In what is widely considered the very first feminist manifesto, Mary Wollstonecraft argues on behalf of women's natural intellect and character—and the absolute necessity of their education for the betterment of society. Considered radical at the time, her writing has paved the way of progress for generations to come.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

The Feminist Papers

A Vindication of the Rights of Women

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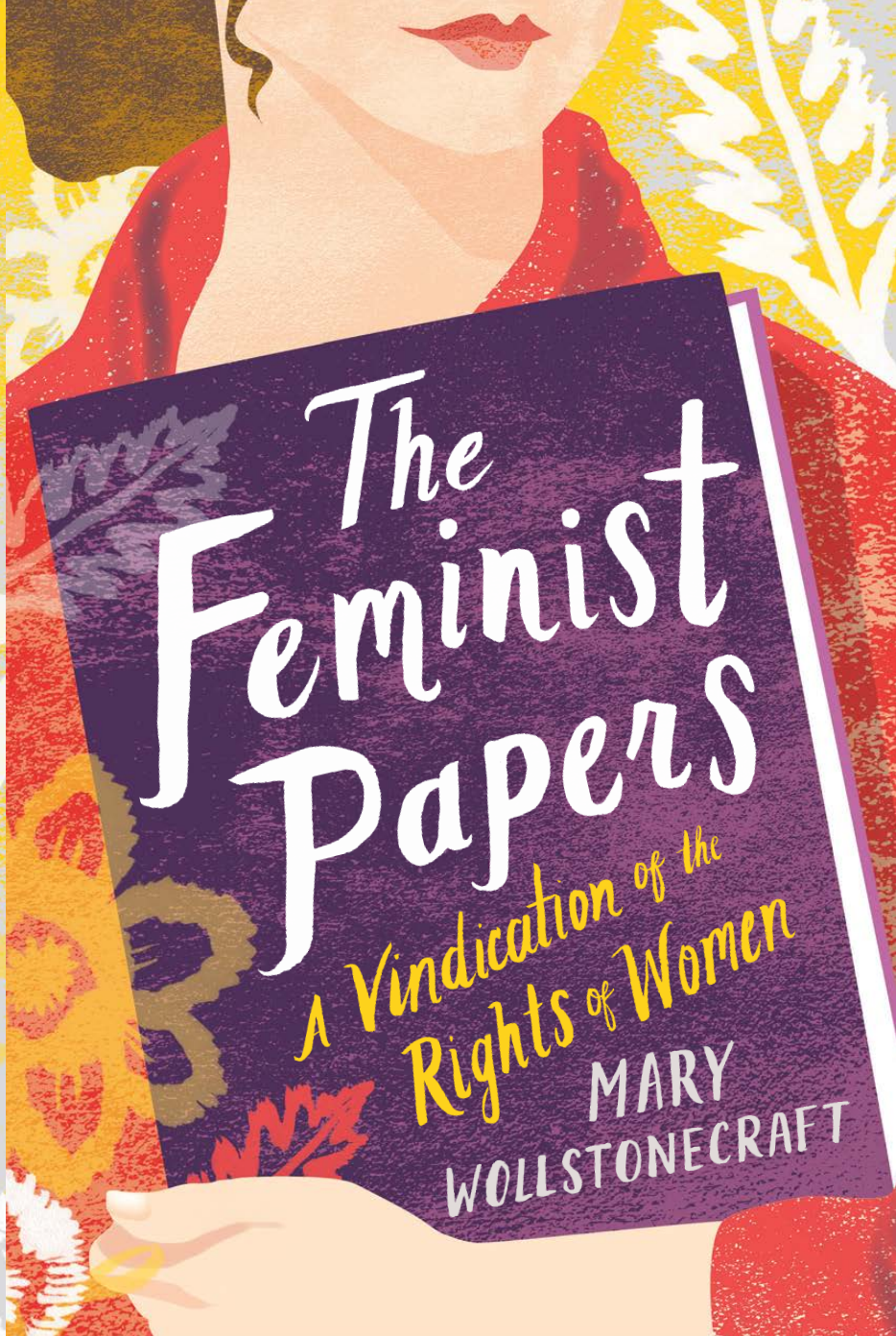

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TO ENRICH AND INSPIRE HUMANKIND

Contents

A Brief Sketch of the Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

M. Wollstonecraft was born in 1759. Her father was so great a wanderer, that the place of her birth is uncertain; she supposed, however, it was London, or Epping Forest: at the latter place she spent the first five years of her life. In early youth she exhibited traces of exquisite sensibility, soundness of understanding, and decision of character; but her father being a despot in his family, and her mother one of his subjects, Mary derived little benefit from their parental training. She received no literary instructions but such as were to be had in ordinary day schools. Before her sixteenth year she became acquainted with Mr. Clare a clergyman, and Miss Frances Blood; the latter, two years older than herself; who possessing good taste and some knowledge of the fine arts, seems to have given the first impulse to the formation of her character. At the age of nineteen, she left her parents, and resided with a Mrs. Dawson for two years; when she returned to the parental roof to give attention to her mother, whose ill health made her

presence necessary. On the death of her mother, Mary bade a final adieu to her father's house, and became the inmate of F. Blood; thus situated, their intimacy increased, and a strong attachment was reciprocated. In 1783 she commenced a day school at Newington Green, in conjunction with her friend, F. Blood. At this place she became acquainted with Dr. Price, to whom she became strongly attached; the regard was mutual.

It is said that she became a teacher from motives of benevolence, or rather philanthropy, and during the time she continued in the profession, she gave proof of superior qualification for the performance of its arduous and important duties. Her friend and coadjutor married and removed to Lisbon, in Portugal, where she died of a pulmonary disease; the symptoms of which were visible before her marriage. So true was Mary's attachment to her, that she entrusted her school to the care of others, for the purpose of attending Frances in her closing scene. She aided, as did Dr. Young, in "Stealing Narcissa a grave." Her mind was expanded by this residence in a foreign country, and though clear of religious bigotry before, she took some instructive lessons on the evils of superstition, and intolerance.

On her return she found the school had suffered by her absence, and having previously decided to apply herself to literature, she now resolved to commence. In 1787 she made, or received, proposals from Johnson, a publisher in London, who was already acquainted with her talents as an author. During the three subsequent years, she was actively engaged, more in translating, condensing, and compiling, than in the production of original works. At this time she laboured under much depression of spirits, for the loss of her friend; this rather increased, perhaps, by the publication of "Mary, a novel," which was mostly composed of incidents and reflections connected with their intimacy.

The pecuniary concerns of her father becoming embarrassed, Mary practiced a rigid economy in her expenditures, and with her savings was enabled to procure her sisters and brothers situations, to which without her aid, they could not have had access; her father was sustained at length from her funds; she even found means to take under her protection an orphan child.

She had acquired a facility in the arrangement and expression of thoughts, in her avocation of translator, and compiler, which was no doubt of great use to her afterward. It was not long until she had occasion for them. The eminent Burke produced his celebrated "Reflections on the Revolution in France." Mary full of sentiments of liberty, and indignant at what she thought subversive of it, seized her pen and produced the first attack upon that famous work. It succeeded well, for though intemperate and contemptuous, it was vehemently and impetuously eloquent; and though Burke was beloved by the enlightened friends of freedom, they were dissatisfied and disgusted with what they deemed an outrage upon it.

It is said that Mary, had not wanted confidence in her own powers before, but the reception this work met from the public, gave her an opportunity of judging what those powers were, in the estimation of others. It was shortly after this, that she commenced the work to which these remarks are prefixed. What are its merits will be decided in the judgment of each reader; suffice it to say she appears to have stept forth boldly, and singly, in defense of that half of the human race, which by the usages of all society, whether savage or civilized, have been kept from attaining their proper dignity—their equal rank as rational beings. It would appear that the disguise used in placing on woman the silken fetters which bribed her into endurance, and even love of slavery, but increased the opposition of our

authoress: she would have had more patience with rude, brute coercion, than with that imposing gallantry, which, while it affects to consider woman as the pride, and ornament of creation, degrades her to a toy—an appendage—a cypher. The work was much reprehended, and as might well be expected, found its greatest enemies in the pretty soft creatures—the spoiled children of her own sex. She accomplished it in six weeks.

In 1792 she removed to Paris, where she became acquainted with Gilbert Imlay, of the United States. And from this acquaintance grew an attachment, which brought the parties together, without legal formalities, to which she objected on account of some family embarrassments, in which he would thereby become involved. The engagement was however considered by her of the most sacred nature, and they formed the plan of emigrating to America, where they should be enabled to accomplish it. These were the days of Robespierrean cruelty, and Imlay left Paris for Havre, whither after a time Mary followed him. They continued to reside there, until he left Havre for London, under pretense of business, and with a promise of rejoining her soon at Paris, which however he did not, but in 1795 sent for her to London. In the mean time she had become the mother of a female child, whom she called Frances in commemoration of her early friendship. Before she went to England, she had some gloomy forebodings that the affections of Imlay, had waned, if they were not estranged from her; on her arrival, those forebodings were sorrowfully confirmed. His attentions were too formal and constrained to pass unobserved by her penetration, and though he ascribed his manner, and his absence, to business duties, she saw his affection for her was only something to be remembered. To use her own expression, "Love, dear delusion! Rigorous reason has forced me to resign; and now my rational prospects are blasted, just as I have learned to

be contented with rational enjoyments." To pretend to depict her misery at this time would be futile; the best idea can be formed of it from the fact that she had planned her own destruction, from which Imlay prevented her. She conceived the idea of suicide a second time, and threw herself into the Thames; she remained in the water, until consciousness forsook her, but she was taken up and resuscitated. After diverse attempts to revive the affections of Imlay, with sundry explanations and professions on his part, through the lapse of two years, she resolved finally to forgo all hope of reclaiming him, and endeavour to think of him no more in connexion with her future prospects. In this she succeeded so well, that she afterwards had a private interview with him, which did not produce any painful emotions.

In 1796 she revived or improved an acquaintance which commenced years before with Wm. Godwin, author of "Political Justice," and other works of great notoriety. Though they had not been favourably impressed with each other on their former acquaintance, they now met under circumstances which permitted a mutual and just appreciation of character. Their intimacy increased by regular and almost imperceptible degrees. The partiality they conceived for each other was, according to her biographer, "In the most refined style of love. It grew with equal advances in the mind of each. It would have been impossible for the most minute observer to have said who was before, or who after. One sex did not take the priority which long established custom has awarded it, nor the other overstep that delicacy which is so severely imposed. Neither party could assume to have been the agent or the patient, the toil-spreader or the prey in the affair. When in the course of things the disclosure came, there was nothing in a manner for either to disclose to the other."

Mary lived but a few months after her marriage, and died in child-bed;

The Rights and Involved Duties of Mankind Considered

In the present state of society, it appears necessary to go back to first principles in search of the most simple truths, and to dispute with some prevailing prejudice every inch of ground. To clear my way, I must be allowed to ask some plain questions, and the answers will probably appear as unequivocal as the axioms on which reasoning is built; though, when entangled with various motives of action, they are formally contradicted, either by the words or conduct of men.

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 purpose were the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes: whispers Experience.

Consequently the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively.

The rights and duties of man thus simplified, it seems almost impertinent to attempt to illustrate truths that appear so incontrovertible: yet such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason, and such spurious qualities have assumed the name of virtues, that it is necessary to pursue the course of reason as it has been perplexed and involved in error, by various adventitious circumstances, comparing the simple axiom with casual deviations.

Men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they cannot trace how, rather than to root them out. The mind must be strong that resolutely forms its own principles; for a kind of intellectual cowardice prevails which makes many men shrink from the task, or only do it by halves. Yet the imperfect conclusions thus drawn, are frequently very plausible, because they are built on partial experience, on just, though narrow, views.

Going back to first principles, vice skulks, with all its native deformity, from close investigation; but a set of shallow reasoners are always exclaiming that these arguments prove too much, and that a measure rotten at the core may be expedient. Thus expediency is continually contrasted with simple principles, till truth is lost in a mist of words, virtue in forms, and knowledge rendered a sounding nothing, by the specious prejudices that assume its name.

That the society is formed in the wisest manner, whose constitution is founded on the nature of man, strikes, in the abstract, every thinking being so forcibly, that it looks like presumption to endeavour to bring forward proofs; though proof must be brought, or the strong hold of prescription will never be forced by reason; yet to urge prescription as an argument to justify the depriving men (or women) of their natural rights, is one of the absurd sophisms which daily insult common sense.

The civilization of the bulk of the people of Europe, is very partial; nay, it may be made a question, whether they have acquired any virtues in exchange for innocence, equivalent to the misery produced by the vices that have been plastered over unsightly ignorance, and the freedom which has been bartered for splendid slavery. The desire of dazzling by riches, the most certain pre-eminence that man can obtain, the pleasure of commanding flattering sycophants, and many other complicated low calculations of doting self-love, have all contributed to overwhelm the mass of mankind, and make liberty a convenient handle for mock patriotism. For whilst rank and titles are held of the utmost importance, before which Genius "must hide its diminished head," it is, with a few exceptions, very unfortunate for a nation when a man of abilities, without rank or property, pushes himself forward to notice. Alas! what unheard of misery have thousands suffered to purchase a cardinal's hat for an intriguing obscure adventurer, who longed to be ranked with princes, or lord it over them by seizing the triple crown!

Such, indeed, has been the wretchedness that has flowed from hereditary honours, riches, and monarchy, that men of lively sensibility have almost uttered blasphemy in order to justify the dispensations of providence. Man has been held out as independent of his power who made him, or as a

lawless planet darting from its orbit to steal the celestial fire of reason; and the vengeance of heaven, lurking in the subtle flame, sufficiently punished his temerity, by introducing evil into the world.

Impressed by this view of the misery and disorder which pervaded society, and fatigued with jostling against artificial fools, Rousseau became enamoured of solitude, and, being at the same time an optimist, he labours with uncommon eloquence to prove that man was naturally a solitary animal. Misled by his respect for the goodness of God, who certainly for what man of sense and feeling can doubt it! gave life only to communicate happiness, he considers evil as positive, and the work of man; not aware that he was exalting one attribute at the expense of another, equally necessary to divine perfection.

Reared on a false hypothesis, his arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible, but unsound. I say unsound; for to assert that a state of nature is preferable to civilization in all its possible perfection, is, in other words, to arraign supreme wisdom; and the paradoxical exclamation, that God has made all things right, and that evil has been introduced by the creature whom he formed, knowing what he formed, is as unphilosophical as impious.

When that wise Being, who created us and placed us here, saw the fair idea, he willed, by allowing it to be so, that the passions should unfold our reason, because he could see that present evil would produce future good. Could the helpless creature whom he called from nothing, break loose from his providence, and boldly learn to know good by practising evil without his permission? No. How could that energetic advocate for immortality argue so inconsistently? Had mankind remained for ever in the brutal state of nature, which even his magic pen cannot paint as a state