

### ***3. A Vindication of the Rights of Women***

Alice, the good friend who gave me this book as well as the other two just reviewed, said that she “just couldn’t get into it. Maybe you’ll have better luck!”

This is a book published in 1792 and written by Mary Wollstonecraft, mother to the Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote the famous novel *Frankenstein* in 1818. The edition I just read is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, by Mary Wollstonecraft, an introduction by Katha Pollitt, and notes by Katherine Lee (The Modern Library, 2001).

I can readily see why a modern woman cannot “get into” this book. It is a very long and wordy rant against all things that make upper class women in Europe useless and stupid and miserable, with much blame going to the women themselves. This is mostly directed at those upper class women we see in old movies who are rather and vapid and weak and vengeful and mean to their help and subject to fainting at any challenge to their claim to class or privilege.

Wollstonecraft makes the point several times that these upper crust women’s lower class sisters, who cannot afford the luxury of being an aristocratic or otherwise rich man’s kept pet, are actually better off, having become to an extent self-reliant and thus empowered.

The women described and addressed by Wollstonecraft are unlike any women I have ever come personally in contact with. I guess that means I do not run around in aristocratic or rich circles. Correct. But the women described by Wollstonecraft, she would be very surprised and pleased to know, have largely ceased to exist. At least in my experience.

There are three categories of persons from her own time and experience she is particularly angry at and she spends some time citing their arguments as to the nature and needs of women. The first is the writers of fiction, popular fiction, whose heroines are anything but. They typify the exact type of woman she is writing her book about. What particularly galls her is the idealized women in these novels having no mind or will except as dictated by a husband. Evil women think for themselves and cannot live under the yoke of a true gentleman.

What really galls her is the guidance books for young women used in schools and churches who teach basically these same traits of total submissiveness and passivity to young girls. They are taught that their only goal in life is to get a man to take care of her and make her decisions for her. She is to guard her purity at all costs, of course. No such purity requirement exists for young men.

Finally she really, really blasts the gentlemen husbands who are so stuck on the propriety of their station that they forbid their wife's nursing their babies. It is just unseemly in such a man's

view, and hence either a wet-nurse or bottled milk is used at some real risk to the well-being of the child.

I enjoyed reading the chapters where she blasts these now hopefully extinct and incomprehensible male tyrants who teach and require the subservient women in their households to be concerned with nothing except catching and pleasing men of proper rank. A system meant to promote the status quo and thus to perpetuate the misery of the female half of humanity.

In her days in England what if a woman was dumped, or widowed? Wollstonecraft suggests the only thing they know how to do—flattering and pleasing men—fits them for the profession of prostitute, and says there is a plague of prostitutes in England's cities, and many are women who were formerly at a higher station in life.

Like my friend Alice, I found much of this book just did not speak to my experience. Nevertheless I did find some snippets of her insights into human nature of interest because in those relatively few instances she did speak to my own observations, if not experience.

I will do with this book what I did with the previous one: (1) name a page, (2) write down an extract from that page, and (3) make a comment on it.

**Page:** 26

**Citation:**

[Cited because it gives some hint of Wollstonecraft's sense of religion:]

Gentleness of manners, forbearance and long suffering, are such amiable Godlike qualities, that in sublime poetic strains the Deity has been invested with them; and, perhaps, no representation of His goodness so strongly fastens on the human affections as those that represent Him abundant in mercy and willing to pardon. Gentleness, considered in this point of view, bears on its front all the characteristics of grandeur, combined with the winning graces of condescension; but what a different aspect it assumes when it is the submissive demeanor of dependence, the support of weakness that loves, because it wants protection; and is forbearing, because it must silently endure injuries; smiling under the lash at which it dare not snarl. Abject as this picture is, it is the portrait of an accomplished woman, according to the received opinion of female excellence, separated by specious reasoning from human excellence. Or, they kindly restore the rib, and make one moral being of a man and woman; not forgetting to give her all the "submissive charms."

How women are to exist in that state where there is neither to be marrying nor giving in marriage, we are not told. For though moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising *woman* only to provide for the present.

Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and, disregarding the arbitrary economy of nature, one writer has declared that it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy. She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.

**Comment:**

A footnote explains that the idea of a future undoing of the separation of woman from man involves the making of the two, a male and a female, into one whole being again. This physical undoing of the separation of woman out of man can be found in the religious writings of the visionary Emanuel Swedenborg and the fiction of the philosopher-writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, two authors that Wollstonecraft particularly dislikes. Although her English tends to be a bit hard to follow, her use of the same praise-words for both God and woman, but having a totally different meaning when seen in their respective contexts, is quite powerful.

**Page:** 36

**Citation:**

[An attack on Rousseau who believes that the human soul is either male or female:]

Yet thus to give sex to mind was not very consistent with the principles of a man who argues so warmly, and so

well, for the immortality of the soul. But what a weak barrier is truth when it stands in the way of an hypothesis?

. . . he labours to invert a law of nature, and broaches a doctrine pregnant with mischief, and derogatory to the character of supreme wisdom.

**Comment:**

Wollstonecraft purposely avoids making the connection to her previous criticism: if a person believed that the future heavenly human being will be a joining of a male a female soul into one soul, then there is a certain consistency in Rousseau's view expressed here.

However this doctrine is indeed "pregnant with mischief" since it justifies the religious and cultural doctrine that assigns "separate spheres" to men and women, and enforces them. Rousseau and Swedenborg solved this separation in one way: the two literally become one as it was before the 'fall.' At least women are put out of their subservient and dependent state in this scheme, they become absorbed into a complete man: which is the meaning of the word "Adam" I have been told. More normative Christians say there is no more marrying in the hereafter and thus the sex distinctions so seemingly important here are completely gone. Mormons believe that the man and the woman endure as a married couple forever and he will create worlds, and with her he produces spiritual offspring with which to populate these worlds, worlds without end! This is

the ultimate projection of the Victorian-era “separate spheres” doctrine into eternity!

**Pages:** 41-45

**Citation:**

[Wollstonecraft paints several portraits in words on these pages. One is a heartbreaking story of a woman who is widowed and then brought to ruin by a man flattering her out of her belongings and leaving her alone and destitute with her children. The author, after this bleak description, now writes a second tale of a wife left alone in order to “relieve myself by drawing a different picture.” This second tale is about a widow who focuses her love and attention on her children and shuns offers of new romance. She sets a strong example and her children grow up practicing the values she taught them, hence she dies fulfilled:]

The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death, and rising from the grave, may say—  
“Behold, Thou gavest me a talent, and here are five talents.”

I wish to sum up what I have said in a few words, for I here throw down my gauntlet, and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; . . . .

Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfill; but they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same.

To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation 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.

**Comment:**

I cited these words only to show that Wollstonecraft is not against women carrying out their wifely and motherly duties. But they deserve respect, and that requires an independent character.

Note the use of the word 'modesty' and the italicized *modest*. She uses modesty as we would use meekness or humility. We can still use it that way too but usually modesty refers to a woman's state of dress or undress. The literature she cites so critically is ever preaching to young women about the necessity, if one wishes to become the wife of a true gentleman, to never be proud or boastful of one's accomplishments or ideas. Boastfulness, in Wollstonecraft's world, is a masculine characteristic; having substantive ideas is a masculine prerogative.

**Citation:**

[In the middle of her description of a good marriage I found this surprising as well as interesting:]

. . . she marries from affection, without losing sight of prudence, and looking beyond matrimonial felicity, she secures her husband's respect before it is necessary to exert mean arts to please him and feed a dying flame, which nature doomed to expire when the object became familiar, when friendship and forbearance take place of a more ardent affection. This is the natural death of love, and domestic peace is not destroyed by struggles to prevent its extinction. I also suppose the husband to be virtuous; . . . .

**Comment:**

She returns several times to this theme of the passionate form of love that ignites a marriage naturally dying. That is how it must inevitably be, she declares. And as long as the husband is virtuous it ought to cause no disruption of the home or heartbreak, the two become very good and close, even loving, friends. Sounds realistic actually, but had not seen this stated so matter-of-factly in print before.

**Pages:** 51-55

**Citation:**

[Wollstonecraft compares upper class women with upper class 'great' men –and she calls out King Louis the 14<sup>th</sup> for special

scolding—both high class men and women are often tyrants and mean-spirited and imbeciles trading on their station in life, their fortunate births, and have no regard for the well-being of anyone at a lower rank. They have no significant personal accomplishments that would make them ‘great’ in any real sense. She links the stratification of society to the miserable place women below the ranks of the nobility must seek frantically to occupy, expending all their energies seeking to become the toys and playthings of the rich and famous:]

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 of their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the excursive flights of ambition, that engross their attention; no, their thoughts are not employed in rearing such noble structures. To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted.

**Comment:**

Although this description of the women in the classes well above peasantry is no longer applicable in western society, I hope, the desire and pressure to marry “up” for security rather than love is still common. And men engage in the same

practice, attempting to marry “up” to give them access to family money is not at all rare. In Wollstonecraft’s day this would be like a common man attempting to marry a noblewoman with property, a feat celebrated in many modern murder mysteries. Elsewhere Wollstonecraft says that in the lower ranks of society women actually have to work and contribute to the well-being of the household and are therefore much more capable and in control of their lives. The difference between the rich and the poor are so stark, however, that no woman in her right mind would work hard at marrying “down” so that she would need to work in the house and garden to survive.

**Page:** 57

**Citation:**

[This is a long diatribe against the conspiracy to make women weak and totally dependent on men to solve their every dilemma and fight every insect for them. I will only cite her last line after imploring her society to educate women for survival in the real world, not only the make-believe tyrannical world of high society:]

I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.

**Comment:**

Even today there are women who, at least temporarily, feel their sole desire is to be married to a strong-willed, yet

successful man, so that she will have no monetary uncertainty and no hard decisions to make in life. He will make them for them both.

A relationship is a ship, and it has one wheel for steering, and most women want to have a role in steering the ship they are part of. This is an expected level of participation in the relationship for many modern women, but in Wollstonecraft's day it was the goal of every woman to never have to touch the wheel, to just go along for the ride, and this was taught in school, church and home.

**Page:** 58

**Citation:**

[Here once again she adds a religious flavor to her arguments, hence peaking my interest:]

Ignorance is a frail base for virtue! Yet, that is the condition for which woman was organized, has been insisted upon by the writers who have most vehemently argued in favour of the superiority of man; a superiority not in degree, but offence; though, to soften the argument, they have labored to prove, with chivalrous generosity, that the sexes ought not to be compared; man was made to reason, woman to feel: and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character.

. . . I discern not a trace of the image of God in either sensation or matter. . . .

I come round to my old argument: if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as the employment of life, an understanding to improve.

[She then suggests that if it were not so, like a flower “she was born only to procreate and rot.” Or perhaps the scheme is that men have been given reason in this life and women may obtain it in the next? If the answer to that question is yes, then:]

. . . through all eternity they will lag behind man, who, why we cannot tell, had the power given him of attaining reason in his first mode of existence.

**Comment:**

In my opinion Wollstonecraft just doesn't get it: didn't she pay attention in Sunday school? The Divine Order prescribes separate spheres here on earth because they are in force in heaven as well: separate spheres forever! Gods are male! No self-thinking reasoning woman needs apply. The Gates of Heaven are closed to such unnatural creatures.

**Page:** 60

**Citation:**

[Wollstonecraft here paints another negative picture, but this time of a girl in a good family with good men in it: a good brother and a good father. The girl is properly educated, taught

to look and act pretty to attract the right man. But then an accident sweeps away the parents, and the brother is now in charge of the sister. He is a good brother and takes care of her just fine out of the family's resources, left by thoughtful parents. But then he marries. Continuing to take care of the sister causes friction in his new household {Wollstonecraft has already explained that powerless women lack compassion:}]

But when the brother marries—a probable circumstance—from being considered as the mistress of the family, she is viewed with averted looks as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house and his new partner.

**Comment:**

The only reason I cited this is that I have heard a story very similar to this one. Taking any care at all of the sister after his marriage had to be done in very small doses because resources were actually tight, and in secret, to keep peace at home. Powerless women do not have much compassion.

**Page:** 63

**Citation:**

[Wollstonecraft has for several pages now described the sorry lot of women who have believed what their social and religious instructors have told them about their own purpose and nature, and now she breaks out into a loud yet prayerful lament:}]

Gracious Creator of the whole human race! hast Thou created such a being as woman, who can trace Thy wisdom in Thy works, and feel that Thou alone art by Thy nature exalted above her, for no better purpose? Can she believe that she was made to submit to man, her equal—a being who, like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue? Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him—merely to adorn the earth—when her soul is capable of rising to Thee? And can she rest supinely dependent on man for reason, when she ought to mount with him the arduous steeps of knowledge?

Yet if love be the supreme good, let women only be educated to inspire it, and let every charm be polished to intoxicate the senses; but if they be moral beings, let them have a chance to become intelligent; and let love to man be only a part of that glowing flame of universal love, which, after encircling humanity, mounts in grateful incense to God.

**Comment:**

Wow! That for me is the highlight of her entire discourse. It is the pearl of great price buried in the very middle of a large field of words! There is a hymn that is called “prayer is the soul’s sincere desire.” These words fit that definition.

**Page:** 65

**Citation:**

[The context here is the fleeting nature of youthful beauty and how no preparation for any endeavor than seducing or being seduced leaves a woman with nowhere to go when the bloom of youth fades:]

We then wish to converse, not to fondle; to give scope to our imaginations as well as to the sensations of our hearts.

**Comment:**

The whole point of this chapter is, of course, that without a substantive education, a woman will have nothing to converse about and will have no imagination to pursue in her later years.

**Pages:** 66-67

**Citation:**

[This page debunks the idea that polygamy, in some places, is necessary because there is a surplus of female babies born, Wollstonecraft makes several astute observations about the practice:]

. . .if polygamy be necessary, woman must be inferior to man, and made for him.

[She then observes that if a married man seduce another woman and has children by her, no matter what you call that arrangement he needs to support her and her children in the present society wherein a woman cannot support herself through her own labor. When a man gets a woman pregnant and then abandons her and her children, or even if there were

no children and she is *ruined* by having lost her virginity, then to survive such women often must resort to the only skill they have been taught well, which is serving and being subservient to men:]

Still, highly as I respect marriage, as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind. It does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, *ruined* before they know the difference between virtue and vice, and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in this world!

A woman who has lost her honour imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away. Losing thus every spur, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and the character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power, unless she possesses an uncommon portion of sense and loftiness of spirit. Necessity never makes prostitution the business of men's

lives, though numberless are the women who are thus rendered systematically vicious. This, however, arises in a great degree from the state of idleness in which women are educated, who are always taught to look up to man for a maintenance, and to consider their persons as the proper return for his exertions to support them.

Meretricious airs, and the whole science of wantonness, have then a more powerful stimulus than either appetite or vanity; and this remark gives force to the prevailing opinion, that with chastity all is lost that is respectable in woman. Her character depends on the observance of one virtue, though the only passion fostered in her heart is love. Nay, the honour of a woman is not made even to depend on her will.

**Comment:**

Note her referral, in her derogatory remark about polygamy, to the religious idea that the woman was made for the man.

Asylums and Magdalens refer to paid or charitable institutions where a fallen young woman can either be placed by her family or she can apply for a place. She is no longer part of mainstream society. She has been pushed onto its criminal fringe. Wollstonecraft's remarks on the state of women who have lost their virginity in her society are heartbreaking. It is a good thing that in this present time in much of Western society this no longer has much importance or relevance. Both sexes are typically experienced before marriage. Few women "save"

their virginity for marriage, and some few who do are so are also inexperienced and innocent in other ways and thus very trusting of promises made by men. I have known of one case where even during the honeymoon, he dropped his pretenses to gentleness and she hardly recognized the abusive monster she married. Some marriages are simply a terrible mistake. Some experience with men could actually protect a woman from being too trusting of the sincerity of the speeches men make to seduce them (nothing has changed in that respect between Wollstonecraft's time and ours). Some prior experience can actually lead to a more honest coupling of people who have taken the time to know each other sans hormonally induced frenzy in either participant.

**Pages:** 68-69

**Citation:**

[This is a return to the theme that marriages that endure are based on friendship and not love. This is an alien concept to me, so I cite it in some detail to attempt to understand what she is saying:]

Love, considered as an animal appetite, cannot long feed on itself without expiring. And this extinction in its own flame may be termed the violent death of love. But the wife, who has thus been rendered licentious, will probably endeavour to fill the void left by the loss of her husband's attentions; for she cannot contentedly become merely an upper servant after having been treated like a

goddess. She is still handsome, and, instead of transferring her fondness to her children, she only dreams of enjoying the sunshine of life. Besides, there are many husbands so devoid of sense and parental affection that, during the first effervescence of voluptuous fondness, they refuse to let their wives suckle their children. They are only to dress and live to please them, and love, even innocent love, soon sinks into lasciviousness when the exercise of a duty is sacrificed to its indulgence.

Personal attachment is a very happy foundation for friendship; yet, when even two virtuous people marry, it would perhaps be happy if some circumstance checked their passion . . . [and] . . . made it on one side, at least, rather a match founded on esteem. In that case they would look beyond the present moment, and try to render the whole of life respectable, by forming a plan to regulate a friendship which only death ought to dissolve.

Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time. The very reverse may be said of love. In a great degree, love and friendship cannot subsist in the same bosom; even when inspired by different objects they weaken or destroy each other, and for the same object can only be felt in succession. The vain fears and fond jealousies, the winds which fan the flames of love, when judiciously or artfully tempered, are both incompatible

with the tender confidence and sincere respect of friendship.

Love, such as the glowing pen of genius has traced, exists not on earth, or only resides in those exalted, fervid, imaginations that have sketched such dangerous pictures. . . . Virtue and pleasure are not, in fact, so nearly allied in this life as some eloquent writers have labored to prove. . .

**Comment:**

Wollstonecraft uses the word “love” as if it can only mean the passionate frenzy that is fueled by lust. It is true that when falling in love this may be an initial phase. But it is quickly tempered by getting to know the object of one’s star-struck love and slowly but surely the fantasy gets replaced by the real person one has become a life-partner with. If that real person is more than what you thought, then the miracle of love changes, it is less frenzied, yet more delicate and intimate and satisfying. It is no longer all-consuming and one can again turn attention to the other pursuits that are part of life: work and social or civic responsibilities, etc.

What Wollstonecraft is describing is the frenzied state that is the initial phase of love ending on the altar and becoming indissoluble in that society. Then as the two get to know one another better, and the fantasy is replaced with a real person, in the main it does not come out well for the woman. The man can go and have affairs and chase that initial love-euphoria

again and again. The woman gets to choose between doing anything and everything to get her husband's initial interest and attention back. Or she can sulk in misery and endure and become mean and vicious.

Once again I see the wisdom of current society's making divorce rather easy to come by.

If a woman is really lucky and has married a man of virtue, then and only then can their relationship become an enduring one of tender confidence and sincere respect, what she calls friendship.

**Page:** 71

**Citation:**

[The part I cite here praises the struggling women of the lower classes:]

. . . when a woman in the lower rank of life makes her husband's and children's clothes, she does her duty, this is her part of the family business; but when [higher class] women work only to dress better than they could otherwise afford, it is worse than sheer loss of time. To render the poor virtuous they must be employed, and women in the middle rank of life . . . might employ them, whilst they themselves managed their families, instructed their children, and exercised their own minds. . . .

**Comment:**

Wollstonecraft's complaint here is that some higher class women spend much time trying to fool others into judging them to be at a higher station in life by making, and wearing publicly, fancier clothes than they can afford to buy. When she does this she spends her means and energy on a frivolous pursuit and denies lower class women an opportunity to work. She would be much better off spending her time and resources running a comfortable household that matches her station in life.

**Pages:** 91-93

**Citation:**

[This is from a chapter where she criticizes the literature of her day:]

I particularly object to the love-like phrases of pumped up passion, which are everywhere interspersed. If women be ever allowed to walk without leading strings, why must they be cajoled into virtue by artful flattery and sexual compliments? Speak to them the language of truth and soberness, and away with the lullaby strains of condescending endearment! Let them be taught to respect themselves as rational creatures, and not led to have a passion for their own insipid person . . . as if they had only feelings.

...

Why are girls to be told that they resemble angels; but to sink them below women? Or that a gentle innocent female is an object that comes nearer to the idea which we have formed of angels than any other. Yet they are told, at the same time, that they are only like angels when they are young and beautiful; consequently, it is their persons, not their virtues, that procure them this homage.

...

[She next quotes a paragraph from a book on how a woman can influence a man so as to create an “abode of domestic bliss.” The prescription is for total subservience, of course. In response she observes:]

Such a woman ought to be an angel—or she is an ass—for I discern not a trace of the human character, neither reason nor passion in this domestic drudge, whose being is absorbed in that of a tyrant’s.

**Comment:**

Angel or ass? All depends on one’s point of reference. By being totally subservient one creates a tyrant.

**Page:** 117-118

**Citation:**

[Wollstonecraft goes back to her inevitable demise-of-love and rise-of-friendship theme here:]

But one grand truth women have yet to learn, though much it imports them to act accordingly. In the choice of a husband, they should not be led astray by the qualities of a lover—for a lover the husband, even supposing him to be wise and virtuous, cannot long remain.

Were women more rationally educated, could they take a more comprehensive view of things, they would be contented to love but once in their lives; and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship—into the tender intimacy, which is the best refuge from care; yet is built on such pure, still affections, that idle jealousies would not be allowed to disturb the discharge of the sober duties of life, or to engross the thought that ought to be otherwise employed. This is a state in which many men live; but few, very few, women.

[She suggests that when the husband no longer plays the role she has been trained to extract from him, then:]

. . . acting the part which they foolishly exacted from their lovers, they become abject wooers and fond slaves.

**Comment:**

Tender intimacy and pure affection! If that is her description of the friendship that exists between the partners in a sound marriage, well then I agree, it is a worthy goal to transform what may have been a rather unruly passion into such a partnership of intimacy and tender caring. Her observation that no husband can remain a lover for long, however, seems a

bit overblown. It suggests that women in her day were expecting a husband to be a rather unrealistic if not impossible physical performer that keeps her, and she him, in a continual state of sexual arousal with frequent release whenever he is around the house. Maybe she is attacking a proverbial “straw-man.” And if her husband cools toward her she panics and woos him and becomes even more subservient to him thinking that his coolness is a direct result of something lacking in her. What a sad society she describes!

**Pages:** 142-143

**Citation:**

[One more mention of the need to devote oneself to one’s offspring, with vain beauty, and wealth, as obstacles:]

. . . I need only observe that when a woman is admired for her beauty, and suffers herself to be so far intoxicated by the admiration she receives as to neglect to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to cultivate an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and happy. True happiness—I mean all the contentment and virtuous satisfaction that can be snatched in this imperfect state—must arise from well-regulated affections, and an affection includes a duty. Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they cherish, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing; they do not consider that they thus make natural and artificial duties clash by sacrificing

the comfort and respectability of a woman's life to voluptuous notions of beauty when in nature they all harmonize.

Cold would be the heart of a husband, were he not rendered unnatural by early debauchery, who did not feel more delight at seeing his child suckled by its mother than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise, yet this natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie, and twisting esteem with fonder recollections, wealth leads women to spurn. To preserve their beauty, and wear the flowery crown of the day, which gives them a kind of right to reign for a short time over the sex, they neglect to stamp impressions on their husbands' hearts that would be remembered with more tenderness when the snow on the head began to chill the bosom than ever their virgin charms. The maternal solicitude of a reasonable affectionate woman is very interesting, and the chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his station is not only a respectable, but a beautiful sight.

[Wollstonecraft then sighs about the lack of this scene of beauty in many homes of wealth where life consists of play-acting out artificial roles. She finds a nursing mother in a well-run home with a supportive husband a rare but beautiful sight.]

**Comment:**

I was frankly surprised by Wollstonecraft's references to an ideal mother and household. I understand she had several failed marriages but was a devoted mother, so she knows whereof she speaks from her own experience. She blames women for much of their own misery, and fathers and husbands for conspiring to make women so totally dependent on them that they fear the consequences of the natural progression that age causes in their physical appearance. Since the relationship is so much based on physical appearance, that is not surprising, just sad.

**Page:** 147-148

**Citation:**

[Wealth as the enemy of virtue is her continuing topic here, and just prior to this statement she again excoriates women more interested in their sex appeal than in the nourishment of their children but then moves on to women needing independence and maybe even a voice in government! She is a radical here:]

. . . when poverty is more disgraceful than even vice, is not morality cut to the quick? . . . though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason, I cannot help lamenting that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence. I may excite laughter, by dropping a hint . . . I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily

governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government.

**Comment:**

Wollstonecraft would be amazed to see how the lot of women has improved at all levels of the social wealth scale through their having access to higher education, work, and not just the ballot box but also public office. Are things just wonderful now? Of course not. But reading her description of the lot of women in her society makes me grateful for ours.

**Page:** 148-150

**Citation:**

[As part of her vision of a new and ideal world Wollstonecraft sees women employed in useful jobs:]

. . . Women might certainly study the art of healing and be physicians as well as nurses. . . . Businesses of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more ardent manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would then not marry for a support . . . nor would an attempt to earn their own subsistence, a most laudable one! sink them almost to the level of those poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution. . . .

. . . is not that Government then very defective, and very unmindful of the happiness of one-half of its members,

that does not provide for honest, independent women by encouraging them to fill respectable stations? . . .

. . . such is the blessed effect of civilization! the most respectable women are the most oppressed; and unless they have understandings far superior to the common run of understanding, taking in both sexes, they must, from being treated like contemptible beings, become contemptible. How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practiced as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry . . . .

**Comment:**

A very sound vision. We in, most of the modern nations of the world not oppressed by religious notions of the subordinate place of woman—as was the case in Wollstonecraft’s day when Christianity ruled the roost—have come a long way from the world she describes. True freedom for women is not possible among true believers in the inerrancy of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. The separation of church and state was a brilliant idea.

**Page:** 150-151

**Citation:**

[Wollstonecraft describes the ideal wife-husband relationship:]

. . . I intreat them [men] to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a *helpmeet* for them.

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love them with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves; and the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, nor the babes sent to nestle in a strange bosom, having never found a home in their mother's.

**Comment:**

One cannot disagree with Wollstonecraft here. If the relationship between two spouses would be a rational fellowship, with respect and intimacy, all would be well with their world. Respect and peace are wonderful foundations for long-lasting intimacy. And the healing spreads in all directions along the living part of the family tree.

**Page:** 201

**Citation:**

[A last observation concerning the ideal couple and its opposite:]

. . . that noble simplicity of affection, which dares to appear unadorned, has few attractions for the libertine, though it be the charm, which by cementing the matrimonial tie, secures to the pledges of a warmer

passion the necessary parental attention; for children will never be properly educated till friendship subsists between parents. . . .

The affection of husbands and wives cannot be pure when they have so few sentiments in common, and when so little confidence is established at home, as must be the case when their pursuits are so different. That intimacy from which tenderness should flow, will not, cannot subsist between the vicious.

. . .

From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of her character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression.

**Comment:**

Tyranny and oppression of a woman at home make for a vicious relationship without intimacy or tenderness. An oppressed woman will be cunning and vicious, and throughout her book she has suggested that the majority of higher class women fall into this camp. And out of such dysfunctional homes will come dysfunctional children who will continue this societal disease she has done her best to describe in this rather difficult to read tome.