Mary Wollstonecraft: “Hyena in Petticoats”

Great Philosophers Public Lecture Series
Brian Carey 15/10/19
Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

Wollstonefacts:

• Philosopher, historian, writer, educator

• One of the most significant “proto-feminist” writers in the Anglosphere.

• Advocate for liberal and republican political ideals
Structure of this talk:

• 1. Life
• 2. Thought
• 3. Legacy
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

- Born in London in 1759 to a well-off family, the second of seven children.

- Her father gradually squandered all of their money.

- Wollstonecraft worked briefly as a “lady’s companion” before setting up a school with her best friend, Frances Blood.

- Blood’s early death in childbirth at the age of 27 devastated Wollstonecraft, and led to the closure of the school.
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

- In 1786, Wollstonecraft moved to Ireland to work as a governess to the daughters of Lord and Lady Kingsborough.

- She had just finished her first published work, a conduct book called *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*.

- Though she only stayed in the post for a year, her experiences would have a significant influence on her next work; *Original Stories from Real Life*, published in 1788.
“One fine morning in spring, some time after Mary and Caroline were settled in their new abode, Mrs. Mason proposed a walk before breakfast, a custom she wished to teach imperceptibly, by rendering it amusing....”

“...the children were regardless of the surrounding beauties, and ran eagerly after some insects to destroy them.”

“Yet, replied Mrs. Mason, God cares for them, and gives them every thing that is necessary to render their existence comfortable. You are often troublesome—I am stronger than you—yet I do not kill you.”
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

- Wollstonecraft moved back to London, where she was determined to make a living as an author.

- During this period she met her future husband, the radical philosopher William Godwin.

- Around this time Wollstonecraft had an affair with Henry Fuseli. The affair ended badly, and Wollstonecraft headed for Paris, partly to escape humiliation, partly to participate in the events which had been the subject of her first major philosophical work two years previously: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).

- Before heading to Paris, Wollstonecraft publishes her most famous work: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

• Wollstonecraft had been a strong supporter of the French revolution.

• Within a few months of her arrival, the moderate Girondin faction which Wollstonecraft has supported had been replaced by the more extremist Jacobins, and Britain and France appeared to be on the brink of war.

• Fearing for her life, Wollstonecraft tried to flee to Switzerland, but was forbidden to leave.
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

- Wollstonecraft had begun a relationship with American businessman and diplomat Gilbert Imlay.

- To provide her with the protection of American citizenship, Imlay falsely claims to have married Wollstonecraft.

- However, after she gave birth to their daughter (Fanny), Imlay abandoned his “wife” and daughter.
The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

• “You can scarcely imagine with what pleasure I anticipate the day, when we are to begin almost to live together; and you would smile to hear how many plans of employment I have in my head, now that I am confident my heart has found peace in your bosom.”
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

“The expectation (I have too fondly nourished it) of regaining your affection, every day grows fainter and fainter.—Indeed, it seems to me, when I am more sad than usual, that I shall never see you more.—Yet you will not always forget me.—You will feel something like remorse, for having lived only for yourself—and sacrificed my peace to inferior gratifications. In a comfortless old age, you will remember that you had one disinterested friend, whose heart you wounded to the quick.”
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

• “The sentiment in me is still sacred. If there be any part of me that will survive the sense of my misfortunes, it is the purity of my affections. The impetuosity of your senses, may have led you to term mere animal desire, the source of principle; and it may give zest to some years to come.—Whether you will always think so, I shall never know.

• It is strange that, in spite of all you do, something like conviction forces me to believe, that you are not what you appear to be.

• I part with you in peace.”
1. The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

“Let my wrongs sleep with me! Soon, very soon, shall I be at peace. When you receive this, my burning head will be cold ... I shall plunge into the Thames where there is the least chance of my being snatched from the death I seek.

God bless you! May you never know by experience what you have made me endure. Should your sensibility ever awake, remorse will find its way to your heart; and, in the midst of business and sensual pleasure, I shall appear before you, the victim of your deviation from rectitude”

- Mary Wollstonecraft's suicide note (addressed to Gilbert Imlay)
1. The Death of Mary Wollstonecraft

• Wollstonecraft did find happiness again, in her (legitimate) marriage to William Godwin.

• "If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration."

  – William Godwin, on having read Wollstonecraft’s letters to Imlay.

• Mary gave birth to her second daughter (also called Mary) on August 30th 1797, but died ten days later due to complications from childbirth, aged 38.
2. The Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft

- Wollstonecraft wrote a number of fictional, historical and other works that were not explicitly philosophical (though there are some themes that run throughout most of her work).

- Her two most significant works of philosophy are *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).
2. **A Vindication of the Rights of Men,**
in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France

- **“The Revolution Controversy”** – a debate among British intellectuals about how to regard the French Revolution (1789-1799)

- In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke opposed the revolution, arguing in favour of tradition and the establishment.

- Wollstonecraft was appalled by Burke’s defense of the status quo, and published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in response.
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

- Wollstonecraft’s primary target in VRM is Burke’s defense of the value of tradition as a source and sustainer of morality and order.

- “…the constitution...was settled in the dark days of ignorance, when the minds of men were shackled by the grossest prejudices and most immoral superstition. And do you, Sir, a sagacious philosopher, recommend night as the fittest time to analyze a ray of light?”

- “Are we to seek for the rights of men in the ages when a few marks were the only penalty imposed for the life of a man, and death for death when the property of the rich was touched? when—I blush to discover the depravity of our nature—when a deer was killed! Are these the laws that it is natural to love, and sacrilegious to invade?—Were the rights of men understood when the law authorized or tolerated murder?—or is power and right the same in your creed?”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

• “In England we have not yet been completely emboweled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate those inbred sentiments which are the faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals.” –Burke

• “What do you mean by inbred sentiments? From whence do they come? How were they bred? Are they the brood of folly, which swarm like the insects on the banks of the Nile, when mud and putrefaction have enriched the languid soil? Were these inbred sentiments faithful guardians of our duty when the church was an asylum for murderers, and men worshipped bread as a God? when slavery was authorized by law to fasten her fangs on human flesh, and the iron eat into the very soul?” - Wollstonecraft
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

• “But, among all your plausible arguments, and witty illustrations, your contempt for the poor always appears conspicuous, and rouses my indignation. The following paragraph in particular struck me, as breathing the most tyrannic spirit, and displaying the most factitious feelings:

• “‘Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

• “This is contemptible hard-hearted sophistry, in the specious form of humility, and submission to the will of Heaven. – 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. They have a right to more comfort than they at present enjoy; and more comfort might be afforded them, without encroaching on the pleasures of the rich: not now waiting to enquire whether the rich have any right to exclusive pleasures.”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

• She also attacks Burke’s own character, accusing him of hypocrisy for having supported American Independence, and the Regency Bill:

• “But on what principle Mr Burke could defend American independence, I cannot conceive...Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country, and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured.—Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty.”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

- Another recurring theme of VRM is the balance between reason and emotions, or sensibility:

  - “But without fixed principles even goodness of heart is no security from inconsistency, and mild affectionate sensibility only renders a man more ingeniously cruel, when the pangs of hurt vanity are mistaken for virtuous indignation, and the gall of bitterness for the milk of Christian charity.”

  - “...you foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to your brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason. It is not in this view surprising, that when you should argue you become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, instead of enlightening your understanding.”

  - “In what respect are we superior to the brute creation, if intellect is not allowed to be the guide of passion? Brutes hope and fear, love and hate; but, without a capacity to improve, a power of turning these passions to good or evil, they neither acquire virtue nor wisdom.—Why? Because the Creator has not given them reason”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Men (VRM)

• VRM was favorably received for the most part upon its first publication (less so upon its second, when it was published under Wollstonecraft's own name).

• Subsequent criticism of VRM focused on its aggressive and emotional style and tone in contrast to Burke’s (contemporary scholars suggest that this criticism was unwarranted).

• “If [Wollstonecraft] assumes the disguise of a man, she must not be surprised that she is not treated with the civility and respect that she would have received in her own person…a Lady should have been addressed with more respect” – The Analytical Review

• “A Hyena in Petticoats” – Horace Walpole

• “The rights of men asserted by a fair lady!” – The Gentleman’s Magazine

• “Intemperate” – William Godwin
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- Reason divides human beings from animals.

- Virtue divides human beings from each other.

- It is tempting to assume that our prejudices represent natural facts about the world, and giving in to this temptation is what has lead some to justify their domination over others.
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2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

• “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their FASCINATING graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- Wollstonecraft shares Rousseau’s disdain for the status quo, but distinguishes her optimism from his pessimism:

- “Rousseau exerts himself to prove, that all WAS right originally: a crowd of authors that all IS now right: and I, that all WILL BE right.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives.”

- “Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

• “Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner, when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood.”

• “The many have always been enthralled by the few; and, monsters who have scarcely shown any discernment of human excellence, have tyrannized over thousands of their fellow creatures. Why have men of superior endowments submitted to such degradation?”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- Wollstonecraft on chivalry:

- “So ludicrous, in fact, do these ceremonies appear to me, that I scarcely am able to govern my muscles, when I see a man start with eager, and serious solicitude to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the LADY could have done it herself, had she only moved a pace or two.”
• Wollstonecraft on education:

  “...if fear in girls, instead of being cherished...were treated in the same manner as cowardice in boys, we should quickly see women with more dignified aspects. It is true, they could not then with equal propriety be termed the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man; but they would be more respectable members of society, and discharge the important duties of life by the light of their own reason. "Educate women like men," says Rousseau, "and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us." This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- Wollstonecraft on unwed mothers:

  “Still, highly as I respect marriage, as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind.

- It does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, RUINED before they know the difference between virtue and vice: and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!”
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- Wollstonecraft on women who support the patriarchy:

- “If he wished to deprive them of some rights, foreign to their sex, how has he for ever restored to them all those to which it has a claim! And in attempting to diminish their influence over the deliberations of men, how sacredly has he established the empire they have over their happiness! In aiding them to descend from an usurped throne, he has firmly seated them upon that to which they were destined by nature; and though he be full of indignation against them when they endeavour to resemble men, yet when they come before him with all the charms weaknesses, virtues, and errors, of their sex, his respect for their persons amounts almost to adoration.” – Baroness de Stael

Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein (1766-1817)
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

- Wollstonecraft on women who support the patriarchy:

- “So devout, indeed, was [Rousseau’s] respect for the person, that excepting the virtue of chastity, for obvious reasons, he only wished to see it embellished by charms, weaknesses, and errors...The master wished to have a meretricious slave to fondle, entirely dependent on his reason and bounty.” - Wollstonecraft
2. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

• “Asserting the rights which women in common with men ought to contend for, I have not attempted to extenuate their faults; but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society. If so, it is reasonable to suppose, that they will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense.”
3. Wollstonecraft’s Legacy

- Wollstonecraft’s reputation was ruined by the publication of *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

- William hath penn'd a waggon-load of stuff, And Mary’s life at last he needs must write, Thinking her whoredoms were not known enough, Till fairly printed off in black and white. — With wondrous glee and pride, this simple wight Her brothel feats of wantonness sets down, Being her spouse, he tells, with huge delight, How oft she cuckolded the silly clown, And lent, O lovely piece! herself to half the town.

  - *Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe*
3. Wollstonecraft’s Legacy

• Attempts to ‘rehabilitate’ Wollstonecraft’s character tended to focus on her as a philosopher while ignoring her personal life, or to focus on her personal life while ignoring her philosophy.

• It was only in the 20th century that scholars began to combine these two perspectives.
3. Wollstonecraft’s Legacy

A petition to allow women to be admitted to study at Trinity College Dublin signed by more than 10,000 Irish women (1892)
3. Wollstonecraft’s Legacy

The first women to graduate from Trinity (1906)
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The first women to graduate from Trinity (1906)
“She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration.” – William Godwin