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Teaching the historical roots of the feminist social and cultural controversy: Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and the New Woman

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Background and Context for the 19th-Century Debates about Women’s Education and Marriage as Social and Economic Institution

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Edition used: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, The Wollstonecraft Debate, Criticism*. Ed. Carol H. Poston. 2nd ed. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1988.

Positive versus negative terms/concepts in Wollstonecraft’s feminist classic:

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<p>Reason</p> <p>Nature (women’s natural rights)</p> <p>Education—rational, orderly, method, exactness</p> <p>“dignity of mind” (61) “unfold faculties, acquire dignity of conscious virtue” (25) suitable occupations for women and wider range of subjects to study</p> <p>Marriage as fellowship, friendship, affection (28), affection (not “spaniel-like” though), (28), being a rational model for kids, two rational minds in conversation, mutual respect</p>	<p>Sentimentality (see W. on the reading of novels which encourage this--p. 61, 192, also 190)</p> <p>Civilization (oppresses women’s natural reason and rights)</p> <p>Haphazard education, focus on superficial accomplishments that treat women as ornaments: social manners, love of dress, “trivial cares” [61], piano lessons as entertainment at social functions, needlework, reading of novels only, manners and social rules for the marriage market, reliance on beauty</p> <p>Marriage as mere transitory passion of the senses (28), mother as sentimental and superficial model, especially for daughters, male tyranny, women as “slaves” (blind obedience and passion—metaphors of seraglio, harem)</p>

How does Wollstonecraft’s argument work? Three anchors and targets to her thinking:

- **Belief in reason as basis for human progress,**
- **women’s education (middle and upper classes only),**
- **women’s rights as human rights (rational beings like men)**

These correspond to three major influences in Wollstonecraft’s life, to which she responds with her own ideas that address women’s roles:

- **French Revolution (1789)**, ideas of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* (liberty, equality, brotherhood)
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s** groundbreaking ideas for pedagogy
- Her relationship with and marriage to **William Godwin**, affiliation with the Radicals (English political and social reform movement), whose ideas influenced Wollstonecraft.

Some important textual examples and points from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

REASON/RATIONALITY: human rationality is a goal for all—including women. Their minds are not in a healthy state at present—see introduction page 6, cf. also 62.

More reason/rationality will advance society and humankind, so men should support women's cause ("progress of reason," 54).

Rational wives and mothers are better companions for men; marriage and kids benefit (67).

EDUCATION: present state of women's education: haphazard ("learning by snatches," 22), superficial; needed: orderly, method, widen subjects of study for women (e.g. politics, history, business, medicine); they have only been educated as objects of desire (9), society encourages their ignorance and cunning (18).

Education must enable independent virtue, 20

More knowledge leads to more morality and virtue, 63

On women's supposed inferiority and superficiality

- "it cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated" (36, also importantly on 34)
- Gender behavior does not necessarily follow from biological sex: see the comparison between soldiers and women, 23. This is an ingenious step in Wollstonecraft's argument: soldiers and women receive the same (superficial) education, with very similar (deplorable) results, so obviously the difference between morally independent people and people mostly interested in superficial rules and manners ("gallantry" and "cunning" to get by) is *not sex, but education*. "Where is then the sexual difference [in our modern terms today, she actually means *gender difference* here], if education has been the same?" (23)

Conclusion:

- Wollstonecraft believes in the necessity of separate gender roles to some extent, but for her, **virtue and morality are asexual—all minds are human and thus equal**. In the history of feminism this is a first logical step toward the idea of gender equality. Note: Wollstonecraft still believes in a biological difference between the sexes--*biologically*, she believes, women are indeed inferior to men.
- Idea that **education is a major tool for the advancement of women's rights and human rationality in general**. Wollstonecraft builds here on enlightenment ideas; ideals of the **French Revolution** from 1789 (*liberty, equality, brotherhood*) for all can only be achieved if women are given the same means of moral advancement as men: **"Without knowledge there can be no morality! Ignorance is a frail base for virtue!"** (63)
- Idea and goal of a **rational fellowship between men and women to advance the whole of society**, improve institutions of marriage and family. It is interesting to note here that "feminism" in the late 18th century (Wollstonecraft's writings) and the 19th century (John Stuart Mill/Harriet Taylor) actually started as a larger, inclusive (rather than separatist) social reform movement. The argument was that women must be given more rights and better status in society *for the good of all humankind and society in general*; Wollstonecraft, Mill/Taylor and others argued that society suffers if women's potential remains untapped, and if one half of the population is effectively subjugated to the other half. From Wollstonecraft to New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand (*The Heavenly Twins*), Olive Schreiner, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman ("The Yellow Wallpaper"), this line of feminist argument is prominent. In the 20th century you still find it in modified form in writers like Rebecca West, Djuna Barnes, or Virginia Woolf (e.g. in her feminist classic *A Room of One's Own*, 1929).