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THE SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN
AS DESCRIBED BY
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT
AND THE WOMEN NOVELISTS OF HER DAY

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Dedicated

with grateful appreciation

to

Dr. James V. Logan Jr.

without whom this thesis

would never have been written.

Introduction

In the latter half of the eighteenth century there lived a remarkable woman. She differed from most other women of her time in refusing to be a mild, retiring creature dominated by superior man, and in insisting upon her right to freedom, self-expression, and independence of thought. She felt so strongly in this matter that she put her ideas upon paper. Thus Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first women to write in defense of the rights of her sex.

It is surprising how advanced in her ideas this woman was, who lived almost two hundred years ago. She agreed in most of her convictions with the twentieth century woman. She believed that women should be educated in order that they might bear their share of life's burdens and help to solve its problems; this education should include physical as well as mental training. She deplored the current idea of a girl's education as consisting properly of novel-reading and the study of music, poetry, dancing, and drawing. She believed that boys and girls should be educated together, with rich and poor meeting on equal terms. She even went so far as to visualize women in business, as doctors and farmers, and as voters and possible members of Parliament.

Mary Wollstonecraft was indignant toward the common conception, that woman was merely a plaything and toy for her husband, meant merely to please and gratify him. She complained that women were exalted sensually and otherwise disregarded. They gave up health, liberty, and virtue, she said, for the protection offered by a husband, becoming like birds shut up in cages. She would have had women be comrades and help-mates to their husbands, sharing their intellectual and spiritual lives. She would have

had distinctions such as were commonly made between the sexes disregarded in society excepting where there was love.

Mary Wollstonecraft was bitter in her condemnation of the treatment received by women. Her own experience with men was conducive to such an attitude. Her father was an improvident ne'er-do-well, who squandered his inheritance, "took to drinking, bullied his wife, and rambled to various places, sinking lower at each move."¹ Her eldest brother, Edward, was strongly favored by the mother, though he was undeserving. The father of Mary's friend Fanny Blood was as much of a scamp as Mr. Wollstonecraft. In order to escape from home Mary's younger sister, Eliza, married a Mr. Bishop, whose brutality made her wretched, and finally drove her from home. Fanny Blood was badly treated by a man who made love to her, and then ignored her for a period of months, eventually marrying her, however. To crown these examples of perfidy, the man to whom Mary Wollstonecraft gave her love was faithless, deserting her when their child was a baby. She was so affected by this that she made two unsuccessful attempts to end her life. It is not surprising, then, that Mary Wollstonecraft was bitter in her opinion of men. It should be added, however, that she found comparative happiness with William Godwin, with whom she lived for about a year before the death of their daughter Mary.

It is the purpose of this little study to provide a critical analysis of the statements made by Mary Wollstonecraft regarding the treatment of women, in order to ascertain to what degree they are borne out by women novelists writing during and shortly after the time of Mary Wollstonecraft. Her statements regarding various phases of women's rights will be given in detail, followed by information on that particular subject taken from the women novelists. The results will then be summarized.

¹ Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. VIII, pp. 60-62

I. The Condition of Women during the Time of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Evils Attending It

1. Education

Mary Wollstonecraft lived during a time in which the education of girls was given little serious consideration. It will be attempted to discover the current attitude upon this subject and its attendant evils, by means of studying statements made by Mary Wollstonecraft and by women novelists writing during and shortly after her time.

In her Introduction to The Rights of Woman Mary Wollstonecraft says:

I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? -- a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore, and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by the variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilised women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.¹

Mary Wollstonecraft believed one cause contributing to enslave women by cramping their intellects to be the disorderly kind of education given them. This, she says, prevents their generalizing matters of fact, so they do today what they did yesterday, merely because they did it yesterday. The little knowledge to which women of strong minds attain is, she says, of

¹ p. 3

a more desultory kind than the knowledge of men, and it is acquired more by sheer observations on real life than from comparing what has been individually observed with the results of experience generalized by speculation. That which they learn is by snatches, and as learning with them is only a secondary thing, they do not pursue any one branch with that persistence necessary for its mastery. In the education of women, she says, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment. Understanding, strictly speaking, has been denied to women, and instinct, sublimated into wit and cunning, has been substituted in its stead. The power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, the only acquirement that really deserves the name of knowledge, has not only been denied to women; writers have insisted that it is incongruous, with but a few exceptions, with their sexual character.

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that the petty meanness which she admits to be too common in women is a result of the narrowness of their existence. She says:

Women ought to endeavour to purify their heart; but can they do so when their uncultivated understandings make them entirely dependent on their senses for employment and amusement, when no noble pursuits set them above the little vanities of the day, or enable them to curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed, over which every passing breeze has power?²

Women have seldom sufficient serious employment to silence their feelings; a round of little cares, or vain pursuits frittering away all strength of mind and organs, they become naturally only objects of sense. In short, the whole tenor of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean.³

She mentions dancing, music, and drawing among these "vain pursuits".

² The Rights of Woman, p. 33

³ ibid, p. 82

She would not do away with these entirely, however, but would admit them as relaxations, not as objects of serious study.

Mary Wollstonecraft felt that, as the care of children in their infancy is one of woman's grandest duties, this duty affords many forcible arguments for the strengthening of the female understanding. A silly woman cannot make a sensible mother. She expresses her opinion thus:

The formation of the mind must be begun very early, and the temper, in particular, requires the most judicious attention --an attention which woman cannot pay who only love their children because they are their children, and seek no further for the foundation of their duty, than in the feelings of the moment. It is this want of reason in their affections which makes women so often run into extremes, and either be the most fond or the most careless and unnatural mothers.

To be a good mother, a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands...unless the understanding of woman be enlarged, and her character rendered more firm, by being allowed to govern her own conduct, she will never have sufficient sense or command of temper to manage her children properly.⁴

As one of the evils of lack of education for women, Mary Wollstonecraft points out the difficulty which occurs when a woman loses her husband, and is left with a family to educate and support. Never having learned to think or act for herself, she is helpless. The destiny of such a woman and of her children is uncertain and probably unhappy. Or, an unmarried woman may be left without any provision. She is then dependent upon her brothers or some other male relatives, and her lot is not often a happy one. These are strong arguments for the education of women for independence.

Mary Wollstonecraft deploras the physical education, or rather lack of it, given to girls:

To preserve personal beauty-- woman's glory-- the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys

⁴ ibid, pp. 166-167

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frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves...The baneful effects which flow from inattention to health during infancy and youth, extend further than is supposed-- dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind; and how can she be a good wife and mother, the greater part of whose time is employed to guard against or endure sickness? Nor can it be expected that a woman will resolutely endeavour to strengthen her constitution and abstain from enervating indulgences, if artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility, have been early entangled with her motives of action. Most men are sometimes obliged to bear with bodily inconveniences, and to endure, occasionally, the inclemency of the elements; but genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection.⁵

Turning from the opinions expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft regarding the education of girls to statements made by women novelists writing during the time of Mary Wollstonecraft and shortly after, we find some interesting likenesses and differences. These statements will simply be quoted now, an evaluation of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas as compared with those of the novelists being reserved for the last section of this work.

It is said of Mrs. Steene, the veterinary surgeon's wife in George Eliot's Brother Jacob, that she has been rather over-educated for her station in life, for she knows many passages from "Lalla Rookh", "The Corsair", and "The Siege of Corinth", which has given her a distaste for domestic occupations. Of the maids and matrons of Grimworth it is said that they can do nothing better with their hands than cooking, so that when a pastry cook comes to town they gossip in idleness.

Mr. Delville in Frances Burney's Cecilia asks, "But what bill at all can a young lady have with a bookseller? The Spectator, Tatler and Guardian, would make library sufficient for any female in the kingdom, nor do I think it like a gentlewoman to have more...And let me counsel you to remember that a lady, whether so called from birth or only from fortune, should never degrade herself by being put on a level with writers, and such

⁵ ibid., pp. 47-49

sort of people."⁶

Celia in Middlemarch is advised to read light things-- Smollett, "Roderick Random", "Humphrey Clinker"-- that she may be a little broad; she may read anything, now that she is married.

When Coelebs in Hannah More's Coelebs in Search of a Wife asks a young lady her opinion of Virgil, she replies that she has never heard of such a person, but that she has read "Tears of Sensibility", "Rosa Matilda", "Sympathy of Souls", "Too Civil by Half", "The Sorrows of Werter", "The Stranger", and "The Orphans of Snowdon". It is said of Mrs. Ranby that though she would have thought it a little heathenish to have had her daughters instructed in polite literature, and to have filled a leisure hour in reading to her a useful book, she feels no compunction at their waste of time, or the trifling pursuits in which the day is suffered to spend itself. The harp, piano-forte, drawing, gilding flower pots, netting white gloves and veils form their occupations.

Mrs. Markham and Mrs. Graham in Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall discuss first the education of boys and then that of girls. Mrs. Markham says of boys:

...and if you were to rear an oak sapling in a hot-house, tending it carefully night and day, and shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy tree, like that which has grown up on the mountain-side, exposed to all the action of the elements, and not even sheltered from the shock of the tempest.

Mrs. Graham says:

Granted;-- but would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?

Certainly not.

No; you would have her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant-- taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil. But will you be so good as to inform me why you make this distinction? Is it that you think she has no virtue?

Assuredly not.

Well, but if you affirm that virtue is only elicited by temptation;-- and you think that a woman cannot be too little exposed to temptation, or too little acquainted with vice, or anything connected therewith. It must be, with her, that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded that she cannot withstand temptation,-- and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of real virtue, to teach her how to sin, is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity,-- whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a superior fortitude, which, the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only the further developed.⁶

Mr. Stanley says of Lady Aston:

She thought they (her daughters) could live contentedly in their closets, without considering that she had neglected to furnish their minds with that knowledge which may make the closet a place of enjoyment, by supplying the intervals of devotional with entertaining reading.⁷

This is his opinion of a knowledge of books in women:

A woman, whose whole education has been rehearsal, will always be dull, except she lives on the stage, constantly displaying what she has been sedulously acquiring. Books, on the contrary, well chosen books, do not lead to exhibition. The knowledge a woman acquires in private desires no witnesses; the possession is a pleasure. It improves herself, it embellishes her family society, it entertains her husband, it informs her children. The gratification is cheap, is safe, is always to be had at home...The reading of a cultivated woman commonly occupies less time than the music of a musical woman, or the dress of a vain woman, or the dissipation of a fluttering woman; she is, therefore, likely to have more leisure for her duties, as well as more inclination, and a sounder judgment for performing them. But pray observe, that I assume my reading woman to be a religious woman; for I will not answer for the effect of literary vanity, more than for that of any other vanity, in a mind not habitually disciplined by Christian principle, the only safe and infallible antidote for knowledge of every kind.⁸

In a letter written by Horatio M--- in Miss Owenson's The Wild Irish Girl, this statement is made:

I fear, however, that this girl (Lady Glorvina) is al-

⁶ Vol. I, p. 27
⁷ p. 233
⁸ pp. 233-234

ready spoiled by the species of education she has received. The priest has more than once spoken of her erudition! Erudition! the pedantry of a school-boy of the third class, I suppose. How much must a woman lose, and how little can she gain, by that commutation which gives her our acquirements for her own graces!⁹

An illuminating statement is made in George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, regarding the knowledge of the Meyrick girls, which had been acquired by the irregular foraging to which clever girls had usually been reduced.

This comment regarding the popular ideal for boarding schools occurs in Jane Austen's Emma:

Mrs. Goddard was the mistress of a school-- not of a seminary, or an establishment, or anything which professed in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality, upon new principles and new systems-- and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health into vanity-- but a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies.¹⁰

This description of perfectly educated girls is taken from Shirley:

The (Synpson) daughters were an example of their sex. ...They had been educated faultlessly. All they did was well done. History and the most solid books, had cultivated their minds. Principles and opinions they possessed which could not be mended. More exactly-regulated lives, manners, habits, it would have been difficult to find anywhere. They knew by heart a certain young-ladies-schoolroom code of laws on language, demeanour, etc.; themselves never deviated from its curious little pragmatrical provisions; and they regarded with secret, whispered horror, all deviations in others.¹¹

This description is found in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall:

Their sister Jane (Wilson) was a young lady of some talent and more ambition. She had, at her own desire, received a regular boarding-school education, superior to what any member of the family had obtained before. She had taken the polish well, acquired considerable elegance of manners, quite lost her provincial accent, and could boast of more

9 p. 76
10 p. 26
11 Vol. II, p. 134

accomplishments than the vicar's daughters.¹²

This quotation is from George Eliot's Janet's Repentance:

These charming, well-frizzled ladies (Miss Landor and the Misses Tomlinson) spoke French indeed with considerable facility, unshackled by any timid regard of idiom, and were in the habit of conducting conversations in that language in the presence of their less instructed elders; for according to the standard of those backward days, their education had been very lavish, such young ladies as Miss Landor, Miss Phipps, and Miss Pittmans, having been "finished" at distant and expensive schools.¹³

Lady Honoria in Cecilia has received a fashionable education; she sings a little, plays the harpischord a little, paints a little, works a little, and dances a great deal. She has quick parts and high spirits, although her mind is uncultivated, and she is totally void of judgment or discretion. When asked whether or not girls should study music seriously, she replies:

O no, Sir, I would not have her study at all; it's mighty well for children, but really after sixteen, and when one is come out, one has quite fatigue enough in dressing, and going to public places, and ordering new things, without all that torment of first and second position, and E upon the first line, and F upon the first space!¹⁴

In Jane Eyre Bessie Reed, who has been to school, boasts of beautiful paintings of landscapes and flowers executed by them, of songs they can sing and pieces they can play, of purses they can net, and of French books they can translate. The children at the orphanage which Jane attends are taught history and grammar, French, drawing, and sewing. Jane teaches her scholars in the village school reading, writing, ciphering, knitting, and sewing.

The ideal for girls was not to be well educated, but to be accomplished. Among the possible accomplishments were singing, drawing, dancing,

¹² Vol. I, p. 12

¹³ The Works of George Eliot, Vol. XVI, pp. 206-207

¹⁴ Vol. III, pp. 371-372

reading, various kinds of fancy work, and languages. The following description of an accomplished lady gives some idea of the books fashionable to read, and of the kinds of fancy work practised;

Miss Linnet had other accomplishments besides that of a neat manuscript, and an index to some of them might be found in the ornaments of the room. She had always combined a love of serious and poetical reading with her skill for fancy-work, and the neatly-bound copies of Dryden's "Virgil," Hannah More's "Sacred Dramas," Falconer's "Shipwreck," Mason on "Self-knowledge," "Rasselas," and Burke "On the Sublime and Beautiful," which were the chief ornaments of the bookcase, were all inscribed with her name, and had been bought with her pocket-money when she was in her teens. It must have been fifteen years since the latest of these purchases, but Miss Linnet's skill in fancy-work appeared to have gone through more numerous phases than her literary taste; for the japanned boxes, the alum and sealing-wax baskets, the fan-dolls, the "transferred" landscapes on the fire-screens, and the recent bouquets of wax-flowers, showed a disparity in freshness which made them referably to widely differeny periods.¹⁵

Following is a young lady's account of her occupations during a winter, taken from Coelebs in Search of a Wife:

I have not been idle, if I must speak the truth. One has so many things to learn, you know. I have gone on with my French and Italian of course, and I am beginning German. Then comes my drawing-master; he teaches me to paint flowers and shells, and to draw ruins and buildings, and to take views. He is a good soul, and is finishing a set of pictures, and half-a-dozen fire-screens which I began for mamma...And then, I learn varnishing, and gilding, and japanning; and next winter I shall learn modelling, and etching, and engraving in mezzotinto and aquatinta...Then I have a dancing-master, who teaches me the Scotch and Irish steps; and another who teaches me attitudes, and I have begun to learn the waltz, and I can stand longer on one leg already than Lady Di. Then I have a singing-master, and another who teaches me the harp, and another who teaches me the piano-forte. And what little time I can spare from these principal things, I give by odd minutes to ancient and modern history, and geography, and astronomy, and grammar, and botany. Then I attend lectures on chemistry, and experimental philosophy.¹⁶

After this account, Sir John seems justified in his statement that girls know nothing well. The more valuable attainments, he says, are kept

¹⁵ From Janet's Repentance, in The Works of George Eliot, Vol. XVI, p. 220
¹⁶ pp. 224-225

in the background, the chief part of the time being devoted to frivolous accomplishments. Continuing the discussion, Mr. Stanley says that he looks upon the great predominance of music in female education as being the source of more mischief than is suspected, not from any evil in it, but because it consumes so much time that it leaves scarcely any for anything else.

Following is a conversation found in Pride and Prejudice: Charles Bingley says that it is amazing to him how young ladies could have the patience to become so accomplished-- painting tables, covering screens, and netting purses. Darcy replies:

Your list of the common extent of accomplishments has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse or covering a screen; but I am very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general. I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished.

Later in the conversation Catherine says:

... no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern language, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions or the word will be but half deserved.

Darcy adds:

All this she must possess, and to all she must yet add something more substantial in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.¹⁷

Further opinions regarding the education of women are given in

Coelebs in Search of a Wife. Coelebs says:

The education of the present race of females is not very favourable to domestic happiness. For my own part I call education, not that which smothers a woman with accomplishments, but that which tends to consolidate a firm and regular system of character; that which tends to form a friend,

companion, and wife. I call education, not that which is made up of shreds and patches of useless arts, but that which inculcates principles, polishes taste, regulates temper, cultivates reason, subdues the passions, directs the feelings, habituates reflection, trains to self-denial, and, more especially, that which refers all actions, feelings, sentiments, tastes, and passions, to the love and fear of god.¹⁸

Coelebs would have a lady be modest about her learning. He says of

Miss Stanley's learning:

This is the true learning of a lady; a knowledge which is rather detected than displayed, which is felt in its effects on her mind and conversation; and which is seen, not by her citing learned names, or adducing long quotations; but in the general result, by the delicacy of her taste, and the correctness of her sentiments.¹⁹

Mr. Flam makes this criticism of the education of girls:

In the first place, don't people educate their daughters entirely for holidays, and then wonder that they are of no use? Don't they charge them to be modest, and then teach them every thing that can make them bold? Are we not angry that they don't attend to great concerns, after having instructed them to take the most pains for the least things?²⁰

Jane Eyre's experience at Lowood Orphanage is indicative of conditions existing in at least some orphanages in England during Charlotte Bronte's childhood, because this portion of the book is autobiographical. Real privations were endured. The account states that the clothing of the little girls was insufficient to protect them from the severe cold; they had no boots, and the snow got into their shoes and melted there. Their ungloved hands became numbed and covered with chilblains, as were their feet. The scanty supply of food was distressing; with the keen appetites of growing children, they had scarcely enough to keep alive a delicate invalid.

Sundays were dreary days in that wintry season. We had to

¹⁸ p. 10
¹⁹ p. 471
²⁰ p. 403

walk two miles to Brocklebridge Church, where our patron officiated. We set out cold, we arrived at church colder; during the morning service we became almost paralysed. It was too far to return to dinner, and an allowance of cold meat and bread, in the same penurious proportion observed in our ordinary meals, was served round between the services.

At the close of the afternoon service we returned by an exposed and chilly road, where the bitter winter wind, blowing over a range of snowy summits to the north, almost flayed the skin from our faces.

...A little solace came at tea-time, in the shape of a double ration of bread-- a whole, instead of a half, slice-- with the delicious addition of a thin scrape of butter; it was the hebdomadal treat to which we all looked forward from Sabbath to Sabbath.²¹

The Sunday evening was spent in repeating from memory the Church Catechism and the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of Saint Matthew, and in listening to a long sermon read by one of the teachers; her yawns attested her own weariness. Often some of the little girls, overpowered with sleep, would fall down and be taken up half dead. The remedy was to thrust them forward into the center of the schoolroom, there to stand until the sermon was finished. Sometimes their feet failed them, and they sank in a heap; they were then propped up with the monitors' high stools.

Because the porridge was burned, on two occasions the kind superintendent had a lunch of bread and cheese served to the children. When the general director of the school, Mr. Brocklehurst, learned of this, he was very much displeased. He said to the superintendent:

You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or the over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralised by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under the temporary privation. A brief address on these occasions

would not be mistimed, wherein a judicious instructor would take the opportunity of referring to the sufferings of the primitive Christians; to the torments of the martyrs; to the exhortations of our blessed Lord himself, calling upon his disciples to take up their cross and follow him; to his warnings that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; to his divine consolations, "if ye suffer hunger or thirst for my sake, happy are ye." Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls.²²

Mr. Brocklehurst severely objected to the girls' having curly hair, even when it was natural, and ordered their hair to be cut off.

The school was visited by a scourge of typhus fever, causing the death of great numbers of the girls. This drew attention to the school. Inquiry was made into the source of the scourge, and by degrees various facts came out which excited public indignation to a high degree. The unhealthy nature of the site, the brackish, fetid water used in the preparation of the food, the quantity and quality of the food, and the pupils' wretched clothing, all were discovered, with the result that several wealthy and benevolent individuals in the county subscribed largely for the erection of a more convenient building in a better situation; new regulations were made; improvements in diet and clothing were introduced; the funds of the committee were entrusted to the management of a committee. Mr. Brocklehurst, who, from his wealth and family position, could not be overlooked, still retained the post of treasurer, but he was aided in the discharge of his duties by men of more enlarged and sympathizing minds. His office of inspector, too, was shared by those who knew how to combine reason with strictness, comfort with economy, compassion with uprightness. The school, thus improved, became in time a truly useful and noble institution.

2. Occupations Open to Women

Mary Wollstonecraft deplored the fact that women were allowed to enter so few occupations respectably. She was far in advance of her time in contemplating women's admittance to such occupations as she did. The following quotation gives her opinion on this subject:

It is a melancholy truth; yet such is the blessed effect of civilisation! the most respectable women are the most oppressed; and, unless they have understandings far superior to the common run of understandings, taking in both sexes, they must, from being treated like contemptible beings, become contemptible. How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility, that consumes the beauty to which it at first gave lustre; nay, I doubt whether pity and love are so near akin as poets feign, for I have seldom seen much compassion excited by the helplessness of females, unless they were fair.²³

Mary Wollstonecraft objected to the common opinion that girls ought to spend a great deal of their time doing needlework. This employment, she says, contracts their faculties more than any other could, by confining their thoughts to their persons. Men order clothes made, and have done with the subject, while women make their own clothes, and are continually talking about them. It is not the making of necessaries that weakens the mind, but the frippery of dress. She believed that the poor should be hired to do the sewing, while women in the middle rank of life could manage their children and exercise their own minds. Gardening, experimental philosophy, and literature would afford them subjects to think of and matter for conversation.

Mary Wollstonecraft did not believe, however, that women should hunt and shoot. If by masculine women are meant women who engage in these sports, she agrees that women should not be masculine.

²³ The Rights of Woman, p. 163

Among all the books that we are considering, mention is made only of teaching as an occupation in which respectable women engage. The lot of a teacher or governess is not pictured as being particularly happy, either. Mrs. Fryor in Shirley describes her experience as a governess as follows:

It was my lot to enter a family of considerable pretensions to good birth and mental superiority, and the members of which also believed that "on them was perceptible" an unusual endowment of the "Christian graces"; that all their hearts were regenerate, and their spirits in a peculiar state of discipline. I was early given to understand that "as I was not their equal", so I could not expect "to have their sympathy." It was in no sort concealed from me that I was held a "burden and restraint in society." The gentlemen, I found, regarded me as a "tabooed woman," to whom "they were interdicted from granting the usual privileges of the sex," and yet who "annoyed them by frequently crossing their path." The ladies too made it plain that they considered me "a bore." The servants, it was signified, "detested me;" why, I could never clearly comprehend. My pupils, I was told, "however much they might love me, and how deep soever the interest I might take in them, could not be my friends." It was intimated that I must "live alone, and never transgress the invisible but rigid line which established the difference between me and my employers." My life in this house was sedentary, solitary, constrained, joyless, toilsome. The dreadful crushing of the animal spirits, the ever-prevailing sense of friendlessness and homelessness consequent on this state of things, began ere long to produce mortal effects on my constitution-- I sickened. The lady of the house told me coolly I was the victim of "wounded vanity." She hinted, that if I did not make an effort to quell my "ungodly discontent," to cease "murmuring against God's appointment," and to cultivate the profound humility befitting my station, my mind would very likely "go to pieces" on the rock that wrecked most of my sisterhood-- morbid self-esteem; and that I should die an inmate of a lunatic asylum.²⁴

This unpleasantness attached to the occupations open to women made marriage the great goal of a girl's ambitions. This idea is expressed in

Pride and Prejudice:

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her (Charlotte's) object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated women of small fortune, and, however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.²⁵

²⁴ Vol. II, p. 54
²⁵ p. 128

Maria in Harriet Martineau's Deerbrook is asked how a woman can earn her living. She replies:

A woman from the uneducated classes can get a subsistence by washing and cooking, by milking cows and going into service, and, in some parts of the kingdom, by working in a cotton mill, or burnishing plate, as you have no doubt seen for yourself at Birmingham. But, for an educated woman, a woman with the powers which God gave her, religiously improved, with a reason which lays life open before her, and understanding which surveys science as its appropriate task, and a conscience which would make every species of responsibility safe,-- for such a woman there is in all England no chance of a subsistence but by teaching, which can never countervail all the education of circumstances, and for which not one in a thousand is fit-- or by being a superior Miss Nares-- the feminine gender of the tailor and hatter.

Margaret replies:

The tutor, the tailor, and the hatter. Is that all?
All; except that there are departments of art and literature from which it is impossible to shut women out. These are not, however, to be regarded as sources for bread.²⁶

Dinah Morris in George Eliot's Adam Bede is a Methodist preacher for a time. When asked if her Society sanctions women's preaching, she says that it doesn't forbid them, when they have a clear call to work, and when their ministry is owned by the conversion of sinners and the strengthening of God's people. At the end of the story, however, it is said that Conference has forbidden women to preach.

Dr. Marchmont in Frances Burney's Camilla says that if one were to ask half the married women in the nation how they became wives, they would say that their friends urged them-- that they had no other establishment in view.

Old maids were looked upon with a good deal of disfavor. In George Eliot's Mr. Gilfil's Love Story Sir Christopher says to Caterina: "I can't have you withering away into an old maid. I hate old maids; they make me dismal to look at them. I never see Sharp without shuddering. My

little black-eyed monkey was never meant for anything so ugly."²⁷ Some idea of a typical old maid is given in this quotation from The Life and Letters of Jane Austen: "A friend of mine who visits her now, says that she has stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of 'single blessedness' that ever existed."²⁸

With such an attitude toward unmarried women common, it is not surprising that girls made every effort to escape the fate of being an old maid, even marrying without love in order to be married. Although there are a few cases in the novels studied of marriage without love, for the most part the attitude taken by parents and others is that young people should never marry without love. Quoting from Sense and Sensibility:

Some mothers might have encouraged the intimacy from motives of interest, for Edward Ferrars was the eldest son of a man who had died very rich; and some might have repressed it from motives of prejudice, for, except a trifling sum, the whole of his fortune depended on the will of his mother. But Mrs. Dashwood was alike uninfluenced by either consideration. It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Eleanor returned the partiality. It was contrary to every doctrine of hers, that difference of fortune should keep any couple asunder who were attracted by resemblance of disposition.²⁹

In a letter to Fanny Knight, quoted in The Life and Letters of Jane Austen, Jane writes: "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection;...nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without love-- bound to one, and preferring another."³⁰

This statement occurs in Pride and Prejudice: "...we see every day that where there is affection young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune from entering into engagements with each other."³¹ Miss Nugent in The Absentee, by Maria Edgeworth, will not marry Mr. Salisbury

²⁷ p. 137

²⁸ p. 300

²⁹ Vol. I, p. 19

³⁰ pp. 344 and 346

³¹ p. 149

because she does not love him.

Mrs. Smith speaks thus in Jane Austen's Persuasion:

When one lives in the world, a man or woman's marrying for money is too common to strike one as it ought. I was very young, and associated only with the young, and we were a thoughtless, gay set, without any strict rules of conduct. We lived for enjoyment. I think differently now; but at that period, I must own I saw nothing reprehensible in what Mr. Elliott was doing. "To do the best for himself" passed as duty.³²

A contrary opinion is expressed by Lucy in Charlotte Bronte's Villette when she says: "but how many people ever do love, or at least marry for love, in this world?"³³ Bertha in George Eliot's The Lifted Veil says: "What! your wisdom thinks I must love the man I'm going to marry? The most unpleasant thing in the world. I should quarrel with him; I should be jealous of him; our menage would be conducted in a very ill-bred manner. A little quiet contempt contributes greatly to the elegance of life."³⁴

32 p. 287
33 p. 124
34 pp. 334-335

3. Conceptions of Womanhood

a. Mentality

In her Introduction to The Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft comments upon the current attitude toward woman's mentality, as represented by books on education written by leading educators of the time. She says:

In a treatise, therefore, on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked, especially when it is asserted, in direct terms, that the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement; that the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mahometanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand.³⁵

She addresses her sex thus:

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. I earnestly wish to point out what true dignity and human happiness consists in. I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.³⁶

Mary Wollstonecraft deplored the fact that so little of positive virtue was expected of women. She says that from them only the negative virtues are expected-- patience, docility, good humour, and flexibility-- virtues incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect. They are more under the influence of sentiments than passions, she says.

We can hardly blame Mary Wollstonecraft for feeling as she did, when we read some passages quoted by her from Rousseau. For example:

³⁵ pp. 3-4
³⁶ p. 5

2

For this reason the education of women should be always relative to the men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable-- these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy. So long as we fail to recur to this principle, we run wide of the mark, and all the precepts which are given them contribute neither to their happiness nor our own.³⁷

He proves that woman ought to be weak and passive, because she has less bodily strength than man: and hence infers that she was formed to be subject to and please him, and that her duty is to render herself agreeable to him, this being the grand end of her existence. Quoting further;

A man speaks of what he knows, a woman of what pleases her; the one requires knowledge, the other taste; the principal object of a man's discourse should be what is useful, that of a woman's what is agreeable. There ought to be nothing in common between their different conversation but truth.³⁸

Mrs. Piozzi is quoted as saying that a woman will pardon an affront to her understanding much sooner than one to her person. "All our attainments, all our arts," she says, "are employed to gain and keep the heart of man; and what mortification can exceed the disappointment, if the end be not attained?"³⁹

Mary Wollstonecraft quotes Dr. Gregory as saying:

Be even cautious in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company. But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.⁴⁰

In a letter to Gilbert Imlay written in Paris, September, 1793, Mary Wollstonecraft says:

With ninety-nine men out of a hundred, a very sufficient dash of folly is necessary to render a woman piquante, a soft word

³⁷ p. 88
³⁸ p. 95
³⁹ p. 112
⁴⁰ p. 108

for desirable; and, beyond these casual ebullitions of sympathy, few look for enjoyment by fostering a passion in their hearts. One reason, in short, why I wish my whole sex to become wiser, is, that the foolish ones may not, by their pretty folly, rob those whose sensibility keeps down their vanity, of the few roses that afford them some solace in the thorny road of life.⁴¹

We shall now see what attitude regarding woman's mental powers is taken by women novelists writing during and shortly after the time of Mary Wollstonecraft. Among the books studied, only two contain statements complimentary to women's intelligence, or in accordance with Mary Wollstonecraft's belief that women's horizon should be broadened. These will now be given.

This statement occurs in Jane Eyre:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or to laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.⁴²

This is taken from The Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay:

He (Mr. Fairly) spoke with uncommon liberality on the female powers and intellects, and protested he had never, in his commerce with the world, been able to discern any other inferiority in their parts than what resulted from their pursuits; -- and yet, with all this, he doubted much whether he had ever seen any woman who might not have been rather better without than with the learned languages, one only excepted (his mother, who knew Latin)...I told him briefly the history of Dr. Johnson's most kind condescension, in desiring to make me his pupil, and beginning to give me lessons of the Latin language, and I proceeded to the speedy conclusion-- my great apprehension, conviction rather, that what I learned of so great a man could never be private, and that he himself would condemn concealment, if

41 Quoted in Camilla Jebb, Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 189

42 p. 130

any progress should be made; which to me was sufficient motive for relinquishing the scheme, and declining the honour, rightly as I valued it, of obtaining such a master.-- "And this," I added, "Though difficult to be done without offending, was yet the better effected, as my father himself likes and approves all accomplishments for women better than the dead languages."⁴³

It is to be noted that even this uncommonly liberal man doubts the benefit of knowledge to a woman, and Frances Burney refuses to learn Latin from Dr. Johnson because her doing so can not be concealed.

Coelebs in Coelebs in Search of a Wife says of his hostess that her dinner was excellent, and everything about her had an air of elegance and splendour; but of course she escaped the disgrace of being thought a scholar, but not the suspicion of having very good taste. Sir John tells some young men that they pretend to be captivated only with mind, but he observes that, previous to their raptures, they always take care to get the mind lodged in fair and youthful form. Later he says that had he met Miss Stanley under the terrifying persuasion that she might be a scholar, he would have met her with prejudice, fearing that she would be forward in conversation, deficient in feminine manners, and destitute of domestic talents. Mr. Stanley enumerates perseverance, meekness, and industry as being the qualities most carefully to be cherished and commended in a woman.

It is said of Mr. Helstone in Shirley that he can not abide sense in a woman; he likes to see them as light-headed, vain, and open to ridicule as possible, because they are then in reality what he holds and wishes them to be-- inferior; toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour and be thrown away.

Captain Duval, a character in Fanny Burney's Evelina, has a rather

contemptuous opinion of girls. When it is proposed that the girls be asked their opinion about where to go for amusement, he says: "What signifies asking them girls? Ask 'em anything that's called diversion, and you're sure they'll say it's vastly fine; --they are a set of parrots and speak by rote, for they all say the same thing; but ask 'em how they like making puddings and pies, and I'll warrant you'll pose 'em."⁴⁴ In a conversation between Mr. Lovel and Mr. Coverly, Mr. Lovel says that he has an insuperable aversion to strength, either of body or mind, in a female. Mr. Coverly says that he would as soon see a woman chop wood as hear her chop logic. Lord Merton then joins the conversation, saying that a woman wants nothing to recommend her but beauty and good nature, for in everything else she is either impertinent or unnatural. "For my part," he says, "deuce take me if I ever wish to hear a word of sense from a woman as long as I live."⁴⁵

This opinion is expressed by Romola's father in George Eliot's Romola: "...the sustained zeal and unconquerable patience demanded from those who would tread the unbeaten paths of knowledge are still less reconcilable with the wandering, vagrant propensity of the feminine mind than with the feeble powers of the feminine body."⁴⁶

In Middlemarch, Lydgate thinks that certainly, if falling in love is to be in question, it would be quite safe with a creature like Miss Vincy, who has just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman--polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life. It is said of Lydgate that he holds it one of the prettiest attitudes of the feminine mind to adore a man's pre-eminence, without too precise a knowledge of what it consists in. For Rosamond never shows any

⁴⁴ p. 159

⁴⁵ p. 497

⁴⁶ Vol. I, p. 72

unbecoming knowledge, and is always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blonde loveliness, which makes the irresistible woman for the doomed man.

It is interesting to note the effect which learning or intellectuality had upon a girl's eligibility for marriage. This is said of Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch:

Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it. Certainly such elements in the character of a marriageable girl tended to interfere with her lot, and hinder it from being decided according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection.⁴⁷

In speaking of a suggested education for Indiana, Miss Margland in Camilla says:

Consider, Sir, what an obstacle it will prove to her making her way in the great world, when she comes to be of a proper age for thinking of an establishment. What gentleman will you ever find that will bear with a learned wife? except some mere downright fogrum, that no young lady of fashion could endure.⁴⁸

In Coelebs in Search of a Wife a Miss Sparkes is mentioned, whom the reputation of being a wit and an Amazon has kept single at the age of five-and-forty, though her person is not disagreeable, and her fortune is considerable. Coelebs is unusual in desiring an intelligent woman for his wife. He says: "A man of sense, who loves home, and lives at home, requires a wife who can and will be at half the expense of mind necessary for keeping up the cheerful, animated, elegant intercourse which forms so great a part of the bond of union between intellectual and well-bred persons."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Vol. I, p. 8

⁴⁸ Vol. I, p. 100

⁴⁹ p. 13

The three grand inducements in the choice of a wife, he says, are that a man may have a directress for his family, a preceptress for his children, and a companion for himself. "Shall we not rejoice," he says, "in a companion who has drawn, though less copiously perhaps, from the same rich sources with ourselves; who can relish the beauty we quote, and trace the allusion at which we hint."⁵⁰

A prolonged discussion is held regarding the necessity for domestic accomplishments in a wife. Miss Sparkes says that the meanest understanding and the most vulgar education are competent to form such a wife as the generality of men prefer-- that a man of talents, dreading a rival, always takes care to secure himself by marrying a fool. Sir John replies that men of the most cultivated minds, men who admire talents in a woman, are still of the opinion that domestic talents can never be dispensed with; he entirely disagrees with Miss Sparkes in thinking that these qualities infer the absence of higher attainments, and necessarily imply a sordid or a vulgar mind. Mr. Stanley says that cookery is one of the arts which could not be universally carried on, if they were not easy and cheap of attainment. He agrees with Miss Sparkes in thinking that a mean understanding and a vulgar education suffice to make a good cook. One reason why he would never choose to marry a woman if she did not have a knowledge of domestic affairs, is that she who wants or despises this knowledge must possess that previous bad judgment, which, as it prevented her from seeking this part of her duty, would be likely to operate on other occasions. Mr. Carlton, too, looks upon contempt for the fulfillment of these duties as pretty certain indication of lack of judgment. He allows that with this knowledge a lady may unhappily have overlooked more important acquisitions, but without it he must ever consider the female character as defective in texture, however

it may be embroidered and spangled on the surface.

Sir John declares that, though he does not have the natural antipathy to a wit which some men have, yet unless the wildness of a wit is tamed like the wildness of other animals, by domestic habits, he would not choose to venture on one. Mr. Stanley questions whether or not a lady of mean understanding will be able to practice economy on a large scale; he considers such economy a field in which a woman of the best sense may honorably exercise her powers. Sir John says:

A philosophical lady may "read Mallebranche, Boyle, and Locke"; she may boast of her intellectual superiority; she may talk of abstract and concrete; complex ideas and mixed modes of identity and relation; she may decorate all the logic of one sex with all the rhetoric of the other; yet if her affairs are delabres, if her house is disorderly, her servants irregular, her children neglected, and her table ill arranged, she will indicate the want of the most valuable faculty of the human mind, -- a sound judgment.⁵¹

Mr. Carlton says that a young lady bred in total ignorance of family management, transplanted from the house of her father, where she has learned nothing, to that of her husband, where she is expected to know everything, disappoints a prudent man: his affection may continue, but his esteem will be diminished; and with his happiness, his attachment to home will be proportionately lessened. Sir John replies that this is perfectly just, and that this comfortless deficiency has naturally taught men to inveigh against that higher kind of knowledge which they suppose, though unjustly, to be the cause of ignorance in domestic matters. Miss Sparkes insists that plodding domestic employments cramp the genius, degrade the intelligence, depress the spirits, debase the taste, and clip the wings of the imagination. This poor, cramped, degraded, stunted, depressed, debased creature is the very being whom men, she says, men of reputed sense, too, commonly prefer to the mind of large dimensions, soaring fancy, and aspiring tastes.

⁵¹ pp. 394-395

This comment appears in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey:

Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can...though, to the larger and more trifling part of the (male) sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable, and too well-informed themselves, to desire anything more in woman than ignorance. But Catherine did not know her own advantages; did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart, and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward.⁵²

The following quotation is from George Eliot's Middlemarch:

Lydgate thought that after all his wild mistakes, and absurd credulity, he had found perfect womanhood-- felt as if already breathed upon by exquisite wedded affection such as would be bestowed by an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours, and would never interfere with them; who would create order in the home and accounts with still magic, yet keep her fingers ready to touch the lute and transform life into romance at any moment; who was instructed to the true womanly limit and not a hair-breadth beyond --docile, therefore, and ready to carry out behests which came from beyond that limit.⁵³

It is said that Lydgate had regarded Rosamond's cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman.

Mr. Tulliver, Maggie's father in George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss, says that Maggie is too cute for a woman, that "an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep-- she'll fetch none the bigger price for that."⁵⁴ He also says that he purposely picked a wife who wasn't overly cute, because he wasn't going to be told the rights of things by his own fireside.

Further indications of the current conception of women's mentality are found in these excerpts and indirect quotations:

Tilney in Northanger Abbey says that he has no patience with such of

⁵² pp. 141-142

⁵³ Vol. I, pp. 354-355

⁵⁴ p. 11

his sex as disdain to let themselves sometimes to the comprehension of the feminine sex; perhaps the abilities of women, he says, are neither acute nor sound, neither vigorous nor keen; perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit. Margaret, a character in Deerbrook, has heard it said of men that there are depths of character where there are not regions of experience, which defy the sympathy and sagacity of women. Mr. Tyrold in Camilla considers Indiana's incapacity to be rather that of her sex than of an individual. Of Eugenia, in the same book, it is said that the equanimity of her temper makes her seem, though a female, born to be a practical philosopher. Mr. Casaubon in Middlemarch says that there is a lightness about the feminine mind-- a touch and go--music, the fine arts, that kind of thing-- they should study these up to a certain point, but in a light way. Sketching, fine art, and so on, he considers just the thing for girls.

In The Mill on the Floss Tom tells Maggie that he learns Latin, and says contemptuously: "Girls never learn such things. They're too silly."⁵⁵ He also says that girls' stories are always silly and stupid. This conversation occurs between him and his schoolmaster:

Girls can't do Euclid; can they, sir?

They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say. They've a good deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far in anything. They're quick and shallow.⁵⁶

This quotation appears in Villette:

I (Lucy) will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass-- the steersman stretched on the little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer. A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest?⁵⁷

55 p. 146

56 p. 152

57 p. 39

Later she says:

I was vaguely threatened by M. Emanuel with I know not what doom if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge.⁵⁸

Again:

"Women of intellect" was the next theme; here he (M. Emanuel) was at home. A "woman of intellect", it appeared, was a sort of "lusus naturæ," a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker. Beauty anticipated her in the first office. He believed in his soul that lovely, placid, feminine mediocrity was the only pillow on which manly thought and could find rest for its aching temples; and as to work, male mind alone could work to any good practical result.⁵⁹

b. Wifehood

Mary Wollstonecraft had very positive ideas concerning wifehood. She believed that women should not depend alone upon their physical charms to hold their husbands, but should develop their minds for that purpose. She held that a woman should be a companion to her husband, sharing in his intellectual interests. A study will now be made of her statements on this question.

She warns women thus:

The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is past and gone. Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and cultivate her dormant faculties? Or is it not more rational to expect that she will try to please other men, and, in the emotions raised by the expectation of new conquests, endeavour to forget the mortification her love or pride has received? When the husband ceases to be a lover, and the time will inevitably come, her desire of pleasing will then grow languid, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place to jealousy or vanity.⁶⁰

The woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, says Mary Wollstonecraft, become the friend, not the humble dependent of her husband. She places the responsibility for training girls in this way upon parents. To quote:

And if it be granted that woman was not created merely to gratify the appetite of man, or to be the upper servant, who provides his meals and takes care of his linen, it must follow that the first care of those mothers or fathers who really attend to the education of females should be, if not to strengthen the body, at least not to destroy the constitution by mistaken notions of beauty and female excellence; nor should girls ever be allowed to imbibe the pernicious notion that a defect can, by any chemical process of reasoning, become an excellence.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The Rights of Woman, p. 32

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 45

She says that the weakness which makes a woman depend upon her husband for subsistence produces "a kind of cattish affection, which leads a wife to purr about her husband as she would about any man who fed and caressed her."⁶² Further, dependence upon men makes women rivals with each other. The sole ambition of a woman, says Mary Wollstonecraft, centers in beauty; interest gives additional force to vanity, and rivalships ensue; women view each other with suspicious and envious eyes. Their great object is to marry to "better themselves."

Mary Wollstonecraft has this to say of men who do not know the joys of friendship in marriage:

The man who can be contented to live with a pretty, useful companion, without a mind, has lost in voluptuous gratifications a taste for more refined enjoyments; he has never felt the calm satisfaction that refreshes the parched heart like the silent dew of heaven -- of being loved by one who could understand him. In the society of his wife he is still alone, unless when the man is sunk in the brute.⁶³

Having seen what was Mary Wollstonecraft's idea concerning the ideal wife, we shall turn to opinions expressed by women novelists writing during and shortly after her time. The prevailing conception regarding a wife's duty to her husband will first be noted.

This is said of Romola:

The new sensibilities and questions which it (Tito's conduct) had half awakened in her were quieted again by that subjection to her husband's mind which is felt by every wife who loves her husband with passionate devotedness and full reliance...Romola was labouring as a loving woman must, to subdue her nature to her husband's.⁶⁴

It is said in Mr. Gilfil's Love Story of Lady Cheverel that she has too rigorous a view of a wife's duties, and too profound a deference to regard submission as a grievance. In the same book it is said that a proud

⁶² p. 193

⁶³ p. 100

⁶⁴ Vol. II, pp. 60 and 63

woman who has learned to submit carries all her pride to the reinforcement of her submission, and looks down with severe superiority on all feminine assumption as "unbecoming."

This passage occurs in Janet's Repentance:

...what use is it for a woman to be loving, and making a fuss with her husband, if she doesn't take care and keep his home just as he likes it; if she isn't at hand when he wants anything done; if she doesn't attend to all his wishes, let them be as small as they may.⁶⁵

In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall the Reverend Michael Millward maintains that Helen has done wrong to leave her husband, though he has been cruel and unfaithful. He says it is a violation of her sacred duty as a wife, and a tempting of Providence by laying herself open to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step-- nor even that, for in such a case she ought to appeal to the law for protection. In the same book, Helen says of her husband: "Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly and to stay at home-- to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way, while he chooses to stay with her; and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, domestic or otherwise, and patiently wait his return; no matter how he may be occupied in the meantime."⁶⁶

In The Mill on the Floss Stephen says playfully to Maggie: "You will sing the whole duty of woman-- 'And from obedience grows my pride and happiness.'"⁶⁷

The following quotations show how distinctly a woman was considered to be inferior to her husband.

This is from Shirley:

He (Mr. Helstone) made no pretense of comprehending women,

⁶⁵ The Works of George Eliot, Vol. XVI, p. 328

⁶⁶ Vol. I, p. 258

⁶⁷ p. 365

or comparing them with men; they were a different, probably a very inferior order of existence; a wife could not be her husband's companion, much less his confident, much less his stay. His wife, after a year⁶⁸ or two, was of no great importance to him in any shape.

This conversation takes place in the same book, between Joe Scott and Shirley Keeldar:

Joe, do you seriously think all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls?

I think that women are a kittle and froward generation; and I've great respect for the doctrine delivered in the second chapter of St. Paul's first Epistle to Timothy.

What doctrine, Joe?

Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve...women is to take their husbands' opinion, both in politics and religion; it's wholesomest for them.⁶⁹

In The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Mrs. Markham tells her son:

...it's your business to please yourself, and hers (his wife's) to please you. I'm sure your poor, dear father was as good a husband as ever lived, and after the first six months or so were over, I should as soon have expected him to fly, as to put himself out of his way to please me.⁷⁰

It is said of Mrs. Tyrold in Camilla that she never says anything in response to a remonstrance of her husband, but retires to her own room, to conceal with how ill a grace she complies with her husband's decision that Camilla shall go to live with the Lynmores.

Had this lady been united to a man whom she despised, she would yet have obeyed him, and as scrupulously, though not as happily, as she obeyed her honored partner. She considered the vow taken at the altar to her husband, as a voluntary vestal would have held one taken to her Maker; and no dissent in opinion exculpated, in her mind, the least deviation from his will.⁷¹

Mrs. Merman exhibits the proper attitude of a wife toward her husband.

Mr. Merman says to her:

68 Vol. I, p. 55
 69 Vol. I, pp. 360-361
 70 Vol. I, pp. 54-55
 71 Vol. I, p. 18

Why, if a woman will not try to understand her husband's ideas, or at least to believe that they are of more value than she can understand-- if she is to join anybody who happens to be against him, and suppose he is a fool because others contradict him-- there is an end to our happiness. That is all I have to say.

Mrs. Merman replies:

Oh no, Proteus, dear. I do believe what you say is right. That is my only guide. I am sure I have never had any opinions any other way; I mean about subjects. Of course there are many little things that would tease you, that you like me to judge of for myself. I know I said once that I did not want you to sing "Oh, ruddier than the cherry," because it was not in your voice. But I cannot remember ever differing from you about subjects. I never in my life thought anyone cleverer than you.⁷²

A young girl's feelings regarding marriage are described thus:

...to become a wife and wear all the domestic fetters of that condition, was on the whole a vexatious necessity. Her observation of matrimony had inclined her to think it rather a dreary state, in which a woman could not do what she liked, had more children than were desirable, was consequently dull, and became irrevocably immersed in the humdrum. Of course marriage was social promotion; she could not look forward to a single life; but promotions have sometimes to be taken with bitter herbs.⁷³

Mr. Casaubon says to Dorothea in Middlemarch, that the great charm of her sex is its capability of an ardent, self-sacrificing affection, and that herein is seen its fitness to round and complete the existence of men. It is said that some men take a wife to adorn the remaining quadrant of their course, and be a little moon that would cause hardly a calculable perturbation. Mr. Casaubon thinks of Dorothea that she may be such a help-mate to him as will enable him to dispense with a hired secretary. A wife, he thinks, a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious qualities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful. Society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers

⁷² pp. 103-104

⁷³ George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, Vol. I, p. 45

for making himself happy.

Mrs. Graham in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall says that her husband is almost too fond of her. She could do with less caressing and more rationality. She would like to be less of the pet and more of the friend.

Coelebs in Coelebs in Search of a Wife believes that a woman's obedience to her husband does not imply degradation. He says:

But the offence taken by the ladies against the uncourtly bard (Milton) is chiefly occasioned by his having presumed to intimate that conjugal obedience

Is woman's highest honour and her praise.

This is so nice a point that I, as a bachelor, dare only just hint, that on this delicate question, the poet has not gone an inch farther than the apostle. Nay, Paul is still more uncivilly explicit than Milton. If, however, I could hope to bring over to my side critics, who, being of the party, are too apt to prejudge the case, I would point out to them that the supposed harshness of the observation is quite done away by the recollection that this scrupled "obedience" is so far from implying degradation, that it is connected with the injunction to the woman "to promote good works" in her husband; an injunction surely inferring a degree of influence that raises her condition, and restores her to all the dignity of equality; it makes her not only the associate but the inspirer of his virtues.⁷⁴

Mr. Farebrother in Middlemarch concedes that a good wife, a good unworldly woman, may really help a man, and keep him more independent.

Mary Wollstonecraft raises the question whether or not women who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience have sufficient character to manage a family or educate children. It is her opinion that they can not have. She says:

The obedience required of women in the marriage state comes under this description (of evils arising from a desire for present enjoyment that outruns itself); the mind, naturally weakened by depending on authority, never exerts its own powers, and the obedient wife is thus rendered a weak indolent mother.⁷⁵

Mary Wollstonecraft could not endure the silliness of women who babied dogs. She says that such a woman is as apt as not to let her children grow up crooked in a nursery. She describes one such woman:

The woman whom I allude to was handsome, reckoned very handsome, by those who do not miss the mind when the face is plump and fair; but her understanding had not been led from female duties by literature, nor her innocence debauched by knowledge. No, she was quite feminine, according to the masculine acceptation of the word; and, so far from loving these spoiled brutes that filled the place which her children ought to have occupied, she only lisped out a pretty mixture of French and English nonsense, to please the men who flocked around her. The wife, mother, and human creature, were all swallowed up by the factitious character which an improper education and the selfish vanity of beauty had produced.⁷⁶

This insufficient a mother is described in Mansfield Park:

To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience, guided in everything important by Sir Thomas and in smaller concerns by her sister. Had she possessed greater leisure for the service of her girls, she would probably have supposed it unnecessary, for they were under the care of a governess, with proper masters, and could want nothing more.⁷⁷

75 The Rights of Woman, p. 80

76 ibid., p. 191

77 Vol. I, pp. 25-26

d. Contribution to Mankind

We now come to an important and interesting phase of this subject; what was the belief during and shortly after the time of Mary Wollstonecraft concerning woman's mission in the world, and her contribution to mankind? As has been done before, Mary Wollstonecraft's views on the subject will first be studied.

In the dedication of The Rights of Woman to M. Talleyrand-Perigord, she says:

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthens her reason till she comprehends her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good. If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman at present shuts her out from such investigations.⁷⁸

Mary Wollstonecraft felt that women had acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit. She believed them to be the prey of their senses, blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. They attempted many pursuits, yet never persevered long enough. To quote:

The education of women has of late been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves-- the only way women can rise in the world-- by marriage.⁷⁹

78 p. 10
79 p. 6

She says that women are so much degraded by these mistaken notions of female excellence that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even while they excite desire. Women are told from infancy, she says, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and scrupulous attention to a peurile 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. Women, she states, have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement. The regal homage which they receive is so intoxicating that it will be very difficult to convince them that the illegitimate power which they obtain by degrading themselves is a curse. To quote:

...while they (women) have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked with artificial graces that enable them to exercise a short-lived tyranny. Love, in their bosoms, taking place of every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be fair, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character. Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.⁸⁰

Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women cannot be confined by force to domestic concerns, for they will meddle with more weighty affairs, however ignorant they may be. She holds that women should have a share in politics. She quotes M. Talleyrand-Perigord as having said "that to see one-half of the human race excluded by the other from all participation of government was a political phenomenon that, according to abstract principles,

it was impossible to explain."⁸¹ She asks him then on what his constitution rests; if the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test. She says:

Females, in fact, denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence, have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts, though the private duty of any member of society must be very imperfectly performed when not connected with the general good. The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events, and reflection deepens what it should, and would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range.⁸²

We shall now study the opinions expressed in novels written during and shortly after the time of Mary Wollstonecraft by women novelists, regarding woman's contribution to mankind. Only one reference was found to women's entering politics. In George Eliot's Felix Holt the women characters are spoken of as being rather indifferent to politics. Some object to politics as having spoiled old neighborliness, and sundered friends who had kindred views as to cowslip wine and Michaelmas cleaning; others, of the melancholy sort, say it would be well if people would think less of reforming Parliament and more of pleasing God. They are more interested in a speech by the curate than in any candidate's speech.

The attitude toward women writers was one of disapproval. The following quotation from Charlotte Bronte's The Professor indicates the common sentiment:

...it appears to me that ambition, literary ambition especially, is not a feeling to be cherished in the mind of a woman; would not Mlle. Henri be much safer and happier if taught to believe that in the quiet discharge of social duties consists her real vocation, than if stimulated to aspire after applause and

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⁸¹ p. 11
⁸² p. 203

publicity.⁸³

As related in The Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay, Frances is given great comfort by being assured that her book Evelina was thought to have been written by a man. In commenting upon the book, Mrs. Montagu says: "...I have been informed it is the work of a young lady, and therefore, though I expected a very pretty book, I supposed it to be a work of mere imagination, and the name I thought attractive; but life and manners I never dreamt of finding."⁸⁴ In a biography of Charlotte Bronte condensed from Mrs. Gaskell's Life it is said that she especially disliked the lowering of standard by which to judge a work of fiction if it proceeded from a feminine pen; and praise mingled with pseudo-gallant allusions to her sex mortified her far more than actual blame.⁸⁵

As has been noted in a previous section, it was believed by some that women were more fitted to do housework as their contribution to the work of the world than anything else. This quotation is taken from Deerbrook:

Women do inevitably love housekeeping, unless educational or other impediments interfere with their natural tastes. Household management is to them the object of their talents, the subject of their interests, the vehicle of their hopes and fears, the medium through which their affections are manifested, and much of their benevolence gratified. If it be true, as has been said, that there is no good quality of a woman's heart and mind which is not necessary to perfect housekeeping, it follows that there is no power of the mind or affection of the heart which may not be gratified in the course of its discharge.⁸⁶

Marriage was considered a woman's great vocation. In the words of Maria in Deerbrook, "...girls are brought up to think of marriage as almost the only event in life. Their minds are stuffed with thoughts of it almost

⁸³ p. 111

⁸⁴ Vol. I, p. 102

⁸⁵ With The Professor, pp. 88-89

⁸⁶ p. 156

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⁸³ p. 111

⁸⁴ Vol. I, p. 102

⁸⁵ With The Professor, pp. 88-89

⁸⁶ p. 156

before they have had time to gain any other ideas."⁸⁷ Mr. Gascoigne in Daniel Deronda tells Gwendolyn that marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman, and Mrs. Davilow says that marriage is the only happy state for a woman.

Women were so oppressed by restrictions that they were hindered from making many contributions to the world, other than that of motherhood. Men were considered, at least by many people, as being so much more capable than and superior to women as to far surpass them. This is Harold Transome's opinion of his mother, in Felix Holt:

The fact that she had been active in the management of the estate-- had ridden about it continually, had busied herself with accounts, had been head baliff of the vacant farms, and had yet allowed things to go wrong-- was set down by him simply to the general futility of women's attempts to transact men's business...It was the way of women, and all weak minds, to think that what they had been used to was unalterable.⁸⁸

It is Sir James's opinion, in Middlemarch, that a man's mind has always the advantage of being masculine, as the smallest birch tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm, and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality. It is said in the same book that a man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her, nature having intended greatness for men. Romola apologizes thus for being a girl:

I will try and be as useful to you as if I had been a boy, and then perhaps some great scholar will want to marry me, and will not mind about a dowry; and he will like to come and live with you, and he will be to you in place of my brother...and you will not be sorry that I was a daughter.⁸⁹

Gwendolyn Fairfax in Daniel Deronda expresses her sense of the narrowness of a woman's horizon:

⁸⁷
⁸⁸ p. 159
⁸⁸ pp. 110-111
⁸⁹ Vol. I, p. 76

We women can't go in search of adventures, --to find out the Northwest Passage or the source of the Nile, or to hunt tigers in the East. We must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. That is my notion about the plants; they are often bored, and that is the reason why some of them have got poisonous.⁹⁰

Daniel's mother rebels against the pressure put upon a Jewish girl to conform to tradition. She says:

You are not a woman. You may try, -- but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out, --"this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt." That was what my father wanted. He wished I had been a son; he cared for me as a make-shift link.⁹¹

Girls were not allowed to have money as their brothers did. Tom Tulliver says to Maggie: "I've a great deal more money than you, because I'm a boy. I always have half sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes, because I shall be a man, and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you're only a girl."⁹²

To conclude, Esther in Felix Holt says:

A woman can hardly ever choose in that way (choosing a life of privation and toil for the good of humanity); she is dependent on what happens to her. She must take meager things, because only meager things are within her reach.⁹³

90 Vol. I, p. 182
91 vol. III, pp. 118-119
92 The Mill on the Floss, p. 34
93 p. 266

II. The Possible Future for Woman as Foreseen by Mary Wollstonecraft and Its Advantages

I. Education

Mary Wollstonecraft attributes the variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows into which women are plunged to the prevailing opinion that they were created rather to feel than to reason, and that all the power they secure must be obtained by their charms and weakness. She goes on to say:

And, made by this amiable weakness entirely dependent, excepting what they gain by illicit sway, on man, not only for protection, but for advice, is it surprising that, neglecting the duties that reason alone points out, and shrinking from trials calculated to strengthen their minds, they only exert themselves to give their defects a graceful covering, which may serve to heighten their charms in the eye of the voluptuary, though it sink them below the scale of moral excellence.

She states further that women are obliged to look up to men for every comfort. They cling to their support in the most trifling danger, and their natural protector extends his arm, or lifts his voice, to guard the lovely trembler from perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse. Though these fears may produce some pretty attitudes, they show a degree of imbecility which degrades a rational creature in a way women are not aware of. Quoting again:

I am fully persuaded that we should hear of none of these infantine airs, if girls were allowed to take sufficient exercise, and not confined in close rooms till their muscles are relaxed, and their powers of digestion destroyed. To carry the remark still further, if fears in girls, instead of being cherished, perhaps, created, 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 man; but over themselves.¹

Again and again Mary Wollstonecraft repeats the argument that if women be allowed to have immortal souls, they must have an understanding to improve. She mentions the need that women have of education:

In the regulation of a family, in the education of children, understanding, in an unsophisticated sense, is particularly required-- strength both of body and mind; yet the men who, by their writings, have been laboured to domesticate women, have endeavoured, by arguments dictated by a gross appetite, which satiety had rendered fastidious, to weaken their bodies and cramp their minds. But, if even by these sinister methods they really persuaded women, by working on their feelings, to stay at home, and fulfill the duties of a mother and mistress of a family, I should cautiously oppose opinions that led women to right conduct, by prevailing on them to make the discharge of such important duties the main business of life, though reason were insulted. Yet, and I appeal to experience, if by neglecting the understanding they be as much, nay, more detached from these domestic employments, than they could be by the most serious intellectual pursuit, though it may be observed, that the mass of mankind will never vigorously pursue an intellectual object, I may be allowed to infer that reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I must again repeat, that sensibility is not reason.²

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that if women were properly trained, in body as well as mind, they could be truly independent, earning their own livings. In this regard she says:

Men have superior strength of body; but were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence; and to bear those bodily inconveniences and exertions that are requisite to strengthen the mind. Let us then, by being allowed to take the same exercise as boys, not only during infancy, but youth, arrive at perfection of body, that we may know how far the natural superiority of man extends. For what reason or virtue can be expected from a creature when the seed-time of life is neglected? None; did not the winds of heaven casually scatter many useful seeds in fallow ground.³

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that boys and girls should be educated

¹ The Rights of Woman, pp. 68-69
² pp. 70-71
³ p. 94

together. She advocated the establishment of day-schools by the government. After the age of nine, girls and boys intended for domestic employments or mechanical trades ought to be removed to other schools, and receive instruction in some measure fitted to the destination of each individual, the two sexes being together in the morning, but in the afternoon the girls attending a school where plain work, mantua making, millinery, etc., would be their employment. The young people of superior abilities or fortune might then be taught in another school the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and continue the study of history and politics, on a more extensive scale, not excluding literature.

Mary Wollstonecraft also believed that women should have some share in the government. Should this be granted them, they would grow better, as they became wiser and more free. Their pettiness would vanish as their lives were broadened by access to morality and politics. She held that this would make them more, not less, attentive to their domestic duties, for an active mind embraces the whole circle of its duties, and finds time enough for all.

In answer to the argument that woman would be unsexed by acquiring strength of body and mind, and that beauty would no longer adorn the daughters of men, Mary Wollstonecraft says that, on the contrary, we should see dignified beauty and true grace; it would not be the grace of helplessness, but such as appears to make us respect the human body. Women should be taught the elements of anatomy and medicine, not only to enable them to take proper care of their own health, but to make them proper nurses for their parents, husbands, and children. It is likewise proper, she says, to make women acquainted with the anatomy of the mind, by allowing the sexes to associate together in every pursuit, and by leading them to observe the progress of the human understanding in the improvement of the sciences and arts,

never forgetting the science of morality, or the study of the political history of mankind. They should acquire a rational love for their country, based upon knowledge.

2. Occupations Open to Women

Mary Wollstonecraft was very advanced in her ideas concerning the vocations which women should be allowed to enter. At a time when practically the only way a respectable woman could earn her own living was by being a teacher or a governess, she professed her belief that women should be doctors, shop keepers, business women, and farmers. She says:

The few employments open to women, so far, from being liberal, are menial; and when a superior education enables them to take charge of the education of children as governesses, they are not treated like the tutors of sons...But as women educated like gentlewomen, are never designed for the humiliating situation which necessity sometimes forces them to fill; these situations are considered in the light of a degradation; and they know little of the human heart, who need to be told, that nothing so painfully sharpens sensibility as such a fall in life.⁴

Commenting upon women's acknowledged tendency to marry simply for a means of support, she says that they can hardly be blamed, since an attempt to earn their own subsistence sinks them to so despised a level. She concludes her argument with this question: "Is not that Government then very defective, and very unmindful of the happiness of one-half of its members, that does not provide for honest, independent women, by encouraging them to fill respectable situations?"⁵

⁴ p. 162

⁵ pp. 162-163

3. Ideals of Womanhood

a. Mentality

Mary Wollstonecraft makes a plea that women shall rise above the popular conception of them as creatures of caprice and emotion, without much mental ability. She deploras the "weak elegance" of mind then so fashionable. She says:

If wisdom be desirable on its own account, if virtue, to deserve the name, must be founded on knowledge, let us endeavour to strengthen our minds by reflection till our heads become a balance for our hearts; let us not confine all our thoughts to the petty occurrences of the day, or our knowledge to an acquaintance with our lovers' or husbands' hearts, but let the practice of every duty be subordinate to the grand one of improving our minds, and preparing our affections for a more exalted state.⁶

She holds up to woman the ideal of being a human being:

Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain the character of a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.⁷

She argues that if women are moral beings, they should have a chance to become intelligent.

6 p. 101

7 p. 5

b. Wifehood

Mary Wollstonecraft has much to say concerning the position and duties of a wife. She held that a woman should not be dependent upon her husband; she says, how can a being be generous who has nothing of her own? or virtuous who is not free?

She warns wives against depending entirely upon their physical attractions to keep their husbands' love. Weak are the women, she says, who imagine that they can long please without the aid of the mind. She says:

Yet, if they (women) only wished to lengthen out their sway, they should not entirely trust to their persons, for though beauty may gain a heart, it cannot keep it, even while the beauty is in full bloom, unless the mind lend, at least, some graces.⁸

She urges that women should keep the relations between them and their husbands upon a high plane of friendship, warning them against being suddenly tumbled from a throne to a stool. Mutual respect must form the basis of a successful and happy marriage. To quote:

When women are sufficiently enlightened to discover their real interest, on a grand scale, they will, I am persuaded, be very ready to resign all the prerogatives of love, that are not mutual, speaking of them as lasting prerogatives, for the calm satisfaction of friendship, and the tender confidence of habitual esteem.⁹

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⁹ p. 113
p. 114

c. Motherhood

In a letter to Gilbert Imlay written in Paris, January 1, 1794, Mary Wollstonecraft expressed her opinion that, considering the care and anxiety a woman must have about a child before it comes into the world, it belongs to her by a natural right. She goes on to say:

When men get immersed in the world, they seem to lose all sensations, except those necessary to continue or produce life! --Are these the privileges of reason? Amongst the feathered race, whilst the hen keeps the young warm, her mate stays by to cheer her; but it is sufficient for man to condescend to get a child, in order to claim it. --A man is a tyrant!¹⁰

Feeling thus passionately a father's duty toward his children, Mary Wollstonecraft did not minimize a mother's responsibility toward her children. She deplored the bad effect caused by lack of education, which made so many women unfit to be intelligent mothers. She says:

In short, speaking of the majority of mothers, they leave their children entirely to the care of servants; or, because they are their children, treat them as if they were little demi-gods, though I have always observed, that the women who thus idolise their children, seldom show common humanity to servants, or feel the least tenderness for any children but their own.

It is, however, these exclusive affections, and an individual manner of seeing things, produced by ignorance, which keep women for ever at a stand, with respect to improvement, and make many of them dedicate their lives to their children only to weaken their bodies and spoil their tempers, frustrating also any plan of education that a more rational father may adopt; for unless a mother concur, the father who restrains will ever be considered as a tyrant.¹¹

She clinches her argument:

For it would be as wise to expect corn from tares, or figs from thistles, as that a foolish ignorant woman should be a good mother.¹²

¹⁰ Camilla Jebb, Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 192

¹¹ p. 211

¹² p. 212

d. Contribution to Mankind

It was Mary Wollstonecraft's conviction that if a woman be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge, and so be a handicap to mankind. In the dedication of The Rights of Woman she says:

It is then an affection for the whole human race that makes my pen dart rapidly along to support what I believe to be the cause of virtue; and the same motive leads me earnestly to wish to see woman placed in a station in which she would advance, instead of retarding, the progress of those glorious principles that give a substance to morality.¹³

The factor which makes woman most intimately connected with the welfare of the race is her influence upon her children during their most impressionable years. The kind of home which a mother establishes makes her a good citizen or a poor one. In the words of Mary Wollstonecraft:

But, we shall not see women affectionate till more equality be established in society, till ranks are confounded and women freed, neither shall we see that dignified domestic happiness, the simple grandeur of which cannot be relished by ignorant or vitiated minds; nor will the important task of education be properly begun till the person of a woman is no longer preferred to her mind.¹⁴

III. An Evaluation of Mary Wollstonecraft's Ideas

1. Education

In many respects Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas concerning the inadequacy of the education of girls are borne out by the women novelists writing during and shortly after her time. Her statement that girls' minds were not in a healthy condition, however, is not supported by a list of the books mentioned in the novels as being read by girls, or recommended to them. The books mentioned are as follows: one of the women in Brother Jacob knows passages from Byron's Lalla Rookh, The Corsair, and The Seige of Corinth; Smollett's Roderick Random and Humphrey Clinker are described in Middlemarch as being light, broadening reading for girls; mention is made in Janet's Repentance of Dryden's Virgil, Hannah More's Sacred Dramas, Rasselas, Burke's On the Sublime and Beautiful, Mason on Self-knowledge, and Falconer's Shipwreck; The Spectator, Tatler, and Guardian papers are named in Cecilia as forming a sufficient library for girls; it is said in Coelebs in Search of a Wife that a philosophical lady may read Mallebranche, Boyle, and Locke; the girl in Coelebs who has never heard of Virgil has read Tears of Sensibility, Rosa Matilda, Sympathy of Souls, Too Civil by Half, The Sorrows of Werter, The Strangers, and The Orphans of Snowdon. Out of this list of writers and literary productions, more than half have survived the test of time, and some of these are in no sense light reading. This is interesting evidence leading to the conclusion that though girls were poorly educated in a formal way, their reading had a high degree of literary merit.

Mary Wollstonecraft charges that the education of girls is disorderly, too much emphasis being put upon mere accomplishments. There is abundant evidence in proof of the justice of this charge. Following is a list of

the accomplishments mentioned in the books as being acquired by young ladies: netting purses, veils, and gloves, making alum and sealing-wax flowers and baskets, fan-dolls, "transferred" landscapes, painting tables, covering screens, varnishing and gilding flower pots, and studying, including the study of French, German, and Italian, painting, drawing, etching, modelling, and music, including study of the harp, piano, and voice. Serious studies mentioned are experimental philosophy, chemistry, botany, grammar, astronomy, geography, and history. These, however, were given a secondary place, as when the girl quoted on page 11 says that she gives what little time she can spare from principal things, meaning accomplishments, to these other things. No less than six of the passages quoted stress the importance attached to the acquirement of accomplishments.

An exception, however, is found in the sentiments expressed by Coelebs, quoted on pages 12 and 13. He insists that education is not that which smothers a woman with 'accomplishments, but that which develops character and tends to form a friend, companion, and wife. Also, Darcy in Pride and Prejudice insists that a woman is not truly accomplished who does not improve her mind by extensive reading.¹

The deplorable conditions described in Jane Eyre as existing in at least some orphans' homes bear testimony not only that the physical welfare of girls was neglected, but that in some cases actual hardships were endured, and health injured thereby.²

For the most part, then, with the exception of the reading done by girls, the women novelists bear out Mary Wollstonecraft's conviction that girls' minds were not in a healthy state, that the education of girls was

¹ Quoted on p. 12

² see pp. 13-15

disorderly, accomplishments being unwisely stressed, and that the physical welfare of girls was neglected or actually damaged.

Mary Wollstonecraft's prophecies as to the possible future of education for women and its advantages have been largely fulfilled. Women are no longer obliged to look to men for every comfort, and to be dependent on them for their very subsistence. Girls no longer jump at cows, and shriek for a protector. They are now given good educations, both mentally and physically; they are admitted to colleges, where they can study history, politics, or any other subject. They are as free to exercise physically as boys are. Boys and girls are educated together. Women have a share in the government, and are taught to be intelligently patriotic.

2. Occupations Open to Women

The women novelists' statements regarding occupations open to women agree with those of Mary Wollstonecraft. She states that the most respectable women are the most oppressed, and this opinion is reiterated in some of the books, particularly in Deerbrook, in which Maria says that, while a woman from the uneducated classes can earn her living with her hands, an educated woman may only teach or become a feminine tailor.³ Unmarried women were treated with scorn or with ridicule, with the result that marriage was the great goal of every girl's life, and it was sometimes contracted without love. It is not to be supposed from the novels studied, however, that such marriages were considered to be desirable, though conflicting opinions are expressed.

Time has proven Mary Wollstonecraft's beliefs regarding the occupations which should be open to women to have been based upon a solid foundation of reason. She believed that women should be allowed to become doctors, shop keepers, farmers, and business women. This belief has more than been justified, for women now engage in these and many other occupations formerly open only to men.

³ quoted on p. 18

3. Conceptions of Womanhood

a. Mentality

Mary Wollstonecraft's presentation of the attitude toward woman's mentality is a fair one, judging by the opinions expressed in the various novels. Almost without exception, woman is represented as being a vastly inferior creature, incapable of attaining any degree of learning. It was considered very unbecoming for a woman to betray any knowledge, and she was particularly advised to conceal any learning which she might chance to possess from the men of her acquaintance. Men had a horror of a learned woman, and a girl having in any degree the reputation of being a wit was doomed to spinsterhood in almost every case. Thus Mary Wollstonecraft is right in saying that a girl's education was believed to be properly relative to man's, she being inferior to him.

Opposing opinions are expressed as to whether or not domestic accomplishments debase a woman, but the prevailing opinion seems to be that they do not, that a woman is properly fitted for them.

Mary Wollstonecraft complains that the negative virtues are expected of a woman. This is well borne out by the women novelists. An ideal woman is pictured as being docile, receptive, light-minded, placid, humble, and passive. She is to look upon her husband's learning with awe and reverence. By no means is she ever to interfere in his affairs. She asks his opinion upon every important matter. Although she is gifted in all the accomplishments, she never shows any unbecoming knowledge. She creates order in the home, and attends to all of her husband's physical needs.

Welcome relief from such opinions is found in Jane Eyre, where it is stated that girls need exercise for their faculties as much as their brothers do, and in Coelebs in Search of a Wife, where Caleb says that a wife

should be directress and præceptress for her family, and a companion for her husband.⁴

Mary Wollstonecraft's hope that women should rise above the popular conception of them as creatures of caprice and emotion, without much mental ability, has been partially realized. Since women have taken positions of responsibility in the world, they have had to lose much of their caprice and emotionalism. By assuming these responsibilities they have proven their mental ability to be greater than it was supposed to have been.

⁴ Quoted on pp. 23 and 27

b. Wifehood

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that a woman should not be merely a plaything and source of amusement to her husband, but should be his companion, sharing all with him, on an equality with him. This was far from being the commonly accepted opinion. Excerpts from the works of women novelists writing during and shortly after the time of Mary Wollstonecraft show that a woman was considered duty-bound to her husband. She must submit to his wishes, subdue her nature to his, and cater to his needs. Should he be unfaithful and cruel to her, she is still bound to him. A husband should please himself, and his wife please him. Women were thought to be so much inferior to men as to preclude any possibility of companionship. She must be a helpmate to him, but the favor need not be returned.

Again the exception is found in Coelebs in Search of a Wife. Coelebs endeavors to show that Paul's injunction to wives to be obedient to their husbands was coupled with the command to promote good works in men, so that wives are not only their husbands' associates, on an equality with them, but the inspirers of their virtues.⁵

Mary Wollstonecraft's hopes regarding wifehood have been largely realized. Women have come to be more of companions and less of inferiors to their husbands. A woman is no longer bound to obey her husband, nor to remain with him when he is cruel and unfaithful. Also, women perhaps depend less upon their physical and more upon their mental charms to keep their husbands' love.

⁵ Quoted on p. 37

c. Motherhood

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that poorly educated women are unfit to be mothers, and that women taught to be passively obedient to their husbands have not sufficient character to train their children properly. Lady Bertram in Mansfield Park is an excellent example of this kind of woman. She pays not the least attention to the education of her daughters, thinking more of her pet dog than of her children. She is guided by her husband in everything of importance, and by her sister in matters of less weight.⁶ Mrs. Bennett in Pride and Prejudice is much the same sort of mother.

It is interesting to note that here, as in so many other instances, Mary Wollstonecraft was right. There is no longer any excuse for unintelligent motherhood, with the information which is available to mothers. Training for parenthood is a part of every college curriculum, and specialized study has been made of child care and the problems of mothers.

⁶ Described on p. 38

d. Contribution to Mankind

Mary Wollstonecraft believed that women should enter politics. No agreement with this opinion is found in the novels studied. Women and politics are mentioned only in Felix Holt, and there an indifferent attitude on the part of the women toward politics is described. They are more interested in a speech by the curate than in any candidate's speech.⁷

Literary ambition in a woman, of course approved by Mary Wollstonecraft, found a good deal of disapproval. A woman's real vocation was believed to consist in the quiet discharge of social duties, rather than a public career. Frances Burney was comforted upon being assured that her book was thought to have been written by a man. Mrs. Montagu expected a book written by a woman to be merely pretty.

Housework was considered woman's proper work, and marriage her only goal and her only true and satisfactory sphere. This is directly opposed to Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas upon the subject; she deplored a girl's marrying to "better herself."

Mary Wollstonecraft's desire that women might advance, rather than retard the progress of the world, has been partially realized. Girls can now more readily learn how to be wise mothers, companionable wives, and worthy citizens than they could at the time this unusual woman expressed her convictions. They are able to make definite contributions to the world in a variety of worthy occupations.

Mary Wollstonecraft can only be admired for the clearness of her vision, and for her courage in declaring her beliefs. She was far in advance of her time, a pioneer to whom all women should be grateful for the service she rendered them.

⁷ See p. 41

IV. General Inferences Drawn from the Novels Regarding the Position of Woman

In spite of the conclusion reached in the preceding section, that Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas regarding the position held by women during her time are largely borne out by the women novelists writing contemporaneously with and immediately after her, a doubt remains in the mind of the reader of these novels as to the degree of certainty with which this conclusion can be accepted. To be sure, according to most of the quotations cited, the education of girls was inadequate, few occupations were open to them, they were not rated high mentally, wives were considered inferior to their husbands, some mothers were poor ones, and the ability of women to make genuine contributions to the progress of mankind was doubted. But some questions arise.

Were girls always poorly educated, because their formal education was meager? Might not some of them have succeeded in educating themselves to a good degree? The high percentage of worthy books mentioned as having been read by girls indicates that they were capable of appreciating good literature, and read more than light novels. A number of women in the books possess enough education to become governesses or teachers, among them Jane Eyre, Frances Henri in The Professor, Lucy Snowe in Villette, and Miss Taylor in Jane Austen's Emma. The conversation of some of the women characters indicates a good degree of knowledge.

Although few occupations were open to women, this does not prove that women in that day were not capable of filling responsible positions adequately. The occupations open to women, positions as governesses or teachers, called for a high degree of learning. Also, it was to the credit of women if they were able to keep contented and cheerful within their limited fields of activity. That many women did this is demonstrated by the group of feminine characters in Mrs. Gaskell's Cranford. They make the utmost of their

opportunities, and are, with exceptions due to temperament, busy and contented. A delightful spirit of co-operation and helpfulness is manifested. When it becomes necessary for Miss Matty to earn her own living, she is set up in business selling tea, and the entire village seems to come to her for tea.

Could not women have been more highly endowed mentally than was commonly supposed? Superior intellects may have lain in obscurity, needing only proper training for expansion and development. Many of the degraded notions of women's intellect are expressed by ignorant and narrow minded characters in the novels, and they cannot be accepted as representing the attitude taken by a more educated class of people. Many of the characters in the novels are sprightly, alert girls, giving every indication of keenness of intellect. Among these may be mentioned Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey, Emma in Jane Austen's book by that title, Elinor Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility, Elizabeth Bennett in Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Shirley, Lucy Snowe in Villette, Helen Lawrence in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Camilla, Evelina, Cecilia, Dinah Morris in Adam Bede, Gwendolyn Fairfax and Mirah Mordecai in Daniel Deronda, Esther Lyon in Felix Holt, Dorothea Brooke and Mary Garth in Middlemarch, Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss, Romola, and Margaret in Deerbrook.

While wives were considered to be inferior to their husbands, some of the wives characterized in the novels are not at all dominated by their husbands. Mrs. John Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility easily succeeds in getting her husband to pursue the course she wishes regarding his giving his mother and sisters a generous sum of money following the death of the elder Mr. Dashwood, and one infers that she habitually influences him in similar ways; Rosamond Lydgate in Middlemarch consistently manages to get her way; although she has no husband, Elizabeth Elliott in Persuasion is able to coax

her father into almost anything; and it is Elizabeth's Bennet's independence and pride of spirit which attracts Darcy to her, and she staunchly but charmingly maintains her rights.

Many admirable mothers are described. Mrs. Dashwood is a wise, sympathetic, and unselfish mother; Mrs. Morland has similar virtues; Mrs. Markham in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall expresses unusually advanced ideas regarding the training of girls⁸; Mrs. Poyser in Adam Bede is a devoted mother; and while she is not a mother, Miss Taylor in Jane Austen's Emma fills the place of the most ideal of mothers to Emma, and Lady Russell performs a similar office to Anne in Persuasion.

As to women's contribution to the world, here, too, different inferences may be gained from general conditions than would seem probable from passages found in the novels. The diary of Fanny Burney reveals the fact that, though a literary career was not generally considered desirable for a woman, the homage and respect accorded to a successful young woman author was such as must have been gratifying, and did not indicate an attitude of disapproval, at least on the part of a class of people interested in literature. Although housework was considered a woman's work, her chief occupation, it was more properly so in those days, when the difficulties involved in domestic labors made them an occupation demanding a fair degree of skill, and much more time than is now required. Further, the fact still remains that, for many women, the business of being a homemaker, wife, and mother, is the most absorbing and challenging of careers, and the one in which they can make the most valuable contribution to the world.

We may believe, then, that a woman of Mary Wollstonecraft's time was

⁸ Quoted on pp. 7-8

not always the ignorant, useless, dominating creature that a literal interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft's statements and those found in the novels would lead one to believe. She was very often well informed, capable of reading good books and of conversing intelligently; she performed creditably the offices of a governess or teacher, or capably managed a home; she was not mentally inferior, nor was she dominated by her husband, but on the contrary, might dominate him; she was a wise mother, training her children well; and she performed her services to humanity in being such a mother, in teaching, or in writing. Only by realizing these facts, which balance the dark picture presented by Mary Wollstonecraft and statements in the novels, can we get a true conception of the woman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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