
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, like most thinkers in advance of their age who find themselves in revolt against existing institutions, provoked during her lifetime such extremes of hero-worship and antagonism that contemporary criticism is of little use to us in the formation of our own judgment of her. Horace Walpole's well-known allusion to "that hyena in petticoats," and Hannah More's comment—"How many ways there are of being ridiculous!"—on Mary's great book, which she was "invincibly resolved" not to read, probably sum up the average polite prejudice of the period against a woman who not only demanded freedom for others, for oppressed men as well as oppressed women, but dared to be free herself.

There were others among her contemporaries whose praises were hardly less extravagant. "She was a delightful woman," declared Southey; "I never saw a woman who would have been better fitted to do honour to her sex . . . Of all the lions I met in London her countenance was the best, infinitely the best." An anonymous writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* concluded an article on her, written after her death, with the unqualified tribute—"For soundness of understanding and sensibility of heart she was, perhaps, never equalled." All this fails, as completely as Shelley's famous lines about her, to suggest Walpole's hyena. Shelley never knew her; she died too soon to be his mother-in-law; but it is significant that, seeing her only in relation to his wife, her daughter, Mary Godwin, he wrote of her as one

Whose life was like a setting planet mild,
Which clothed thee in the radiance undefiled
Of its departing glory.

Mary Wollstonecraft herself gives us a clue to much of this conflicting evidence in a letter she wrote to her sister announcing her intention of earning her living as a writer, then almost an unprecedented thing for a woman to do.

“ I am thus going to be the first of a new genus,” she says ; and again, elsewhere—“ I am not born to tread the beaten track.” But it is possible that she would not have roused either antagonism or admiration in such intensity if her only achievement in life had been the exposure of the wrongs of women. She was not only a champion of oppressed women, she was also a champion of the oppressed poor ; and the inequalities in the distribution of wealth troubled her fully as much as the inequalities in the position of the sexes. It is important to remember what is often overlooked, that her first notable publication was not her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, on which her fame rests, but her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, an answer to Burke’s attack upon the French Revolution. As a feminist, which she never was in the narrow sense of the word, she might have been dismissed for a harmless crank ; but as champion of the mob, whose wretched condition seemed to her some justification for the excesses of the Revolutionists, she became dangerous. The history of democracy is full of similar instances of intellectual ostracism.

In making a study of Mary Wollstonecraft it is impossible to separate her life from her work ; she lived too intensely to succeed in detaching her art from her human experience, as some writers, more often men than women, seem able to do. All through her childhood and youth her spirit was bound and her genius thwarted by poverty and by the inferior position of women in the home. There was nothing in her up-bringing to make her think well of the marriage tie, or of the way men were able to use their power over their wives and daughters, or of the protection afforded by society to women thrown upon it by misfortune or by lack of means. If she had really been the hyena in petticoats, the uncompromising exponent of women’s rights she is still often imagined to have been, there was clearly abundant excuse for it. That she was nothing of the sort, but retained to the end her inner faith in the beauty of family relationships and in the importance of building a nation’s happiness upon the happiness of its homes, and, further, that she even converted Godwin to this view of hers, after first living with him unmarried, is a testimony to her power of rising above personal experience in her search for truth.

She was born in Essex, probably in Epping Forest, in 1759, and was the eldest daughter and the second of six children. Both her parents were unsatisfactory; her father, as imprudent as Micawber, drank into the bargain and ill-treated her mother, who was a weak creature and in her turn bullied Mary. "How can women be just or generous when they are the slaves of injustice?" she wrote, years later; and one result of her home life was the discovery, an important one for a reformer, that good and bad qualities were pretty equally distributed between the sexes. Another was that there was something to be said for running wild with her brothers and escaping regular lessons, for, in a passage advocating co-education, she afterwards wrote: "Most of the women, in the circle of my observation, who have acted like rational creatures or shown any vigour of intellect, have accidentally been allowed to run wild."

Some idea of her sufferings during those early years of struggle may be gathered from her two works of fiction, not great books in themselves, but of some autobiographical value. In 1778, she gained further bitter experience from two years spent as companion to a rich and tyrannical woman at Bath, then returned home to nurse her mother, who had now come to lean upon the daughter she formerly oppressed; and when, after her mother's death, her father married again, she almost wilfully asked the worst of fate by going to live with the family of her great friend, Fanny Blood, whose home life was a dreadful repetition of her own. Her first defiance of the conventions occurred when she carried off her sister and helped her to hide from a husband who wanted to put her in an asylum; but it was characteristic of Mary that she still saw the husband's unhappy point of view, and, owing to this impartiality, was able finally to arrange an amicable separation between the two. When, soon after, she set up a little school for the support of her own and Fanny Blood's relations, it looked as though she was at last going to find some peace of mind in this outlet for her original views on education.

Again came one of those demands upon her sympathies that she never refused to meet. The unfortunate Fanny, now married and dying in Lisbon, sent her an urgent call; and off went Mary just in time to see her before she died.

On her return she found the school had gone to pieces in her absence, and two sets of relatives were again waiting to be helped. It was little wonder that she wrote later to her lover Imlay that, "fatigued during my youth by the most arduous struggles . . . not merely pleasures escaped me, I mean the simple pleasures that flow from passion and affection, but the most melancholy views of life were impressed by a disappointed heart on my mind."

These perpetual interruptions to her career would not be worth dwelling upon if it were not for their bearing upon her character. Moving amid these human failures, she retained by some superhuman strength of will the driving force of her purpose in life, and at last secured her independence. She met the publisher Johnson to whom she afterwards owed so much, earned her first ten guineas from him with a little book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, used it to send the Bloods to Dublin whence they fortunately never returned, and then, in 1788, after a year spent as governess in Ireland, returned at Johnson's suggestion to London, where she settled down to a literary career in rooms in George Street, Southwark.

The next four years were years of happiness and development. She was at last fulfilling herself, winning recognition, doing the work she liked, mixing with her intellectual equals; and it was probably a matter of indifference to her that she had to hand out her hard-earned money to subsidise her father, train her brothers and keep her sisters in their periods of unemployment, so long as she was left in comparative peace to live her own life. She learned German and Italian, translated from both and from French for Johnson, reviewed books for his *Analytical Review*, and wrote her two finest works—the more famous of the two in six weeks. She dined with the Johnsons once or twice a week, met Tom Paine, Mrs. Trimmer (the founder of Sunday Schools), Fuseli the painter, and many others. She was at her best among these congenial people, was now able to dress better, and people discovered that she was a beauty. She made her mark before her books appeared.

Enjoying that comradeship with men on which she always set so much store, not yet enslaved by a love affair or distracted by the cares of motherhood, and deeply stirred

by the French Revolution which awakened all her natural enthusiasm for liberty, Mary was free to put her emotional vitality as well as her literary ability into her work ; and in those eventful four years she wrote, first, *Mary : a Fiction* ; and *Original Stories from Real Life, with conversations calculated to regulate the affections and form the mind to truth and goodness* (both in 1788) ; then *The Vindication of the Rights of Men : A Letter to Burke occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) ; then her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with strictures on Political and Moral subjects* (1792). Later there followed other publications ; in 1794, the first volume of her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution, and the effect it has produced in Europe*, unfortunately never finished ; and lastly her second novel, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (published posthumously) ; and she left behind her a collection of letters, some private, and some written definitely for publication during her tour in Scandinavia, which alone would have brought her considerable notice. But most critics would agree that her highest accomplishment as a writer was reached in the work she did during the years, 1788-92, when she enjoyed almost complete immunity from domestic anxiety and was still untouched by the violent emotions that seem to have characterised her more intimate relationships with men.

Her friendship with Fuseli was the first of these affairs. Whether it ever became anything warmer than friendship must always remain a matter for speculation. It certainly meant so much to her that she made the extraordinary proposition to his wife that she should live with them in order to enjoy his uninterrupted companionship ; and when his wife declined to concur in this arrangement, and Mary soon afterwards went to Paris, there were naturally some who saw in her journey abroad a proof that she had something to run away from. But it is at least equally possible that to a woman of her independence and pride the rumour that she was in love with Fuseli (if she was not) would have been enough to make her want to avoid for a time the set in which such things were being said about her, apart from her very natural desire to go to the centre of the

events that were stirring as much controversy then as we have seen roused in our own time by similar events in Russia. In any case, it does not concern us here whether she was or was not in love with Fuseli. It is surely time that we approached with more detachment the love affairs of Mary Wollstonecraft, which have been allowed too long to obscure her importance as a prophet of democracy. Had she been a man, they would have been regarded as natural accompaniments to imaginative genius. Or had she been a conventional woman who concealed both her sentimental intrigues and her outrageous opinions from a censorious world, she would have caused less turmoil in respectable circles, both during and after her lifetime. But Mary was not that sort of woman. She scorned hypocrisy as she insisted on freedom of thought and action—and human affection was indispensable to her. “I cannot live without some particular affection—I am afraid not without a passion,” she wrote to Imlay in 1795; “and I feel the want of it more in society than in solitude”; and this is a revealing statement, especially the last sentence of it.

If Fuseli was her first lover, he was soon replaced by another—Gilbert Imlay, a captain in the American army during the war of Independence, and author of the first American novel, *The Emigrants*. She met him in Paris and her letters leave no shadow of doubt as to her passion for him. It absorbed her while it lasted; she refused to believe in his inconstancy when it was patent to all the world; when she could no longer doubt it, she tried to drown herself. The birth of their child at Havre in 1794, the ill-fated Fanny who afterwards took her own life, only increased her infatuation for the father. She was, undoubtedly, at this period of her life an absurd woman in love, though not more absurd than any man or woman who is reduced to unreason by an overmastering affection for some one who has ceased to return it. But she showed greater strength of character than some women might in her ability to take up her life again when her love for Imlay died, and to absorb herself in her work and her child, to whom she appears to have been an ideal and adorable mother; so that finally, when she again met William Godwin after her rupture with Imlay, there was nothing to stand in the way

of their yielding to their natural affinity for one another. In 1797, after living with him openly for some months, she married him legally within a short time of the birth of her second child, the daughter who afterwards married Shelley and was the author of *Frankenstein*. When this baby was born, Mary insisted on being attended only by a midwife, a dangerous concession to feminism in those days of primitive midwifery, and it cost her her life. Ten days later, she died at the early age of thirty-eight.

Mary Wollstonecraft's unconventional attitude towards the relations of the sexes undoubtedly created a prejudice against her in the minds of many who would otherwise have hailed her as a prophet. This seems to be the only explanation of the neglect of her written works by those who, whether social, political or educational reformers, ought to have drawn from her books in the century-and-a-half that followed her death ample support for their democratic views. From this standpoint, and because the economic position of the wife and mother creates a problem in democracy that only Soviet Russia among modern States has so far attempted frankly to face (and along lines that Mary Wollstonecraft herself might have laid down), her opinions on the subject of what is called free-love, if they can be discovered, are worth consideration here. Her actual conduct does not tell us very much, for accomplishment rarely matches endeavour in anybody's life. There is a doubt whether she was in love with Fuseli at all, so her flight from him, if it was flight, cannot be taken as a proof of chastity. In Paris, owing to the unsettled conditions of the time, there were obstacles in the way of her marrying Imlay; if they had been removed, or if he had remained faithful to her after their return to England, we do not know what she would have done; nor do we know whether she would have taken another lover if she had lived long enough to outgrow her passion for Godwin. There is no real evidence for or against promiscuity in the actual story of her love affairs.

In her writings we find expressions of opinion that point to certain broad principles. She certainly thought that no conventional considerations should stand between two people who really loved each other; it was always the

substance and not the shadow that she pursued through life. "What is termed virtue is only want of courage," she writes; and again—"We should never perhaps have heard of Lucretia had she died to preserve her chastity instead of her reputation." Too much importance, she felt, was attached to constancy, and in women's constancy as such she frankly disbelieved, saying that "A mistaken education, a narrow uncultivated mind and many sexual prejudices tend to make women more constant than men." In a letter to Imlay she drew a distinction between fidelity and constancy, to the advantage of the former, adding that "Two people who mean to live together ought not to be long separated." And of one thing we can be absolutely certain; she denied that love and marriage were the only, or even the chief business of women, saying delightfully in one passage on the subject—"How women are to exist in that state where there is neither to be marrying nor giving in marriage we are not told."

Everything that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote was interesting, and not least attractive among her miscellaneous writings is a fragment called *Lessons*, which she wrote for her little girl Fanny. It is a charming witness to the intelligent way she approached the upbringing of children at a period when such ideas were more or less without precedent. But indisputably, her best and most characteristic work is to be found in the two *Vindications*, and it is upon them that her claim rests for inclusion among the early preachers of democracy.

In *The Vindication of the Rights of Men* all her indignation is concentrated upon a defence of the oppressed classes, with no reference to the special wrongs of women. She pours scorn upon Burke for his inconsistency, for upholding American independence and the abolition of slavery while he condemns the French Revolution; for praising the British Constitution as a model of liberty—"Security of property! Behold in a few words the definition of English liberty!" she scoffs—; for lamenting the griefs of a Queen of France when the miseries of poor mothers in his own country leave him unmoved; and above all, for his "contemptible hard-hearted sophistry" in commending to the downtrodden labourers of town and country a "submission to the will

of Heaven." She draws a touching picture of the landless peasant, and an astonishingly modern picture of the workless mechanic rendered unemployable by the inability to get work, and goes on to say scornfully—

It is, Sir, *possible* to render the poor happier in this world, without depriving them of the consolation which you gratuitously grant them in the next . . . Is the human heart satisfied with turning the poor over to another world, to receive the blessings this could afford ?

Finally, referring to Burke's condemnation of the Royal executions and comparing these with the way the poor live always, she asks dramatically: "What were the outrages of a day to these continual miseries?" It is true that to some extent her admiration for the French Revolution was theoretic, like Burke's for the British Constitution; and her personal contact with it in Paris, in 1794, certainly tended to modify her revolutionary enthusiasm. But nothing ever changed her passion for freedom and her conviction that neither class nor sex should set up an artificial barrier to freedom; and in this early publication we have evidence of that passionate faith.

But others at that time were also defending the French Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft stands at this period almost alone as champion of the emancipation of women. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is incomparably her greatest work, not only because it is far in advance of its time in regard to the position of women, but also because it is far in advance of its time in other matters as well. On education, on peace and war, on economics, on the treatment of animals and of children, it reveals her as a pioneer, and especially in education, which she thinks should be national, free to younger children, and open to all, irrespective of class. There should be public day schools; for "schoolboys infallibly lose that decent bashfulness which might have ripened into modesty at home"; and girls and boys should be taught together, "to improve both sexes," the curriculum to be the same for both and to include botany, mechanics, astronomy, reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history and some simple experiments in natural philosophy—"but these pursuits should never

encroach on gymnastic plays in the open air." She comes directly into line with our enlightened educationalists of to-day with her suggestion of self-government in schools—"They should be tried by their peers"—and even anticipates the co-operation of parents and staff by proposing a committee of teachers in each parish to which the former could bring complaints. She has, too, a great saying about animals :

Humanity to animals should be particularly inculcated as a part of national education. . . . Justice, or even benevolence, will not be a powerful spring of action unless it extend to the whole creation ; nay, I believe that . . . those who can see pain unmoved will soon learn to inflict it.

After this, one is not surprised to find her saying that defensive war "is the only justifiable war in the present advanced state of society . . . I sincerely wish to see the bayonet converted into a pruning-hook"; and, with regard to political emancipation :

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.

It is only by understanding Mary Wollstonecraft's conception of human freedom that one can understand her plea for the freedom of women. Those who have dismissed her as an atheist because she denounces "slavery to forms that makes religion worse than a farce" are equally ready to see in her an opponent of the marriage tie because she says bluntly—"Marriage will never be held sacred till women, by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions rather than their mistresses." Her *Vindication* will remain a feminist tract for all who do not read it carefully enough to discover that in her own words—"It is an affection for the whole human race that . . . leads me earnestly to wish to see woman placed in a station in which she would advance and not retard progress." No woman-hater of either sex could be harder on women's faults than is the writer of the *Vindication*, but she never fails to point out that their subjection and their lack of a

liberal education are the causes of those faults. "The whole tenor of female education tends to render the best-disposed romantic and inconstant, and the remainder vain and mean," she says: but a better education "might save many from legal and common prostitution," since "women would not then marry for a support."

In the same spirit she refuses to attribute any special qualities to men or to women, so long as their upbringing remains different:—

I here throw down my gauntlet and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. For men and women truth must be the same . . . Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfil, but they are *human* duties . . .

It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men. . . . Virtue will never prevail in society till the virtues of both sexes are founded on reason, and till the affections common to both are allowed to gain their due strength by the discharge of mutual duties.

Finally, she sees in women's subjection infinite harm resulting to the home and thence to the whole nation. She refers to the "brutish affection" that the subject-woman shows for her own children, "forgetting the common relationship that binds the whole family on earth together." And the democrat in her speaks out again when she maintains that the freedom of the race depends upon the freeing of women, who, "denied all political privileges, and not allowed as married women, except in criminal cases, a civil existence, have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts."

It is always the whole community that concerns this broad-minded idealist. "For a small number of distinguished women I do not ask a place," she insists; and—"It is not for the benefit of society that a few brilliant men should be brought forward at the expense of the many." But quotation can give only a limited idea of Mary Wollstonecraft's breadth of vision. The only way to arrive at the truth about her, by adjusting the balance between her intellectual aims and her very human attempts to carry them out in her own life, is to read without prejudice what

she wrote and to study the few facts of her life that are actually established as facts. These will tell their own story and it will be found the fascinating story of one of those rare spirits that appear now and then in the course of centuries, to disturb our equanimity and shock our complacency, but stirring us nevertheless to new endeavour and never quite leaving the world as they found it.

As a mortal life, Mary Wollstonecraft's might be said to be incomplete. She was only thirty-eight when she died; it is impossible to say in what directions she might have developed or modified her theories of love and marriage, of economics and sociology, of politics and the humanities, had she lived her full threescore-and-ten, though it is fairly safe to assume that her fundamental sincerity and her passionate regard for freedom and justice would never have allowed her to abandon one jot of her basic principles. Still, to judge her accomplishment as we should judge that of one who had lived to be old might appear to be unfair.

This theory would be challenged, however, by those who believe in some guiding purpose behind all the groping and the endeavour, the rising and the falling of the human race. Mary Wollstonecraft was neither the first nor the last of the world's artists and teachers to die prematurely young. Byron, Burns, Raphael, Mozart, leaving behind them names unforgettable in the minds of men, all died before the age of thirty-eight; others, and some greater than they, have died still younger. We may then see equally in the life of one whose name and work have won fame in many countries besides our own (the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is widely read in America and on the Continent, and has been translated more than once) a similar indication that Mary Wollstonecraft was the chosen instrument for just the message she did bring and the task she did accomplish; and so a career which seems to have been cut short was in reality a completed career.

That seems to explain in some degree Mary Wollstonecraft's tremendous vitality and the immediate impression, pleasing or the reverse, that she made on every one with whom she came in contact. She was the "hyena in petticoats", or she was unequalled "for soundness of understanding and sensibility of heart"; no moderate

estimate of her seemed possible. She did everything with the whole of herself, whether she threw up her prospects to rush across the sea to a dying friend, or wrote a work of genius in six weeks, or lavished a torrent of affection upon an average man incapable of realising the woman she was. She was a great lover and friend and mother, as well as a great writer and pioneer; and, glancing at her meteoric passage across a world that was not nearly ready for the message of genius that she brought, and in some ways is not ready for it yet, we see the inevitability of her early death. She loved too much, she fought too hotly, she felt too intensely. She had to burn herself out at an age when most of us are still short of our prime. But the flame of her burning will lighten the path, down through the ages, of all rebels, all visionaries, who help to pave the way to that democracy which, some day, will bring freedom to humanity.