

Mary Wollstonecraft: Britain's First Feminist [B2]

Nella Gran Bretagna del XVIII secolo, quando la vita delle donne era quasi interamente controllata dagli uomini, la figlia di un agricoltore scrisse quello che poi diventò un classico del femminismo.

One of the leading intellectuals of the Age of Enlightenment, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was a trailblazing advocate for the equality of women, laying the foundation for modern feminism. In the 18th century, women had very few rights. They were barred from politics, higher education and most professions. They were considered the property of their husbands or fathers and were even considered incapable of rational thought! Wollstonecraft was born during the Enlightenment, a European movement which critiqued traditional authority in religion and politics. The rights of men were widely debated, but not those of women. Wollstonecraft would fill this gap.

DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD

Born into a farming family, she experienced brutality in her childhood. Her father was often drunk and violent, and little Mary slept in front of her mother's room to protect her. Poorly schooled and then disinherited, she saw education as her only escape. She became a reader of philosophical thinkers of the time, including John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. After working as a governess and teacher, she decided to earn her living as a writer, one of the first women to do so.

Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's SCEPTRE, the mind shapes itself to the body, and ROAMING ROUND its GILT CAGE, only seeks to adorn its prison.

REVOLUTIONS

Describing herself “the first of a new genus”, Wollstonecraft went to work for the radical London publisher Joseph Johnson, who published the works of some of Britain’s greatest thinkers. Now moving with the cultural elite, she began to feel that privileged and educated men were denying education and autonomy to women. Her first publication, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), criticised women’s education for obsessing over appearance and ignoring independence of thought.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution of 1789 provoked both excitement and fear in Britain. Wollstonecraft saw it as a great opportunity for human improvement. When the conservative thinker Edmund Burke criticised the revolution, a furious Wollstonecraft defended its egalitarian ideals in a pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), making her famous overnight.

A VINDICATION

Two years later, she published her most famous and influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It was an unflinching response to the French statesman Charles de Talleyrand, who had suggested that women should only receive a domestic education. Wollstonecraft effectively argued for equal rights for women, especially in education, which would then permit women to contribute as much to society as men. Her work was well received, as society was open to change.

RELATIONSHIPS

Wollstonecraft decided to travel to Paris in 1792, at an incredibly violent time. She had criticised the leaders of the revolution, and now decided to write a live history. Ignoring convention, she began a relationship with the American

adventurer Gilbert Imlay. After the birth of their illegitimate child Fanny, he abandoned her. Back in London, Wollstonecraft found Imlay with another woman. She tried to commit suicide twice, once jumping into the Thames. Raising her daughter alone, she continued to write. After meeting the famous philosopher William Godwin at a dinner party, they became lovers. Wollstonecraft was soon pregnant and in 1797 they were married, though still lived in separate houses.

BETRAYAL?

Tragically, Wollstonecraft died from septicaemia shortly after giving birth to a baby girl — who in the future would find fame as Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein. Devastated by her death, Godwin decided to write Wollstonecraft's biography as a tribute. Believing in total truth, he included intrusive details, such as Wollstonecraft's affairs, her illegitimate child and her suicide attempts. The book horrified people, including some of her admirers. Her enemies said it proved she was "a whore." Wollstonecraft was demonised for decades, her ideas forgotten.

REPUTATION

With the late 19th century suffragette movement, however, Wollstonecraft returned to favour. Marchers carried huge banners proclaiming "Mary Wollstonecraft Pioneer". Her reputation then grew steadily in importance. By the time of the publication of the bicentennial edition of The Rights of Woman in 1992, she was considered a feminist icon. In the words of the popular TV historian Mary Beard, "Every woman who wants to make a difference to how this country is run has Mary Wollstonecraft to thank."

I do not wish [women] to have power over men, but over themselves.

A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

Wollstonecraft's **groundbreaking** work, The Rights of Woman, which was received with considerable respect, was one of the first works of feminist philosophy. The pamphlet talked about "uneducating women"; Wollstonecraft considered that women acquired a false sense of themselves through their prescribed social identity, in which they were taught to value beauty and practise the arts of femininity. Women were not simply decorative objects meant to please men, she said. They had rights and it was time to act. She thought rights were God-given and inherent in everyone. Wollstonecraft argued that women were just as capable of rational thought as men, and that educating women would also serve to educate society. She proposed an education system in which boys and girls should study together not only the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic,) but also mechanics, botany and the sciences! She also wrote that women should not have to marry if they did not want to, that men should not control their wives' money, and that women should be able to earn their own living and live freely. Mary Wollstonecraft **made a powerful case** for liberating and educating women. The story of her life shows that she also **lived out** her theories. In her final, unfinished book, The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria, a sequel to The Rights of Woman, she wrote about the need of women for companionship and freedom to express their sexuality. The work was both radical and highly original in that it featured a working-class prostitute as well as an adulterous heroine.

Glossary

- **banners** = striscioni
- **groundbreaking** = rivoluzionario
- **made a powerful case** = sostenere una causa, presentare argomentazioni
- **trailblazing** = pionieristica
- **advocate** = sostenitrice
- **gap** = vuoto
- **ROAMING ROUND** = girare in tondo
- **overnight** = da un giorno all'altro
- **SCEPTRE** = scettro
- **denying** = negare
- **statesman** = uomo di stato, politico
- **Raising** = crescere
- **run** = gestire, dirigere, amministrare
- **Poorly schooled** = poco istruita
- **governess** = istitutrice
- **GILT CAGE** = gabbia dorata
- **improvement** = miglioramento
- **unflinching** = risoluta, intrepida
- **genus** = genere, specie
- **lived out** = mettere in pratica
- **Enlightenment** = Illuminismo
- **laying the foundation** = gettare le basi
- **barred** = impedire, vietare
- **disinherited** = diseredare
- **earn her living** = guadagnarsi da vivere