**Wollstonecraft 2: Rights of women and men**

**Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)**

**A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (1792)**

An argument for women’s rights, Wollstonecraft frequently appeals to the idea that freedom is necessary for moral improvement. Giving women legal rights will improve both them and society.

‘Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.’

‘men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they can scarcely trace how, rather than to root them out.’

Custom, tradition, and habit should be subject to assessment by reason.

‘I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man.’

Wollstonecraft was an educational theorist and made several attempts to set up schools. The aim was two-fold: to apply her educational theory and to gain financial independence.

Education and reason will promote the interests of men and women. Education must concern itself with morality not manners, real accomplishments not frivolous arts.

**The Critique of Rousseau**

The most significant target of the **Vindication** is the theory of education promoted by Rousseau in **Emile** (1762).

Rousseau provides an idealised theory of education for his young hero that stresses immersion in nature and learning from experience to free him from the corruption of society.

Towards the end of the novel he turns to the ideal education of a female companion for Emile: Sophy.

Men and Women are different by nature and so must be educated differently. Men should be ‘strong and active’ while women should be ‘weak and passive.’ This way they will complement each other.

‘woman is specially made for man’s delight’

‘Do not try to make your daughter a good man in defiance of nature. Make her a good woman, and be sure it will be better for her and us.’

‘Women are no strangers to the art of thinking, but they should only skim the surface of logic and metaphysics.’

‘A woman’s education must therefore be planned in relation to men. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young.’

‘A woman’s thoughts, beyond the range of her immediate duties, should be directed to the study of men…’

‘By her own speech and action, look and gesture, she must be able to inspire them with the feelings she desires, without seeming to have any such purpose.’

‘The shame of humiliation adds to the pangs of disappointed love. He no longer approaches Sophy with that pleasant confidence of his own worth; he is shy and timid in her presence. He no longer hopes to win her affections, but to gain her pity. Sometimes he loses his patience and is almost angry with her. Sophy seems to guess his angry feelings and she looks at him. Her glance is enough to disarm and terrify him; he is more submissive than he used to be.’

**Wollstonecraft’s reply:**

‘The mother, who wishes to give true dignity of character to her daughter, must, regardless of the sneers of ignorance, proceed on a plan diametrically opposite to that which Rousseau has recommended with all the deluding charms of eloquence and philosophical sophistry: for his eloquence renders absurdities plausible, and his dogmatic conclusions puzzle, without convincing, those who have not ability to refute them.’

‘Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it’ and women will no longer accept second class status. A rational relationship is to be preferred to the use of feminine wiles and flattery. An educated woman will be the friend and not the dependent of her husband.

Freedom strengthens reason. Humanity will benefit from ‘rational mothers’.

‘To be a good mother – a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands.’

The current debased relationship of inequality between the sexes leads to a loss of virtue on the part of both sexes. Eighteenth Century views on female virtues are ‘degraded’. Women are viewed as ‘ephemeron triflers…kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence’

Education also ensures that women will be able to survive in single life (or after the death of her husband). There is a physical dimension to this argument. Women are held to live unhealthily sedentary lives. Proper mental and physical exercise is encouraged. Wollstonecraft then engages in several chapters of educational theorising based on the problems that arise from the ‘early association of ideas.’ Children of both sexes should be educated together.

The problem is not entirely male. Social attitudes are accepted by women who have resigned their natural rights in pursuit of their sensual life.

‘when a man seduces a woman, it should, I think, be termed a left-handed marriage, and the man should be legally obliged to maintain the woman and her children, unless adultery, a natural divorcement, abrogated the law.’

She has an interesting theory of marriage which views it as a sort of friendship that remains once the initial passion has departed. Mutual care for children replaces passion as a mutual bond.

‘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.’

The reforms demanded go further than a change of attitudes on marriage.

Wollstonecraft calls for the reform of society to enshrine reason and progress institutionally. The regulations of society must aim at encouraging virtue in all individuals. She questions monarchy, aristocratic institutions and ceremony.

‘Taxes on the very necessaries of life, enable an endless tribe of idle princes and princesses to pass with stupid pomp before a gaping crowd, who almost worship the very parade which costs them so dear.’