

Wollstonecraft "A Vindication of the Rights of Women"

Summary of Important Points

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- Women can't be forced to be "domestic"
- Women are allowed an minimal education while men are encouraged variety; this variety encourages men to explore; this exploration results in extra-marital affairs; wives, in retaliation, will resort to infidelity as well; all of which takes them both farther from "virtue"
- Equitable laws (for both husband and wife) have created a more sanctimonious marriage pact that allows men and women to choose their own partners (instead of it being dictated by family and politics)
- If husband and wife are on equal levels to each other, then the wife will be a better mother to her children. She will teach her children the "virtue" she has acquired and provide an example of a righteous marriage for them – one where she and her husband are friends.

Introduction

- Because women are socialized to rely only upon their beauty, conduct and manners, they soon become unpalatable human beings for others to notice. Their beauty, their most important aspect, fades with age.
- Women's education, created by men, causes this: "One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creature, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized woman of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect" (232).
- In these conduct manuals/books written by men, women are treated as "subordinate beings" (232).
- Wollstonecraft does not address the entire female gender; in this treatise, she specifically focuses on middle-class women because the middle-class supposedly has not been corrupted by the extremes of poverty or wealth (233).
- In writing this treatise, Wollstonecraft refuses to treat women like children and appeals to women's "reason" to acquire strength of both in their intellect (education) and in their physical bodies (exercise) (233).
- Wollstonecraft refuses to write her prose as if it were entertainment and wants women to read the treatise without expecting to be entertained. Here, Wollstonecraft is poking fun at "sentimental" (emotional) novels and accusing the prose in novels of creating a "sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and over-stretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid" (234). Novels hinder the intellect and education of women. (More on novels in Chp. 8, which you won't read.)

Chapter 1

- "Man" is differentiated from animals by reason, virtue and knowledge (235).
- There are many remarks about British politics (monarchy, men's professions, war in Europe) in this chapter. (Wollstonecraft typically gets caught up in the politics of the nation throughout this treatise.)

Chapter 2

- Women have been declared to have no soul; however, they must have a soul in order to gain virtue (237). Virtue is a trait acquired by Man, not born with it. (Contrast with Blake!)
- Women are taught that through "cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety," they will marry men who will protect them. And, if she's beautiful, her life will be easy "for, at least, twenty years." The point is that beauty fades as will the protection of her husband if gained under these false pretenses (238). Wollstonecraft believes this is an "imperfect cultivation" and will result on in obtaining "evil" (238) instead of good.
- Also, this set-up supposes that the husband is good, virtuous, knowledgeable and reasonable. However, this is a big "if." Wollstonecraft purports that because men are overgrown children, they are not equipped to lead women to virtue (240).
- Wollstonecraft creates an outline for women to make themselves equal in spirit to God. The only way to achieve this equality is to exercise reason, which in turn will lead a human being to be virtuous. (239)
- The writings of specific men have made women "artificial, weak characters . . . and, consequently,

- more useless members of society” (239).
- The only way to avoid being corrupted by society, men and politics is for women to become educated: “Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing. The sensualist, indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them” (241).
- Education will produce an individual who can then choose to lead a virtuous life governed by reason.
- Women need not be made subservient to men because of love or lust. However, Wollstonecraft proposes that a woman’s capacity for virtue is inferior to a man’s capacity for virtue. This still places women as subordinates to men but because of mental deficiency instead of being soul-less and useless to society (242). But, both man and woman would be closer to truth if they tried to be both virtuous (248).
- Wollstonecraft doesn’t want to deny “love” and all its faculties; however, she objects that the education of women is solely “to render them pleasing” (243). If women only are educated to please without any rational thought of their own, then they will try to please not only husbands, but also any man who desires to be pleased. If a woman is educated only for “love,” then when her marriage becomes loveless, she will seek it elsewhere. However, if a woman is educated to trust her own rational thoughts, she can take comfort from within herself and not from the society at large. Women need power over themselves and not necessarily over men (244).
- When women are educated only for “love,” they become artificial in the pursuit of fashion, passion, feelings and vanities. Women have been advised to hide their feelings (246). Instead, women should “endeavor to purify their heart” to bring them closer to a spiritual plane with God. (244)
- In marriage, passion soon fades and gives way to friendship: “an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and . . . the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother” (245). This “marriage” has been defined and discussed by Dr. Gregory, a philosopher against whom Wollstonecraft is arguing. Dr. Gregory’s definition of marriage will eventually cause jealousy and envy among wives because the marriage’s passion (so applauded by Gregory) will eventually die.
- The current education of women is equal to slavery. Instead, both men and women should be educated as moral beings and guided by reason (247).
- Wollstonecraft discusses the definition of women in her day (as subservient beings) in a significant paragraph: “Gentleness of manners . . .” (247). And, then she gives what women should be: “If, I say, for I would not impress . . .” (248).
- Women have an immortal soul and the free will to improve it (247). Their sole purpose in life is not about giving “spaniel-like affection” (247).

Chapter 13

- “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 their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression” (256).
- “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty” (257).