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Radical Spirituality and Reason in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Kari Lokke

The stamen of immortality, if I may be allowed the phrase, is the perfectibility of human reason; for, were man created perfect, or did a flood of knowledge break in upon him, when he arrived at maturity, that precluded error, I should doubt whether his existence would be continued after the dissolution of the body. But, in the present state of things, every difficulty in morals that escapes from human discussion, and equally baffles the investigation of profound thinking, and the lightning glance of genius, is an argument on which I build my belief in the immortality of the soul. Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet outwardly ornamented with elaborate care, and so adorned to delight man, 'that with honour he may love,' the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction, and man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust. But dismissing these fanciful theories, and considering woman as a whole, let it be what it will, instead of a part of man, the inquiry is whether she have reason or not. If she have, which, for a moment, I will take for granted, she was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character.¹

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft builds her case for women's rights on the foundational assumption that all human beings possess reason. In this passage, Wollstonecraft presents the heart of her argument for the equality of men and women: both possess the God-given faculty of reason. Though the presence of reason may be more evident in certain individuals than in others, 'the nature of reason must be the same in all' (167). In privileging the faculty of reason, Wollstonecraft joins the mainstream of European Enlightenment philosophers, from John Locke to Voltaire to Immanuel Kant. But what exactly does Wollstonecraft mean by reason? Her conceptualization of reason is distinctive and unique, just as, according to William Godwin, 'her religion was almost entirely of her own creation'.² Although nominally Anglican, Wollstonecraft developed her own religious creed, asserting the immortality of the soul while dispensing with the need for divine retribution or punishment in the afterlife. Similarly, she conceives of reason in an entirely positive and forward thinking, if eclectic, manner. Reason is 'the simple power of improvement', 'an emanation of divinity' and the tie that connects 'the creature with the Creator' (167). Integrating Neo-platonic ideas of humanity as emanating from a single Godhead with Judeo-Christian notions of creation and Enlightenment belief in human perfectibility, Wollstonecraft suggests that the purpose of life on earth is to prepare human beings for a reunion with the Divine after death through self-improvement grounded in the exercise of their reason.

Her metaphor of reason as 'the stamen of immortality' (166) is telling. We witness here both the precision and the suggestiveness of Wollstonecraft's terminology. The first meaning of 'stamen' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the fixed, vertical warp of a textile fabric through which the woof is cast.³ In other words, for Wollstonecraft, reason is, metaphorically, upwardly directed, pre-existing, innate and permanent in human nature. The experience of questioning, searching and overcoming error represents the woof that weaves through this stable warp as humans wind their way towards death. The second entry defines 'stamen' in a threefold manner. (A) 'Stamen' can designate the thread spun by the Fates, the length of which determines one's life span. The ideas of death and the possibility of life after death may thus also be implicit in the choice of the word 'stamen'. (B) It is a 'germinal principle' in which future characteristics of any nascent existence are implicit. Thus, Wollstonecraft's choice of metaphors suggests that reason is inextricable from human capacity for change and growth and that it directs that development. Stamen then becomes (C) 'the fundamental or essential element of a thing'. Immortality

cannot be conceived of, Wollstonecraft emphasizes, without the concept of reason. The third OED entry for 'stamen' is the meaning most common today: 'the male or fertilizing organ of a flowering plant'. This definition was also current in the intellectual discourse of Wollstonecraft's day, so pervaded by botanical terminology. If, indeed, reason is a universal human attribute, then, in contemporary feminist or psychoanalytic parlance, Wollstonecraft might be suggesting, perhaps unconsciously, that the phallus and its fertility are not sex specific.

Wollstonecraft, however, is certainly not unique among Enlightenment thinkers in defining reason in relation to divinity and accompanying religious concepts like faith, inspiration and revelation. Eighteenth-century philosophers could not avoid positioning themselves in relation to the enormous ideological power of the Christian church. Thus, Locke, for example, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, defines reason as 'natural revelation, whereby the eternal Father of light, and fountain of all knowledge, communicates to mankind that portion of truth, which he has laid within the reach of their natural faculties'.⁴ Locke argues that one must employ these natural faculties to establish proof of the truth of an assertion, through a painstaking search for and examination of evidence even if that assertion appears to be the product of revelation. Once reason steps in, Locke's focus is here on earth rather than on 'the eternal Father of light'.⁵ Voltaire, much more polemically, sets reason in opposition to theological dogma, institutionalized religion and fanaticism. Reason, for Voltaire, is a kind of common sense that is unfortunately anything but common. Thus, in the chapter on enthusiasm from the *Philosophical Dictionary*, he claims, as a matter of fact, as if it were completely self-evident, that, unlike the ecstatic visions of Christian saints or Hindu fakirs, '[r]eason consists in constantly perceiving things as they really are'.⁶ Voltaire's subsequent entry 'Reason' tells the tale of the quintessentially reasonable, and thereby unfortunate, man. The Pope imprisons him for explaining that the pontiff's power and wealth make him an anti-Christ. The Doge of Venice also locks him up for holding the Ascension Day ritual of Venice's marriage to the sea up to rational scrutiny. Ultimately, Voltaire's reasonable man is executed by Muslims in Constantinople, when he calls the Koran 'a rehash of Judaism and a tedious collection of fairy tales'.⁷

As Genevieve Lloyd has demonstrated in *The Man of Reason*, the western philosophical tradition, from the time of Plato and Aristotle, has been a masculinist tradition that defined reason through transcendence of traits culturally coded as feminine.⁸ Thus, the ideal of sovereign reason was itself

gendered and constructed in opposition to the feminine. Even when reason was in theory defined as universal and beyond sex, women were in practice excluded from mainstream philosophical debate by virtue of their association with the mundane, the particular, the childlike and the natural. With the rise of the bourgeois family, the ascendancy of the doctrine of separate spheres and two-sex complementary models of biology in eighteenth-century England, ideological pressure for this exclusion intensified. Wollstonecraft meets this challenge not by claiming woman's right to a masculine standard of rationality and order as critics often suggest. Instead, she radically redefines reason as moral and spiritual effort, a search for truth, fuelled by emotional and passionate conflict and instilled in humanity by the Creator. Furthermore, she renders evident the illogic of limiting this God-given capacity of reason to one half of the human race.

Unlike Locke and Voltaire, then, Wollstonecraft makes immortality, the existence of the soul after the dissolution of the body, key to her definition of reason. Her focus on the disembodied soul shifts the emphasis away from biological differences of the sexes and allows Wollstonecraft to argue for the potential absolute equality of the sexes. Thus, religious belief is central to her understanding of reason. Furthermore, her disquisition on reason does not directly address the nature of revelation, question its reality or seek to define instances in which claims to inspiration may be valid. Instead, she avoids the quagmire of these murky questions that preoccupied the European Enlightenment by simply making it clear that attaining physical adulthood is obviously not synonymous with revelatory spiritual maturity; no 'flood of knowledge' that precludes error suddenly breaks in upon the individual. Like many of her fellow Romantic era writers, Wollstonecraft was fascinated by questions of the nature of genius, yet here she acknowledges that even 'the lightening glance of genius' (167) is often baffled in the face of weighty moral questions. Neither intellectual nor poetic inspiration, then, provides dependable and direct access to the truth. This human frailty is paradoxically, for Wollstonecraft, proof of the immortality of the soul as well as of the divine provenance of the faculty of reason. 'Can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?' (167), she asks. In other words, the search for truth, guided by reason, is the essential purpose of life on earth, and it is this search that opens the door to life after death. The knowledge gained in this search, she asserts in a later passage, is based on the power of drawing comprehensive, generalized ideas from individual observations. In an intriguing metaphor that sums up her train of thought,

she describes this fund of comprehensive ideas or conclusions as preparation for eternal life, 'the store laid up that is to clothe the soul when it leaves the body' (169). Metaphors of ornamentation, drapery and veiling abound in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* almost always with overwhelmingly negative connotations of waste, superficiality, superfluity, vanity and deceit. Thus, for example, in her critique of a standing army, she describes the polished manners and gallantry of military men as 'render[ing] vice more dangerous, by concealing its deformity under gay ornamental drapery' (123). Similarly, she sets 'the real dignity of man' in opposition to the 'gaudy hereditary trappings' of the aristocracy (129). Wollstonecraft thus embeds her critique of women's socialized preoccupation with adornment and fashion in a web of metaphors prominent throughout her text. Here, in contrast, she imagines a disembodied soul clothed only in the comprehensive ideas it has, in a sense, *earned* in its life on earth.

Wollstonecraft's definition of reason is, furthermore, distinctive in its emphasis upon progress and perfectibility; '[r]eason is the simple power of improvement' (167), she writes. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is above all else a manifesto for change, for progress in women's cultural, economic, civil and political position in western society. Her targets are tradition, custom, prejudice and the status quo in both socioeconomic and gender relations. Accordingly, Wollstonecraft argues from beginning to end for the necessity of the *progress* of knowledge and liberty *and* for woman's right and duty to participate in this progress. The improvement Wollstonecraft seeks is both individual and collective; as the process of development prepares each person for the afterlife, so it also improves the moral and spiritual tenor of life on earth. Wollstonecraft takes the word 'perfectibility' from Jean-Jacques Rousseau who coined the term in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754). For Rousseau, human perfectibility is the capacity for self-improvement that, along with free will, distinguishes humanity from animals and makes possible a sense of history and self-awareness or self-reflection. Far from being an unequivocally positive attribute that leads humankind towards perfection, perfectibility for Rousseau is the source of modern humanity's greatest scourges: pride, vanity, competition, egotism, possessiveness and greed. In order to expose the deleterious influence of the human capacity for 'progress', Rousseau posits a hypothetical, idealized state of nature as a critique of the corruptions of civilized society brought on by the human drive towards improvement. Wollstonecraft purposely turns Rousseau's critique on its head by naming reason, the 'simple power of improvement' as the highest good

and ‘an emanation of divinity’ (167). In an earlier memorable formulation, she articulates her differences with both Rousseau’s regressive idealization of a state of nature and with conservative apologists for the status quo: ‘Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors that all *is* now right; and I, that all will *be* right’ (121; emphasis in original). Here, Wollstonecraft joins her contemporaries Condorcet, Germaine de Staël, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller in transforming Rousseau’s perfectibility into a vision of unending human progress, both individual and collective. Wollstonecraft’s conclusion is, however, distinctively and unequivocally utopian: ‘all will *be* right’ (121), she claims.

Wollstonecraft’s ongoing debate with Rousseau throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* highlights its cosmopolitan philosophical context. Along with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published two years earlier in 1790, it was written quickly in response to French Revolutionary ferment and to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, in particular. Like Olympe de Gouges (see Chapter 5 of this volume), Wollstonecraft considered it an injustice, an absurdity, in fact, that ‘the rights of man’ were not extended to women. In her opening address to the French diplomat Talleyrand, Wollstonecraft writes that her ‘affection for the whole human race... leads [her] 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’ (101). Talleyrand had recently presented a report on state-supported public education to the French Revolutionary National Assembly. Wollstonecraft seeks to compel him to rethink the short-sighted recommendation that schooling for girls should continue only until eight years of age, after which they would be confined to domestic duties in the paternal home, a recommendation undoubtedly influenced by the gender complementary pedagogical programme spelled out in Rousseau’s *Emile*. Rousseau believed that female and male virtues are essentially different and names ‘sweetness’ (*douceur*) as the foremost female virtue. Women, he suggests, must cultivate this quality because, as weak and delicate beings, they are formed to obey man, an imperfect being full of vices and faults. If wives suffer even injustice and wrongs inflicted by their husbands without complaining, their sweetness and passivity will eventually win the day. When Wollstonecraft concludes this passage by affirming that woman ‘was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character’ (167), she is explicitly refuting Rousseau’s assertions that woman’s purpose is to provide alluring, comforting and supportive companionship to man.

Accordingly, Wollstonecraft's chapter 'On National Education' argues forcefully that women historically have not been and cannot be confined to domestic life, and that they should therefore be free to participate in the ongoing self-improvement inherent in all mankind. Whereas in the past women have gained enormous power through the devious means of cunning and manipulation, direct and honest access to civil and economic power would be far better for them and for society as a whole, she asserts. Her earlier chapter on 'unnatural' social distinctions furthermore argues that women should gain self-sufficiency through employment as doctors, nurses, farmers, business managers and direct participants in representative government. Thus, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that the perfectibility of men and that of women are interdependent and that currently this interdependence takes the form of a master/slave relationship degrading to both. 'Make [women] free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet' (320). Most emphatically, Wollstonecraft concludes her treatise with an urgent plea to the 'men of understanding' among her readers: 'Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty' (343).

Wollstonecraft's appeal to male authority and to masculine standards as well as her veiled contempt for her fellow women have troubled feminists today, but one must remember that this appeal is calculated and rhetorical; Wollstonecraft is well aware that men in her day hold the power to make institutional and political change. In fact, Wollstonecraft's disquisition on reason culminates in her emphatic rejection of the notion, which she attributes to both Rousseau and John Milton, that women's access to reason, truth and virtue should be mediated by men. If 'man, [is] ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust' (167). As beings endowed with reason, women should be free 'to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue' (134). This aim, and not the duties of daughter, wife and mother in relation to men, should be the foremost goal of their earthly exertions. Woman, contrary to Biblical and British legal tradition, is not a part of man but a whole unto herself.

Wollstonecraft's definition of reason as 'an emanation of divinity', a capacity for self-improvement, implies an explicit individualism; '[e]very

individual is this respect a world in itself' (167). This is not the bourgeois, possessive individualism so well described by C. B. Macpherson in his classic study.⁹ After all, Wollstonecraft considered respect for private property 'a poisoned fountain' from which flow 'most of the evils and vices which render this world such a dreary scene to the contemplative mind' (277). The elucidation here of the spiritual foundation of her faith in rational thought instead corroborates current redefinitions of her feminism as rooted in 'religiously inspired utopian radicalism' rather than bourgeois liberalism.¹⁰ Wollstonecraft emphasizes that each individual woman is a spiritual and moral microcosm, who should be free to develop her reason and virtue independently. It is clearly wrong that man should 'ever [be] placed between her and reason' (167). Reason for Wollstonecraft means self-determination, 'the divine indefeasible earthly sovereignty breathed into man by the Master of the universe' (343). In this way, she mounts a direct attack on the spiritual subordination of women voiced by Milton's Eve when Eve indicates her willingness to defer to Adam's judgement in questions of divine law: 'To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorned. / My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst / *Unargued* I obey; so God ordains; / God is *thy law, thou mine*: to know no more / Is Woman's *happiest* knowledge and her *praise*' (PL 4. 634–38; Wollstonecraft's italics).¹¹ Similarly, she quotes with ironic contempt Raphael's admonition to Adam that he love honourably rather than carnally ('that with honor he may love'), given Adam's simultaneous preoccupation with Eve's irresistible seductiveness and his conviction of her mental inferiority. Appropriately, Wollstonecraft's critique of *Paradise Lost* is clothed in metaphors of celestial light. She writes, 'For if it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understandings, that stability of character which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite' (127). The spirited dialogue with Milton and Rousseau that Wollstonecraft sustains in this passage and throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* clarifies the feminist resonances of her use of the Enlightenment terms reason and perfectibility and places them in the context of her belief in providential design and rational religion.