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DECONSTRUCTING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: RECONSTRUCTING MODERN WOMAN

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Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft provides an explanation of why such domination may persist and offers a model through which it can be addressed. Mary Wollstonecraft had a unique position with her interest in women rights and with her criticism about women rights although she agreed in many ways with the thinkers of the era who were considered. Mary Wollstonecraft makes friendship a central concept in her political theory of social justice and good government. This article analyses how politics and friendship are related in her texts, exploring her arguments that friendship in society is a condition of just government, but also suggesting that for Wollstonecraft friendship and citizenship are congruent with one another, and hence that the connection between politics and friendship is conceptual as well as causal. Our attempt in this research article is to speculate into the various dimensions of Mary Wollstonecraft's eventful life. We have investigated the course of her life dividing periphery of importance – modern philosopher, religious thinker, political activist and feminist.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft, Modern Woman, Republican, Educationalist, Religious Thinker.

Introduction

The question of whether Mary Wollstonecraft was a republican draws attention to a slew of issues that, while today we label them political- 'freedom', 'liberty', 'dominance', 'rights', 'representation', etc. in Wollstonecraft's time they were referred to as 'manners' and emerged at the nexus of politics and culture. Politics piqued Wollstonecraft's curiosity, but she rarely addressed them as a distinct topic of conversation. However, if modern politics were a supporting component in Wollstonecraft's philosophy, manners were categorically not. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) notably urged a 'revolution in female manners,' and Wollstonecraft's bitter dispute with some of her scholarly contemporaries was largely fueled by ill manners both in and around women—that is, manners that degraded and perverted them.

We are prompted to take Wollstonecraft substantially as a political thinker and a feminist. They give us the impression of a young thinker developing and changing her beliefs under intense strain, using any tools at her disposal - especially republican principles that had been honed during earlier ideological disagreement meet the demands of the time. To assert that Wollstonecraft was not a philosopher is not the same as saving her from execution by canonization. She did, in fact, see herself in this way, as a 'modern philosopher,' one of those 'bold intellectuals' whose 'enlightened ideas of masculinity and enhanced philosophy' were changing Europe. Wollstonecraft was a 'Gallic Philosophess,' as her adversaries termed her, who believed that philosophy was a no-holds-barred, meaningful critique of 'things as they are,' leading to improvement for all people. The search for a philosophical system in English Jacobin philosophers' writings is rather irrelevant, given the intense pressure they were working under by the middle of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft's understanding of women's oppression experienced some striking alterations between A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and what was supposed to be its second volume, The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria, during the course of her brief philosophical career. Before we start trying to fit Wollstonecraft's ideas into one intellectual tradition or another, it's vital to keep these alterations in mind. We can only hint at them here.

Research Questions

1. Can Wollstonecraft be called as a Modern Philosopher?
2. Can Wollstonecraft be graded as a Religious Thinker?
3. Can we view Wollstonecraft as a Political Activist?
4. Can we study Wollstonecraft as a Feminist?

Methodology

For this study Qualitative Research Method and Narrative Research Design was followed.



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Analysis and Interpretation Modern Philosopher

This leads to an argument about Wollstonecraft as a contemporary philosopher, which is the extent to which her ideas were affected by her womanhood, but instead by the female situation as she experienced it and understood it. According to the author's opening statement in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she wished first to "consider women in the grand light of human creatures who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties" before "pointing out [women's] peculiar designation." The hierarchy of importance is significant, but the leitmotif of the book is really the quirks and particularities of women. As a result, the subject of oppression and power is viewed from a unique, in some ways quite new, perspective. The 'modern philosophy' that we are hinting here, places Wollstonecraft in a very listing to some of her intellectual contemporaries because she examines their attitudes toward women and discovers that they are permeated with prejudice and deception. She proposes a symptomatic reading of these sentiments in some instances Burke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, James Fordyce – in terms of masculine anxieties: about manhood, about intellectual and sexual potency; keeping the male mind at bay. The reason for this is that it is important to remember the agonistic circumstances in which feminism first appeared. This raises doubts about attempts to comprehend Wollstonecraft to male-dominated philosophical systems, not least because doing so runs the risk of losing vision of those elements of her thought that are unique to her feminism and the feminist tradition which she founded.

Religious Thinker

Additionally, we must keep in mind that Wollstonecraft was a religious thinker. Her deep, albeit unconventional, religious faith was stressed by every contemporary commentator, including two people who were quite acquainted to her: William Godwin and Mary Hays. Although its implications for her radicalism could have gotten greater attention, this component of her philosophy has been difficult to include into modern readings, thus it is encouraging to see careful references to it here. Wollstonecraft, for instance, accuses sexist males of condemning women to spiritual abjection in her critique of male power, which is framed by a traditional anti-voluntarist interpretation of divine power; if we think of such thoughts being considered archaic, we need to take a glance at the contemporary notion of anti-fundamentalist feminisms. Additionally, Wollstonecraft calls on her female readers to "attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves dependent entirely on God" in order to achieve a certain sort of female dependency, which she not only endorses but also demands upon. The moral foundation upon which Western feminists rested their claims before the late twentieth century was God, not man. Does referring to Wollstonecraft as a republican obfuscate its importance? It goes without saying that many Early Modern Christian intellectuals Richard Price, a fellow Jacobin and colleague of Wollstonecraft – are today identified as Republicans, so this is only sarcasm, but the issue merits more thought.

Political Programmes

With regard to Wollstonecraft's political platform, which is the subject of the chapters by Susan James, Lena Halldenius, and Alan Coffee, we can see the benefits of applying the republican model to shed light on parts of her thinking that have been obscured by earlier interpretations of her as a classical liberal. True freedom, in the view of Wollstonecraft and as emphasised in these chapters, entails independence from all despotism, whether formal and unofficial, soft or harsh in its use. According to Wollstonecraft, no one is truly free when their survival depends on their master's 'good humour.' A fully liberated woman should be able to follow through on her own independently formed conclusions. This might be interpreted as the essence of Halldenius' definition of political rights as 'rights against oppression' and James' account of rights as 'realisable powers to act.' The argument is furthered by Coffee, who defines freedom as 'liberation from those social ideas, values, and traditions' that support female subjugation. This enlarged perspective on the prerequisites for individual liberty is significant. Concept can be discussed looking into its notion of cultural components of this agenda in greater detail.

In Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), her response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, she accused Burke of doing something similar. James points out that one problem with the definition of 'rights as powers to act' is that it seems to strip rights-talk of any moral dimension, making it nearly impossible to prefer one set of righteous actions over another and leaving power alone as the benchmark of right. As James points out, Burkean rights is, historical privileges – were undoubtedly susceptible to this accusation, which is why Wollstonecraft instead turns to God-given rights, or those governed by natural law, rather than historical privileges. Wollstonecraft does not really have a lot to say about rights, as James points out. Her history of the French Revolution contains an unambiguous expression of her conviction in the "natural and imprescriptible rights of man" under the social compact, and she briefly addresses them in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and again in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, nowhere in her corpus does the theme receive a lengthy treatment. When she does speak, it is traditional and innovative all at once, undermining natural law theory as it was presented to her by two sources: In particular, Richard Price and his circle, as well as – more significantly – from that extensive and significant body of moral literature that is devoted to women and acknowledges their prescribed roles and responsibilities, or – to use the language of natural law – their 'offices,' are



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among her radical associates. There is no doubt that Wollstonecraft owes this discourse on female offices. Why is ‘women’ not used in the title of her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*? The answer lies in the ‘peculiar’ position that women occupy in the moral hierarchy, which bestows upon them a set of obligations and privileges. These are not to be construed as powers that can be exercised at one’s discretion – a term Wollstonecraft would have used to describe license – but rather as divinely granted authority to carry out the duties of the female office. In Wollstonecraft’s words, “a right always includes a duty,” and “I think it may, likewise, fairly be inferred that they forfeit the right, who do not fulfill the duty.” What does this mean for the civic rights of women?

Context of Female Independence

Wollstonecraft has a lot to say about female dependent, and it’s insightful to consider this in light of republican polemics against dependence. Although it’s important to keep in mind that these polemics had a decidedly masculine tone because republicans frequently contrasted manly freedom with womanly frailty and effete reliance. But what does female independence actually entail? When he portrays independence as psychological along with being practical – the capacity, as he describes it in very Wollstonecraftian terminology, to ‘think for oneself’ instead of being a ‘slave of prejudice’ – Coffee lays out several key parts in this. However, he frequently discusses female independence in terms of an individual, which ignores the fact that often women in Wollstonecraft’s (and modern) times led intricately intertwined lives. This is brought up in an interesting way by Bergès’ discussion on mothering, who claims that the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* make great use of mothering as the foundation of female entitlements. As a result, when Wollstonecraft discusses female independence, she does it in terms of household duties: the independent woman is not an independent person, but rather an equal member in the family. ‘The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent’, she says this while painting a lavishly sentimentalised picture of a modest rural family inhabited by an admirable mother and her hardworking artisan husband: “a couple . . . equally necessary and independent of each other because each fulfils the respective duties of their station”. However, after making this claim, Wollstonecraft moves past it and criticises all those enlightened moralizers, including Rousseau, James Fordyce, Dr. Gregory, and others, “earnestly laboured to domesticate women” by “prevailing on them to make the discharge of [family] duties the main business of life, though reason were insulted”, reminding her readers that, like all God’s children, women have a prior duty, to “perfect our souls by the exercise of our own reason”.

The independent woman should be ‘depending exclusively on God,’ free to follow her own moral convictions. The strongest intellectual weapon in Wollstonecraft’s arsenal and the most challenging for her opponents to refute was definitely this argument, which was directly derived from Rational Dissent but latent in all forms of Protestantism. However, she also makes the much more audacious claim that the genuine meaning of independence for both men and women is the ability “to earn one’s own subsistence.” Although Wollstonecraft’s feminism’s economic component isn’t given much focus in this book, it is crucial to her radical response, as we can see when we read *The Wrongs of Woman*. By advocating a version of women’s rights that amounts to a full-scale assault on patriarchal marriage, this final feminist work is significantly more seditious of natural law prescriptions than *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. These rights include legal and political equality, but also economic security, sexual self-determination, and custody of children. Before another feminist ventured to raise the stakes to this level again, it would be another 150 years.

Emotional Conflicts

We witness Wollstonecraft’s struggle to balance sensual passion with female self-governance and ethical decency everywhere in her life and writings. In *The Rights of Woman*, she proposes abandoning romantic love for transcendent love, divine eros, and the passions of the spirit as opposed to those of the body. However, by the time she began writing *The Wrongs of Woman*, this fictitious solution had been abandoned and no replacement had been provided. “I feel my fate united to yours by the most sacred principles of my soul” After his rejection of her, she communicates to Gilbert Imlay two months earlier she attempts suicide. In this most personal of power dynamics, it seemed that not even the powers of the soul could shield a woman out of emotional pain. Maria also avoids, or at least generally avoids, the misogynist caricatures of women that are prevalent in Wollstonecraft’s earlier writings, particularly the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which is rife with them. The cruelest criticisms of illegitimate authority in the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are aimed not at men however at women, whom Wollstonecraft repetitively accuses of foregoing their natural rights in balance in favour of a cunning sexual ascendancy over men. This is something we need to keep in mind as we consider Wollstonecraft’s views on power and domination, “When, therefore, I call women slaves,” she writes, “I mean only in a political and civil sense; for, indirectly they obtain too much power, and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway.” She likens women to Adam Smith’s description of the degenerate aristocracy in Britain. Why the ferocious rhetoric against women? Looking at its own misogynistic tendencies, attacks on ‘effeminacy’ and elegance (usually portrayed as feminine), and its representation of women as reactionary agents, Republicanism provides us with one clue in this regard, although a negative one. But when Halldenius discusses the problem of ‘artificial’ manners and the positions given to women in the theatre of courteous manners, she gives us another, crucial hint.



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Conclusion

As was already mentioned, Wollstonecraft was upset with some of her philosophical colleagues because of their poor manners. The Rights of Woman rails against ‘gothic manners’, a term that refers not to the crass sexist effronteries that women had long been subjected to but rather to the flowery language of sexual flattery known as ‘gallantry’, which was demolished in polite society by the late eighteenth century. In the writings of the British Enlightenment, gallantry – an updated version of mediaeval chivalry – was frequently discussed. This is notably true of James Fordyce’s and Dr. Gregory’s very popular conduct volumes. In The Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft racks up these with fire, mocking their obscene sentimentality and accusing them of ‘bubbling’ women’s minds with ideas that would corrupt them, ‘specious homage’, ‘those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence’. Wollstonecraft is emphatic that men are to blame in this situation, but the reader today may be turned off by the rhetorical emphasis she places on women and the harsh language she uses. However, if we do look away, what we lose is Wollstonecraft’s suggestion – which is believed is a very significant one – that, manners may be both demeaning and liberating for women. This merits some thought. Some of Wollstonecraft’s statements about how women manipulate sexual norms still have the power to make us pause. Not all power flows in one direction. There are forms of female empowerment that, in my opinion, are not feminist ideals; women are not always the only sufferers. Politics having a sexual difference, feminism is not like most forms of politics; it is the individual become political. When reading Mary Wollstonecraft in the context of the feminist legacy she established and thinking about the ramifications of her concepts for our own sexually charged and profoundly unequal society, we need to bear this in mind.

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