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The life of Mary Wollstonecroft and the principles of conduct put forward in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

By Dr. Stephen Carruthers[1]

1. Introduction

'I have certain principles of action: I know what I look for to found my happiness on.' (1989:401). These words, written by Mary Wollstonecraft in Paris on 9th February 1795 to her lover Gilbert Imlay, at a time when she had been effectively abandoned and left to bring up her infant daughter alone, reveal a character that even in times of intense personal distress and dependency was determined to follow the principles of conduct she had established as conducive to her happiness. While elements of these principles can be gleaned from her earlier works - *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, published in 1787, *Mary, A Fiction* and *Original Stories*, both published in 1788, and *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* published in 1790 - it is in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which was dedicated to the French statesman Talleyrand who had published in 1791 a report advocating public education for both sexes, that Wollstonecraft first clearly set out these principles of conduct and guidance on how they could be respected.

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (*A Vindication*), over the period 1790 to 1792 and, following on the success of *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* written in reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the work established her literary reputation both in England and France. *A Vindication* draws

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heavily on Wollstonecraft's background and experiences: first as a dutiful but physically abused oldest daughter from a financially insecure background with a violent father and submissive mother, and then as a single woman struggling to establish her independence and support her parents and siblings within the limited career opportunities available to women. *A Vindication* was written at a critical junction in her life where, following her earlier experiences as a teacher and governess, she had become acquainted with leading dissenters and radicals centered around Dr. Price, whose sermon extolling the virtues of the French Revolution was the target of Burke's *Reflections*, her publisher Joseph Johnson, with whom she was collaborating on the *Analytical Review*, and the Swiss painter Henry Fuseli with whom she was entangled in an unrequited love affair.

In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft seeks to establish a moral framework within which the justification for the rights of woman asserted in the book can be defended. This moral framework, which is seen as an 'emanation of divinity' (1995: 127), is composed from a number of key conceptual ideas which provide the principles of conduct which should be followed by both men and women to enable the rights of woman to be vindicated: 'If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim' (1995:94-95). Wollstonecraft did not set out to demonstrate equality between the sexes, but she did seek to establish a shared moral universe which would provide women with the opportunity to demonstrate their true capacities and character. For Wollstonecraft the key requirements for creating this shared universe were self-evident: 'In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason. What acquirement exalts one being above another? Virtue; we spontaneously reply. For what purposes were

the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes; whispers experience' (1995:79). Wollstonecraft's analysis in *A Vindication* of the role of reason, virtue, and knowledge in establishing principles of conduct will now be examined and the extent to which her own conduct can be reconciled with the precepts she advocated.

2. Reason

For Wollstonecraft, reason is derived from God and the distinguishing mark of humanity: 'Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? (1995: 127). This belief in the progressive and beneficial effect of reason followed in the mainstream of enlightenment thinking but was sharply at odds with Rousseau's pessimistic assessment of reason's heightened role in human life (Hampsher-Monk 1992:154). However, for Wollstonecraft reason not only established women on an equal status with men but also was the guiding force which could enable women to escape the debilitating dependency on their emotions that was cynically encouraged by men to maintain women's subservient status: 'Let the honest heart shew itself, and reason teach passion to submit to necessity; or let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather imbitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds' (1995:101).

However, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the controlling power of rationality is hard to reconcile with several aspects of her own behaviour

where emotion rather than reason dictated her conduct: her visit to Lisbon in 1785 to assist her closest friend Fanny Blood in childbirth which led to the closure of the school in Newington Green she had established in 1784; the perilous journey to revolutionary Paris alone in December 1792 following her rejection by Fuseli; and her continuing trust in Imlay over the period 1794 to 1795 notwithstanding the evidence of his growing detachment, both physical and emotional. An explanation for this divergence may be found in Wollstonecraft's views on the relationship between rationality and emotionalism. Wollstonecraft argued that women's excessive emotionalism, or 'overweening sensibility' (1995:94), had developed as a consequence of defective education aimed only at achieving 'trivial accomplishments': 'All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering - not the wavering produced by deliberation or progressive views, but by contradictory emotions' (1995:136). If, however, women, freed from 'the tyranny of man', had the opportunity to develop their faculties of reason through a proper system of education and were able to secure financial independence and civil status independently of marriage, they would be able to acquire virtues by their own exertions and the exercise of reason (1995:125).

The occasions on which Wollstonecraft failed to exercise her own 'faculties of reason' can therefore be seen as confirming her own inability to escape from the dependency and social constraints she had identified in *A Vindication*. As Ferguson and Todd commented on Wollstonecraft's relationship with Fuseli, a married man, at the time she was writing *A Vindication*: 'Ironically, however, its ringing lines were composed when she herself was the victim of the excessive sensibility she condemned, a prey to an infatuation encouraged by her female education but forbidden by society' (1984:59). It was only in the final year of her life, when

Wollstonecraft enjoyed a relationship with William Godwin based on mutual respect and affection, that she finally attained the balance between rationality and emotional fulfillment she had sketched in *A Vindication*: 'Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practicing various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband' (1995:99).

3. Virtue

'For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; yet the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience' (1995:124). Wollstonecraft opposed this relative conception, developed most notably by Rousseau in *Emile* (1762) who considered that 'women should order their conduct not to align it with absolute ethical standards but to please men' (Ferguson and Todd, 1984:67), and argued in *A Vindication* for a shared conception of virtue based on reason rather than utility: 'every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason' (1995:89). Consequently, Wollstonecraft employed virtue in the modern as opposed to ancient, 'austerely civic' sense, following the terminology elaborated by Pocock (1985:48), in that she accepted that it was to be located in the social rather than the political sphere. While women's exclusion from public life led Wollstonecraft to adopt this usage in *A Vindication*, she did not accept such exclusion was justified: 'women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government' (1995:237).

In *A Vindication* Wollstonecraft explores how a common standard of virtue could be achieved by deconstructing a number of individual virtues

and analysing how far each one is irredeemably compromised or capable of a positive reinterpretation. In particular, she castigates gallantry and 'polished manners' (1985:84) for men and 'gentleness, docility and spaniel-like affection' for women (1985:103) as false, superficial virtues submitting women to dependency on men and depriving them of liberty, 'the mother of virtue' (1995:107). The positive virtues are those that encourage independence and mutual respect and affection between men and women: 'Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, or they will be cultivated to little effect' (1995:229).

However, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on chastity as the foundation of modesty in both sexes, which derived from her emphasis on spiritual values and led her to argue for a platonic basis to sexual relationship within marriage (1985:100), conflicted with her view that sexuality and morality should be kept separate: 'Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature, they are only brutal when unchecked by reason: but the obligation to check them is the duty of mankind, not a sexual duty. Nature, in these respects may safely be left to herself; let women only acquire knowledge and humanity, and love will teach them modesty' (1995:217). This conflict was illustrated in Wollstonecraft's relationship with Fuseli where, as Godwin wryly commented: 'She had, at first, considered it as reasonable and judicious, to cultivate what I may be permitted to call, a Platonic affection for him; but she did not, in the sequel find all the satisfaction in this plan, which she had originally expected from it' (1969:64-65).

However, it was during Wollstonecraft's relationship with the American writer and businessman Gilbert Imlay from 1793 to 1796, which is recorded in *Letters to Imlay* and *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, both

published by her husband William Godwin in 1798, that the principles she had established for virtuous conduct in *A Vindication* were most severely tested. Many aspects of Wollstonecraft's conduct in the relationship, in particular her two suicide attempts in 1795 while her daughter was barely a year old, cannot be reconciled with her admonition to women in *A Vindication*: 'Their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother' (1995:235). However, many of Wollstonecraft's actions during this period, did display the 'truth and fortitude, the cornerstones of all human virtue' (1985:94) she had advocated in *A Vindication*: her continued residence in France after war with England broke out in February 1793 during which she wrote her account of the origins and early stages of the Revolution, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*; her arduous voyage to Scandinavia in 1795, accompanied only by her daughter and maid, on the business affairs of Imlay and described in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796); and the emotional frankness with which she recorded her relationship with Imlay and their infant daughter Fanny in *Letters to Imlay* (1798).

4. Knowledge

In *A Vindication* Wollstonecraft advocates the pursuit of knowledge as the key to women achieving independence and virtue: 'Would ye. O my sisters, really possess modesty, ye must remember that the possession of virtue, of any denomination, is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! Ye must acquire that soberness of mind, which the excesses of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire, or you will remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and only be loved while you are fair!' (1995:218). As Tomaselli pointed out (1995:313), Wollstonecraft's views on the importance of the acquisition of knowledge were heavily influenced by John Locke's empiricist theories on the association of ideas in *Essay*

Concerning Human Understanding (1690) and their application to educational practices in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). However, they were also founded on her belief in the immortality of the soul since, without such a belief, the purpose of life would be limited to maximising earthly happiness: 'knowledge beyond the conveniences of life would be a curse' and 'the passions also, the winds of life, would be useless, if not injurious' since the 'appetites would answer every earthly purpose' (1995:192). Instead, Wollstonecraft argued the urge to improve 'the faculties of each individual' was implanted by God: 'But the powers of the soul that are of little use here, and, probably, disturb our animal enjoyments, even while conscious dignity makes us glory in possessing them, prove that life is merely an education, a state of infancy, to which the only hopes worth cherishing should not be sacrificed' (1995:192).

Wollstonecraft, consistently with her belief in the progressive nature of the development of human understanding, was careful in *A Vindication* to advocate the acquisition of knowledge by the exercise of a person's own faculties rather than instruction based upon 'blind obedience' and premature 'regulation of the passions'; for passions when subjected to the 'exercise of their own reason' are a principal cause of attaining 'great virtues' (1995:190-193). Knowledge moreover was not something to be easily acquired, and hardship was not in her eyes wasted: 'I very much doubt whether any knowledge can be attained without labour and sorrow; and those who wish to spare their children both, should not complain, if they are neither wise nor virtuous' (1995: 196).

While this endorsement of the value of hardship and endurance and hostility to ivory tower education echoes the stoic values defended by Rousseau (Hampsher-Monk 1992:158-159), an elitist theory of education such as he had supported in *A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750) was rejected by Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication*: 'It is not for the benefit

of society that a few brilliant men should be brought forward at the expense of the multitude'(1995:256). Instead, Wollstonecroft advocated a national system of mixed-sex elementary day schools until the age of nine followed by specialised schooling as the means to break down social and sexual divisions instilled by single sex and private schools: 'These would be schools of morality - and the happiness of man, allowed to flow from the pure springs of duty and affection, what advances might not the human mind make? Society can only be happy and free in proportion as it is virtuous; but the present distinctions, established in society, corrode all private, and blast all public virtue.' (1995:269).

Wollstonecraft's conviction that the acquisition of knowledge was the key to improving women's character and opportunities directed her early career and writings: in 1784 she established with her friend Fanny Blood and sister Eliza a day school in Newington Green; in 1786 she wrote *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and acted as governess to the daughters of Viscount Kingsborough, where her radical methods of education led to her dismissal in 1787; and in 1787 she wrote *Original Stories from Real Life*, a series of morality tales for children. However, the failure of these attempts to put into practice her educational ideas led her to reassess what could be achieved within the existing social constraints: 'By the time she wrote *The Rights of Woman*, she no longer treated as ends in themselves the acquisition of virtue and knowledge through the exercise of reason and the regulation of passion. She had become persuaded that reason alone could not ameliorate social and political evils, for people like the powerful judge in *The Wrongs of Woman* will act reasonably only in self-interest' (Ferguson and Todd, 1984:127).

5. Conclusions

Wollstonecraft's experiences after completing *A Vindication*, when she suffered rejection by Fuseli and the disintegration of her relationship with Imlay, showed her that the rational pursuit of virtue and knowledge she had advocated in *A Vindication* was insufficient to bring personal fulfillment. As she wrote to Imlay in November 1795, following her second suicide attempt: 'It seems to me, that my conduct has always been governed by the strictest principles of justice and truth. Yet, how wretched have my social feelings and delicacy of sentiment rendered me! I have loved with my whole soul, only to discover that I had no chance of a return - and that existence is a burden without it.' (1989:435).

If Wollstonecraft had survived her second childbirth in 1797 she may well, encouraged by the intellectual companionship of her husband William Godwin, author of *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793), have continued to develop the principles set out in *A Vindication* to take account of her subsequent experiences. Her unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria, A Fragment*, published posthumously in 1798, showed she was undertaking just such an examination of the relationship of individual consciousness 'in its contact with the world' (Ferguson and Todd, 1984:105) at the time of her death. The dialectical relationship between Wollstonecraft's experiences and the development of her ideas, suggest however that a rigid attempt to reconcile her conduct with the principles in *A Vindication* would be to misunderstand the progressive nature of her thought.

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