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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the life of Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneer feminist, author, and educator in 18th century England and how the influences of rational education caused her to be an advocate of women's education beyond social deportment and menial activities. Wollstonecraft believed that education should be built on strengthening a women's intellectual faculties, particularly by emphasizing the skills of logical reasoning and abstract thinking through the mastery of such subjects as mathematics, science, history, literature, and language. The Industrial Revolution forced a redefinition of women's social and economic status when many abandoned their traditional child-rearing roles and joined the factory labor force, at usually lower wages than men. The paper provides numerous citations of Wollstonecraft's writings in which she challenges the inherent inequality of the English educational and social system and calls for change. (EH)

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Mary Wollstonecraft's "Rational Education" Agenda and the Status of Women in Eighteenth Century England.

by Leonard H. Roberts

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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S "RATIONAL EDUCATION" AGENDA AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneer feminist, author and educator was born in London in 1759. Mary was the eldest daughter of Edward John and Elizabeth Wollstonecraft and their seven children. Soon after Mary's birth her father left the family's prosperous silk weaving trade and pursued a new career as a gentleman farmer. Edward John's quixotic attempt to raise his social status by emulating the landed gentry eventually led to a long, slow impoverishment and disintegration of his family's life and happiness. Mary's schooling was haphazard except for an extended contact with the neighboring Arden family of educators during her childhood and adolescence in the Yorkshire town of Beverley. Through the former schoolmaster, John Arden, Mary became acquainted with the value of a "rational education" as a possible means to success and independence for women. England in Mary's time, however, was not quite ready for such a radical change of women's role in society.

A modest amount of formal schooling for women, emphasizing social deportment and menial activities, such as sewing and water color painting rather than the development of any cognitive skills, was a common educational practice in eighteenth century England. Mary Wollstonecraft observed that:

> ... in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment.... Besides, in youth, their faculties are not brought forward by emulation; and having no serious scientific study, if they have natural sagacity, it is turned too soon to life and manners. They dwell on effects and modifications, without drawing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behavior are a weak substitute for simple principles.[1]

According to Wollstonecraft, overcoming such deficencies was possible if women were afforded the same rational education

as men. Such an education, she believed, should be built on strengthening a woman's intellectual faculties, particularly by emphasizing the skills of logical reasoning and abstract thinking through the mastery of such subjects as mathematics, science, history, literature and languages.[2] Unfortunately, most men (and women) in eighteenth century England regarded a woman's cognitive capabilities as innately inferior. Mary's acceptance of Jean Jacque Rousseau's views on education was tempered by his assertion "that man and woman are not, nor ought to be, constituted alike in temperment and character, it follows, of course, that they should not be educated in the same manner."[3] As a result of such male judgments, according to Wollstonecraft, "women...receive only a disorderly kind of education, seldom...with the degree of exactness that men...from their infancy...observe."[4]

What limited educational opportunities for women existed coincided with a dearth of any legitimate employment. Respectable women were not expected to venture beyond a very narrowly defined range of activities outside the small circle of family and friends. Married and unmarried middle-class women were expected to engage in only certain socially approved wage earning positions such as shopkeepers, governesses, school teachers (although no teacher training institutions existed at the time), and, in a few cases, writers of novels or childrens' books.

Even when pursuing amusements and recreations, women were expected to conform to the prevailing standards of masculine imposed propriety regardless of their rank. It was observed that: "Princess Amelia Sophia, daughter of King George II (1711-1786) whose passionate love of hunting led her to adopt masculine costume when on horseback, seems to have aroused doubt in many minds whether Amazonian qualities were compatible with female decorum...."[5]

The Industrial Revolution, however, forced a redefinition of women's social and economic status when many of them abandoned their traditional child-rearing roles and joined the growing factory labor force, although at generally lower wages than

men. Much of women's work in mines, mills and shops, like their previous menial labors as milkmaids or servants, required only a minimum amount of learning skills.

As children, many of these working class women had attended Sunday Schools, Charity or Blue Coat Schools, founded by various organizations, such as The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. In such institutions "poor girls" were instructed in a "Christian and Useful Education of the Poor, Necessary for their Piety, Virtue and Livelihood."[6] Instructional "Orders" for one Charity School, in 1711, taught "the girls learn to read, &c. and generally to knit their stockings and gloves; to Mark, Sew, Make and Mend their Cloaths (sic.): and several learn to Write and some Spin their Cloaths."[7]

Such a threadbare education for girls was not limited only to the daughters of the poor. According to an advertisement in the Leeds Mercury (6 March 1739),the daughters of the gentry could attend a "Boarding School for Young Ladies" where "...all sorts of Needlework, and Patterns Drawn on Cloth or Canvas after the newest fashion, likewise Paistry (sic.), Huswifry, Pickling, and Sweetmeats, will be carefully taught as usual, at their School over against the Vicarage in Leeds, by the abovesaid Teachers."[8] It is not suprising that Wollstonecraft regarded "the education which women now receive scarcely deserves the name."[9]

For some upper-class women, private tutors and "female academies" polished their manners and added a smattering of French in their quest for aristocratic vocabularies. They were taught, according to Wollstonecraft, "from infancy that beauty is a woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming around its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison."[10] In Catherine Macaulay's case (1731-1791), the highly acclaimed historian and advocate of women's rights largely taught herself by roaming through her father's extensive library. "He paid no attention to the education of his daughters, who were left at the family seat, at Olantigh, to the charge of an antiquated, well-recommended, but ignorant governess, ill-qualified for

the task she undertook."[11]

For women condemned to the bottom of the social hierarchy by the new economic order the alternatives were, in a few cases, kept mistresses to the wealthy and powerful or, for women with no skills or resources to fall back on, prostitutes to the poorer classes. Those who had fallen into this degraded state were regarded as women of weak moral character who had chosen their lifestyle rather than being driven into it by ignorance, poverty, broken homes or lack of more refined employments elsewhere. One contemporary social commentator observed that they "are mostly composed of women who have been in a state of menial servitude, and of whom not a few, from the love of idleness and dress, WITH THE MISFORTUNE OF GOOD LOOKS (sic.), have partly from inclination...resorted to prostitution as a livelihood."[12]

Women of all social classes shared in the hope for a well-connected marriage as a haven and source of happiness and security for themselves and their children. To achieve this they were encouraged to study those amenities that would attract and please a husband and help in proper child rearing. By the inculcation of useful skills and habits at home and the teaching of morally uplifting scripture in church, parents and religious authorities collaborated together to establish and reinforce a woman's place in the social order. This was done, primarily by emphasizing her need for obeying the Will of the Heavenly Father and his representative institutions on earth: church, crown, marriage and family. In A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that a key source of her countrymen's views on gender were derived from "Moses poetical story...from remotest antiquity, (which) found it convenient...to subjugate his companion, and his invention that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience and pleasure."[13]

It is not suprising that such social conditioning resulted in women of all social classes passively accepting their exclusion from the clergy, law and medicine, or not challenging

why the commercial and craft guilds and the educational institutions such as the Grammar Schools, Public Schools (Eton, Harrow, Rugby, etc.), as well as Cambridge and Oxford Universities, were closed to them.

Such attitudes were supported by laws condemning women as, essentially, chattels. Wollstonecraft noted that "the laws respecting women...make an absurd unit of a man and his wife; and then, by the easy transition of only considering him as responsible, she is reduced to a mere cipher."[14] Accordng to the renowned English jurist of the time, Sir William Blackstone: "Husband and wife are one person in the law; that is, the very being or legal existance of the woman is suspended during marriage...."[15] For centuries English Common Law mandated that whatever property a woman inherited became the property of her husband, leading to the multiplication of many Hogarthian scoundrels throughout the land and at all social levels. Such was the food for many a contemporary novel.

Under the ancient laws of primogeniture, parental wealth fell to the eldest son of the family. Or, as Wollstonecraft dramatically described it: "The younger children have been sacrificed to the eldest son; sent into exile or confined in convents, that they might not encroach on what was called, with shameful falsehood, the family estate."[16] Thus, in "Merry Old England," women were not only hobbled by their precarious social status and financial vulnerability, but they were denied by law and masculine authority any opportunity to pursue a meaningful education that might lead to independence through a rewarding and distinguished livelihood. "What," asked Mary Wollstonecraft, "have women to do in society?" "...but to loiter with easy grace; surely you would not condemn them all to suckle fools and chronicle small beer! "No." "...How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practiced as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry...if they were educated in a more orderly manner... which might save many from common and legal prostitution."[17]

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT"S "RATIONAL EDUCATION" AGENDA AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

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