

## Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman as a Feminist Critique of Male Definitions of Civilization



### Literature

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a feminist critique of male definitions of civilization. Civilization is the master word in her essay, and she exposes the vestiges of "barbarism in European" societies or civilization because of the male-centered public sphere. Yet she is optimistic as to the possibility of salvaging civilization through a project of a future enlightened society propped by a rational political system and a rational morality based on a well-reflected educational system. This project proposes a revision of the enlightenment philosophers' definition of education like that of J. J. Rousseau and Dr. Gregory and the ideological construction of femininity that runs counter to the project of building a new civilization. In parallel to the language of "folly" and "civilization," she also deploys the language of prison, the clinic, and sexuality that Foucault has also amply documented. She is particularly harsh with those who seek to imprison women in their own bodies by urging them to care much more about personal accomplishment than the development of virtues that will ensure the immortality of their souls. Through her critique of male definitions of civilization, Wollstonecraft entered one of the professions, which until then was denied to women by the gender boundaries set by the ideology of separate spheres.

## 1. Introduction

Unlike Mary Wollstonecraft's first essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was not written in response to a resented fellow British author but as a plea to the attention of "M. Talleyrand-Périgord, late of Autun," also an influential French political figure in the new regime, to express her disappointment that "the rights of women and national education" were not included in the newly approved French Constitution. In the preface addressed to Talleyrand, she explains that she "pleads for her sex – not for myself [and out of] affection for the whole human race. (p.65)" She hopes that Talleyrand and some other "enlarged minds who formed your constitution" will accept to amend that constitution once they understand that educated women "would advance, instead of retarding the progress of those principles that give a substance to morality. (p.65)" While recognizing that France was at the time in advance over other European nations in terms of knowledge she reminds Talleyrand that Revolutionary France remains behind England by not trying to change the sensually marked relationship between French women and men. The latter are remnants of a residual aristocratic ideology of gender relationship that stands as a flagrant contradiction to the emancipation project that legitimated the new French regime. In other words, Wollstonecraft elevates rational morality for both women and men as the prerequisite for the realization of political ideals sustained by philosophical rationalism. It is implied that rational morality cannot be obtained without allowing women the right to exercise their reason and achieve that autonomy necessary for proper conduct in the domestic and public spheres. Everything in this

preface to Talleyrand reads as if Wollstonecraft had carried out her moral revolution at home in Britain through her *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* standing ready to export her own feminist ideology across the channel. In the process, she emerges as a cool-headed cultural British heroine who wants to diffuse her homegrown feminist ideas abroad.

## 2. Discussion

Arguably, the master word in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is that of civilization. It is with the discussion of this concept in the first chapter entitled “The Rights and Involved Duties of Mankind Considered” that Wollstonecraft starts her essay. For the definition of the principles on which civilization rises and falls, she asks three rhetorical questions. The first question is related to reason as a distinguishing mark that makes for the preeminence of civilized and rational men over brutes. The second question concerns the criterion of excellence among people, which she identifies as the acquisition of virtue. The third question is linked to the reason why God has “implanted passions” in man, which she answers by saying that experience shows that they are there to be struggled with so that they can “attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes. (p.76)” It is in light of these principles that Wollstonecraft seeks to assess the state of civilization in the Enlightenment period. Her main conclusion is that the “civilization of the bulk of the people of Europe is very partial. (p.77)”

In this civilization, reason is prostituted by being employed to rationalize imbibed or acquired prejudices instead of acting as a principle for the “conduct of understanding.” “Intellectual cowardice” has made people shrink from the task of rooting prejudice, “or only do it by half. (p.77)” Its principles are sacrificed at the altar of expediency to such an extent that “truth is lost in the mist of words, virtue in forms, [and] knowledge rendered as sounding nothing.” Through prescription this corrupted civilization has “deprived men (or women) of their natural rights. (Ibid.)”

However, in spite of her cultural critique of European civilization, Wollstonecraft does not completely lose hope of improving it. In this, she resembles her contemporary historian Edward Gibbon in his indirect cultural criticism of the state of British civilization in his *The History of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* where he identifies moral decline and the loss of freedom, virtue and honour as the main causes of the fall of Rome, to teach his contemporaries the lesson of not letting the same decadence catch upon them. We can observe here that while Gibbon’s book received a flow of praise at its publication, it is not spared adverse criticism because of what was considered then as blasphemy and immorality in the two chapters devoted to the close link between the decay of Roman greatness and the rise of Christianity, whose spread was retraced to “natural” instead of “miraculous means.” Religion, which until then had been the sole preserve of theology and theologians, was made a subject of historical discourse or historiography. What was even more hurtful to the religious sensibilities of the time, Gibbon put on the same footing the earlier persecution of Christians by pagans and the later persecution of pagans and heretics by Christians because of their intolerant zeal. Following in the footsteps of Voltaire, Gibbon was harshly critical of prejudice, superstition as well as the abuse of power not based on reason. The

following remark and similar ones spread throughout Gibbon's book show the extent to which Wollstonecraft might have been influenced in the diagnosis of the ills of European civilization and the cure she proposes to salvage it: "The freedom of the mind, the source of every generous and rational statement, was destroyed by the habits of credulity and submission; and the monk, contracting the vices of a slave, devoutly followed the faith and passions of his ecclesiastical tyrant."

Wollstonecraft's allegiance to Gibbon's optimistic view of about mankind's capacity to save civilization from falling into barbarism through the deployment of philosophical rationalism and a rational morality contrasts sharply with her rejection of Rousseau's cheap swapping of European civilization for primitivism or the primitive state of nature. She tells us that Rousseau's ideal was flawed in its hypotheses that the world was originally created as perfect, that man was a solitary being, that God or nature's god is beyond good and evil, and that knowledge is a Promethean theft, and so on. These hypotheses do not square with the three principles or pillars that constitute her idea of society and civilization: reason, virtue and knowledge as god's gifts through which mankind can "rise above the state in which sensation produced brutal ease. (p.79)" For her, civilization and civilized societies were not a "curse" but a "blessing." The problem with Rousseau, she suggests, is that he has let his reason to be warped by giving way to popular prejudice and "intellectual cowardice" instead of rationally confronting the civilization problems of his day. Rousseau prefers flight to nature rather than sober reflection on the way to make men and women feel at home in an improved civilization. She goes on to say that if only Rousseau had thought more deeply about the state of civilization, he would have discovered that the major problem that it confronted was a remnant, a "vestige" of the barbarism that was a hallmark of the primitive state of nature he was so fond of.

Wollstonecraft closes her debate with Rousseau about the state of civilization by sorting out three main positions: "Rousseau exerts himself that all was right originally; a crowd of others that all is right now; and I, that all will be right. (p.79)" Hence, what she proposes for salvaging civilization is a project of a future enlightened society propped by a rational political system and a rational morality based on a well-reflected educational system. Rousseau is of the Enlightenment philosophers who laid down the ideological basis of the Revolution in France, so indirectly Wollstonecraft's critique of his political philosophy is also meant as a constructive critique of Revolutionary France in its constitutional discrimination against women. That's why after having settled accounts with Rousseau over the issue of civilization versus the primitive state of nature, she turns to the issue of education with a main emphasis on the French's author's educational prejudices against women. One of the major arguments in Wollstonecraft's arsenal is that character taken in the large sense of selfhood, subjectivity or identity is the result of nurture and culture rather nature. In other words, character is a cultural construct largely determined by the political, social, economic and cultural environment. Wollstonecraft's deconstruction and re/construction of character was thought over mostly in an analogical manner intersecting public politics and the politics of sexuality.

In exposing the "vestiges of barbarism" in Western societies or civilization, Wollstonecraft puts all its institutions and professions on the same footing. Absolute power whether exercised by

monarchs or husbands sacks both individual character and the social fabric of society by fostering artificiality and the sophistication of manner instead of solid virtues. Sexual oppression just like political oppression is the congenial ground for cultivating obedience, idiotism and servility. Wollstonecraft carries out this embedding discursive strategy by stating her “firm persuasion that every profession, in which great subordination of rank constitutes its power, is highly injurious to morality. (p.81)” Taking stock of the British prejudice against a standing army, she tells us that this profession is inimical to freedom because discipline and punishment constitute its backbones. To paraphrase Spivak in another context, the subalterns in a military institution, like women in the home cannot speak their minds. They must obey the command of officers at the risk of incurring punishment for the breach of discipline. Because these subalterns are taught at an early age to obey and not to listen to their reason, and to be careful about their uniforms (Wollstonecraft dismisses them as “badges of slavery”), they are “prejudicial to the morals of the inhabitants of a country towns. (p.81)”

The many analogies that Wollstonecraft establishes between institutions and professions progressively leads her to ask the question whether the servile attitudes of courtiers, soldiers and other such lower social ranks can be denied the rational faculty that men’s prejudice disallows for women. If this cannot be done, the author implies that a country that has already dismantled the oppressing institutions of the old regime and made legal provisions for the rights and education of its male citizens cannot stop at that without actually renouncing to its ideals of equality and justice. The persistence in the erection of barriers against the participation of women in the public sphere after their dismantlement in terms of class is a vestigial form of “otherness” that impedes civilization in its progress towards virtue. Women cannot simply be fixed in an economy of desire to cater for the pleasure of men since their supposed weakness is an outgrowth of sexual oppression. It is suggested that a regime that is based on sexual oppression is ultimately as unstable as a regime propped up by political oppression because it is in the home that the democratizing project of society has its source. Sexual oppression, Wollstonecraft argues, makes the domestic sphere a site of conflict wherein wives pretend to be slaves to their husbands while actually acting like “petty cunning tyrants.” In the process, women as nurturing mothers transmit to their children a private sphere ideology that run at cross-purposes with the public sphere ideology because of a fundamental disjunction between the two separate spheres. It follows that the same education must be provided for men and women in order to develop virtues most likely to make them cooperate in the advance of civilization.

Wollstonecraft takes Rousseau and other philosophers of education like “Dr Gregory” to task for the ideological construction of femininity that runs counter to the enlightenment project of building a new civilization. The first thing that she reproaches Rousseau is that he differentiates between the education that must be provided to women and men according to the supposed differences in their nature. For Wollstonecraft, “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 had recommended with all the deluding charms of eloquence. (p.108)” In his *Emile, ou de l’éducation* and *Emile et Sophie les solitaires*, Rousseau recommends a gendered education on the basis of what is supposed to be an observation of the

behaviour of boys and girls. For example, in an anecdotic style, he relates the story of a girl who at an early age took it to her head to write the letter “O” with her needle until one day she happened to see herself in the mirror in the constrained attitude of a scribbler, and decided to throw out her pen in order to attend to her beauty. Her brother took an aversion, but this aversion was directed against confinement that restricted the growth of his body. In refutation of such prejudiced ideas, Wollstonecraft affirms that her own observations contradict Rousseau’s supposition that a “girl is naturally a coquette and that a desire connected with the impulse of nature to propagate the species, should appear even before an improper education has, by heating the imagination, called it forth prematurely. (p.109)” Experience has shown her that the “fair defects” (e.g., gossip, liveliness, admiration for dress, beauty, weakness, modesty, etc.) attributed to “the fair sex” are a consequence of an imposed confinement and “miseducation” wherein girls during infancy unwittingly imitate and educated in the manners of the women within their confined purview.

Wollstonecraft’s ire is raised against Rousseau and other fellow writers like Milton, Pope, and Dryden for having either denied character for women or differentiate it on the basis of sex. Human character and the moral standard for its measurement are so that it is an aberration to speak of sexual character, which proceeds from an error of reasoning. To restore women to their dignity, the one thing needed is to cease making them satellites turning around the orbit of men’s reason, and looking at them as a “feathered race,” and to allow them to see the world through the own ideas, and fly out of their “gilded cages.” Just as for men, reason has to be their sole authority, and just like men they must be given the chance to use in various employments in order to cultivate virtues and the necessary knowledge to differentiate between vice and good. The argument is at once religious and secular, and aims to demonstrate the necessity not to contradict god’s plan and the enlightenment project of human emancipation from prejudice and superstition. “Folly” and “civilization” are the two most prominent words in this discourse against prejudice and superstition. Just as Michel Foucault develops it in his *Madness and Civilization*, Wollstonecraft dismisses everything as folly that does not square with the norm of reason.

In parallel to the language of “folly” and “civilization,” she also deploys the language of prison, the clinic, and sexuality that Foucault has also amply documented. She is particularly harsh with those who seek to imprison women in their own bodies by urging them to care much more about personal accomplishment than the development of virtues that will ensure the immortality of their souls: “Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison. (p.112)” Appealing to the idealist philosophy, Wollstonecraft reminds women’s jailors that women, just like men, are constituted of body and soul, and that the former is just a temporary home for the latter. Unless the soul is given enough elbow room by enlarging its moral and intellectual perspectives and making provisions for the natural growth of her body, the soul is condemned to shrink to insignificance. Indeed, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* reads as a judicial discourse in defense of women as victims unjustly prosecuted and imprisoned on the flimsy evidence of a supposed difference in their sexual character. In her plea, she has not ceased repeating that there is no such thing as a sexual character and that women and men share a basic humanity which makes the imprisonment of the latter a mere abuse of physical power. In her hands nearly all male mentors turn into

tormentors and jailors unaware that their victimization/imprisonment of women has a boomeranging effect on the public sphere of political activity that they seek to preserve from the so-called female irrationality.

In addition to the discourse of prison, Wollstonecraft also deploys the language of the clinic. For her, the health of civilization is at peril because of the prevalent Epicureanism and the *carpe diem* philosophy that makes men in general and women in particular live for the enjoyment of the pleasures of the day without thinking about what will advent tomorrow. Modern existentialist like Jean Paul Sartre will call this a “fall” because this mode of social life does not involve a choice of a project of life. In Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, women are not “condemned to be free” (the words are Sartre’s) as they are accustomed to living under the man’s “gaze.” The latter’s preference for weakness aestheticized as a criterion of beauty, is seen as the source of physical and social illnesses such as indigestion, indolence, adultery, prostitution, masochism, sadism, etc. Epicure’s male and female, Wollstonecraft suggests, cannot build a viable civilization since they are diseased at their very core. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by talking about the Epicurean disease undermining civilization, Wollstonecraft seems to be involved in what Freud would later call the “talking cure.”

The discourse of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is also interwoven with a discourse about sexuality. The recurrence of the word “pleasure” associated with sex shows to what extent Wollstonecraft is concerned with what Foucault refers to as “the usage of the pleasures.” The sexuality that Wollstonecraft speaks about in her text borrows its major paradigms from Christian morality and Greek philosophy. It is well-known that Christian morality associates sexual abstinence or continence with access to spiritual truth and secular wisdom. Wollstonecraft suggests the extent to which modern civilization as defined by men has diverged from the search of that truth and wisdom by encouraging the relaxation in the “practice of pleasures” through the promotion of Epicurean ideals. Women in particular are left as slaves to their passions, incapable of “transforming themselves into moral subjects of their own conduct (Foucault, 1954: 39)” because of their subjugation to a flawed reasoning developed by a segregated type of education.

The suggestion is that her contemporary male fellows will be accountable before God and the future generations because they are responsible for putting women’s souls as well as civilization in peril.

This Christian morality of sex is sustained by what looks like paradigms of thought about sexuality or love borrowed from Greek philosophy. The theme of love is so recurrent in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that one has the impression that one is reading such works by Socrates as the *Phaedrus* and the *Banquet*. In the manner of Plato in *The Republic*, Wollstonecraft brings male and female novelists and poets and other merchants of romantic love for vitiating the imagination of their audience by nourishing illusions about the most ephemeral passion that is love. For her, romantic love cannot constitute a basis for stable households because it is largely a passion that is insatiable and as evanescent as the physical beauty that nourishes it. Because of the dangers and risks that accompany it, Wollstonecraft advises women to observe what Foucault calls “the diet of pleasure.” It is understood that as long as men do not accord women the right to an appropriate education, women cannot undertake this ethical work on themselves. The Romantic or

physical love peculiar to the youth cannot be transformed at adult age into that permanent and more sublime relation Wollstonecraft calls friendship and that Socrates refers to as *Philia*, or into its more subtle form the *Agape*, the love and respect for the soul sister. She repeatedly affirms that only “a revolution in female manners (p.113)” through a moral education of both sexes can lead to the purification of sexual passions, the elevation of the soul above its material condition, and the erection of mutual respect as a fundament principle for the regulation of conduct between men and women.

In the second volume to his *Histoire de la sexualité*, Foucault writes that “sexual austerity relates to an axis of experience and a complex set of concrete relationships: relationships with the body, itself linked to the issue of health, and behind it the play with life and death; relationship to the other sex... (p.34)” He closes the long list of relationships by underlining the “problem of adjustment between social roles and sexual roles; [and] finally the relationship to truth wherein is posed the question about the spiritual conditions that allow access to wisdom. (p.35) Trans. ours” I have already tried to illustrate how Wollstonecraft criticizes the way that the prevalent education weakens women’s bodies in order to make them meet the aesthetic requirement that associates beauty with weakness. As female physical beauty is short-lived, the sexual power that women hold over their male counterparts does not last long, since it is not sustained by an internal intellectual beauty. The attitude to age differs according to gender. Wollstonecraft is outraged over the way the male-dominated cultural and aesthetic norms of the time accord men the privilege to look for younger women for the satisfaction of their sexual pleasures while they bring aged women to contempt because of the loss of physical beauty and grace.

Foucault argues that the morality of sex is primarily a morality made, thought over men and addressed to free men. It is a virile morality wherein women appear only as sexual objects. This might explain the vociferous critique that contemporary conservative women authors like Hannah Moore addresses to Wollstonecraft for meddling in men’s business by writing about the politics of sex. Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is harsh with men for the wasteful expenditure of their sexual energies that has undermined the moral fiber of the nation. Whether in France or in England this cannot fail to hit the point since nationalism is partly on gender othering. Nationalism holds effeminacy in abhorrence since it destroys the national character and exposes the nation to both internal and external forces. Among other sociological and ethnological evidence which Wollstonecraft musters in support of a sexual hygiene is polygamy that she takes as an example of wasteful sexual expenditure. According to the sources that she cites, one of the harmful consequences of polygamy in Africa is that the birth of girls outnumbers that of boys. Obviously, unless sex is normalized through an appropriate national education, France or for that matter Britain are most likely to turn to effeminate nations. France, particularly, will thus confirm the British clichéd view as a nation of perverse effeminate because of its sexual deviance.

The word character is arguably the most recurrent in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, as we read the latter, one has the impression that Wollstonecraft is interested not only in character as a sociological and psychological reality but also in characterization as character formation and representation. She is particularly concerned with the use and abuse of

representation in gender power relationships. One of her major claims is that there is no gender in sex just as virtue and the soul do not know sex. In other terms, sex or gender just as the linguistic sign is the result of an arbitrary cultural system with no outside reference in nature to explain its binary oppositions. Her deconstruction of sexual characterization as an ideological representation through which men seek to impose their masculine rule leads her to posit the existence of one human nature peculiar to both men and women. Following in the footsteps of David Hume, she tries hard to show that the gendered differentiation in character just as differentiation in national character is not natural but acquired, in other words due to moral causes such as “the nature of government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which people live. (Hume David, 1963:203)” This explains why an education focused on a rational morality is advocated in replacement of an education devoted to artificial manners.

### 3. Conclusion

It follows that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* completes *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* in the work of ideological deconstruction of femininity. If the latter chastens the aristocratic figure of Burke and celebrates in Price the surrogate tamed or civilized father that Wollstonecraft had never had, the former gives ample room to the mother envisaged both as a human figure (an immanence) and a metaphysical representation of freedom (transcendence). So we shall argue that looked at from the perspective of the two works together, Wollstonecraft’s Gothic feminism, contrary to Hoeveler’s conclusion, is not concerned with the “gendering of the civilization process.” What emerges from the two works is that European civilization can be redeemed only if gender inequality is dislodged. The slippage from text to author in both works gives the picture of a redefined civilized family wherein sexual and sociological roles are adjusted according to the rules of reason and rational morality.

We also differ with Hoeveler in her affirmation that Wollstonecraft laid down the agenda for the “gendering of victimization” characteristic of Gothic fiction. While it is true that women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are characterized as victims, it is also true that both men and women are shown as being victimized by skewed institutions. Consequently, we would argue that what stands out most in this epistolary essay is the cultural critique of gendered institutions that retard the progress of civilization. It is not the mantle of gothic heroine that Wollstonecraft wears in this work but that of a cultural critic mindful about the harmful consequences of a gendered civilization. We would further argue that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a critical or theoretical essay concentrated on the analysis of the interplay of characterization and setting in that universal drama staged by men and women in their strife for the improvement of civilization. By staking a claim in the field of cultural production and cultural criticism, Wollstonecraft entered one of the professions, which until then was denied to women by the gender boundaries set by the ideology of separate spheres.



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