a whole. She follows this with a paragraph saying that although the Roman emperors were 'depraved by lawless power', kings in Europe have generally been at least somewhat restrained, and she contrasts this with 'the destructive blast [an intensely hot wind] that desolates Turkey, and makes the men as well as the soil unfruitful'.]

Women are in this deplorable state everywhere, because truth is hidden from them so as to preserve their 'innocence' (the polite name for ignorance), and they are made to take on an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre [see Glossary], the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around in its gilt cage it only seeks to adorn its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits that engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one pursuit and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their view beyond the triumph of the hour. But if their understanding were emancipated from the slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man and their short sighted desire. . . . has subjected them, we would probably read of their weaknesses with surprise.

Let me pursue the argument a little further. If there were an evil being who, in the allegorical language of scripture [1 *Peter* 5:8] 'went about seeking whom he should devour', he could not more effectively degrade the human character than by giving a man absolute power. This argument branches off in various directions. Birth, riches, and every intrinsic advantage that **raise a man above** his fellows, without any mental exertion, really **sink him below** them. In proportion to his weakness, he is manipulated by designing men, until the bloated monster loses all traces of humanity. And tribes of men like flocks of sheep quietly follow such a leader!—that is a blunder that can only be explained by narrowness of understanding and a desire for present enjoyment. Educated in slavish dependence and weakened by luxury and sloth, where can we find men who will stand up and •assert the rights of man, or •claim the privilege of moral beings, who should have only one road to excellence? Slavery to monarchs and ministers, whose deadly grasp stops the progress of the human mind, is not yet abolished and won't be for a long time.

[MW now argues that men who contend 'that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so' are using the very argument that 'tyrannical kings and venal ministers' use to justify their subjection of everyone else, men included. Men who go on about the folly of women, she says, should bear in mind the folly of men.]

It is obviously true that when women obtain power by unjust means they lose the rank appropriate to their having reason, and become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants. In acquiring power they lose all simplicity, all dignity of mind, and act as we see men act when they have been exalted by the same wrong means.

·MOVING INTO A DISCUSSION OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES·

It is time to bring about a revolution in female manners, time to restore their lost dignity to them and to make them, as a part of the human species, work to reform the world by reforming themselves. It is time to separate unchangeable •morals from local •manners. If men are demi-gods, then let us indeed serve them! And if the dignity of the female soul is as disputable as that of animals, if their [= women's] reason doesn't give enough light to direct their conduct but they don't have unerring instinct either, they are surely the most miserable of all creatures; bent beneath the iron hand of destiny, they must submit to being a *beautiful defect* in creation. In that case, God has made half of mankind at once morally accountable •because they have reason• and yet not accountable •because they don't have enough reason•. I challenge moral theologians to point out some conclusive reason for God to behave like that!

The only solid foundation for morality appears to be the character of the Supreme Being; the harmony of that character arises from a balance of attributes; and...one attribute seems to imply the *necessity* of another: God must be just because he is wise, he must be good because he is omnipotent. To exalt one attribute at the expense of another equally noble and necessary one bears the stamp of warped human reason. . . . Man, accustomed to bow down to power in his savage state, can seldom get rid of this barbarous prejudice—•this attaching of weight to physical power•—even when civilization fixes how greatly mental strength is superior to bodily strength; and his reason is clouded by these crude opinions, even when he is thinking about God. His omnipotence is made to swallow up or preside over his other attributes, and mortals who think •as I do• that his power must be regulated by his wisdom are accused of **irreverently** limiting his power.

There is a kind of 'humility' that investigates nature but stops short of nature's Author. I disclaim that. ·God·, the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, no doubt has many attributes of which we can form no conception; but •reason tells me that those attributes can't clash with the divine attributes that fill me with loving wonder, and I am compelled to listen to •her voice.

It seems natural for man to search for excellence, and either to •find it in the object that he worships or •blindly clothe that object with perfection. But what good effect can the blindly-clothing type of worship have on the moral conduct of a rational being? He bends to power; he stands in wonder before a dark cloud, which may •open a bright prospect to him, or •burst in angry fury on his doomed head without his knowing why. And if God does act on the basis of the vague impulse of an undirected will, what is man to do? He must either follow his own will, or act according to rules derived from principles that he rejects as **irreverent**. This is a dilemma into which both fanatics and cooler thinkers have fallen when trying to free men from the wholesome restraints imposed by a correct conception of God's character.

It isn't impious to scan God's attributes: we *have to* do it if we are to exercise our faculties. For someone wanting to acquire either virtue or knowledge, the only ·useful· worship consists in loving God as the fountain of wisdom, goodness, and power. A blind unsettled affection may, like human passions, occupy the mind and warm the heart, ·but that has no moral benefit because it can happen· while 'doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God' [Micah 6:8] are forgotten. I shall resume this subject when I consider religion in a light opposite to that recommended by Dr. Gregory, who treats it as a matter of sentiment or taste—·a question of how you feel or what you like·.

·END OF DISCUSSION OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES·

Returning now from this apparent detour: It is desirable that women's affection for their husbands should be based on the same principle that ·religious· devotion ought to rest on. Nowhere in the world is there any other firm base. Let women beware of the misleading light of 'sentiment', which is often used as a softer phrase for *sensuality*. So it follows, I think, that from their infancy women should either be •shut up like eastern princes or •educated in a manner that enables them to think and act for themselves.

Why do men halt between two opinions, and expect impossibilities? Why do they expect virtue from a slave, or from a being who has been made weak—or worse—by the constitution of civil society?

Still, I know that eradicating the firmly rooted prejudices that sensualists have planted will take a long time; and it will also take time

- to convince women that they are acting contrary to their real long-term interests when they value weakness or pretend to have it, under the name of 'delicacy', and
- to convince the world that the poisoned source of female vices [see Glossary] and follies. . . has been the sensual homage paid to beauty.

I'm talking about beauty of features; for a German writer has shrewdly observed that a **pretty** woman is an object of desire for men of all descriptions, whereas a **fine** woman, who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty, may have no attraction for men who find their happiness in the gratification of their appetites.

I can see an obvious retort that may be made, namely:

For as long as man goes on being as imperfect as he appears to have been so far, he *will* be pretty much the slave of his appetites; and it is always the case that the women who get the most power are those who gratify

a predominant appetite; so the sex is degraded by a physical if not by a moral necessity. [The last clause is verbatim MW. It means something like this: 'The female sex *will* be degraded—this isn't morally right, but it is inevitable.']

This objection has some force, I admit; but it is based on the idea that if we can see that something is inevitable we shouldn't waste our energy trying to change it; and that idea is open to question. In the light of the sublime precept 'be pure as your heavenly father is pure,' it would seem that God. . . .hasn't set any limits to the virtues of man, and that man may press forward without considering whether he is stepping out of his sphere [= 'getting out of line'] by harbouring such a noble ambition as to be as pure as God is. . . .

- Matter yields to the great governing spirit by following the causal laws that he has established; but an immortal
- soul, not restrained by mechanical laws and struggling to free itself from matter's shackles, doesn't disturb the order of creation—indeed it contributes to it—when it tries in co-operation with the Father of spirits to govern itself by the invariable rule. . . .by which the universe is regulated.

Besides, if women are educated for dependence, i.e. to act according to the will of another fallible being, and to submit to power, whether it is right or wrong, where are we to stop? Are they to be considered as vice-regents—deputy monarchs—allowed to reign over a small domain, and answerable for their conduct to a higher tribunal that is as liable to error as they are?

It won't be hard to prove that such deputies will act like men who are held down by fear, and will make their children and servants endure their tyrannical oppression. As they submit without reason, so also they will govern without reason: having no fixed rules against which to judge their conduct, they will be kind or cruel as the mood takes them; and it won't be surprising if sometimes, chafing under their

heavy yoke, they take a mean pleasure in resting it on weaker shoulders.

•THE CASE OF ONE WIDOW•

Consider this case:

A woman who has been trained up to obedience marries a sensible man, who directs her judgment without making her feel the servility of her subjection. He helps her to act by this reflected light with as much propriety as can be expected when reason is taken at second hand, but she can't ensure the life of her protector; he dies and leaves her with a large family.

She now has a double duty: to play both the mother's and the father's part in educating her children, forming their principles and securing their property. But she has never thought for herself, much less acted for herself. She has only learned to please men, to depend gracefully on them; but how with her burden of children is she to obtain another protector, another husband to supply the place of reason? A rational man—we aren't treading on romantic ground!—though he may think her a pleasing docile creature won't choose to marry a *family* for love when the world contains many creatures who are prettier than she is. What then is to become of her? She either falls an easy prey to some mean fortune hunter who defrauds her children of their paternal inheritance and makes her miserable, or becomes the victim of discontent and blind indulgence. Unable to educate her sons or get them to respect her. . . ., she suffers under the anguish of impotent regret. The serpent's tooth enters into her very soul, and the vices of lawless youth bring her with sorrow—and perhaps also with poverty—to the grave. [MW is echoing King Lear's words 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child.']. . . .

It seems likely that someone who has been taught only to please must still find her happiness in pleasing; and if that is true of this woman, what an example of folly—and even vice—she will be to her innocent daughters! The mother will be lost in the coquette, and instead of making friends of her daughters she will view them with suspicion because they are her rivals, the cruellest rivals because they invite a comparison and drive her from the throne of beauty—she who has never thought of a seat on the bench of reason.

It doesn't require a lively pencil. . . .to sketch the domestic miseries and petty vices which such a mistress of a family spreads around her. Yet she is only acting as a woman ought to act if she has been brought up according to Rousseau's system. She can't be reproached for being 'masculine' or stepping out of her sphere; indeed she may conform to his rules well enough to be reckoned a good kind of woman. Yet in what respect can she be termed good? It's true that she abstains, without any great struggle, from committing gross crimes; but how does she fulfil her duties? Duties!—she has no time or energy for duties, when she has enough to think about in adorning her body and nursing a weak constitution.

With regard to religion, she never presumed to judge for herself. As a dependent creature should, she conformed to the ceremonies of the church she was brought up in, piously believing that wiser heads than her own have settled that business [MW's phrase]; and her idea of perfection in religious matters is *not to doubt*. So she makes her little weekly payment to the church, and thanks her God that she is not as other women are. These are the blessed effects of a good education! these are the virtues of man's helpmate. I must relieve myself—give myself a break from my rage and sadness—by drawing a different picture.

·THE CASE OF ANOTHER WIDOW·

Now let us imagine a woman with a fairly good understanding (I don't want to deal with extremes), whose constitution, strengthened by physical exercise, has allowed her body to acquire its full vigour; while her mind has gradually expanded itself to understand the moral duties of life and what human virtue and dignity consist in. Formed in this way by the duties she has because of her position in life, she marries from affection, without losing sight of prudence; and. . . .she secures her husband's respect before there's any need to exert low tricks to please him and feed a dying flame of love. Nature dooms *that* to expire when the loved one becomes familiar, when friendship and forbearance take the place of a more ardent affection. This is the natural death of love; and in the marriage I am describing here domestic peace is not destroyed by struggles to prevent the death from happening. I am also supposing the husband to be virtuous. . . .

Fate, however, breaks this tie. She is left a widow, without enough to live on comfortably, but she is not desolate! The pang of nature is felt; but after time has softened sorrow into sad resignation, her heart turns to her children with redoubled fondness, and in her anxiety to provide for them her affection presents her maternal duties as sacred and heroic. She thinks that her virtuous efforts are seen by the eye of God, from whom all her comfort now must flow and whose approval is life; and her imagination, a little abstracted and exalted by grief, lets her hope that. . . .her husband's eyes still see how she subdues every wayward passion in order to fulfil the double duty of being father as well as mother to her children. Raised to heroism by misfortunes, she represses the first faint dawning of a natural inclination before it ripens into love; and in the bloom of life she forgets her sex [see Glossary]—forgets the pleasure of an awakening passion

which might again have been inspired and returned. . . . Her children have her love, and her brightest hopes are beyond the grave, where her imagination often strays.

I think I see her surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. . . . Health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks; and as they grow up, the cares of her life are lessened by their grateful attention. She lives to see the virtues that she tried to implant in her children through principles become fixed in them as habits, and to see her children achieve enough strength of character to be able to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example.

The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death. When she rises from the grave she can say to God: 'Behold, you gave me a talent, and here are five talents'. [This is a variant on a story in Matthew 25; a talent was a coin.]

* * * * *

I want to sum up what I have said in a few words: I here throw down my gauntlet [= 'pose a challenge to anyone who wants to oppose me'] and deny that there is any way for a woman to be virtuous that isn't also a way for a man to be virtuous—and **modesty** is not an exception to that. If I understand the meaning of the word, *truth* must be the same for man and for woman; yet the fanciful female character that poets and novelists draw so prettily demands the sacrifice of truth and sincerity; and so virtue becomes a relative idea, based on nothing but utility, and men set themselves up as judges of utility, shaping it to their own convenience.

Women may have different duties to fulfill, but they are *human* duties, and I firmly maintain that the principles that should regulate the performance of them must be the ones that hold for all human beings.

To become worthy of respect, women must use their understandings; there is no other basis for independence of character. I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the **modest** slaves of opinion.

In the upper ranks of life we seldom we meet with a man of superior abilities, or even one whose abilities are about average! The reason seems to me clear: the state they are born in was an unnatural one. The human character has always been formed by the employments the individual or class pursues; and if the faculties are not sharpened by necessity, they must remain obtuse [= 'blunt']. The same line of thought can fairly be extended to women. [MW is saying that *women in general* tend to be dim in the way that *men who have titles or high rank or great wealth* tend to be dim.] That is because most of them have no *serious* occupations; they are left to the pursuit of pleasure, which gives to their character the triviality that makes the society of the *great* so insipid. The lack of firmness, produced by a similar cause, forces them both—'great' men and all women—to fly from themselves [MW's phrase] to noisy pleasures and artificial passions, until vanity takes place of every social affection, and the characteristics of humanity almost disappear from sight. The blessings of civil governments as they are at present organized operate in such a way that wealth and female softness equally tend to debase mankind, and are produced by the same cause. If women are rational creatures they should be urged to acquire virtues that they can call their own, for how can a rational being be ennobled by anything that is not obtained by his or her *own* efforts?

Chapter 4: The state of degradation to which woman is reduced by various causes

It is clear, I think, that woman is •naturally weak or •degraded by a combination of circumstances. I shall lay this alongside a conclusion that I have often heard sensible men assert in favour of an aristocracy, namely:

The mass of mankind are a sort of nothing; if they weren't—if there anything to them—the obsequious slaves who patiently allow themselves to be imprisoned would have a sense of their own worth and would throw off their chains. Men everywhere submit to oppression, when they have only to lift up their heads to throw off the yoke; yet, instead of asserting their birthright, they quietly lick the dust and say 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die'.

Women, I argue from analogy, are degraded by the same inclination to enjoy the present moment and eventually to despise the freedom that they haven't enough virtue [see Glossary] to struggle to get. But I must be more explicit.

•WHAT THE NEXT PARAGRAPH SEEMS TO MEAN•

As regards people's ability to manage and develop their feelings, no-one thinks that males are ahead of females, or vice versa. But we do have to reckon with the view that males are ahead of females when it comes to intellectual

powers.⁵ The only positive feature that woman is credited with having *absolutely* is loveliness; as for rationality, the fraction of *that* that's conceded to her is a tiny one; for when she has been denied high-level intellect and judgment, what is there left to count as her intellect?

•WHAT MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT ACTUALLY WROTE:•

With respect to the culture of the heart, it is unanimously allowed that sex is out of the question; but the line of subordination in the mental powers is never to be passed over. [footnote] Only 'absolute in loveliness' [Milton's phrase], the portion of rationality granted to woman is, indeed, very scanty; for, denying her genius [see Glossary] and judgment, it is scarcely possible to divine what remains to characterize intellect.

What immortality is *for* is the perfectibility of human reason. If man were created perfect, or if when he reached maturity a flood of knowledge broke in on him and preserved him from error, I'm not sure that his existence would continue after the death of his body. But as things are, every difficulty in morals that eludes human solution—that baffles the investigation of profound thinking and the lightning glance of genius—is part of my case for believing in the

⁵ What inconsistencies men fall into when they argue without a compass! Women, weak women, are •teasingly• compared with angels; yet a superior order of beings •such as angels• should be supposed to have more intellect than man—if they don't, what makes them superior? In a similar spirit, and not teasingly, women are credited with having more goodness of heart, piety, and benevolence •than men•. This is meant as a compliment, but I doubt that it is true, unless ignorance is the mother of invention! I am quite convinced that people's virtue is nearer than is usually thought to being (on average) proportional to their knowledge.

immortality of the soul. Thus, reason is the simple power of *improvement*—or, more accurately, of *recognising truth*. . . . The nature of reason must be the same in everyone, if reason is an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; can a soul be stamped with the heavenly image if it isn't perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet. . . .the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction; with man always placed *between* her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a fog and to believe what she is told. But. . . .if woman has reason, which for a moment I will take for granted, she wasn't created merely to be the solace of man, and her sexual character should not destroy her human character.

Men have probably been led into this error by viewing education [see Glossary] in a false light, seeing it not as the first step in forming a being who will advance gradually toward perfection (not strictly the right word, but I can't find a better one), but rather as merely a preparation for life. That is the basis on which the false system of female manners been built, robbing the whole sex of its dignity and classing women with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land. This has always been the language of men, and even highly intelligent women adopt the same sentiments for fear of departing from the character they are supposed to have just as women. Thus **understanding** strictly so-called has been denied to woman; and **instinct**—refined into wit and cunning for the purposes of life—has been put in its place.

The power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only thing an immortal being can have that really deserves to be called 'knowledge'. Merely to observe, without trying to explain anything, may serve (very incompletely) as everyday common sense; but where is the store laid up that is to clothe the soul when it leaves the body?

Women have been said not to have this power, and some writers have insisted that it is nearly always inconsistent with their sexual character. Let men prove *this* and I'll admit that woman only exists for man. In fact the power of generalizing ideas to any great extent is not very common among men or women. But this activity is the true cultivation of the understanding; and everything works together to make the cultivation of the understanding harder in the female than in the male world.

This remark naturally leads into the main subject of the present chapter: I shall now try to point out some of the causes that degrade the female sex and prevent women from generalizing their observations.

I shan't go back to ancient times to trace the history of woman. All I need to say is that she has always been either a slave or a despot, and that both these roles hold back the progress of reason. It has always seemed to me that the great source of female folly and vice is narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way of developing the female understanding and thus curing the narrowness of the female mind; yet virtue can be built on no other foundation! The same obstacles are thrown in the way of the rich, with the same results.

The proverb has it that *necessity is the mother of invention*; it is also the mother of virtue. Virtue is an acquisition to which pleasure must be sacrificed; and no-one sacrifices available pleasure unless his or her mind has been opened and strengthened by adversity, or the pursuit of knowledge goaded on by necessity. It is a good thing for people to have the cares of life to struggle with; for these struggles prevent them from becoming a prey to enervating vices purely through idleness! If men and women are born into a tropical zone, where the mid-day sun of pleasure shines directly

down on them, how can they adequately brace their minds to discharge the duties of life, or even to enjoy the affections that carry them out of themselves?

Pleasure is the business of a woman's life, according to society's present estimate; and for as long as that continues to be so, not much can be expected from such weak beings. Inheriting the sovereignty of beauty in a lineal descent from Eve, the first 'fair defect' in nature, they have maintained their power by resigning the natural rights that the exercise of reason might have given them, and chosen to be short-lived queens rather than labour to have the sober pleasures that arise from equality. Exalted by their inferiority (this sounds like a contradiction) they constantly demand homage as women, though experience should teach them that the men who pride themselves on the scrupulous exactness with which they pay this insolent respect to the sex are the ones who are most inclined to tyrannize over and despise the very weakness they cherish. They often repeat Hume's sentiments, when he alludes to women in the course of comparing the French and Athenian characters:

But what is more singular in this whimsical nation, the French, (I say to the Athenians) is that a frolic of yours during the Saturnalia when the slaves are served by their masters is seriously continued by them through the whole year, and through the whole course of their lives. . . . Your sport elevates for only a few days those whom fortune has thrown down, and whom she might in sport really elevate forever above you. But the French gravely exalt those whom nature has made subject to them, and whose inferiority and infirmities are absolutely incurable. The women, though without virtue [see Glossary], are their masters and sovereigns.

Ah! why do women (I write with affectionate solicitude) lower themselves to receive attention and respect from

strangers? I mean: attention and respect that goes beyond the two-way civility that the dictates of humanity and the politeness of civilization authorise between man and man. . . . Confined in cages, like birds, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves and stalk with mock-majesty from perch to perch. They are provided with food and clothing and don't have to work to get them, but they give up health, liberty and virtue in exchange. But actually it isn't surprising that women do this. Who among mankind has ever had enough strength of mind to give up these adventitious prerogatives, rising with the calm dignity of reason to a level above that of common opinion, and daring to be proud of the privileges inherent in man? [That sentence contrasts benefits that are 'adventitious', i.e. are available because of facts about one's circumstances, with benefits that are 'inherent in man', and thus available to every human being in any circumstances.] And there's no point in waiting for this to change—not while hereditary power chokes the affections and nips reason in the bud.

In this way men's passions have placed women on thrones; and until mankind become more reasonable women will avail themselves of the power that they get with the least exertion, and that is the most indisputable. They will smile; yes, they will *smile* even if they are told that

In beauty's empire is no mean,
And woman either slave or queen,
Is quickly scorn'd when not ador'd'.

But the adoration comes first, and the scorn is not anticipated.

Louis XIV, in particular, spread artificial manners and used their glitter to catch the whole nation in his web: establishing a carefully contrived chain of despotism, he brought it about that it was the in the interests of each French person to respect his position and support his power.

And women, whom he flattered by a childish attention to the whole sex, obtained during his reign the prince-like distinction that is so fatal to reason and virtue.

A king is always a king, and a woman always a woman. . . . His authority and her sex always stand between them and rational discourse. She *should* be like this with a lover, I agree, and in that relationship her sensibility will naturally lead her to try to arouse emotion to gratify not her vanity but her heart. I don't count this as coquetry; it is the uncalculated impulse of nature; I exclaim against the sexual desire for conquest only when the heart doesn't come into it.

This desire isn't confined to women; 'I have endeavoured', says •Lord Chesterfield, 'to gain the hearts of twenty women whose persons [see Glossary] I would not have given a fig for.' The libertine who in a gust of passion takes advantage of •some woman's• unsuspecting tenderness is a *saint* when compared with •this cold-hearted rascal. . . . Yet only taught to please, women are always on the watch to please, and with true heroic ardour they try to gain hearts that they will give up or kick aside once it is clear that they have won the victory.

Now I must get into the details of the subject.

I lament the fact that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions that •men think it manly to pay to the •female• sex, when in fact •they are insultingly supporting their own superiority. There is nothing graceful about bowing to an inferior, •which is what a man must think he is doing when he bows to a woman•. Indeed, these ceremonies strike me as so ludicrous that I can hardly control my muscles [= 'can hardly stop myself from laughing'] when I see a man jump up with eager and serious solicitude to lift a handkerchief or shut a door, when the *lady* could have done it herself if she moved a pace or two.

A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I won't stifle it although it may arouse a horse laugh [= 'may make you roar with laughter']. Except in cases where love animates the behaviour, **I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society**—that is, I wish things could be managed in such a way that it was usually not clear whether a given person was male or female. For this sorting into two sexes is, I am firmly persuaded, the basis for the weakness of character ascribed to woman; is the cause why •the understanding is neglected while accomplishments [see Glossary] are acquired with care, and why women prefer the graceful virtues to the heroic ones.

Every human being wishes to be loved and respected for *something*; and the common herd will always take the shortest road to the fulfillment of their wishes. The respect paid to wealth and beauty is the surest and least ambiguous road, and as a matter of course it will always attract the eye of common minds. For men to rise from •the middle rank of life into •prominence, they absolutely must have abilities and virtues; and this explains the well-known fact that the middle rank contains most virtue and abilities. In one social rank at least, men have therefore an opportunity to exert themselves with dignity, and to rise by efforts of kinds that really do improve a rational creature; but the whole female sex are, until their character is formed, in the same condition as the rich: for they are born. . . .with certain sexual privileges, and while those are freely available to them not many of them will ever think of works of supererogation as a means to getting the esteem of a small number of superior people. [Works of supererogation are acts of benevolence or charity that go above and beyond the call of duty.]

When do we hear of women who begin in obscurity and boldly claim respect on account of their great abilities or daring virtues? Where are they to be found? To be observed,

to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, satisfaction and approval are all the advantages that they seek.' True! my male readers will probably exclaim; but before they draw any conclusion they should remember that this was written originally as descriptive not of women but of the rich! In Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I have found a general characterisation of 'people of rank and fortune that I think very thoroughly applies to 'the female sex. . . . Let me quote a passage from that book, to add strength to an argument that I intend to insist on as the most conclusive argument against a sexual character [i.e. against there being any such thing as female nature or male nature, as distinct from human nature]. 'The argument goes like this:

Apart from warriors, no great men of any sort have ever appeared among the nobility. From this fact we can reasonably infer that their local situation swallowed up the man, and produced a character similar to that of women, who are *localised*, so to speak, by the rank they are placed in as a matter of courtesy. [An unstated premise in MW's argument about nobles is that pretty often someone gets a noble rank because of something excellent that he has done. Then the fact that we don't find excellence among the nobility is evidence that 'the excellence was extinguished by 'the circumstances of having that rank—i.e. 'the man was swallowed up by 'the local situation.] Women, commonly called Ladies, are not to be contradicted in company, are not allowed to exert any manual strength. When any virtues are expected from them they are negative ones—patience, docility, good-humour, and flexibility—virtues incompatible with any vigorous exercise of intellect. Besides, by living more with each other and seldom being absolutely alone, they are more under the influence of sentiments than of passions. Solitude and reflection are necessary

to give wishes the force of passions, enabling the imagination to enlarge the object and make it the most desirable. The same holds for the rich; they don't deal in general ideas, collected by level-headed thinking or calm investigation—don't deal with them *enough* to acquire the strength of character on which great resolves are built.

But now hear what an acute observer, 'Adam Smith', says about the great.

'ADAM SMITH ON 'THE GREAT'

Do the great seem unaware of how easily they can get the admiration of the public? or do they seem to think that, for them as for anyone else, their rank must have been purchased either by sweat or by blood? If the young nobleman is instructed in how to support the dignity of his rank, and to make himself worthy of the superiority over his fellow-citizens that he has acquired through the virtue of his ancestors, *what* accomplishments is he told to acquire for this purpose? Is he to make himself worthy of his rank by knowledge, hard work, patience, self-denial, or any other kind of virtue? Because his least move is *noticed*, he acquires a habit of care over every detail of ordinary behaviour, and tries to perform all those small duties with the most exact propriety. Being conscious of how much he is observed, and of how much people are disposed to allow him to have whatever he wants, he acts—even in utterly ordinary situations—with the freedom and loftiness that are naturally inspired by the thought of how the populace view him. Everything about his conduct marks an elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority—something that those who are born lower down the social scale can hardly ever achieve. *These* are the arts [here = 'the devices' or even 'the tricks'] by which he proposes to make mankind more easily submit to his authority and govern *their* inclinations

according to *his* wishes; and in this he usually succeeds. . . . During most of his reign Louis XIV of France was widely regarded as the most perfect model of a great prince. What were the talents and virtues by which he acquired this great reputation? The scrupulous and inflexible rightness—the danger and difficulty—the tireless energy—of everything he did? His broad knowledge, his exquisite judgment, his heroic valour? It was none of these. What he *did* have was the status of the most *powerful* prince in Europe, which gave him the highest rank among kings; and then, says his historian. . . [and Smith gives a long quotation (MW includes some of it) about Louis XIV's grand and imposing personal manner, his fine voice, his handsomeness, and so on. Then:] These trivial accomplishments—supported by his rank and no doubt by some degree of other talents and virtues, though not an outstanding degree—established this prince in the esteem of his own age and later generations' respect for his memory. Compared with this kingly manner, no other virtue appeared to have any merit. . . . Knowledge, industry, valour, and beneficence were abashed, trembling, and lost all dignity before them.

·END OF QUOTATION FROM ADAM SMITH·

In the middle rank of life (to continue the comparison) men in their youth are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whereas women have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the extensive flights of ambition that engross their attention. . . . To rise in the world and be free to run from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and their time is sacrificed and their persons [see Glossary] often legally prostituted [MW's word] to this objective. When a man enters a profession, he has his eye steadily fixed on some future advantage (and the mind gains great strength by having all its efforts directed

to one point) and. . . he regards pleasure as mere relaxation; while women seek pleasure as the main purpose of existence. In fact, from the education they receive from society, the love of pleasure may be said to govern them all; but does this prove that there is a sex [see Glossary] in souls? It would be just as rational to declare that the courtiers in France, where a destructive system of despotism had formed their character, were not men because liberty, virtue, and humanity were sacrificed to pleasure and vanity—fatal passions that always domineered over the *whole* race!

The same love of pleasure, encouraged by the over-all trend of their education, has a trivialising effect on women's conduct in most circumstances: for instance, they are always anxious about secondary things, and on the watch for adventures instead of being occupied by duties.

[MW develops this thought in a contrast between a man's thoughts and a woman's at the start of a journey: he is thinking about the journey's purpose, she is thinking about clothes, how she will impress people, troubles that may be met on the road. She continues:] In short, women in general and the rich of both sexes have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed its useful fruit. (Here as always in my generalisations about women, I mean to be allowing for a few exceptions.) Their senses are inflamed and their understandings neglected; so they become the prey of their senses—delicately called their 'sensibility'—and are blown around by every momentary gust of feeling. Thus, civilised women are so weakened by false refinement that their moral condition is much lower than it would have been if they had been left in a state nearer to nature, .i.e. in a less 'civilised' state. Always restless and anxious, their over-used 'sensibility' makes them not only uncomfortable in themselves but also troublesome (to put it mildly) to others. All their thoughts are about things that are likely to arouse

emotion; their conduct is unstable because they *feel* when they should *reason*; and their opinions are wavering because of contradictory emotions (quite different from the wavering produced by deliberation or development in one's thinking). By fits and starts they are eager in many pursuits, but this eagerness is never concentrated into perseverance, and soon exhausts itself. Sometimes it just wears itself out; sometimes it meets with some other fleeting passion to which reason has never given any specific gravity, so that neutrality ensues. [That is a joke involving physics. When one moving body collides with another, their post-collision movements depend in part on their specific gravities; but a trivial passion doesn't have any specific gravity—reason hasn't supplied it with one—so that when two of them collide they both come to a halt right there.] Miserable, indeed, must someone be whose cultivation of mind has tended only to inflame his or her passions! (Don't confuse inflaming passions with strengthening them.) When the passions are pampered in this way while the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue? Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly!

These remarks don't apply only to the 'fair' sex; but at present I am talking only about them.

Novels, music, poetry and gallantry all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed during the time they are acquiring accomplishments [see Glossary], the only improvements that their place in society motivates them to acquire. This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, preventing the intellect from achieving the sovereignty that it needs to attain to make a rational creature useful to others and content with his or her own role in life; because as one grows older the only natural method for calming the passions is through the exercise of reason. . . .

Will moralists claim that *this* is the condition in which half the human race should be encouraged to remain, with listless inactivity and stupid acquiescence? Kind instructors! what were we created for? 'To remain innocent' they may say—meaning to remain in a state of childhood. We might as well never have been born, unless our creation was needed for *man* to be able to acquire the noble privilege of •reason, •the power of distinguishing good from evil, while *we* lie in the dust from which we were taken, never to rise again.

It would take for ever to trace the variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows that women are plunged into by the prevailing opinion that they were created feel rather than to reason, and that the only way they can obtain any power is through their charms and weakness: 'Fine by defect, and amiably weak!' [Pope, *Of the Characters of Women*] And having been made by this 'amiable weakness' entirely dependent. . . . on man not only for protection but also for advice, is it surprising that women,

neglecting the duties that only reason points out and shrinking from trials that would be likely to strengthen their minds, exert themselves only to give their defects a graceful covering that may serve to •heighten their charms in the eye of the voluptuary, though it sinks them below the scale of moral excellence?

Fragile in every sense of the word, they're obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trivial dangers they cling to their support with a parasite's grip, piteously demanding help; and their *natural* protector extends his arm or raises his voice to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a *rat* would be a serious danger! In the name of reason and even of common sense, what can save such beings from contempt, even if they are soft and fair?

When these fears are genuine they may be very pretty, but they show a degree of imbecility that degrades a rational creature in a way women are not aware of—for love is a very different thing from esteem.

I'm sure that we would hear no more of these infantile airs if girls were allowed to have enough ·physical· exercise and weren't confined in close rooms until their muscles are relaxed and their powers of digestion destroyed. I would go further: if fear in girls, instead of being valued and perhaps created, were treated in the same way as cowardice in boys, we would quickly see women looking more dignified. It's true that they couldn't then be described as 'the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man', but they would be more respect-worthy members of society, performing the important duties of life by the light of their own reason. 'Educate women like men,' says Rousseau, 'and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.' That is exactly the point I am making; I don't want women to have power over men; I want them to have power over themselves.

Similarly, I have heard men argue against instructing the poor. . . . 'Teach them to read and write,' they say, 'and you take them out of the role in life assigned them by nature.' An eloquent Frenchman has answered them; I will borrow from him. They don't realise that if they make man a lower animal they can expect to see him at any moment transformed into a ferocious beast. [An aristocrat named Riqueti, who supported the revolution, said in the Constitutional Assembly: 'You have loosed the bull—do you expect that he won't use his horns?'] Without knowledge there can be no morality!

Ignorance is a frail basis for virtue! Yet woman was built to be ignorant, according to the writers who have most energetically argued in favour of the superiority of man. They mean this to be a superiority in essence, ·in kind·, not merely

in degree; though to soften the argument they have tried with chivalrous generosity to prove that the sexes ought not to be compared:

man was made to reason, woman to feel; and together—spirit and flesh—they make the most perfect [see Glossary] whole, by happily blending reason and sensibility into one character.

And what is sensibility? 'Quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy.' That is how Dr. Johnson defines it; and all I get from the definition is an idea of the most exquisitely polished instinct. I don't see a trace of the image of God in either sensation or matter. Refined seventy times seven, they are still material; intellect dwells not there. and fire won't turn lead into gold!

I come around to my old argument; if woman has an immortal soul she must have—as the employment of her life—an understanding to improve. And when. . . .she is incited by present gratification to forget her grand destination, then •nature is counteracted or else •woman was born only to procreate and to rot. [In that sentence, 'to rot' is a vivid way of saying 'to be mortal' (see Glossary).] Or here is another possibility:

All the lower animals have a soul, though not a reasonable one; and their use of instinct and sensibility is the step they have to take in this life towards the attainment of reason in the next.

If that is how things stand, ·and if in this respect woman is in the same boat as the lower animals·, she and they will be one step behind man through all eternity; and we can't explain why man was enabled to attain reason in his first mode of existence.

When I discuss the special duties of •women in the way that I would discuss the special duties of a •citizen or a •father, you'll see that I don't mean to imply that women in general should be taken out of their families. Bacon says:

He who has •wife and •children has given hostages to fortune; for •they are impediments to great enterprises, good and bad. Certainly the achievements that have done the most public good have been the work of unmarried or childless men.

I say the same of women. But the welfare of society isn't built on extraordinary efforts; and if society were more reasonably organized there would be still less need for great abilities or heroic virtues. In running a family and educating children one has a special need for strength both of body and of mind. . . ., and yet the men who in their writings have worked hardest to domesticate women have tried. . . .to weaken their bodies and cramp their minds. But even if these writers really *persuaded* women—by working in an underhand way on their feelings—to stay at home and fulfil the duties of a mother and mistress of a family, this would be a bad way of getting women to do the right thing—bad because it would be an insult to reason. I appeal to experience to confirm that if by neglecting the understanding women are actually more detached from these domestic duties than they could be by the most serious intellectual pursuit. . . ., I may be allowed to infer that reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I'll say it again: sensibility is not reason.

The comparison with the rich still occurs to me: when men neglect the duties of humanity, women will follow their example; a common stream hurries them both along with thoughtless speed. Riches and honours prevent a man from enlarging his understanding, and slacken all his powers by reversing the order of nature, which has always made true pleasure the reward of labour. Pleasure—enervating pleasure—is similarly within woman's reach without earning it. But until hereditary possessions are distributed throughout society, how can we expect men to be proud of virtue?

And until they are, women will govern them by the most direct means, neglecting their dull domestic duties so as to catch the pleasure that is on the wing of time. . . .

Another argument that has had a great weight with me, must, I think, have some force with every considerate benevolent heart. Girls who have been thus weakly educated are often cruelly left by their parents without any provision [MW means that through a cruelty of fate they become penniless orphans], and of course are then dependent not only on the reason but also on the generosity of their brothers. In the best cases these brothers are good men, and they give as a favour what children of the same parents had an equal right to. An easy-going female may fairly comfortably remain for some time in this ambiguous and humiliating situation; but when the brother marries, as he probably will, the sister will move from being considered as the mistress of the family to being viewed as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house and his new partner.

Who can describe the misery that many unfortunate beings, whose minds and bodies are equally weak, suffer in such situations—unable to work and ashamed to beg? The wife is likely to be a cold-hearted, narrow-minded woman; for the present style of education doesn't tend to enlarge the heart any more than to enlarge the understanding. This wife will be jealous of the little kindness that her husband shows to his relations; and because her sensibility doesn't rise to the level of humanity, she will be displeased at seeing *her* children's property being lavished on a helpless sister.

These are matters of fact that I have seen for myself again and again. The upshot is obvious: the wife resorts to cunning to undermine the habitual affection •of her husband for his sister•, which she is afraid to oppose openly; she uses tears and caresses relentlessly, until 'the spy' is worked out of her home, and •thrown on the world, unprepared for

its difficulties; or—as a great effort of generosity, or from some regard to propriety—sent with a small pension and an uncultivated mind into joyless solitude.

These two women—the sister and the wife—may be much on a par with regard to reason and humanity; and it may be that if their situations had been switched so would their behaviour have been. But if they had been differently educated [see Glossary] the upshot would also have been very different. The wife wouldn't have had the sensibility of which self is the centre, and reason might have taught her not to expect—and not even to be flattered by—her husband's affection if it led him to violate pre-existing duties. She would want to love him not merely because he loved her but on account of his virtues; and the sister might have been able to struggle for herself instead of eating the bitter bread of dependence.

I am convinced that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation [i.e. has its scope widened by being developed and attended to], and also by strengthening the organs, though that is less obvious. I'm not talking of momentary flashes of sensibility, but of durable affections. And in the education of both sexes it may be that the most difficult task is to adjust the instruction in such a way that the understanding and the affections are in a proper balance. That involves not letting the understanding

- be narrowed while the heart is warmed by the generous juices of spring. . . ., or
- engage itself in investigations that are remote from life, thereby drying up the feelings.

When women get a careful education, they come out of it either as fine ladies, brimful of sensibility, and teeming with capricious fancies, or as mere notable women. [This uses 'notable' in a now obsolete sense in which it means 'capable and industrious in household management'.] The latter are often friendly, honest

creatures, and have a shrewd kind of good sense joined with worldly prudence—a combination that often makes them more useful members of society than the fine sentimental lady although they don't have any greatness of mind or of taste. The intellectual world is shut against them; take them out of their family or neighbourhood and they come to a halt, finding nothing for their minds to do; for they have never tried to enjoy the fund of amusement that literature provides; often they have despised it. The sentiments and taste of more cultivated minds appear ridiculous, even in those whom chance and family connections have led them to love; but in mere acquaintance they think it all affectation.

If a man of sense [see Glossary] loves a woman like that, it can only be on account of her sex, and if he respects her it is because she is a trusty servant. To preserve his own peace he lets her scold the servants, and go to church in clothes made of the best materials. A man with only her level of understanding would probably not suit her so well, because he might wish to encroach on her territory and manage some domestic concerns himself. Yet women, whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or in whom the natural selfishness of sensibility hasn't been expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family, because they always stretch their power and use tyranny to maintain a superiority that rests on nothing but the arbitrary distinction of fortune. The evil is sometimes more serious than that, and domestic servants are deprived of innocent pleasures and made to work beyond their strength, in order to enable the notable woman to keep a better table, and outshine her neighbours in finery and parade. If she attends to her children, it is usually to dress them expensively—and whether she does this out of vanity or out of fondness for the children, it is pernicious either way.

Many women of this sort pass their days, or at least their evenings, discontentedly. Their husbands acknowledge that they are good managers, and chaste wives; but they leave home to seek for more agreeable and stimulating society; and the patient drudge who fulfils her task like a blind horse in a mill is defrauded of her just reward, for the wages due to her are the caresses of her husband; and women who have so few resources in themselves don't patiently bear being deprived of a natural right in this way.

A fine lady on the other hand has been taught to look down with contempt on common vulgar [see Glossary] employments of life; though she is in no position to be so haughty, because the only accomplishments she has been motivated to acquire are ones with next to no intellectual content; for even bodily accomplishments can't be acquired with any precision unless the understanding has been strengthened by exercise. Without a foundation of principles, taste is superficial; and grace must arise from something deeper than imitation. . . .

[In case you are interested, the ellipsis at the end of that paragraph replaces the sentence: 'The imagination, however, is heated, and the feelings rendered fastidious, if not sophisticated; or, a counterpoise of judgment is not acquired, when the heart still remains artless, though it becomes too tender.']

These women are often amiable; and their hearts are more sensitive to general benevolence, more alive to the feelings that civilize life, than the sturdy family drudge; but because they are deficient in reflection and self-government, they only inspire love; and for as long as they have *any* hold on their husbands' affections it is as their mistresses. . . . These women are the 'fair defects' in nature—the women who seem to be created not to enjoy the fellowship of man, but •to save him from sinking to the merely animal level by •rubbing off the rough angles of his character; and •to

give some dignity to the appetite that draws man to them by •playful teasing. Gracious Creator of the whole human race! have you created such a being as woman—who can trace your wisdom in your works, and feel that you alone are by your nature exalted above her—for no better purpose than this? Can she believe that she was made only to submit to man, who is her equal—a being sent into the world to acquire virtue, as she was? Can she consent to be wholly occupied in pleasing him; merely to adorn the earth when her soul is capable of rising to you? And can she slackly depend on man for reason, when she ought to climb the difficult slopes of knowledge alongside him? . . .

To fulfil domestic duties one needs a serious kind of perseverance that requires a firmer support than emotions can give, however lively and true to nature they are. *Order* is the soul of virtue; to give an example of it a person has to adopt some austerity of behaviour, and this can hardly be expected from a being who, from his or her infancy, has been made the weathercock of his or her own sensations. Whoever rationally means to be useful must have a plan of conduct; and in performing the simplest duty we are often obliged to act *against* the present impulse of tenderness or compassion. Severity is often the clearest. . . .proof of affection; and the lack of this power over the feelings, and of the dignified affection that makes a person prefer the future good of the beloved object to a present gratification, is the reason why so many fond mothers spoil their children. Which is more damaging—negligence or indulgence? I am inclined to answer 'Indulgence'.

Mankind seem to agree that children should be left under the management of women during their childhood. Judging by what I have seen, women of sensibility—i.e. women in whom feelings are uppermost—are the least fit for this task because they are bound to be carried away by their

feelings, and spoil a child's temperament. The management of the temperament, the first and most important branch of education, requires the sober steady eye of reason ·so as to form and stick with· a plan of conduct that is equally distant from ·tyranny and ·indulgence. Yet ·these are the extremes that people of sensibility fall into—first on one side, then on the other, always shooting beyond the mark. These thoughts and the further development of them that I have gone through lead me to conclude that a person of genius [see Glossary] is the least suitable person to be employed in education, whether public or private. Minds of this rare species see things too much in masses, and seldom if ever have a good temperament. The habitual cheerfulness that we call 'good humour' is perhaps as seldom united with great mental powers as it is with strong feelings. And people who admiringly follow the flights of ·genius, or with cooler approval drink in the instruction elaborately prepared for them by ·a profound thinker, ought not to be upset if they find ·the former bad-tempered and ·the latter gloomy; because liveliness of imagination and a tenacious comprehension of mind are hardly compatible with the smooth politeness which leads a man at least to ·bend to the opinions and prejudices of others instead of ·roughly confronting them.

[MW now switches abruptly from thoughts about highly intelligent people as teachers to the question of what should be done about them as pupils.] When we are thinking about education or manners, minds of a superior class can be left to take care of themselves. It is the middlingly able multitude who need instruction and ·are at risk because they· catch the colour of the atmosphere they breathe [those eight words are MW's]. This body of men and women should be respected, and should not have their sensations heightened in the hot-bed of luxurious idleness at the expense of their understanding; for unless there's a ballast of understanding they will never

become virtuous or free. ·Why won't they be free? Because· an aristocracy based on property or on solid talents will always overwhelm the alternately timid and ferocious slaves of feeling.

I now switch to look at our topic from a different angle. Men have used countless arguments in support of morally and physically degrading the · female· sex. The arguments are brought forward with a show of reason, because they are supposed to be derived from *nature*. I must discuss a few of them.

The female understanding has often been spoken of with contempt, as reaching maturity sooner than the male. I shan't answer this argument by mentioning the early proofs of reason—and indeed genius—in Cowley, Milton, Pope and many others. I merely appeal to experience to decide whether young men who are early introduced into company. . . .don't acquire the same precocity. . . .

Some natural scientists have said that men don't attain their full growth and strength until thirty, whereas women reach maturity by twenty. I think they are reasoning on false premises, having been led astray by the male prejudice that regards beauty as the perfection of woman, taking 'beauty' in the everyday sense in which it refers only to features and complexion, while male beauty is regarded as having some connection with the mind. Strength of body, and the facial character that shows maturity and moral strength, is something that women don't acquire before thirty, any more than men do. The artless little tricks of children are indeed particularly pleasing and attractive; but when the pretty freshness of youth has worn off, these 'artless' graces become careful poses, and they disgust every person of taste. In the faces of girls we look only for vivacity and bashful modesty; but when the springtide of life is over we look for a more sober sense in the face, and for traces of passion,

instead of the dimples of animal spirits, expecting to see individuality of character, which is the only thing that can fasten the affections.⁶ We then want to converse, not to fondle; to give scope to our imaginations as well as to the sensations of our hearts.

. . . The French, who admit more *mind* into their notions of beauty, give the preference to women of thirty. This means that they allow women to be in their most perfect state when vivacity gives way to reason and to the majestic seriousness of character which signifies maturity. . . . Between twenty and thirty the solid parts of the body become denser and the flexible muscles grow more rigid, giving character to the face; i.e. they trace the operations of the mind with the iron pen of fate, and tell us not only what powers the person has but how they have been employed.

Animals who arrive slowly at maturity are the longest lived, and of the noblest species. But men can't claim any natural superiority from the grandeur of longevity, for in this respect nature has not distinguished the male.

Polygamy is another physical degradation, a custom that blasts every domestic virtue; and a plausible argument for it is drawn from the well-attested fact that in the countries where polygamy is established more females are born than males. [This was widely believed at MW's time; it isn't true.] Nature seems to be telling us something here, and apparently reasonable theories must yield capitulate to nature. And a further conclusion obviously presents itself: if polygamy is necessary, woman must be inferior to man, and made for him.

We know very little about the formation of the foetus in the womb, but it seems to me probable that an accidental physical cause may explain this phenomenon of the unbalanced

birth ratio, proving it not to be a law of nature. [She quotes a writer who says that the birth ratio results from polygamy, not vice versa: it comes from the fact that in the countries in question 'the men are enervated by the use of so many women', and the women have a 'hotter' constitution partly because they are aggrieved at not having their husbands to themselves. 'So the necessity of polygamy does not appear', MW writes, and then in mid-sentence she launches on a new aspect of the degradation of women, namely seduction.]

When a man seduces a woman, I think this should be called 'a left-handed marriage', and the man should be *legally* obliged to support the woman and her children unless adultery—a natural divorce—cancels the obligation. And this law should remain in force for as long as women's weakness causes the word 'seduction' to be used as an excuse for their frailty and lack of principle—indeed, for as long as they depend on man for subsistence, instead of earning it by the use of their own hands or heads. But these women shouldn't be called 'wives' in the full sense of that word; otherwise the very purpose of marriage will be subverted, and all those endearing charities that flow from *personal fidelity* would melt into selfishness. [MW builds into that sentence that the 'endearing charities' in question 'give the marriage tie a sanctity even where there is neither love nor friendship between the parties'.] A woman who is faithful to the father of her children demands respect, and shouldn't be treated like a prostitute; though I readily grant that if it is necessary for a man and woman to live together in order to bring up their offspring, nature never intended any man to have more than one wife.

Still, highly as I respect marriage as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I can't help feeling the most lively compassion for the unfortunate females who are broken off

⁶ The strength of an affection is generally proportional to the extent to which, in the beloved object, the character of the •species is lost in the character of the •individual.

from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind. In many cases it doesn't even deserve to be called an 'error'; because many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere affectionate heart, and even more girls are—to put it vigorously—*ruined* before they know the difference between virtue and vice. Their education has prepared them to become infamous, and that is exactly what they do. Refuges and shelters are not the proper remedies for these abuses. what the world is short of is not charity but justice!

A woman who has lost her honour imagines that she can't fall any lower, and as for recovering her former status—that is impossible; no exertion can wash away this stain. Losing thus every motivation, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and her character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power unless she is uncommonly intelligent and high-spirited. Necessity never makes prostitution the business of men's lives, but countless women are rendered systematically vicious in this way. But this arises largely from the state of idleness in which women are educated—always taught to look up to man for maintenance, and to consider their persons [see Glossary] as the proper payment for his exertions to support them. . . . It is usually thought that when chastity is lost everything worthy of respect in a woman is lost. Her character depends on one virtue, but the only passion fostered in her heart is love.

Indeed, a woman's honour is not even made to depend on her will. When in his novel *Clarissa* Richardson makes Clarissa tell Lovelace that by raping her he has robbed her of her honour, he must have strange notions of honour and virtue. The condition of someone who could be degraded without his or her [see Glossary] own consent is miserable beyond all names of misery! . . .

Most of life's evils arise from a desire for present enjoyment that gallops out of control. The obedience required of women in the marriage state comes under this description. [That is verbatim MW: she presumably means that a wife's obedience consists in reining in her desires for present enjoyment.] A mind that is naturally weakened by depending on authority never exerts its own powers, so that the obedient wife is turned into a weak, idle mother. And even if this doesn't happen, there is a different kind of moral degradation inherent in this situation. When only negative virtues are cultivated, almost no thought is given to a future state of existence, i.e. to life after death. Writers on morals, especially when writing about women, have too often considered virtue in a very limited way, basing it solely on what will produce benefits in *this* life; indeed, the stupendous structure that is *virtue* has been given an even more fragile base, in that the wayward fluctuating feelings of men have been made the standard of virtue. . . .

[MW writes now about the 'vain absurdities' of men who degrade the sex that they claim is the source of their chief pleasure. She targets men who—turning away from prostitutes either because they prudently want to avoid diseases or because they are worn out from all their uses of prostitutes—get married in order to have 'a safe companion', viewing their wives (MW implies) as merely safer and more convenient prostitutes.]

Love considered as an animal appetite can't feed on itself for long without dying. This *extinction in its own flame* could be called the violent death of love. But a wife who has been made licentious in this way will probably try to fill the void left by the loss of her husband's attentions; because after being treated like a goddess she won't settle for becoming merely an upper servant. She is still handsome, and instead of transferring her fondness to her children she only dreams

of enjoying the sunshine of life. Besides, many husbands are so lacking in sense and parental affection that during the first effervescence of voluptuous fondness they refuse to let their wives breast-feed their children. . . .

Personal attachment is a fine basis for friendship; but when two young people marry—even virtuous ones—it might also be fine if some circumstance checked their passion; if the memory of some prior attachment or disappointed affection made it, on one side at least, a match based on esteem rather than love. That would have them looking beyond the present moment, trying to make the whole of life worthwhile by making plans to regulate a friendship which ought to last until death.

Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is based on principle and cemented by time. The very reverse may be said of love. In a great degree, love and friendship can't exist together in the same heart: even when it's love for one person and friendship for someone else, they weaken or destroy each other; and for just one person you can't have love and friendship at the same time—they have to take turns. The vain •fears and foolish •jealousies—when managed with wisdom or cunning they are the winds that fan the flame of love—are •both incompatible with the tender confidence and sincere respect of friendship.

•A PARAGRAPH ABOUT LOVE AS PORTRAYED BY GENIUS•

Love of the kind that the glowing pen of genius has described doesn't exist anywhere on earth except perhaps in the exalted, feverish imaginations that have sketched such dangerous pictures. Dangerous? Yes, because they not only •provide a plausible excuse for the voluptuary who disguises sheer sensuality under a sentimental [see Glossary] veil, but also •spread insincerity and detract from the dignity of virtue. •Virtue should have an appearance of seriousness, if not

austerity; and to try to doll •her up in the garb of pleasure because 'virtue' has been used as another name for pleasure, is to raise •her up on a foundation of quicksand; a most underhand attempt to hasten her fall by apparent respect. Virtue and pleasure are not in fact as closely related in this life as some eloquent writers have tried to prove. Pleasure prepares the fading wreath, and mixes the intoxicating cup; but the fruit that virtue gives is the reward for hard work; and when it is seen as it gradually ripens, all it provides is calm satisfaction—indeed, appearing to be the result of the natural tendency of things, it is hardly noticed. *Bread*, the common food of life and seldom thought of as a blessing, supports the constitution and preserves health; but *feasts* delight the heart of man although disease and even death lurk in the cup that elevates the spirits or the morsel that tickles the palate. The lively heated imagination likewise. . . .draws the picture of love, as every other picture, with the glowing colours stolen from the rainbow by a daring hand that is directed by a mind condemned, in a world like this, to prove its noble origin by panting after unattainable perfection; always pursuing what it admits to be a fleeting dream. An imagination of this vigorous cast can give existence to unsubstantial forms, and stability to the shadowy day-dreams which the mind naturally falls into when it is bored by reality. It can then depict love with heavenly charms, and dote on the grand ideal object; it can imagine

a degree of mutual affection that will refine the soul. . . .and make it absorb every less noble affection and desire. In each other's arms, as though in a temple with its summit lost in the clouds, the world is to be shut out and along with it every thought and wish that doesn't nurture pure affection and permanent virtue.

Permanent virtue! alas! Rousseau, good visionary! your

paradise would soon be violated by the entrance of some unexpected guest. Like Milton's, it would contain only angels and men sunk below the dignity of rational creatures. Happiness is not material, it cannot be seen or felt! Yet the eager pursuit of the good that everyone imagines for himself proclaims man to be the lord of this lower world, and to be a thinking creature whose role is not to •be given happiness but to •acquire it. So those who complain of the delusions of passion forget that they are exclaiming against a strong proof of the immortality of the soul.

I shall leave superior minds to correct themselves, and pay dearly for their experience! What I want to guard the female heart against by •getting women to• exercise the understanding is not •strong, persevering passions but •romantic, wavering feelings—daydreams that result from idleness more often than from a lively imagination.

[MW blames women's education for their tendency to be 'romantic and inconstant', because it takes them away from 'nature and reason'. But, she continues:] their reason will never be strong enough to be able to regulate their conduct while the first wish of the majority of mankind is *to make an appearance in the world*. [Note: the majority of *mankind*.] The natural affections and the most useful virtues are sacrificed to this weak wish. Girls marry merely to 'better themselves' (to borrow a significant common phrase), and they have such perfect power over their hearts that they don't allow themselves to 'fall in love' until a wealthy man shows up. I'll say more about this in a later chapter; at present I need only to drop a hint. . . .

From the same source comes the opinion that young girls ought to spend much of their time on needle-work, though this contracts their faculties more than any other that could have been chosen for them, by confining their thoughts to their bodies. Men order their clothes to be made,

and have done with the subject; women make their own clothes—both the •necessary and the •ornamental—and are continually talking about them; and their thoughts follow their hands. What weakens the mind is not the making of •necessaries but the •frillery of dress. When a woman in the lower rank of life makes her husband's and children's clothes, she is doing her duty: this is part of her business. But when women sew only so that they can dress better than they could otherwise afford, it is worse than sheer loss of time. For the poor to become virtuous, they must be employed, and •women in the middle rank of life could employ them while •they managed their families, instructed their children, and exercised their own minds. They could, but they don't, because they are aping the fashions of the nobility without having the nobility's means to have those fashions easily. Gardening, experimental science and literature would provide them with subjects to think and talk about—subjects that would give some exercise to their understandings. French women are not so rigidly nailed to their chairs. . . .; their conversation is often superficial but it's not half as insipid as the conversation of those English women who spend their time making caps, bonnets, and the whole nonsense of trimmings, not to mention shopping, bargain-hunting, etc. These practices are most degrading to decent, prudent women, because the motive of the practices is simply vanity. The wanton, who exercises her taste to make her person alluring, has something more in view. [To make sure that these two sentences are understood: Martha and Mary are both making clothes for themselves. Martha is a prudent decent woman, doing something whose only point is to satisfy vanity—a thin, trivial project, unworthy of her. Mary is a promiscuous woman who is doing something to make herself sexually more attractive—a more contentful motive than mere vanity, and a better fit for Mary than vanity is for Martha.]

[Admitting that she is repeating herself, MW says that how a person thinks affects his or her character. Her present topic has been one special case of this general truth, namely the harm that women do to themselves by spending so much time thinking about 'their persons', e.g. what sort of effect they will have when they next appear in public.] Women of quality [MW's phrase] seldom do any of the actual dress-making: all they exercise is their taste. And because they think less about the finery, when the business of their toilet is over they can put it behind them and be at ease in a way that is usually not open to women who dress merely for the sake of dressing. In fact, the observation that the middle rank of society is the one in which talents thrive best doesn't apply to women. [If MW means her own observation on page 39, then she isn't quite accurate. What she referred to back there was the well-known fact that 'the middle rank contains most virtue and abilities'.] Women of the superior class do at least pick up a smattering of literature, and they converse more with men on general topics, so they acquire more knowledge than the women who ape their fashions and faults without sharing their advantages. As for *virtue* (using the word in

a comprehensive sense): I have seen most virtue in low life. Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered; but gentlewomen are too lazy to be actively virtuous, and are softened rather than refined by civilization. Indeed the good sense I have met with among poor women who have had few advantages of education yet have acted heroically has strongly confirmed my opinion that trivial activities have made women trivial. . . .

In tracing the causes that I think have degraded woman, I have confined myself to ones that universally act on the morals and manners of the whole sex; and it seems clear to me that they all arise from lack of understanding. Does this weakness of the faculties arise from physical or from accidental causes? [That is: is it causally determined by the constitutions of women as such, or is it caused by their circumstances?] Time alone can tell. I shan't lay any great stress on the example of a few women⁷ who were given a masculine education from which they acquired courage and resolution; I only contend that *men* who have been placed in similar situations have acquired a similar character. . . .

⁷ Sappho, Héloïse, Catherine Macaulay, Catherine the Great of Russia, Madame d'Eon, etc. These and many more can be counted as 'exceptions'; and aren't all heroes *and heroines* exceptions to general rules? I want to see women neither as heroines nor as lower animals, but as reasonable creatures. [Catherine Macaulay was a contemporary of MW's, a much respected thinker and writer; Madame d'Eon was in fact a man who passed as a woman through most of his life.]