

# A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects

Mary Wollstonecraft

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—If this work gets you interested in its author, read Claire Tomalin's fine *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1974).

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## Glossary

**accomplishment:** That is a kind of sneer-word when MW uses it writing about the ‘accomplishments’ that women are trained to have. To ‘accomplish’ something can be to complete or finish it; a few decades ago some young women were sent to a ‘finishing school’ before being launched into society.

**address:** skill, elegance, dexterity; usually thought of (by MW at least) as something learned, practised, contrived—not natural. See page 58.

**amuse:** In MW’s time ‘amuse’ had a central meaning which it now has only at the margins: to ‘amuse oneself by...’ was to pass the time by... A child who is ‘amusing herself’ by dressing her doll (page 29) needn’t be taking much pleasure in this.

**animal spirits:** These figured in a theory, popularised by Descartes: they were supposed to be an extremely fine-divided liquid or gas—much less lumpy than water or air—that could move with great speed and get in anywhere; among their roles was to transmit causal influences from the sense-organs to the brain, almost instantaneously.

**brute, brutal:** A brute is a lower or non-human animal. A brutal or brutish way of behaving is one that falls below a minimum standard for being human—e.g. the ‘brutal’ behaviour of a mother [on page 89] who indulges her child without thinking about the effects of her conduct on the child’s later development or on •other people.

**docile:** Strictly and originally this meant ‘able to learn’ and/or ‘willing to learn’. In MW’s usage, as in ours today, a ‘docile’ person is one who is easy to manage, persuade, manipulate, etc. One who is biddable.

**education:** In MW’s time this word had a wider meaning than it tends to have today. It wouldn’t be far wrong to replace most occurrences of it by ‘upbringing’. See MW’s discussion of ‘education’ starting on page 14.

**genius:** In the present work this means something like ‘extremely high-level intellect’; similar to the word’s present meaning, but not as strong.

**he or she:** MW never uses ‘he or she’, ‘his or hers’ or the like. These occur in the present version to avoid the discomfort we feel in her use of ‘it’, as when she says ‘every being’ can become virtuous by the exercise of ‘its own reason’.

**(im)mortal:** MW ties •being immortal to •having reason and to •being answerable to God.

**mistress:** In this work, a ‘mistress of’ a family is in charge of a family; and a ‘mistress of’ a man is a sexual partner of a man. The word is not used here except in those two kinds of context.

**person:** When MW refers to a woman’s ‘person’ she is always referring to the woman herself considered as sexually attractive. A man’s interest in a woman’s ‘person’ is his sexual interest in her body, though clothing and jewellery may also come into it.

**prescription:** In several important places MW uses ‘prescription’ in its sense as a legal term, now obsolete, referring to something’s being accepted or unchallenged etc. *because it has been in place for so long.*

**sceptre:** An ornamental rod held in the hand of a monarch as a symbol of royal authority. MW uses the word several times, always as a metaphor for power or authority: ‘beauty

is woman's sceptre' means that beauty is woman's source of power.

**sense:** MW speaks of 'a man of sense' she means 'a fairly intelligent man' or, in her terms, 'a man with a fairly enlarged understanding'.

**sensibility:** Capacity for refined emotion, readiness to feel compassion for suffering, or the quality of being strongly affected by emotional influences. MW uses the adjective 'sensible'—e.g. on page 63—in pretty much our sense of it.

**sentimental:** This meant 'having to do with feelings'; the implication of shallow and unworthy feelings came after MW's time. On page 1 'sentimental lust' presumably means 'intense hankering for various kinds of feelings'.

**sex:** For MW 'sex' is a classificatory term—e.g. 'I speak for my sex' meaning 'I speak for all women'. (The use of 'sex' as short for 'copulation' is of more recent vintage.) See the striking example on page 36. MW uses phrases about 'giving a sex to X' meaning (page 6) treating X as though it related to only one of the sexes, or (pages 24, 29 and 41) treating X as though there were one version of it for females and a

different one for males.

**subtlety:** In MW's usage this means something close to 'address' (see above).

**vice, vicious:** For an 18th century writer vice is simply wrong conduct, with no necessary implication of anything sexual (except perhaps on page 55); and a vicious person is simply someone who often acts wrongly, with no necessary implication of anything like savage cruelty.

**virtue:** On a few occasions in this work MW uses 'virtue' with some of its older sense of 'power'. One example is on page 36. On page 65 MW personifies virtue as feminine.

**voluptuous:** Having to do with sexual pleasure.

**vulgar:** In MW's day 'vulgar' as applied to people meant 'common, ordinary, not much educated, not very thoughtful'. More generally, 'vulgar x' meant 'the kind of x that would be associated with vulgar people'.

**woman:** This version follows MW exactly in her uses of 'woman', 'women', 'lady', 'female' and 'feminine', and in her use of the masculine counterparts of these.

## Dedicatory Letter

[This work appeared in 1792, when Talleyrand—as he is usually called today—was active in the higher levels of the developing French revolution. A Constitution establishing France as a constitutional monarchy had been established in 1791. The infamous ‘reign of terror’ was still a year away. Two years earlier, MW had published a defence of the revolution against Burke, entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*.]

### To M. Talleyrand-Périgord former Bishop of Autun

Sir:

Having read with great pleasure a pamphlet on National Education that you recently published, I dedicate this volume to you, to induce you to reconsider the subject and maturely weigh what I shall say about the rights of woman and national education; and I’m calling with the firm tone of humanity. [‘National education’ is the topic of the penultimate chapter, starting on page 93.] In these arguments, sir, I am not trying to get anything for myself; I plead not for myself but for my for my sex. ·My own personal wants, anyway, amount to very little·. For many years I have regarded *independence* as the great blessing of life, the basis of every virtue; and even if I end up living on a barren heath, I will always guarantee my independence by contracting my wants.

So it is my affection for the whole human race that •makes my pen speed along to support what I believe to be the cause of virtue, and •leads me to long to see woman’s place in the world enable her to advance the progress of the glorious principles that give a substance to morality, rather than holding them back. My opinion about the rights and duties of woman seems to flow so naturally from those simple principles that it seems almost inevitable that some of the enlarged minds who formed your admirable constitution will agree with me.

[In this next paragraph, ‘essence’ is used not in the customary philosophical sense, but in the sense involved in ‘essence of lavender’. A ‘voluptuary’ is someone devoted to the pursuit of luxury and sensual pleasure.]

Knowledge is spread more widely in France than in any ·other· part of Europe; and I attribute this in large measure to the social intercourse there has long been in France between the sexes. It is true (I’m going to speak freely) that in France the very essence of sensuality has been extracted for the pleasure of the voluptuary, and a kind of sentimental lust [see Glossary] has prevailed. This, together with the system of deceptiveness that the whole spirit of their political and civil government taught, have given a sinister sort of knowingness to the French character. . . .and a polish of manners that injures the substance by driving sincerity out of society. And modesty—the fairest garb of virtue—has been more grossly insulted in France than even in England; the ·minimal· attention to decency that ·even· brutes instinctively observe is regarded by French women as *prudish*!

Manners and morals are so closely related that they have often been confused with one another; but although manners *should* be only the natural reflection of morals, when various causes have produced unnatural and corrupt manners that infect even the young, morality becomes an empty name. Personal restraint and respect for cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life are the graceful pillars of modesty, but French women almost despise them. If the pure flame of patriotism has reached their hearts, they should work

to improve the morals of their fellow-citizens by teaching men not only •to respect modesty in women but •to become modest themselves, as the only way to deserve women's respect.

Fighting for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle: *If woman isn't fitted by education to become man's companion, she will stop the progress of knowledge*, because truth must be common to all; if it isn't it won't be able to influence how people in general behave. And how can woman be expected to cooperate if she doesn't know *why* she ought to be virtuous? if freedom doesn't strengthen her reason until she understands her •duty and sees how it is connected with her real •good? If children are to be brought up to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly sequence of virtues arises, can be produced only by attending to the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the upbringing and situation of woman at present shuts her out from such investigations.

In this work I have produced many arguments that I found conclusive, showing that the prevailing notion of 'the female character' is subversive of morality. I have contended that to make the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail; and that chastity will never be respected in the male world until *the person of a woman* is not virtually idolized while *the woman* has little virtue or sense. [see Glossary on 'person']. . . .

Consider these remarks dispassionately, Sir, for you seemed to have a glimpse of this truth when you said that 'to see one half of the human race excluded by the other half from all participation of government is a political phenomenon that can't possibly be explained according to abstract principles'. If that is so, what does your constitution rest on? If the abstract rights of man can stand discussion

and explanation, those of woman—by a parity of reasoning—won't shrink from the same test: though a different view prevails in this country, built on the very arguments that you use to justify the oppression of woman—prescription [see Glossary].

I address you as a legislator: When men fight for their freedom, fight to be allowed to judge for themselves concerning their own happiness, isn't it inconsistent and unjust to hold women down? I know that you firmly believe you are acting in the manner most likely to promote women's happiness; but who made *man* the exclusive judge •of that• if woman shares with him the gift of reason?

Tyrants of every kind, from the weak king to the weak father of a family, use this same argument •that 'It is in your own best interests'•. They are all eager to crush reason, but they always say that they usurp reason's throne only to be useful. Isn't that what you are doing when you *force* all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain walled in by their families and groping in the dark? Surely, sir, you won't say that a duty can be binding without being founded on reason! Arguments •for civil and political rights can be drawn •from reason; and with that splendid support, the more understanding women acquire the more they will be attached to their duty, *understanding* it. Unless they understand it—unless their morals are based on the same immutable principles as those of man—no authority can make them act virtuously. They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.

If you are going to exclude women, without consulting them, from sharing in the natural rights of mankind, then defend yourself against accusations of injustice and inconsistency by proving that *women don't have reason*. If you don't do that, then this flaw in your *New Constitution*—the first

constitution based on reason—will show for all times that man must in some way act like a tyrant, and that tyranny, in whatever part of society it raises its arrogant head, will always undermine morality.

I have produced what seemed to me to be irrefutable arguments, drawn from matters of fact, to prove my often-repeated assertion that women cannot by force be confined to domestic concerns. However ignorant they are, they *will* get involved in more weighty affairs, neglecting private duties only to disturb by cunning tricks the orderly plans of reason that rise above their comprehension.

Also, while women are only made to acquire personal accomplishments [see Glossary], men will seek pleasure in variety, and faithless husbands will make faithless wives. Indeed, such ignorant beings as wives are in such a system will be very excusable when, not having been taught to respect public good or allowed any civil rights, they try to make things more fair by *retaliation*.

When the box of mischief has been thus opened in society, what is to preserve private virtue, the only security of public freedom and universal happiness?

•The answer is: Let there be no coercion established in society—no laws that *force* people into this or that social role or situation. When that is achieved, the common law of gravity will hold sway and the sexes will fall into their proper places. With fairer laws forming your citizens, marriage can

become more sacred; your young men can choose wives from motives of affection, and your maidens can allow love to root out vanity.

The father of a family won't weaken his constitution and debase his sentiments by visiting prostitutes; he won't in obeying the call of •sexual• appetite forget the purpose for which it was implanted in him; and the mother won't neglect her children to practise the arts of teasing and flirting when sense and modesty secure her the friendship of her husband.

But until men become attentive to the duty of a father, you can't expect women to spend in their nursery the time that they . . . choose to spend at their mirror; for this exercise in cunning is only a natural instinct to enable them to obtain indirectly a little of the power of which they are unjustly denied a share. If women aren't permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will seek illicit privileges in ways that make both men and themselves vicious [see Glossary].

I wish, sir, to get some investigations of this kind going in France. If they lead to a confirmation of my principles, then when your constitution is revised the rights of woman may be •respected, if it has been fully proved that reason calls for this •respect and loudly demands *justice* for one half of the human race.

I am, sir,

Yours respectfully,

M. W.

## Introduction

After thinking about the sweep of history and viewing the present world with anxious care, I find my spirits depressed by the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation. I have had to admit, sadly, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the world is not yet anywhere near to being fully civilized. I have looked into various books on education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but all this has given me is a deep conviction that •the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the main source of the misery I deplore, and that •women in particular are made weak and wretched by a number of co-operating causes, originating from one hasty conclusion [MW's phrase]. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, show clearly that their minds are not in a healthy state; as with flowers planted in soil that is too rich, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flamboyant leaves, after giving pleasure to viewers, fade on the stalk, disregarded, long before it was the time for them to reach maturity. This barren blooming is caused partly by a false system of education, gathered from the books on the subject by men. These writers, regarding females as women rather than as human creatures, have been more concerned to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and this homage to women's attractions has distorted their understanding to such an extent that almost all the civilized women of the present century are anxious only to inspire •love, when they ought to have the nobler aim of getting •respect for their abilities and virtues.

In a book on female rights and manners, therefore, the works written specifically for their improvement mustn't be

overlooked; especially when the book says explicitly •that women's minds are weakened by false refinement, •that the books of instruction written by men of genius [see Glossary] have been as likely to do harm as more frivolous productions; and •that—when improvable *reason* is regarded as the dignity that raises men above the lower animal and puts a natural sceptre [see Glossary] in a feeble hand—those 'instructive' works regard woman (in true Moslem fashion) as beings of a subordinate kind and not as a part of the human species.

But don't think that because I am a woman I mean to stir up violently the debated question about the equality and inferiority of the •female• sex; but that topic does lie across my path, and if I sidle past it I'll subject my main line of reasoning to misunderstanding. So I shall pause here in order to give a brief statement of my opinion about it. In the government of the physical world—as distinct from the governments of the social or political world—it is observable that the female is, so far as strength is concerned, inferior to the male.

This is the law of nature; and it doesn't seem to be suspended or repealed in favour of woman. This physical superiority can't be denied—and it is a noble privilege! But men, not content with this natural pre-eminence, try to sink us lower still, so as to make us merely alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration that men (under the influence of their senses) pay them, don't try to achieve a permanently important place in men's feelings, or to become the *friends* of the fellow creatures who find amusement [see Glossary] in their society.



I am aware of an obvious inference: from every direction I have heard protests against ‘masculine women’, but where are they to be found? If men are using this label in criticism of women’s ardour in hunting, shooting, and gambling, I shall gladly join in; but if their target is

the imitation of manly virtues, or (more accurately)  
the achieving of the talents and virtues that ennoble  
the human character and raise females in the scale  
of animal being when they are brought under the  
comprehensive label ‘mankind’,

all those who view women with a philosophical eye must, I should think, join me in wanting women to grow more and more ‘masculine’ every day.

This discussion naturally divides the subject. I shall first consider women as **human creatures** who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to develop their abilities; and then I shall attend to the implications of the more specific label **women**.

I want to steer clear of an error that many writers have fallen into, namely giving *women* instruction that has been appropriate for *ladies*. . . . I shall address my sex in a firmer tone, focussing particularly on those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state. ‘As for the upper classes: Perhaps the ‘great’ have *always* scattered seeds of false refinement, immorality, and vanity! Weak, artificial beings who have been prematurely and unnaturally raised above the ordinary wants and feelings of mankind undermine the very foundation of virtue and spread corruption through the whole mass of society! They have a stronger claim to pity than any other class of mankind. The upbringing of the rich tends to make them vain and helpless, and their unfolding minds are not strengthened by the practice of the duties that dignify the human character. They live only to amuse [see Glossary] themselves, and—by a

law that also operates in nature—they soon come to have nothing to offer except barren amusement.

That is enough about that for the present: I plan to take the different ranks of society separately, and discuss the moral character of women in each. I have mentioned the subject of class-differences here only because I think that the essential task of an Introduction is to give a sketchy account of the contents of the work it introduces.

I hope my own sex 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 and unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out what true dignity and human happiness consist in; I want to persuade women to aim at strength 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 expressions indicating weakness, and •that creatures who are the objects only of pity and the kind of love that has been called ‘pity’s sister’ will soon become objects of contempt.

So I dismiss those pretty feminine phrases that the men condescendingly use to make our slavish dependence easier for us, and I despise the weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility [see Glossary] of manners that are supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker sex. I want to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the most praiseworthy ambition is to obtain a character as a *human being*, whether male or female, and that lesser ambitions should be tested against that one.

That is a rough sketch of my plan; and I offer now three remarks about how I aim to carry it out. (1) I shall refrain from pruning my phrases and polishing my style, because

it is important to me to affect the thoughts and actions of my readers, and I'll do that better if I sometimes express my conviction with the energetic emotions that I feel. **(2)** I shan't waste time elegantly shaping my sentences, or fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings that come from the head and therefore never reach the heart; because I want to persuade by the force of my arguments rather than to dazzle by the elegance of my language. **(3)** I shall try to avoid the flowery diction that has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation; because I'll be dealing with things, not words! In all this I'll be anxious to turn my sex into members of society who are more worthy of respect.

These pretty nothings (these caricatures of the *real* beauty of sensibility) drop glibly from the tongue, spoil one's sense of taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth. [She means 'delicacy' in the sense of pickiness, choosiness; readiness to push things to the edge of one's plate.] A deluge of false sentiments and over-stretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, make *insipid* the domestic pleasures that ought to sweeten the exercise of the severe duties that prepare a rational and immortal [see Glossary] being for a nobler field of action. [The adjective 'immortal' suggests that the 'nobler field of action' that MW had in mind is life after death.]

The education [see Glossary] of women has been attended to more in recent years than formerly; but they're still regarded as a frivolous sex, and are ridiculed or pitied by writers who try to improve them by satire or instruction. It is acknowledged that they spend many of their earliest years acquiring a smattering of accomplishments [see Glossary], but strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire to get themselves settled by marriage—the only way women can rise in the world.

This desire makes mere animals of them, and when they marry they act as such children can be expected to act: they dress, they paint, they give nicknames to God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for the seraglio! [= the women's quarters in a Turkish palace; she is implying that women are kept there purely for sexual purposes.] Can they govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

The present conduct of the 'female' sex, its prevalent fondness for pleasure in place of ambition and the nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul, are evidence that the instruction that women have received, with help from the constitution of civil society, has only tended to turn them into insignificant objects of desire, mere propagators of fools!

If it can be proved that

men, in aiming to bring women to perfection without cultivating their understandings, take them out of their sphere of 'real' duties and make them ridiculous and useless when the brief bloom of beauty is over,

I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for trying to persuade them [i.e. women] to become more masculine and worthy of respect.

Indeed the word 'masculine' is only a pointless scare-word: there's little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude, because their visible inferiority in bodily strength must make them to some extent dependent on men in the various relations of life; but why should that dependence be increased by prejudices that •give a sex [see Glossary] to virtue and •can't distinguish simple truths from sensual daydreams?

Women are so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence that this artificial weakness produces in them a tendency to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning—

the natural opponent of strength—which leads them to exploit those contemptible infantile airs that undermine esteem even while they excite desire. Let men become more chaste and modest, and if women don't become correspondingly wiser it will be clear that they have weaker understandings.

I hardly need to explain that I am talking about the

•female• sex in general. Many individual women have more sense than their male relatives; some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern. Where there's a constant struggle for an equilibrium, nothing will swing the scales its way unless it naturally has greater weight.

## Chapter 1: Human rights and the duties they involve

In the present state of society it seems that we have to go back to first principles in search of the simplest truths, and to fight against some prevailing prejudice for every inch of ground. Let me clear my way by asking some plain questions: the answers to them will probably appear to be as obviously right as the axioms on which reasoning is based; but when they are entangled with various motives of action they are flatly contradicted by men's words or their conduct.

•What does man's pre-eminence over the lower animals consist in? The answer is as clear as 'A half is less than the whole'; it consists in *reason*.

•What acquirement raises one being above another? We spontaneously reply: *virtue*.

•For what purpose were we given passions? Experience whispers the answer: *so that man by struggling with his passions might achieve a degree of knowledge that the lower animals can't have*.

So the perfection of our nature and capacity for happiness must be measured by the degree of reason, virtue, and

knowledge that •distinguish the individual and •direct the laws that bind society; and it is equally undeniable that, taking mankind as a whole, knowledge and virtue naturally flow from the exercise of reason.

With the rights and duties of man thus simplified, it seems hardly necessary to illustrate truths that seem so incontrovertible. But such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason, and such spurious qualities have taken the name of 'virtues', that it is necessary to track the course of reason as it has been tangled in error. . . .so that we can set the simple axiom alongside the deviations from it that circumstances bring.

Men generally seem to employ their reason to •justify prejudices that they have taken in they can't tell how, rather than to •root them out. Only a strong mind can resolutely form its own principles; for a kind of intellectual cowardice prevails, making many men shrink from the task or do it only by halves. Yet the imperfect conclusions that are drawn in this way are often very plausible, because they are built

on partial experience, on views that are correct ·as far as they go· but narrow.

Going back to first principles, vice [see Glossary] in all its native ugliness slinks away from close investigation; but shallow reasoners are always exclaiming that these arguments ·from first principles· ‘prove too much’, and that a given course of conduct is ‘expedient’ even if it is rotten at the core. Thus ·expediency is continually contrasted with ·simple principles, until truth is lost in a mist of words, virtue is lost in forms [= ‘in mechanical rules of conduct’], and the tempting prejudices that claim the title ‘knowledge’ suppress real knowledge.

*The most wisely formed society is the one whose constitution is based on the nature of man*—that statement, in the abstract, strikes every thinking being so forcibly that it looks like presumption to try to prove it; but we *do* need to prove it, or reason will never be able to make prescription [see Glossary] relax its grip. And yet urging prescription as an argument to justify depriving men (or women) of their natural rights is one of the absurd sophisms that daily insult common sense.

The bulk of the people of Europe are only very partially civilized. Indeed, it’s an open question whether they have acquired *any* virtues in exchange for the innocence ·they have lost·, comparable with the misery produced by the vices that have been plastered over unsightly ignorance, and the freedom that has been traded away in exchange for glittering slavery. The desire to dazzle by riches (the surest route to pre-eminence!), the pleasure of commanding flattering yes-men, and many other complicated low calculations of stupid self-love, have all joined forces in overwhelming the mass of mankind and making ‘liberty’ a convenient label for mock patriotism.

For while rank and titles are held to be of the utmost importance, before which genius ‘must hide its diminished

head’ [quoted from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*], it is almost always disastrous for a nation when an able man without rank or property pushes himself into the limelight. When such a scheming obscure adventurer works to get a cardinal’s hat, longing to be ranked with princes—or above them, by seizing the triple crown ·worn by Popes·—the events involved in this bring unheard-of misery to thousands of people.

So much wretchedness has flowed from hereditary honours, riches, and monarchy, that men of lively sensibility have been reduced almost to blasphemy in their attempts to justify God’s management of the world. They have represented man as ·independent of his Maker or as ·a lawless planet darting from its orbit to steal the celestial fire of reason; and the vengeance of heaven. . . .punished his boldness by introducing evil into the world.

Impressed by this view of the misery and disorder that pervaded society, and weary from contending with artificial fools, Rousseau fell in love with solitude; and in his optimism he worked with uncommon eloquence to prove that man is naturally a solitary animal. Misled by his respect for the goodness of God, who certainly—for what man of sense [see Glossary] and feeling can doubt it?—gave life only in order to give happiness, he considered evil as. . . .the work of man; not aware that he was exalting one ·divine· attribute at the expense of another that is equally necessary to divine perfection. [Jean-Jacques Rousseau, mentioned many times in his work, had died fourteen years before the present work appeared.]

Constructed on the basis of a false hypothesis, Rousseau’s arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible; but they are unsound, because the assertion that a state of nature is preferable to the most perfect civilization there could be is in effect a charge against supreme wisdom. The paradoxical exclamation:

- God has made all things right, and
- evil has been introduced by the creature whom God formed, knowing what he was forming

is as unphilosophical as it is impious.

The wise Being who created us and placed us here . . . allowed it to be the case—and thus willed it to be the case—that our passions should help our reason to develop, because he could see that present evil would produce future good. Could the helpless creature whom God created out of nothing break loose from his providence and boldly learn to *know good by practising evil* without his permission? No. How could ·Rousseau·, that energetic advocate for immortality, argue so inconsistently? If mankind had remained for ever in the brutal state of nature, which even Rousseau's magic pen can't paint as a state in which a single virtue took root, it would have been clear. . . . that man was born to run the circle of life and death, and adorn God's garden for some purpose that couldn't easily be reconciled with his [= God's] attributes.

But if the whole divine plan was to be crowned by rational creatures who would be allowed to rise in excellence through the use of powers given to them for that purpose; if God in his goodness thought fit to bring into existence a creature above the brutes,<sup>1</sup> one who could think and improve himself; why should that incalculable •gift be openly called a •curse?

(A gift? Man was enabled to rise above the state in which sensations gave him the sort of comfort that lower animals are capable of; *of course* it was a gift!)

It might be regarded as a curse if our time in this world was the whole span of our existence; for why should the gracious fountain of life give us passions and the power of reflecting, only to embitter our days and inspire us with mistaken notions of dignity? Why would God lead us from love of ourselves to the sublime emotions aroused by the discovery of his wisdom and goodness, if these feelings weren't launched so as to improve our nature (of which they are a part)<sup>2</sup> and enable us to enjoy a more godlike portion of happiness? Firmly convinced that no evil exists in the world that God didn't intend to occur, I build my belief on the perfection of God.

Rousseau strains to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors argues that all *is* now right; and I claim that all *will be* right.

True to his first position which is nearly a state of nature, Rousseau celebrates barbarism, and in his praise of Fabricius [said to be one of the founders of ancient Rome] he forgets that the Romans in conquering the world didn't dream of establishing their own liberty on a firm basis, or of extending the reign of virtue. Eager to support his system, he condemns as vicious [see Glossary] every effort of

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the opinion of the anatomists, who argue by analogy from the formation of the teeth, stomach, and intestines, Rousseau denies that man is a carnivorous animal. And, carried away from nature by a love of system, he questions whether man is a gregarious animal, though the long and helpless state of infancy seems to point him out as especially forced to *pair*, which is the first step towards *herding*.

<sup>2</sup> Suppose that

- you asked a mechanic to make a watch that would point out the hour of the day, and
- to show his ingenuity he added wheels and springs to make it a repeater, as a result of which the mechanism malfunctioned, and
- you complained, and
- he replied in self-defence 'If you hadn't touched *that* spring you wouldn't have known that I had varied the plan; I would have been amusing myself by making an experiment without doing you any harm',

what would you say? Wouldn't you respond, fairly, 'If you hadn't added those needless wheels and springs, the accident couldn't have happened?'

genius; and in praising savage virtues to the skies he raises to demigod status people who were scarcely human—the brutal Spartans, who in defiance of justice and gratitude sacrificed in cold blood the slaves who had served them well. [In 424 BCE the Spartans murdered two thousand helots, i.e. slaves serving as soldiers in the Spartan army. Thucydides wrote: ‘The helots were invited to select those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves against the enemy, so that they could be freed. The object was to test them, thinking that the first to claim freedom would be the most apt to rebel. About two thousand were selected and rejoiced in their new freedom; but the Spartans secretly killed each of them.’]

Disgusted with artificial manners and virtues, Rousseau didn’t sift through the subject but simply threw away the wheat with the chaff, not pausing to consider whether the evils that his ardent soul indignantly rejected were •consequences of civilization or •vestiges of barbarism. He saw vice trampling on virtue, and seeming-goodness taking the place of the real thing; he saw talents bent by power to sinister purposes; and he never thought of tracing the gigantic harm back to •*arbitrary power*, back to •the *hereditary* distinctions that clash with the mental superiority that *naturally* raises a man above his fellows. He didn’t see that it takes only a few generations for royal power to introduce idiotism into the noble family line, and that it holds out baits to make thousands idle and vicious. [MW adds harsh words about the crimes that bring people to royal status, and about the feeble passiveness of ‘millions of men’ who have let the royal criminals get away with it. She continues:]

When the chief director of a society is instructed only in how to invent crimes, or in the stupid routine of childish ceremonies, how can it *not* be the case that the society has a poisonous fog hovering over it? [MW’s ‘instructed in’ is ambiguous: she may mean that that’s all he is taught, or that it is all he knows.]. . . .

In circumstances as good as they could possibly be, it would still be impossible for *any* man to acquire enough knowledge and strength of mind to perform the duties of a king who has been entrusted with uncontrolled power. Think how knowledge and strength of mind must be violated when •the sheer fact that the man does become a king poses an insuperable bar to his acquiring either wisdom or virtue, when •all his feelings are stifled by flattery, and when •thoughtfulness is shut out by pleasure! Surely it is madness to make the fate of thousands depend on the whims of a weak fellow creature whose very position in life puts him *necessarily* below the poorest of his subjects! But one power should not be thrown down in order to raise up another. Man is weak, and all power intoxicates him; and the way power is misused proves that the more equality there is among men—and thus the less power of men over men—the more virtue and happiness will reign in society. But this. . . raises an outcry: ‘If we don’t have absolute faith in the wisdom of antiquity, the church is in danger’ or ‘. . . the state is in danger’. Those who are roused by the sight of human calamity to be so bold as to attack human authority are reviled as despisers of God and enemies of man. These are bitter libels, yet they were levelled at one of the best of men (Dr. Price), whose ashes still preach peace, and whose memory demands a respectful pause when subjects that lay so near his heart are discussed. [Richard Price, who died a year or so before the present work was published, had greatly influenced Mary Wollstonecraft. He had been reviled for his writings on the French Revolution. His *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* is on the website from which the present text came.]

Now that I have attacked the ‘sacred’ majesty of kings, you won’t be surprised when I add my firm conviction that every profession whose power depends on large differences of rank is highly injurious to morality.

A standing army, for instance, is incompatible with freedom because strictness and rank are the very sinews of military discipline; and despotism is necessary to give vigour to enterprises that have one person in charge. A spirit inspired by romantic notions of honour—a kind of morality based on the fashion of the times—can be felt by only a few officers, while the main body must be moved by command, like the waves of the sea; for the strong wind of authority pushes the crowd of subalterns forward, they scarcely know or care why, with headlong fury. [Then as now, ‘subaltern’ mainly meant ‘junior officer’, so the ‘main body’ presumably refers to the main body of the officers. The rank and file are not being talked about here.]

•And armies are harmful in another way•. Nothing can damage the morals of the inhabitants of country towns as much as the occasional residence of a set of idle superficial young men whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners make vice more dangerous by concealing its ugliness under gay ornamental drapery. An air of *fashion*, which is really a badge of slavery, showing that the soul doesn’t have a strong individual character, awes simple country people into imitating the vices when they can’t catch the slippery graces of social polish. Every military body is a chain of despots who obey and give commands without using their reason, and become dead weights of vice and folly on the community. A man of rank or fortune whose connections guarantee that he will rise has nothing to do but to pursue some extravagant whim; while the needy *gentleman* who has to rise ‘by his merit’, as they say, becomes a servile parasite or a vile pander [= ‘pimp’, or perhaps merely ‘person whose job it is to satisfy his superiors’ desires’.]

Sailors, the gentlemen of the navy, can be described in similar terms, except that their vices [see Glossary] are different and grosser. They are more positively indolent [= ‘wholly idle’, ‘idly idle’] when they aren’t performing the ceremonials

required by their rank, whereas the insignificant fluttering of soldiers could be called ‘active idleness’. More confined to the society of men, sailors acquire a fondness for humour and mischievous tricks; while soldiers, who are often in the company of well-bred women, are infected with a ‘sensitive’ whiny way of speaking. But whether someone indulges in •the sailor’s• horse-laugh or •the soldier’s• polite simper, *mind* is equally out of the question.

[This next paragraph refers to the Anglican church, of which MW was a member. A **patron** was a person, not himself a cleric, who had sole control over who became the well-paid **rector** or senior parson of a parish; and a **curate** was a junior parson who did most of the parish work and received a tiny fraction of the rector’s income.]

Let me extend the comparison to a profession where there is certainly more *mind* to be found—the clergy. They have better opportunities for improvement, but *rank* almost equally cramps their faculties. The blind submission to forms of belief that is imposed at college serves as a training for the curate who most obsequiously respects the opinion of his rector or patron—or he does if he means to rise in his profession. There can hardly be a more striking contrast than between •the servile, dependent manner of a poor curate and •the top-of-the-world manner of a bishop. And

**MW’s next phrase:** the respect and contempt

**perhaps meaning:** the little respect and great contempt

they inspire makes the work they do in their separate functions equally useless.

It is important to understand that every man’s character is to some extent formed by his profession. A man with a good mind may reflect his profession only in superficial ways that wear off as you trace his individuality; while weak, common men have hardly any character except what belongs to their profession. . . .

As society becomes more enlightened, therefore, it should be very careful not to establish bodies of men who are bound to be made foolish or vicious by the very constitution of their profession.

In society's infancy when men were just emerging out of barbarism, chiefs and priests must have had unlimited influence because they tapped into the most powerful springs of savage conduct—hope and fear. **Aristocracy** is of course, naturally the first form of government. But clashing interests soon get out of balance, there is a confusion of ambitious struggles, and what emerges is a **monarchy** and hierarchy. . . . This appears to be the origin of monarchical and priestly power, and the dawn of civilization. But such combustible materials can't be held down for long; and foreign wars and uprisings at home give the ·common· people a chance to acquire some power, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a show of right. Thus as wars, agriculture, commerce, and literature expand the mind, despots are forced to use •hidden corruption to keep

the power that was initially snatched by open force.<sup>3</sup> And this •lurking gangrene is spread most quickly by luxury and superstition, the sure dregs of ambition. The idle puppet of a ·royal· court first becomes a luxurious monster or fastidious pleasure-seeker, and the contagion that his unnatural state spreads becomes the instrument of tyranny. [In this context, 'luxury' and its cognates refer to *extreme and dissipated* pursuit and enjoyment of sensual pleasures.]

It is the plague-carrying purple ·of royalty· that makes the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding until men of good sense doubt whether the expansion of intellect will bring more happiness or more misery. But the nature of the poison points out the antidote; if Rousseau had climbed one step higher in his investigation—or if his eye could have pierced the foggy atmosphere that he was hardly willing to breathe—his active mind would have darted forward to contemplate •the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization, instead of taking his ferocious flight back to •the night of sensual ignorance.

## Chapter 2: The prevailing opinion about sexual differences

To explain and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been presented to prove that in the acquiring of virtue the two sexes ought to have very different aims; or, to put it bluntly, women aren't thought to have enough

strength of mind to acquire virtue properly so-called. But it would seem that if they have souls there is only one way appointed by God to lead *mankind* to virtue or to happiness.

<sup>3</sup> Men of abilities scatter seeds that grow and have a great influence on the development of •public opinion; and once •that gets the intellectual upper hand through the exertion of reason, the overthrow of arbitrary power is not very distant.



If then women are not a swarm of insignificant ephemera [inserts like mayflies, that live for only one day], why should they be kept in ignorance under the pretty label 'innocence'? Men complain, with reason, about the follies and whims of our sex, except when they sharply satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. I would answer: Behold the natural effect of ignorance! A mind that has only prejudices to rest on will always be unstable, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by their mothers' example, that

- a little knowledge of human weakness (properly called 'cunning'),
- softness of temperament,
- outward* obedience, and
- scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety,

will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that's all they need for at least twenty years.

That is how Milton describes our first frail mother, 'Eve'; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace I don't understand him unless in true Moslem fashion he means to deprive us of souls, insinuating that all we were designed for was to use sweet attractive grace and docile blind obedience to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation.

Those who advise us only to turn ourselves into gentle domestic animals—how grossly they insult us! For instance, the 'winning softness' that is so warmly and frequently recommended, that 'governs by obeying'—what childish expressions! And a being who will sink to the level of governing by such underhand methods—what an insignificant being that must be! Can it be an immortal one? 'Certainly,' says Lord Bacon, 'man is of kin to the beasts by his body: and

if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature!' Men, indeed, seem to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by keeping them always in a state of childhood. Rousseau was more consistent when he wanted to stop the progress of reason in both sexes; for if men eat 'fruit' of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste, but the imperfect cultivation that their understandings now receive will give them only a knowledge of evil.

Children, I agree, should be innocent; but when 'innocent' is applied to men or women it is merely a polite word for 'weak'. If it is granted that women were destined by Providence [= 'God'] to acquire human virtues, and to use their understandings to achieve the stability of character that is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes on, then they must be permitted to look to the fountain of light ('God') and not forced to steer by the twinkling of a mere satellite ('man'). Milton was of a very different opinion. . . ., but it would be hard to make consistent two passages that I am now going to contrast. But then great men often led by their senses into such inconsistencies. [In these lines Eve is speaking to Adam.]

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.

These are *exactly* the arguments I have used to children! But then I have added: 'Your reason is now gaining strength. Until it arrives at some degree of maturity, you must look up to me for advice; but when it does arrive there, you ought to *think*, and rely only on God.'

Yet, in these next lines, Milton seems to agree with me, when he makes Adam protest to his Maker like this:

Hast thou not made me here thy substitute,  
 And these inferior far beneath me set?  
 Among unequals what society  
 Can sort, what harmony or delight?  
 Which must be mutual, in proportion due  
 Given and received; but in disparity  
 The one intense, the other still remiss  
 Cannot well suit with either, but soon prove  
 Tedious alike: of fellowship I speak  
 Such as I seek, fit to participate  
 All rational delight. . . .

In discussing the manners of •women, therefore, let us set aside sensual arguments and work out what we should try to make •them into in order to co-operate, if the expression isn't too bold, with God.

The sense of the word 'education' isn't precisely defined, so I should explain: by 'individual education' I mean

the kind of attention to a child that will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temperament, regulate the passions as they begin to bubble up, and set the understanding to work before the body reaches maturity; so that the •fully mature• man will only have to •continue the important task of learning to think and reason, rather than having to •start it.

I don't believe that a private education can work the wonders that some optimistic writers have attributed to it. [This topic will be extensively discussed in chapter 12.] Men and women must be educated to a large extent by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried everything along with it, giving to that age a family character, so to speak. So it's reasonable to conclude that until society is differently constituted, not much can be expected from education. All

I need for my present purpose, however, is this: Whatever effect circumstances have on people's abilities, everyone *can* become virtuous by the exercise of his or her [see Glossary] own reason; for if just one being was *created* with vicious inclinations—i.e. was created positively bad—what could save us from atheism? or if we worshipped a god, wouldn't we be worshipping a devil?

So the most perfect education, in my opinion, is the use of the understanding in the way that is most likely to strengthen the body and form the heart—i.e. to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render him or her independent. To describe as 'virtuous' anyone whose virtues don't result from the exercise of his or her own reason is a farce. This was Rousseau's opinion regarding men: I extend it to women. . . . Still, the royal homage that •women receive is so intoxicating that, until manners in general come to be formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince •them that

- the illegitimate power that they get by degrading themselves is a *curse*, and that
- if they want to enjoy the peaceful satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart, they must return to nature and equality.

But for the present age we must wait until kings and nobles, enlightened by reason,. . . .throw off their gaudy hereditary trappings. If that happens and women still don't resign the arbitrary power of beauty, they'll be showing that they have *less* mind than man. At the risk of seeming arrogant, I must declare my firm belief that

Everyone who has have written about female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, has helped to make women •more artificial, weaker characters than they would otherwise have been; and consequently •more useless members of society.

I could have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but that would have been an insincere whine and not the faithful expression of my feelings—of the clear conclusion that experience and reflection have led me to draw. When I come to the right place for that I'll discuss the passages that I especially disapprove of in the works of the authors I have just mentioned [chapter 5]; but *this* is the right place to remark that I object ·not just to isolated passages but· to the whole purport of those books, which I think tend to degrade one half of the human species, and make women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.

Reasoning on Rousseau's premises, we could say this:

If man did achieve a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper—so as to make a man and his wife *one*—that she should rely entirely on his understanding. Then the graceful ·female· ivy, clasping the ·male· oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous.

But alas! husbands as well as their wives are often only overgrown children; indeed, thanks to early debauchery they are hardly grown men in their outward form. We don't need a messenger angel from heaven to tell us what happens when the blind lead the blind.

In the present corrupt state of society many causes collaborate to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses. One that silently does more harm than all the rest, perhaps, is their disregard of order.

*Do everything in an orderly manner* is a most important precept, but women, who in general; receive only a disorderly kind of education [see the account of education on page 14], seldom attend to it with as much exactness as men do, because men are from their infancy are broken into method. This negligent kind of guesswork prevents women from generalizing matters

of fact [the meaning of this will become clear in the next paragraph], so what they did yesterday they do again today, merely because they did it yesterday. Guesswork? Well, isn't that the right word for the random exertions of a sort of instinctive common sense, never brought to the test of reason?

This off-hand neglect of the understanding in early life has worse consequences than is commonly supposed. The little knowledge acquired by women with strong minds is, for various reasons, more random and episodic than the knowledge of men; it is acquired more by •sheer observations of real life than from •relating individual observations to the results of experience generalized by theorizing. . . . What women learn they learn by snatches; and—because learning for them is in general only a secondary thing—they don't pursue any one branch ·of learning· with the persevering eagerness that is needed to give vigour to the faculties and clarity to the judgment. In the present state of society, a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman; and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of ·intellectual· discipline. But in the education of women the development of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquiring of some physical accomplishment; [and yet, MW continues, on the physical side women don't acquire the best kind of grace and beauty, being barred from it by 'confinement and false notions of modesty'. She seems to be thinking of something like the grace and beauty of an accomplished female athlete.]. . . . Having no serious scientific study, if women have natural soundness of judgment it is turned too soon onto life and manners. They dwell on effects. . . .without tracing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behaviour are a weak substitute for simple principles.

As a proof that education gives females this appearance of weakness, consider the example of military men, who are (as women are) sent into the world before their minds have

been stored with knowledge or strengthened by principles. The results are similar:

Soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation; and by continually mixing with society they gain what is termed 'knowledge of the world'.

(This acquaintance with manners and customs has often been confused with •knowledge of the human heart. But that •honourable label can't be deserved by the crude fruit of casual observation, never brought to the test of judgment based on combining experience with theory.) When the education has been the same, where is the difference between the sexes? The only difference I can see comes from the fact that soldiers are free to see more of life than women are. . . .

Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men; they may be well disciplined machines but they will seldom contain men moved by strong passions or with very vigorous faculties. And depth of understanding isn't found in an army more often than it is found among women; and the cause is the same. Furthermore, officers are also particularly attentive to their persons [see Glossary], and fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and mockery. As with the 'fair' sex, the business of their lives is *gallantry*. They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they. . . .are still regarded as superior to women, though it is hard to discover what their superiority consists in other than what I have just mentioned.

The great misfortune is that they both acquire •manners before •morals, and •a knowledge of life before reflection gives them •an acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature. It naturally follows that they, satisfied with common nature, become a prey to prejudices, and blindly submit to authority, simply believing what they are told. If they have any sense, it is a kind of instinctive fast uptake

of social situations; but this fails when opinions are to be analysed or arguments are to be pursued below the surface.

. . . .Riches and hereditary honours have made cyphers of women. . . .and idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism in society, which leads men who are slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. . . . Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it and that will bring an end to blind obedience; but because blind obedience is always sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are right to try to keep women in the dark: the tyrants only want slaves, and the sensualists only want toys. In fact, sensualists have been the most dangerous tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes are by their ministers, while dreaming that they reigned over them!

I am principally thinking of Rousseau, •and specifically of his work on education entitled *Émile*•. His character Sophie •in that book• is a captivating one, no doubt, though it strikes me as grossly unnatural; but what I am planning to attack is not the superstructure but the foundation of her character, the principles on which her education was built. Warmly as I admire the genius [see Glossary] of that able writer. . . ., indignation always takes place of admiration when I read his voluptuous [see Glossary] day-dreams. Is *this* the man who in his ardour for virtue wants to banish all the soft arts of peace and almost carry us back to Spartan discipline? Is *this* the man who loves to portray the useful struggles of passion, the triumphs of good dispositions, and the heroic flights that carry the glowing soul out of itself? How are these mighty sentiments lowered when he describes the prettyfoot and enticing airs of his little favourite! [That sentence is verbatim MW.] But I'll set that aside for just now, and. . . .merely remark that whoever has cast a benevolent eye on society must often have been gratified by the sight of humble mutual love,

not dignified by sentiment or strengthened by a union in intellectual pursuits. The domestic trifles of the day have provided material for cheerful conversation, and innocent caresses have softened toils which didn't require great exercise of mind or stretch of thought. But hasn't the sight of this middling happiness aroused more tenderness than respect? It is an emotion like what we feel when we see children playing;<sup>4</sup> whereas the contemplation of the noble struggles of suffering merit has created admiration and carried our thoughts to that world where sensation will give place to reason.

So women are to be considered either as •moral beings or as •so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men.

Let us examine this question. Rousseau declares that a woman should never for a moment feel herself to be independent, that she should be •governed by fear to exercise her 'natural' cunning, and •made a coquettish slave in order to make her a more alluring object of desire, a 'sweeter' companion to man whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries his arguments (which he claims to infer from the indications of *nature*) still further, and indicates that truth and fortitude—the corner-stones of all human virtue—should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because with respect to the female character obedience is the great lesson which ought to be impressed •on the woman• with unrelenting rigour.

What nonsense! When will a great man arise with enough strength of mind to puff away the fumes that pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject? If women are by nature *inferior* to men, their virtues must be •comparable with men's, meaning that they must be• the same in quality

if not in degree....; so their conduct should be based on the same principles as men's conduct, and should have the same aim.

Connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, the moral character of women may be judged by how they fulfill those simple duties; but the great *end* of their exertions should be to develop their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue. They may try to make their road pleasant; but they should never forget, as men do, that *life* doesn't yield the happiness that can satisfy an immortal soul. I don't mean to imply that either sex should be so lost in abstract reflections or distant views as to forget the affections and duties that •lie before them and •are indeed the means appointed to produce the fruit of life; on the contrary, I warmly recommend them even while I say that they give most satisfaction when they are considered in their true subordinate light. [These 'affections and duties' are presumably ones relating to sexual intercourse, the 'appointed means' to continuing the species.]

The dominant opinion that woman was created for man may have been inferred from Moses' poetical story; but presumably very few who have *thought* about the subject ever believed that Eve was literally one of Adam's ribs; so that inference must be dropped—or be admitted only as proving that from the remotest antiquity man found it convenient to exert •his strength to subjugate his companion, and •his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke because she as well as the lower animals was created to do his pleasure.

Don't think I that I want to invert the order of things. I have already conceded that the constitution of men's bodies (I'm speaking collectively of the whole sex) seem to indicate

<sup>4</sup> Milton's pleasing picture of •paradisiacal happiness has always raised similar feelings in me; but instead of envying the lovely pair, I have with conscious dignity (or satanic pride!) turned to •hell for more sublime things to think about. . . .

that God designed them to attain a greater degree of virtue [see Glossary] ·than women·. But I don't see the faintest reason to conclude that their virtues are different *in kind* ·from women's·. How *could* they be. if virtue has only one eternal standard? If I am to be consistent in my reasoning, therefore, I must put as much energy into maintaining ·with regard to male virtue and female virtue· that •they have the same simple direction as I put into maintaining that •there is a God.

It follows from this that I mustn't set up a contrast between

- female· cunning and ·male· wisdom,
- little ·female· cares and great ·male· exertions, or
- insipid ·female· softness (varnished over with the label 'gentleness') and the ·male· fortitude that can only be inspired by grand views.

I shall be told that ·if women aimed at the same virtues as men·, woman would then lose many of her special graces; and the line I am taking here might be attacked by quoting from a well-known poet—Alexander Pope, who has said on behalf of the whole male sex:

Yet ne'er so sure our passions to create,  
As when she touch'd the brink of all we hate.

I'll leave it to you to decide in what light this joke places men and women; and in the meanwhile I'll content myself with remarking that I can't discover why females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust, unless they are mortal [see Glossary].

Yes, yes—speaking disrespectfully of love is committing high treason against sentiment and fine feelings! But I want to speak the simple language of truth, addressing the head rather than the heart. To try to reason •love out of the world would be pointless and contrary to common sense;

but it appears less wild to try—as I shall—to restrain •this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it shouldn't be allowed to dethrone superior powers or grab the sceptre [see Glossary] that should always be wielded, coolly, by the understanding.

Youth is the season for love in both sexes; but in those days of thoughtless enjoyment one should prepare for the more important years of life when reflection takes place of sensation. [MW was 33 years old when this was published.] But Rousseau and most of his male followers have strongly maintained that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed towards one goal—to make women pleasing.

If you support that opinion, let me reason with you. Do you imagine that marriage can eradicate the habits of life? The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sun-beams, and that they can't have much effect on her husband's heart when he sees them every day and when the summer ·of her physical beauty· is past and gone. When that happens, she may

have enough energy to look into herself for comfort,  
and cultivate the faculties she has idled;

or she may instead

try to please other men, and try in the emotions raised  
by the expectation of new conquests to forget how her  
love or pride has been humiliated.

Which do you think is more likely? When the husband has stopped being a lover—and that time will inevitably come—her desire to please will weaken, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps the least durable of all the passions, will give place to jealousy or vanity.

Now think about women who are restrained by principle or prejudice. *They* would shrink from an intrigue [= 'an extra-marital affair'] with real abhorrence, ·but play with the

idea because they want to be convinced by the homage of gallantry that they are cruelly neglected by their husbands; or they spend days and weeks dreaming of the happiness enjoyed by souls in harmony, until their health is undermined and their spirits broken by discontent. If that is right, then how can it have been so necessary for them to study the great art of pleasing? It is useful only to a mistress; the chaste wife and serious mother should regard her power to please as merely the polish of her virtues, and the affection of her husband as merely one of the comforts that make her task less difficult and her life happier. But whether she is loved or neglected, her first wish should be to make herself worthy of respect, and not rely for all her happiness on a being who is subject to infirmities like her own!

The amiable Dr. Gregory fell into a similar error. I respect his heart, but entirely disapprove of his celebrated *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*.

He advises them to develop a fondness for dress, because this, he says, is 'natural' to them. I can't understand what he or Rousseau mean in their frequent uses of the vague word 'natural'. If they told us that the soul before birth was fond of dress and brought this inclination with it into a new body, I would listen to them with a half smile, as I often do when I hear someone pontificating about 'innate elegance'. But if Gregory meant to say only that using one's faculties will give one this fondness for dress, I deny it. It is not natural: it arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power.

[MW scornfully rejects Gregory's recommendation to his daughters that they be careful to hold down any feeling that might lead them to be too vigorous in dancing, because that might give men a wrong impression. She concludes:] I hope that no sensible mother will restrain the natural frankness of youth by instilling such indecent cautions. . . .

Women ought to try to purify their hearts; but can they do so when their undeveloped understandings make them entirely dependent on their senses for occupation and amusement [see Glossary], when no noble undertaking raises them above the day's little vanities or enables them to curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed over which every passing breeze has power?

To gain the affections of a virtuous man, is affectation necessary? [In that sentence 'affectation' means 'pretence about what one's actual feelings are'.] Nature has given woman a weaker body than man; but to ensure her husband's affections must a wife lower herself to pretending to be sickly and delicate? It very often really is pretending, on the part of a wife who, by the exercise of her mind and body while she was discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, and mother, has allowed her constitution to retain its natural strength and her nerves a healthy tone.

Weakness may excite tenderness, and gratify the arrogant pride of man; but the lordly caresses of a protector won't please a noble mind that is panting for respect and deserves to have it. Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship!

In a seraglio, I admit, all these arts are necessary [and she develops this thought through a paragraph that doesn't add to the content of the chapter. It repeats that someone who could settle for such a life cannot be one who 'has an immortal soul'.]

Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent, of her husband; and if she deserves his respect by having such solid qualities, she won't find that she needs to conceal her affection or pretend to an unnatural coldness of constitution [meaning 'pretend to have little interest in sex'] to excite her husband's passions. Look at history and you'll

find that the women who have distinguished themselves haven't been the most beautiful or the most gentle of their sex.

Nature—or, to speak more accurately, God—has made all things right; but man has devised many inventions to spoil God's work. I'm referring to the part of Dr. Gregory's book where he advises a wife never to let her husband know the extent of her sensibility or affection. . . . That is as ineffectual as it is absurd! By its very nature love must be transitory. Searching for a secret that would make it constant is as wild as searching for the philosopher's stone [that can turn lead into gold] or the grand panacea [that can cure every disease]; and if the search succeeded and something was discovered that would make love constant, that would be useless, or rather *pernicious*, to mankind. The most holy tie of society is friendship. The shrewd satirist ·La Rochefoucauld· was right when he said that 'rare as true love is, true friendship is still rarer'.

This is an obvious truth, and the reason for it is easy to find, because it doesn't lie deep. Love, the common passion, in which

chance replaces choice, and  
sensation replaces reason,

is felt to some degree by everyone. (I am not talking here about emotions that rise above love, or ones that sink below it.) This passion, naturally increased by suspense and difficulties, draws the mind out of its usual state and exalts the affections; but the fever of love is allowed to subside by the security of marriage—its release from the kinds of suspense and difficulties that occur in a love affair. The only people who find a healthy temperature insipid are ones who don't have enough intellect to substitute

- the calm tenderness of friendship for blind admiration, and
- the confidence of respect for the emotions of foolish sensuality.

This is the course of nature; it *has* to be; love is inevitably followed by either friendship or indifference. And this state of affairs seems to harmonize perfectly with the way things go generally in the moral world. Passions are spurs to action, and open the mind; but when the object has been gained and the satisfied mind relaxes in enjoyment, the passions sink to the level of mere appetites, a matter of momentary personal gratification. The man who had some virtue while he was struggling for a crown often becomes a voluptuous tyrant when he is wearing it; and when the lover continues to exist in the husband the result is a foolish old man who

- is a prey to childish whims and foolish jealousies, and
- neglects the serious duties of life, and by whom
- the caresses that should arouse confidence in his children are lavished on the overgrown child, his wife.

In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments that form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean that they ought not to indulge emotions that disturb the order of society and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed. A mind that has never been absorbed by one object lacks vigour; a mind that can be thus obsessed for a long time is ·downright· weak.

. . . I haven't the faintest thought of producing a paradox when I say: An unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and a neglected wife is in general the best mother. This would almost always be the case if the female mind were more enlarged; ·let me explain why·.



God's plans seem to have ruled that, in most cases, what we gain in present enjoyment is to be deducted from our experience, which is the ·true· treasure of life; and that when we are gathering the flowers of the day and revelling in pleasure, the solid fruit of toil and wisdom is not to be caught at the same time. The road forks here; we must go to the right or to the left; and someone who spends his life bounding from one pleasure to another mustn't complain if he acquires neither wisdom nor a character worthy of respect.

\* \* \* \* \*

[The preparer of this version is defeated by the following paragraph—not by its individual episodes but by how it meant to hang together. So it is passed on to you exactly as Mary Wollstonecraft wrote it. Good Luck!]

Supposing, for a moment, that the soul is not immortal, and that man was only created for the present scene,—I think we should have reason to complain that love, infantine fondness, ever grew insipid and palled upon the sense. Let us eat, drink, and love, for to-morrow we die, would be, in fact, the language of reason, the morality of life; and who but a fool would part with a reality for a fleeting shadow? But, if awed by observing the improvable powers of the mind, we disdain to confine our wishes or thoughts to such a comparatively mean field of action, that only appears grand and important, as it is connected with a boundless prospect and sublime hopes, what necessity is there for falsehood in conduct, and why must the sacred majesty of truth be violated to detain a deceitful good that saps the very foundation of virtue? Why must the female mind be tainted by coquettish arts to gratify the sensualist, and prevent love from subsiding into friendship, or compassionate tenderness, when there are not qualities on which friendship can be built? Let the honest heart show itself, and *reason* teach passion to submit to

necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather embitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm not talking about the romantic passion that is the concomitant of genius. Who can clip its wings? But that grand passion is out of proportion to the little enjoyments of life; what it is true to is only *itself*, what it feeds on is only itself. The passions that have been celebrated for their durability have always been unfortunate. They have been strengthened by absence and by constitutional melancholy. The imagination has hovered round a dimly seen form of beauty; familiarity with it might have turned admiration into disgust—or at least into indifference—and freed the imagination to start fresh game [= 'flush out new foxes or deer or hares to hunt']. According to this view of things, it is perfectly proper for Rousseau to make the heroine of his novel *Julie* love her tutor when life was fading before her; but this is no proof of the immortality of the passion.

Of the same sort is Gregory's advice regarding delicacy of sentiment. He advises a woman not to acquire sentiment if she intends to marry. This intention is perfectly consistent with his former advice, but here he calls sentiment 'indelicate' and earnestly persuades his daughters to conceal it even if it governs their conduct—as if it were *indelicate* to have the common appetites of human nature!

Noble morality! and consistent with the cautious prudence of a little soul that can't look further than the present tiny fraction of ·our· existence [i.e. the part that concerns life before death, whose extent is tiny compared with the eternal life that awaits us after death]. •If all the faculties of woman's mind are to be cultivated only with respect to her dependence on man; if

when she gets a husband she has reached her goal and. . . is satisfied with such a trivial crown, let her contentedly grovel in the dirt, scarcely raised by her employments above the lower animals. But •if she is struggling for the prize of her high calling [presumably meaning God's giving her the task of becoming as virtuous as possible], let her look beyond the present scene, let her develop her understanding without stopping to consider what the husband she is going to marry will be like. If she resolves to acquire the qualities that ennoble a rational being, without being too anxious about present happiness, a rough, inelegant husband may shock her taste but he won't destroy her peace of mind. She will model her soul not •to make it fit with her companion's frailties but •to enable it to put up with them. His character may be a trial, but it won't be an impediment to virtue.

If Gregory meant to be talking only about romantic expectations of constant love and congenial feelings, he should have remembered that •such expectations exist only when the imagination is kept alive at the expense of reason, that •advice can never make them go away, but that •experience can do so.

I admit that many women who have developed in themselves a romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling have wasted their lives in *imagining* how happy they would have been with a husband who could love them with intense and increasing affection all day every day. But they might as well lament married as lament single; they wouldn't be a jot more unhappy with a bad husband than they are longing for a good one. I agree that a proper education—or, more accurately, a well-stocked mind—would enable a woman to live unmarried with dignity; but what if she avoids cultivating her taste in case her •future• husband •if she comes to have one• should occasionally shock it? That is quitting a substance for a shadow! The fact is that I don't know what use an improved

taste is if it's not to make the individual more independent of life's disasters, and to open up new sources of enjoyment that depend only on the solitary operations of the mind.

People of taste (whether married or single, it makes no difference) will always be disgusted by various things that have no effect on less observant minds; but that fact on its own mustn't be allowed to disqualify taste. The question is: *in the whole sum of enjoyment* is taste to be counted as a blessing? Does taste procure more pain or more pleasure? The answer will settle whether Gregory's advice was good, and will show how absurd and tyrannical it is to lay down a system of slavery •as he does•, or to try to educate moral beings by any rules other than those deduced from pure reason, which apply to the whole species.

Gentleness of manners, forbearance, and long-suffering are such lovable godlike qualities that high-flying poetry has attributed them to God; and there may be no representation of his goodness that fastens on the human affections as strongly as those that represent him abundant in mercy and willing to pardon. Looked at this point of view, gentleness has all the marks of grandeur combined with the winning graces of kindness towards subordinates; but how different gentleness looks when it is the submissive manner of a dependent, the support of weakness that loves because it needs protection, and is forbearing because it must silently endure injuries, smiling under the lash at which it doesn't dare to snarl! This picture of degradation is the portrait of an accomplished [see Glossary] woman, according to the received opinion of female excellence as something different. . . from human excellence. Or they (for example Rousseau and Swedenborg) kindly give Adam back his rib, making one moral being of a man and woman, and not forgetting to give her all the 'submissive charms' [that is a phrase from Milton].

We aren't told how women are to exist in a state of affairs where there is no marriage. Moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, but they are unanimous in advising *woman* to provide only for the present. Gentleness, docility [see Glossary], and spaniel-like affection are consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and one writer . . . has declared that it is 'masculine' for a woman to be sad. She was created to be the man's toy, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever he dismisses reason and chooses to be amused.

It is absolutely correct to recommend gentleness in a general way. A frail being—and all humans *are* frail—should try to be gentle. But when forbearance confuses right with wrong, it stops being a virtue. It may be found agreeable in a companion, but that companion will always be regarded as an inferior, and will inspire only a flat and lifeless tenderness which easily degenerates into contempt. Still, if advice really could make gentle a being to whom such a fine polish isn't natural, that would move things on a little in the direction of true morality; but it's easy to show that what such advice actually produces is affectation, pretence, which puts a stumbling block in the way of personal improvement, so that the 'female' sex gets little benefit from sacrificing solid virtues to the acquiring of superficial graces, even if for a few years these graces give the individual a great deal of power.

As a philosopher, I read with indignation the nice-sounding descriptions that men use to soften their insults; and as a moralist, I ask what they mean by such oxymorons as 'fair defects', 'amiable weaknesses' and so on. [In *Paradise Lost* Eve is called a 'fair defect'.] If there is only one criterion of morals for men, only one model for them to follow, women seem to be suspended by destiny. . . .: they don't have the

unerring instinct of the lower animals, but nor are they allowed to fix the eye of reason on a perfect model. They were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as 'masculine'.

Look at this topic now from a different angle. Do passive idle women make the best wives? Never mind the after-life just now; let us confine our discussion to the present moment of existence, and ask: How well do such weak creatures perform their part? Do the women who by attaining a few superficial accomplishments have strengthened the common prejudice regarding women contribute only to the happiness of their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to entertain them? And do women who were brought up on notions of passive obedience have enough character to manage a family or educate children? So far from it that after surveying the history of woman I can't help agreeing with the severest satirist who regards the 'female' sex as the weaker as well as the more oppressed half of the species. What does history reveal except marks of inferiority? How many women have freed themselves from the humiliating yoke of sovereign man? So few that the exceptions remind me of the ingenious conjecture that Newton was probably a being of a superior order, accidentally caged in a human body! Following that line of thought I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in various directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex were *male* spirits confined by mistake in a female body. But if it isn't philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned, the inferiority of women must depend on the organs, or else the heavenly fire that makes the clay develop isn't distributed in equal portions.

I am continuing to avoid any direct comparison between the two sexes collectively; I do frankly acknowledge the inferiority of woman according to the present appearance of

things. And I insist that men have increased that inferiority until women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and *then* determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale. But don't forget that for a small number of distinguished women I do not ask for a place [= 'a place on that scale'].

It's hard for us dim-sighted mortals to say what height human discoveries and improvements may arrive at when we are freed from the gloom of despotism that makes us stumble at every step. But there's one prediction I am willing to make without being gifted with a prophetic spirit: it is that when morality is settled on a more solid basis, woman will be either man's friend or his slave. There will be no question, as there is now, as to whether she is a moral agent or ·rather· the link that unites man with the lower animals. And if it does then turn out that like the lower animals women were principally created for the use of man, he will let them patiently bite the bridle [= 'leave them to *put up with* their servitude] and not mock them with empty praise; and if ·on the other hand· their rationality comes to be proved, man won't impede their improvement merely to gratify his sensual appetites. He won't use all the graces of rhetoric to persuade them to submit their understandings uncritically to the guidance of man. He won't, when discussing the education of women, assert that they ought never to have the free use of reason. . . .

Surely there can be only one rule of right, if morality has an eternal foundation; and whoever sacrifices virtue—strictly so-called—to present convenience. . . . lives only for the passing day and can't be an accountable [= 'morally responsible'] creature.

·If that is the category into which women belong·, then the poet ·Matthew Prior· should have dropped his sneer when

he wrote 'If weak women go astray, / The stars are more in fault than they.' Why? Because ·if women are like that, then what he says about them is simply *true* and not a fit topic for sneering sarcasm·. If it comes to be proved that women will never

- exercise their own reason,
- be independent,
- rise above opinion,
- feel the dignity of a rational will that •bows only to God and •often forgets that the universe contains any being but itself and God

then quite certainly they *are* bound by the unbreakable chain of destiny. [Let it be confessed that the final 'God' in the above indented passage replaces 'the model of perfection to which its ardent gaze is turned, to adore attributes that, softened into virtues, may be imitated in kind, though the degree overwhelms the enraptured mind'.]

I am proceeding by argument. I'm not willing to impress by rhetoric when reason offers her sober light. [This is the first time in this work that MW has treated reason as female. There are two others, on pages 32 and 65.] If women are really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves, or like lower animals who depend on the reason of man when they associate with him. Instead, develop their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of *principle*, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling that they depend only on God. Teach them in common with man to submit to necessity, instead of trying to make them more pleasing by giving a sex [see Glossary] to morals.

And if it turns out that they can't reach the same degree of strength of mind, perseverance and fortitude ·as men can·, let their virtues be the same in •kind ·as men's· although they can't be the same in degree. And man's superiority will be equally clear, if not clearer; and truth. . . . would be common to both. This wouldn't invert the order of society

as it is now. because woman would then have only the rank that reason assigned to her, and she couldn't employ her skills to level the balance, let alone to make it swing the other way.

These may be called 'utopian' dreams, but I shan't be deterred by that. I give thanks to the Being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me enough strength of mind to dare to employ my own reason until—becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue—I view with indignation the mistaken notions that enslave my sex.

I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre doesn't reign over me unless I owe homage to the reason of an individual; and even if I do, what I am submitting to is •reason, not to •man. In fact, the behaviour of a •morally• accountable being must be regulated by the operations of his or her own reason—if that is wrong, what foundation does the throne of God rest on?

It seems to me that I have to dwell on these obvious truths because females have been insulted, as it were; stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked out with artificial graces that enable them to be tyrants for a little time. Because in them love takes the place every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be beautiful, 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 are slaves by their very constitution, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must always languish like exotics, and be regarded as beautiful flaws in nature.

The argument about the subjection in which the sex has always been held can be turned back on man. [She means the argument from 'prescription'; see Glossary, and see also the end of this paragraph.] The many have always been subject to the few; and monsters who have shown almost no perception of human excellence have tyrannized over thousands of their fellow creatures. Why have men with superior gifts submitted to such degradation? Doesn't everyone know that kings, taken as a whole, have always been inferior in abilities and virtue to the same number of men taken from the common mass of mankind? Yet haven't they been—and aren't they still—treated with a degree of reverence that is an insult to reason? China isn't the only country where a living man has been made a God. *Men* have submitted to superior strength so as to enjoy with impunity the pleasure of the moment, and *women* have only done the same. Therefore until it is proved that the courtier who servilely gives up his birthright as a man is not a moral agent, it can't be argued that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated. . . .

### Chapter 3: The same subject continued

Bodily strength, once the distinction of heroes, has sunk into such undeserved contempt that men as well as women seem to think it unnecessary: women because it detracts from their feminine graces and from that lovely weakness that is the source of their undue power; and men because it seems to conflict with the character of a gentleman. [MW is probably here using 'contempt' in a now obsolete sense, meaning merely that bodily strength has come to be regarded as negligible.]

It won't be hard to prove that the two sexes have both departed from one extreme and run into another; but before I come to that I should perhaps observe that a certain common error has come to have some acceptance, and this has given strength to a false conclusion in which an effect has been mistaken for a cause.

People of genius have very often impaired their constitutions by study, or by careless inattention to their health, and . . . superficial observers have inferred from this that men of genius have commonly weak—or to use a more fashionable term, *delicate*—constitutions. But the truth is the opposite of that, I believe. Diligent inquiry has led me to the conclusion that strength of mind has in most cases been accompanied by superior strength of body—natural soundness of constitution, I mean, not the robust tone of nerves and vigour of muscles that come from bodily labour when the mind is at work only in directing the hands.

Dr. Priestley has remarked. . . .that the majority of great men have lived beyond the age of 45. Now, think about  
a great scientist who carelessly lavishes his strength when investigating his favourite science, wasting the lamp of life, forgetful of the midnight hour;

or think about

a poet lost in dreams that his imagination has peopled, and his soul disturbed—until it shakes his constitution—by the passions that his meditation has raised; passions whose purely imaginary objects fade before his exhausted eye.

They must have had iron constitutions! Shakespeare himself didn't grasp the airy dagger with a nerveless hand, and Milton didn't tremble when he led Satan far from the confines of his dreary prison. [MW is referring here to Macbeth's having a vision of a dagger and saying 'Is this a dagger I see before me? Come, let me clutch thee!', and to this passage from *Paradise Lost*: 'Satan was now at hand, and from his seat / The Monster moving onward came as fast, / With horrid strides, Hell trembled as he strode.'] These were not the ravings of imbecility, the sickly effusions of unwell brains; but the exuberance of an imagination that wasn't continually reminded of its material shackles when it was wandering 'in a fine frenzy' [Shakespeare's phrase].

I am aware that this argument would carry me further than you may think I want to go; but I follow truth, and still adhering to my first position I will admit that bodily strength seems to give man a natural superiority over woman; and this is the only solid basis on which the superiority of the sex can be built. But I still insist that not only the *virtue* but also the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree; and that women, considered not only as moral but as rational creatures, should try to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of *half*-being, one of Rousseau's wild inventions.

·A LONG FOOTNOTE QUOTING ROUSSEAU·

Researches into abstract and speculative truths, the principles and axioms of sciences—in short, everything that tends to generalise our ideas—is not the proper province of women. Their studies should concern points of practice; it is for them to apply the principles that men have discovered, and to make observations that direct men to the establishment of general principles. All the ideas of women that aren't immediately relevant to points of duty should be directed to the study of men, and to the attainment of the pleasant accomplishments that have to do with taste. Works of genius are beyond the capacity of women, who don't have enough precision or power of attention to succeed in sciences that require accuracy; and physical knowledge belongs only to those who are most active, most inquiring, and understand the greatest variety of things—in short, it belongs to those who are best able to make judgments about how sensible beings relate to the laws of nature. A woman who is naturally weak and doesn't carry her ideas very far does know how to make judgments about (and form proper estimates of) the movements that she gets started in order to aid her weakness; these movements are the passions of men. The mechanism she employs is much more powerful than ours, for all her levers move the human heart. She must have the skill to incline us to do everything that she needs or wants and that her sex won't enable her to do herself. So she ought to study the mind of man thoroughly,

not abstractly the mind of man in general, but  
·concretely· the dispositions of the men she is subject  
to by the laws of her country or by the force of opinion.

She should learn to discover their real sentiments from their conversation, actions, looks and gestures. She should also work out how to communicate—by her own conversation, actions, looks, and gestures—the sentiments that are agree-

able to those men, without seeming to intend it. Men will argue more philosophically about the human heart, but women will read the heart of man better than they do. It is women's role to form an experimental morality, so to speak, and to reduce the study of man to a system. Women have more wit, men have more genius; women observe, men reason. The two together give us the clearest light and the most perfect knowledge that the human mind is capable of attaining unaided. In one word, from this source we acquire the most intimate acquaintance with ourselves and with others that we are capable of; and that is how art has a constant tendency to perfect the endowments that nature has bestowed. The world is the book of women. (from Rousseau's *Émile*)

·END OF ROUSSEAU FOOTNOTE·

I hope my readers still remember the comparison I made between women and officers.

But if bodily strength is (with some show of reason) something men boast of having, why are women so foolish as to be proud of ·weakness, which is· a defect? Rousseau has provided them with a plausible excuse that could only have occurred to a man whose imagination had been allowed to run wild in a search for ways of making impressions of the senses seem more refined—to give him a pretext for yielding to a natural appetite without violating a romantic sort of modesty that gratifies his pride and his libertinism.

Women, deluded by these sentiments, sometimes *boast* of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men, . . . and coming to have, like Turkish generals, more real power than their masters. But this involves sacrificing •virtue to •temporary gratifications, and sacrificing •a life worthy of respect to •the triumph of an hour.

[MW begins this next paragraph by saying, rather obscurely, that her objection is not to women's having this power over men but to how they obtain it, namely by a method that is degraded and harmful to society in general. Then:] So I will venture to assert that until women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge is bound to meet continual obstacles. If you accept that woman was not created merely to gratify the appetite of man, to be the upper servant who provides his meals and takes care of his linen, then you ought to grant also that

mothers or fathers who are serious about the education of females should have as their first concern: if not to strengthen the body, at least not to destroy the ·girl's physical· constitution by mistaken notions of beauty and female excellence; and girls should never be allowed to absorb the pernicious notion that some chemical process of reasoning can turn a defect into an excellence!

On this matter I am happy to find that the author of one of the most instructive books our country has produced for children thinks as I do. . . .

·QUOTATION FROM THOMAS DAY'S *Sandford and Merton*·

A respectable old man gives the following sensible account of how he went about educating his daughter Selene. 'I tried to give to both her mind and her body a degree of vigour that is seldom found in the female sex. As soon as she was strong enough to be capable of light work in the garden and around the farm, I employed her as my constant companion. Selene soon became dexterous in all these rustic jobs, which gave me equal amounts of pleasure and admiration. If women are in general feeble in body and mind, that arises less from nature than from education. We encourage a bad slackness and inactivity, which we falsely call "delicacy"; instead of

hardening their minds by the severer principles of reason and philosophy, we train them in useless arts that lead only to vanity and sensuality. In most of the countries I had visited, they are taught nothing of a higher nature than a few modulations of the voice or useless postures of the body; their time is taken in idleness or trifles, and trifles become the only pursuits capable of interesting them. We seem to forget that our own domestic ·comforts and the ·education of our children must depend on the qualities of the female sex. And what ·comforts or ·education can we expect from a race of beings who are corrupted from their infancy and know nothing of the duties of life? The only arts cultivated by women in most of the polished nations I had seen were touching a musical instrument with useless skill, exhibiting their natural or artificial graces to the eyes of idle and debauched young men, and wasting their husbands' wealth in riotous and unnecessary expenses. And the consequences are always just what you would expect to come from such polluted sources—private misery and public servitude.

'Selene's education was regulated by different views, and conducted on severer principles—if you can call "severe" something that opens the mind to a sense of moral and religious duties, and arms it most effectively against the inevitable evils of life.'

·END OF QUOTATION FROM *Sandford and Merton*, VOL. 3·

Suppose it were proved that woman is naturally weaker than man, how does it follow that it is natural for her to try to become even weaker than nature intended her to be? Arguments of this sort are an insult to common sense, and have a whiff of passion about them. I hope that in this enlightened age the divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, can be challenged without danger ·to the challenger·; and although conviction may not silence many boisterous disputants, still when any prevailing prejudice is



attacked the wise will *think about it* and leave thoughtless and noisy scolding to the narrow-minded.

A mother who wants to give her daughter true dignity of character must ignore the sneers of ignorance and proceed on a plan diametrically opposite to the one Rousseau has recommended with all the deluding charms of eloquence and philosophical trickery. His eloquence makes absurdities plausible, and when his dogmatic conclusions are considered by people who aren't able to refute them, they produce puzzlement but no conviction.

Throughout the whole animal kingdom every young creature requires almost continual exercise, and the infancy of children should similarly be spent in harmless play that exercises the feet and hands without requiring very precise direction from the head or the constant attention of a governess. In fact, the care necessary for self-preservation is the first natural exercise of the understanding, as inventive little pastimes stretch the imagination. But these wise designs of nature are counteracted by mistaken fondness or blind zeal. The child is not left for a moment to its own direction, particularly a girl, and is thus made dependent—and dependence is called *natural*.

To preserve personal beauty—woman's glory!—the girls' limbs and faculties are cramped with worse-than-Chinese bands; and the sedentary life they are condemned to live, while boys play in the open air, weakens their muscles and slackens their nerves. [MW is referring to the Chinese practice of binding girls' feet very tightly so as to keep them fashionably small, with the result that the adult woman could only hobble.] As for Rousseau's remarks, since echoed by many writers, that

girls have naturally, i.e. from their birth and independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking,

they are too puerile to merit a serious refutation. If a girl

is condemned to sit for hours listening to the idle chat of weak governesses or to be present at her mother's toilet, it is indeed very natural for her to •try to join the conversation, and •to imitate her mother or aunts and to amuse herself [see Glossary] by adorning her lifeless doll, as they amuse themselves in dressing her, poor innocent babe! Men of the greatest abilities have seldom been strong enough to rise above the surrounding atmosphere; and if the page of genius [see Glossary] has always been blurred by the prejudices of the times, some allowance should be made for •the members of a sex who—like kings!—always see things through a false medium.

Thus, we can easily explain women's conspicuous fondness for dress without supposing it to come from a desire to please •the members of• the sex on which they are dependent. In short, the supposition that

a girl is naturally a coquette, and her behaviour expresses a desire connected with nature's impulse to propagate the species, even before an improper education has, by heating the imagination, created the desire prematurely

is *absurd*. It's so unphilosophical that such an intelligent observer as Rousseau wouldn't have adopted it if he hadn't been accustomed to pushing his desire for uniqueness ahead of reason, and pushing a favourite paradox ahead of truth.

To give a sex [see Glossary] to *mind* in this way was not very consistent with the principles of a man who argued so warmly and so well for the immortality of the soul. But truth is a weak barrier when it stands in the way of an hypothesis! Rousseau respected virtue—he almost adored it—and yet he allowed himself to love with sensual fondness. His imagination constantly prepared combustible fuel for his combustible senses; but, in order to reconcile •his other views with• his respect for self-denial, fortitude and those

heroic virtues that a mind like his could not coolly admire, he tries to invert the law of nature, and launches a doctrine that is pregnant with harm and derogatory to the character of God.

His ridiculous stories that aim to show that girls are *naturally* attentive to their persons. . . . are beneath contempt. [She quotes one such story and says that it belongs 'with the anecdotes of the learned pig'; this presumably refers to *The Story of the Learned Pig*, an anonymous work that had appeared not long before, questioning whether Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him. MW continues:]

I have probably had more opportunity to observe girls in their infancy than J. J. Rousseau has. I can recollect my own feelings, and I have looked steadily around me [for a while she had earned her living as a governess]; and far from sharing his view about the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to say that a girl whose spirits haven't been damped by inactivity, and whose innocence hasn't been tainted by false shame, will always be a romp [= 'a lively playful girl'], and the doll will never interest her unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys would play harmlessly together if the difference between the sexes hadn't been drilled into them long before nature makes any difference. Among the women I have known—this is a matter of plain objective fact—the ones who have acted like rational creatures, or shown some vigour of intellect, are ones who had this kind of freedom in their youth, or in the language of some of the elegant experts on the fair sex, had been 'allowed to run wild'.

The evils that flow from inattention to bodily health during infancy and youth extend further than is supposed; dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind, and how can someone be a good wife or mother if most of her time is spent guarding against or enduring sickness?

And it can't be expected that a woman will resolutely try to strengthen her constitution, abstaining from indulgences that would harm her health, if her motives of action were at an early age entangled with artificial notions of beauty and false descriptions of sensibility. Most men sometimes have to put up with bodily troubles, and occasionally to go out into bad weather; but genteel women are, literally speaking, *slaves to their bodies*—and they glory in their subjection.

I once knew a weak woman. . . . who was more than commonly proud of her delicacy and sensibility. [MW contemptuously gives details; she is clearly remembering a real case; the details don't add to the content of the work as a whole. She follows this with a paragraph saying that although the Roman emperors were 'depraved by lawless power', kings in Europe have generally been at least somewhat restrained, and she contrasts this with 'the destructive blast [an intensely hot wind] that desolates Turkey, and makes the men as well as the soil unfruitful'.]

Women are in this deplorable state everywhere, because truth is hidden from them so as to preserve their 'innocence' (the polite name for ignorance), and they are made to take on an artificial character before their faculties have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre [see Glossary], the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around in its gilt cage it only seeks to adorn its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits that engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one pursuit and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their view beyond the triumph of the hour. But if their understanding were emancipated from the slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man and their short sighted desire. . . . has subjected them, we would probably read of their weaknesses with surprise.

Let me pursue the argument a little further. If there were an evil being who, in the allegorical language of scripture [1 *Peter* 5:8] 'went about seeking whom he should devour', he could not more effectively degrade the human character than by giving a man absolute power. This argument branches off in various directions. Birth, riches, and every intrinsic advantage that **raise a man above** his fellows, without any mental exertion, really **sink him below** them. In proportion to his weakness, he is manipulated by designing men, until the bloated monster loses all traces of humanity. And tribes of men like flocks of sheep quietly follow such a leader!—that is a blunder that can only be explained by narrowness of understanding and a desire for present enjoyment. Educated in slavish dependence and weakened by luxury and sloth, where can we find men who will stand up and •assert the rights of man, or •claim the privilege of moral beings, who should have only one road to excellence? Slavery to monarchs and ministers, whose deadly grasp stops the progress of the human mind, is not yet abolished and won't be for a long time.

[MW now argues that men who contend 'that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so' are using the very argument that 'tyrannical kings and venal ministers' use to justify their subjection of everyone else, men included. Men who go on about the folly of women, she says, should bear in mind the folly of men.]

It is obviously true that when women obtain power by unjust means they lose the rank appropriate to their having reason, and become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants. In acquiring power they lose all simplicity, all dignity of mind, and act as we see men act when they have been exalted by the same wrong means.

#### •MOVING INTO A DISCUSSION OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES•

It is time to bring about a revolution in female manners, time to restore their lost dignity to them and to make them, as a part of the human species, work to reform the world by reforming themselves. It is time to separate unchangeable •morals from local •manners. If men are demi-gods, then let us indeed serve them! And if the dignity of the female soul is as disputable as that of animals, if their [= women's] reason doesn't give enough light to direct their conduct but they don't have unerring instinct either, they are surely the most miserable of all creatures; bent beneath the iron hand of destiny, they must submit to being a *beautiful defect* in creation. In that case, God has made half of mankind at once morally accountable •because they have reason• and yet not accountable •because they don't have enough reason•. I challenge moral theologians to point out some conclusive reason for God to behave like that!

The only solid foundation for morality appears to be the character of the Supreme Being; the harmony of that character arises from a balance of attributes; and...one attribute seems to imply the *necessity* of another: God must be just because he is wise, he must be good because he is omnipotent. To exalt one attribute at the expense of another equally noble and necessary one bears the stamp of warped human reason. . . . Man, accustomed to bow down to power in his savage state, can seldom get rid of this barbarous prejudice—•this attaching of weight to physical power•—even when civilization fixes how greatly mental strength is superior to bodily strength; and his reason is clouded by these crude opinions, even when he is thinking about God. His omnipotence is made to swallow up or preside over his other attributes, and mortals who think •as I do• that his power must be regulated by his wisdom are accused of **irreverently** limiting his power.

There is a kind of 'humility' that investigates nature but stops short of nature's Author. I disclaim that. ·God·, the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, no doubt has many attributes of which we can form no conception; but •reason tells me that those attributes can't clash with the divine attributes that fill me with loving wonder, and I am compelled to listen to •her voice.

It seems natural for man to search for excellence, and either to •find it in the object that he worships or •blindly clothe that object with perfection. But what good effect can the blindly-clothing type of worship have on the moral conduct of a rational being? He bends to power; he stands in wonder before a dark cloud, which may •open a bright prospect to him, or •burst in angry fury on his doomed head without his knowing why. And if God does act on the basis of the vague impulse of an undirected will, what is man to do? He must either follow his own will, or act according to rules derived from principles that he rejects as **irreverent**. This is a dilemma into which both fanatics and cooler thinkers have fallen when trying to free men from the wholesome restraints imposed by a correct conception of God's character.

It isn't impious to scan God's attributes: we *have to* do it if we are to exercise our faculties. For someone wanting to acquire either virtue or knowledge, the only ·useful· worship consists in loving God as the fountain of wisdom, goodness, and power. A blind unsettled affection may, like human passions, occupy the mind and warm the heart, ·but that has no moral benefit because it can happen· while 'doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God' [Micah 6:8] are forgotten. I shall resume this subject when I consider religion in a light opposite to that recommended by Dr. Gregory, who treats it as a matter of sentiment or taste—a question of how you feel or what you like·.

·END OF DISCUSSION OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES·

Returning now from this apparent detour: It is desirable that women's affection for their husbands should be based on the same principle that ·religious· devotion ought to rest on. Nowhere in the world is there any other firm base. Let women beware of the misleading light of 'sentiment', which is often used as a softer phrase for *sensuality*. So it follows, I think, that from their infancy women should either be •shut up like eastern princes or •educated in a manner that enables them to think and act for themselves.

Why do men halt between two opinions, and expect impossibilities? Why do they expect virtue from a slave, or from a being who has been made weak—or worse—by the constitution of civil society?

Still, I know that eradicating the firmly rooted prejudices that sensualists have planted will take a long time; and it will also take time

- to convince women that they are acting contrary to their real long-term interests when they value weakness or pretend to have it, under the name of 'delicacy', and
- to convince the world that the poisoned source of female vices [see Glossary] and follies. . . .has been the sensual homage paid to beauty.

I'm talking about beauty of features; for a German writer has shrewdly observed that a **pretty** woman is an object of desire for men of all descriptions, whereas a **fine** woman, who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty, may have no attraction for men who find their happiness in the gratification of their appetites.

I can see an obvious retort that may be made, namely:

For as long as man goes on being as imperfect as he appears to have been so far, he *will* be pretty much the slave of his appetites; and it is always the case that the women who get the most power are those who gratify

a predominant appetite; so the sex is degraded by a physical if not by a moral necessity. [The last clause is verbatim MW. It means something like this: 'The female sex *will* be degraded—this isn't morally right, but it is inevitable.']

This objection has some force, I admit; but it is based on the idea that if we can see that something is inevitable we shouldn't waste our energy trying to change it; and that idea is open to question. In the light of the sublime precept 'be pure as your heavenly father is pure,' it would seem that God... hasn't set any limits to the virtues of man, and that man may press forward without considering whether he is stepping out of his sphere [= 'getting out of line'] by harbouring such a noble ambition as to be as pure as God is....

- Matter yields to the great governing spirit by following the causal laws that he has established; but an immortal
- soul, not restrained by mechanical laws and struggling to free itself from matter's shackles, doesn't disturb the order of creation—indeed it contributes to it—when it tries in co-operation with the Father of spirits to govern itself by the invariable rule... by which the universe is regulated.

Besides, if women are educated for dependence, i.e. to act according to the will of another fallible being, and to submit to power, whether it is right or wrong, where are we to stop? Are they to be considered as vice-regents—deputy monarchs—allowed to reign over a small domain, and answerable for their conduct to a higher tribunal that is as liable to error as they are?

It won't be hard to prove that such deputies will act like men who are held down by fear, and will make their children and servants endure their tyrannical oppression. As they submit without reason, so also they will govern without reason: having no fixed rules against which to judge their conduct, they will be kind or cruel as the mood takes them; and it won't be surprising if sometimes, chafing under their

heavy yoke, they take a mean pleasure in resting it on weaker shoulders.

•THE CASE OF ONE WIDOW•

Consider this case:

A woman who has been trained up to obedience marries a sensible man, who directs her judgment without making her feel the servility of her subjection. He helps her to act by this reflected light with as much propriety as can be expected when reason is taken at second hand, but she can't ensure the life of her protector; he dies and leaves her with a large family.

She now has a double duty: to play both the mother's and the father's part in educating her children, forming their principles and securing their property. But she has never thought for herself, much less acted for herself. She has only learned to please men, to depend gracefully on them; but how with her burden of children is she to obtain another protector, another husband to supply the place of reason? A rational man—we aren't treading on romantic ground!—though he may think her a pleasing docile creature won't choose to marry a *family* for love when the world contains many creatures who are prettier than she is. What then is to become of her? She either •falls an easy prey to some mean fortune hunter who defrauds her children of their paternal inheritance and makes her miserable, or •becomes the victim of discontent and blind indulgence. Unable to educate her sons or get them to respect her..., she suffers under the anguish of impotent regret. The serpent's tooth enters into her very soul, and the vices of lawless youth bring her with sorrow—and perhaps also with poverty—to the grave. [MW is echoing King Lear's words 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child.']. . . .

It seems likely that someone who has been taught only to please must still find her happiness in pleasing; and if that is true of this woman, what an example of folly—and even vice—she will be to her innocent daughters! The mother will be lost in the coquette, and instead of making friends of her daughters she will view them with suspicion because they are her rivals, the cruellest rivals because they invite a comparison and drive her from the throne of beauty—she who has never thought of a seat on the bench of reason.

It doesn't require a lively pencil. . . .to sketch the domestic miseries and petty vices which such a mistress of a family spreads around her. Yet she is only acting as a woman ought to act if she has been brought up according to Rousseau's system. She can't be reproached for being 'masculine' or stepping out of her sphere; indeed she may conform to his rules well enough to be reckoned a good kind of woman. Yet in what respect can she be termed good? It's true that she abstains, without any great struggle, from committing gross crimes; but how does she fulfil her duties? Duties!—she has no time or energy for duties, when she has enough to think about in adorning her body and nursing a weak constitution.

With regard to religion, she never presumed to judge for herself. As a dependent creature should, she conformed to the ceremonies of the church she was brought up in, piously believing that wiser heads than her own have settled that business [MW's phrase]; and her idea of perfection in religious matters is *not to doubt*. So she makes her little weekly payment to the church, and thanks her God that she is not as other women are. These are the blessed effects of a good education! these are the virtues of man's helpmate. I must relieve myself—give myself a break from my rage and sadness—by drawing a different picture.

·THE CASE OF ANOTHER WIDOW·

Now let us imagine a woman with a fairly good understanding (I don't want to deal with extremes), whose constitution, strengthened by physical exercise, has allowed her body to acquire its full vigour; while her mind has gradually expanded itself to understand the moral duties of life and what human virtue and dignity consist in. Formed in this way by the duties she has because of her position in life, she marries from affection, without losing sight of prudence; and . . . she secures her husband's respect before there's any need to exert low tricks to please him and feed a dying flame of love. Nature dooms *that* to expire when the loved one becomes familiar, when friendship and forbearance take the place of a more ardent affection. This is the natural death of love; and in the marriage I am describing here domestic peace is not destroyed by struggles to prevent the death from happening. I am also supposing the husband to be virtuous. . . .

Fate, however, breaks this tie. She is left a widow, without enough to live on comfortably, but she is not desolate! The pang of nature is felt; but after time has softened sorrow into sad resignation, her heart turns to her children with redoubled fondness, and in her anxiety to provide for them her affection presents her maternal duties as sacred and heroic. She thinks that her virtuous efforts are seen by the eye of God, from whom all her comfort now must flow and whose approval is life; and her imagination, a little abstracted and exalted by grief, lets her hope that. . . her husband's eyes still see how she subdues every wayward passion in order to fulfil the double duty of being father as well as mother to her children. Raised to heroism by misfortunes, she represses the first faint dawning of a natural inclination before it ripens into love; and in the bloom of life she forgets her sex [see Glossary]—forgets the pleasure of an awakening passion

which might again have been inspired and returned. . . . Her children have her love, and her brightest hopes are beyond the grave, where her imagination often strays.

I think I see her surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. . . . Health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks; and as they grow up, the cares of her life are lessened by their grateful attention. She lives to see the virtues that she tried to implant in her children through principles become fixed in them as habits, and to see her children achieve enough strength of character to be able to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example.

The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death. When she rises from the grave she can say to God: 'Behold, you gave me a talent, and here are five talents'. [This is a variant on a story in Matthew 25; a talent was a coin.]

\* \* \* \* \*

I want to sum up what I have said in a few words: I here throw down my gauntlet [= 'pose a challenge to anyone who wants to oppose me'] and deny that there is any way for a woman to be virtuous that isn't also a way for a man to be virtuous—and **modesty** is not an exception to that. If I understand the meaning of the word, *truth* must be the same for man and for woman; yet the fanciful female character that poets and novelists draw so prettily demands the sacrifice of truth and sincerity; and so virtue becomes a relative idea, based on nothing but utility, and men set themselves up as judges of utility, shaping it to their own convenience.

Women may have different duties to fulfill, but they are *human* duties, and I firmly maintain that the principles that should regulate the performance of them must be the ones that hold for all human beings.

To become worthy of respect, women must use their understandings; there is no other basis for independence of character. I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the **modest** slaves of opinion.

In the upper ranks of life we seldom we meet with a man of superior abilities, or even one whose abilities are about average! The reason seems to me clear: the state they are born in was an unnatural one. The human character has always been formed by the employments the individual or class pursues; and if the faculties are not sharpened by necessity, they must remain obtuse [= 'blunt']. The same line of thought can fairly be extended to women. [MW is saying that *women in general* tend to be dim in the way that *men who have titles or high rank or great wealth* tend to be dim.] That is because most of them have no *serious* occupations; they are left to the pursuit of pleasure, which gives to their character the triviality that makes the society of the *great* so insipid. The lack of firmness, produced by a similar cause, forces them both—'great' men and all women—to fly from themselves [MW's phrase] to noisy pleasures and artificial passions, until vanity takes place of every social affection, and the characteristics of humanity almost disappear from sight. The blessings of civil governments as they are at present organized operate in such a way that wealth and female softness equally tend to debase mankind, and are produced by the same cause. If women are rational creatures they should be urged to acquire virtues that they can call their own, for how can a rational being be ennobled by anything that is not obtained by his or her *own* efforts?

## Chapter 4: The state of degradation to which woman is reduced by various causes

It is clear, I think, that woman is •naturally weak or •degraded by a combination of circumstances. I shall lay this alongside a conclusion that I have often heard sensible men assert in favour of an aristocracy, namely:

The mass of mankind are a sort of nothing; if they weren't—if there anything to them—the obsequious slaves who patiently allow themselves to be imprisoned would have a sense of their own worth and would throw off their chains. Men everywhere submit to oppression, when they have only to lift up their heads to throw off the yoke; yet, instead of asserting their birthright, they quietly lick the dust and say 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die'.

Women, I argue from analogy, are degraded by the same inclination to enjoy the present moment and eventually to despise the freedom that they haven't enough virtue [see Glossary] to struggle to get. But I must be more explicit.

•WHAT THE NEXT PARAGRAPH SEEMS TO MEAN•

As regards people's ability to manage and develop their feelings, no-one thinks that males are ahead of females, or vice versa. But we do have to reckon with the view that males are ahead of females when it comes to intellectual

powers.<sup>5</sup> The only positive feature that woman is credited with having *absolutely* is loveliness; as for rationality, the fraction of *that* that's conceded to her is a tiny one; for when she has been denied high-level intellect and judgment, what is there left to count as her intellect?

•WHAT MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT ACTUALLY WROTE:•

With respect to the culture of the heart, it is unanimously allowed that sex is out of the question; but the line of subordination in the mental powers is never to be passed over. [footnote] Only 'absolute in loveliness' [Milton's phrase], the portion of rationality granted to woman is, indeed, very scanty; for, denying her genius [see Glossary] and judgment, it is scarcely possible to divine what remains to characterize intellect.

What immortality is *for* is the perfectibility of human reason. If man were created perfect, or if when he reached maturity a flood of knowledge broke in on him and preserved him from error, I'm not sure that his existence would continue after the death of his body. But as things are, every difficulty in morals that eludes human solution—that baffles the investigation of profound thinking and the lightning glance of genius—is part of my case for believing in the

<sup>5</sup> What inconsistencies men fall into when they argue without a compass! Women, weak women, are •teasingly• compared with angels; yet a superior order of beings •such as angels• should be supposed to have more intellect than man—if they don't, what makes them superior? In a similar spirit, and not teasingly, women are credited with having more goodness of heart, piety, and benevolence •than men•. This is meant as a compliment, but I doubt that it is true, unless ignorance is the mother of invention! I am quite convinced that people's virtue is nearer than is usually thought to being (on average) proportional to their knowledge.



immortality of the soul. Thus, reason is the simple power of *improvement*—or, more accurately, of *recognising truth*. . . . The nature of reason must be the same in everyone, if reason is an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; can •a soul be stamped with the heavenly image if •it isn't perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet. . . .the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction; with man always placed *between* her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a fog and to believe what she is told. But. . . .if woman has reason, which for a moment I will take for granted, she wasn't created merely to be the solace of man, and her sexual character should not destroy her human character.

Men have probably been led into this error by viewing education [see Glossary] in a false light, seeing it not as •the first step in forming a being who will advance gradually toward perfection (not strictly the right word, but I can't find a better one), but rather as merely •a preparation for life. That is the basis on which the false system of female manners been built, robbing the whole sex of its dignity and classing women with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land. This has always been the language of men, and even highly intelligent women adopt the same sentiments for fear of departing from the character they are supposed to have just as women. Thus **understanding** strictly so-called has been denied to woman; and **instinct**—refined into wit and cunning for the purposes of life—has been put in its place.

The power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only thing an immortal being can have that really deserves to be called 'knowledge'. Merely to observe, without trying to explain anything, may serve (very incompletely) as everyday common sense; but where is the store laid up that is to clothe the soul when it leaves the body?

Women have been said not to have this power, and some writers have insisted that it is nearly always inconsistent with their sexual character. Let men prove *this* and I'll admit that woman only exists for man. In fact the power of •generalizing ideas to any great extent is not very common among men or women. But •this activity is the true cultivation of the understanding; and everything works together to make the cultivation of the understanding harder in the female than in the male world.

This remark naturally leads into the main subject of the present chapter: I shall now try to point out some of the causes that degrade the •female• sex and prevent women from generalizing their observations.

I shan't go back to ancient times to trace the history of woman. All I need to say is that she has always been either a slave or a despot, and that both these roles hold back the progress of reason. It has always seemed to me that the great source of female folly and vice is narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way of developing the female understanding •and thus curing the narrowness of the female mind•; yet virtue can be built on no other foundation! The same obstacles are thrown in the way of the rich, with the same results.

The proverb has it that *necessity is the mother of invention*; it is also the mother of virtue. Virtue is an acquisition to which pleasure must be sacrificed; and no-one sacrifices available pleasure unless his or her mind has been opened and strengthened by adversity, or the pursuit of knowledge goaded on by necessity. It is a good thing for people to have the cares of life to struggle with; for these struggles prevent them from becoming a prey to enervating vices purely through idleness! If men and women are born into a tropical zone, where the mid-day sun of pleasure shines directly

down on them, how can they adequately brace their minds to discharge the duties of life, or even to enjoy the affections that carry them out of themselves?

Pleasure is the business of a woman's life, according to society's present estimate; and for as long as that continues to be so, not much can be expected from such weak beings. Inheriting the sovereignty of beauty in a lineal descent from Eve, the first 'fair defect' in nature, they have maintained their power by resigning the natural rights that the exercise of reason might have given them, and chosen to be short-lived queens rather than labour to have the sober pleasures that arise from equality. Exalted by their inferiority (this sounds like a contradiction) they constantly demand homage as women, though experience should teach them that the men who pride themselves on the scrupulous exactness with which they pay this insolent respect to the sex are the ones who are most inclined to tyrannize over and despise the very weakness they cherish. They often repeat Hume's sentiments, when he alludes to women in the course of comparing the French and Athenian characters:

But what is more singular in this whimsical nation, the French, (I say to the Athenians) is that a frolic of yours during the Saturnalia when the slaves are served by their masters is seriously continued by them through the whole year, and through the whole course of their lives. . . . Your sport elevates for only a few days those whom fortune has thrown down, and whom she might in sport really elevate forever above you. But the French gravely exalt those whom nature has made subject to them, and whose inferiority and infirmities are absolutely incurable. The women, though without virtue [see Glossary], are their masters and sovereigns.

Ah! why do women (I write with affectionate solicitude) lower themselves to receive attention and respect from

strangers? I mean: attention and respect that goes beyond the two-way civility that the dictates of humanity and the politeness of civilization authorise between man and man. . . . Confined in cages, like birds, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves and stalk with mock-majesty from perch to perch. They are provided with food and clothing and don't have to work to get them, but they give up health, liberty and virtue in exchange. But actually it isn't surprising that women do this. Who among mankind has ever had enough strength of mind to give up these adventitious prerogatives, rising with the calm dignity of reason to a level above that of common opinion, and daring to be proud of the privileges inherent in man? [That sentence contrasts benefits that are 'adventitious', i.e. are available because of facts about one's circumstances, with benefits that are 'inherent in man', and thus available to every human being in any circumstances.] And there's no point in waiting for this to change—not while hereditary power chokes the affections and nips reason in the bud.

In this way men's passions have placed women on thrones; and until mankind become more reasonable women will avail themselves of the power that they get with the least exertion, and that is the most indisputable. They will smile; yes, they will *smile* even if they are told that

In beauty's empire is no mean,  
And woman either slave or queen,  
Is quickly scorn'd when not ador'd.

But the adoration comes first, and the scorn is not anticipated.

Louis XIV, in particular, spread artificial manners and used their glitter to catch the whole nation in his web: establishing a carefully contrived chain of despotism, he brought it about that it was the in the interests of each French person to respect his position and support his power.

And women, whom he flattered by a childish attention to the whole sex, obtained during his reign the prince-like distinction that is so fatal to reason and virtue.

A king is always a king, and a woman always a woman. . . . His authority and her sex always stand between them and rational discourse. She *should* be like this with a lover, I agree, and in that relationship her sensibility will naturally lead her to try to arouse emotion to gratify not her vanity but her heart. I don't count this as coquetry; it is the uncalculated impulse of nature; I exclaim against the sexual desire for conquest only when the heart doesn't come into it.

This desire isn't confined to women; 'I have endeavoured', says •Lord Chesterfield, 'to gain the hearts of twenty women whose persons [see Glossary] I would not have given a fig for.' The libertine who in a gust of passion takes advantage of •some woman's• unsuspecting tenderness is a *saint* when compared with •this cold-hearted rascal. . . . Yet only taught to please, women are always on the watch to please, and with true heroic ardour they try to gain hearts that they will give up or kick aside once it is clear that they have won the victory.

Now I must get into the details of the subject.

I lament the fact that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions that •men think it manly to pay to the •female• sex, when in fact •they are insultingly supporting their own superiority. There is nothing graceful about bowing to an inferior, •which is what a man must think he is doing when he bows to a woman•. Indeed, these ceremonies strike me as so ludicrous that I can hardly control my muscles [= 'can hardly stop myself from laughing'] when I see a man jump up with eager and serious solicitude to lift a handkerchief or shut a door, when the *lady* could have done it herself if she moved a pace or two.

A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I won't stifle it although it may arouse a horse laugh [= 'may make you roar with laughter']. Except in cases where love animates the behaviour, **I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society**—that is, I wish things could be managed in such a way that it was usually not clear whether a given person was male or female. For this sorting into two sexes is, I am firmly persuaded, the basis for the weakness of character ascribed to woman; is the cause why •the understanding is neglected while accomplishments [see Glossary] are acquired with care, and why women prefer the graceful virtues to the heroic ones.

Every human being wishes to be loved and respected for *something*; and the common herd will always take the shortest road to the fulfillment of their wishes. The respect paid to wealth and beauty is the surest and least ambiguous road, and as a matter of course it will always attract the eye of common minds. For men to rise from •the middle rank of life into •prominence, they absolutely must have abilities and virtues; and this explains the well-known fact that the middle rank contains most virtue and abilities. In one social rank at least, men have therefore an opportunity to exert themselves with dignity, and to rise by efforts of kinds that really do improve a rational creature; but the whole female sex are, until their character is formed, in the same condition as the rich: for they are born. . . .with certain sexual privileges, and while those are freely available to them not many of them will ever think of works of supererogation as a means to getting the esteem of a small number of superior people. [Works of supererogation are acts of benevolence or charity that go above and beyond the call of duty.]

When do we hear of women who begin in obscurity and boldly claim respect on account of their great abilities or daring virtues? Where are they to be found? To be observed,

to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, satisfaction and approval are all the advantages that they seek.' True! my male readers will probably exclaim; but before they draw any conclusion they should remember that this was written originally as descriptive not of women but of the rich! In Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I have found a general characterisation of •people of rank and fortune that I think very thoroughly applies to •the female sex. . . . Let me quote a passage from that book, to add strength to an argument that I intend to insist on as the most conclusive argument against a sexual character [i.e. against there being any such thing as female nature or male nature, as distinct from human nature]. •The argument goes like this:

Apart from warriors, no great men of any sort have ever appeared among the nobility. From this fact we can reasonably infer that their local situation swallowed up the man, and produced a character similar to that of women, who are *localised*, so to speak, by the rank they are placed in as a matter of courtesy. [An unstated premise in MW's argument about nobles is that pretty often someone gets a noble rank because of something excellent that he has done. Then the fact that we don't find excellence among the nobility is evidence that •the excellence was extinguished by •the circumstances of having that rank—i.e. •the man was swallowed up by •the local situation.] Women, commonly called Ladies, are not to be contradicted in company, are not allowed to exert any manual strength. When any virtues are expected from them they are negative ones—patience, docility, good-humour, and flexibility—virtues incompatible with any vigorous exercise of intellect. Besides, by living more with each other and seldom being absolutely alone, they are more under the influence of sentiments than of passions. Solitude and reflection are necessary

to give wishes the force of passions, enabling the imagination to enlarge the object and make it the most desirable. The same holds for the rich; they don't deal in general ideas, collected by level-headed thinking or calm investigation—don't deal with them *enough* to acquire the strength of character on which great resolves are built.

But now hear what an acute observer, •Adam Smith•, says about the great.

•ADAM SMITH ON 'THE GREAT'•

Do the great seem unaware of how easily they can get the admiration of the public? or do they seem to think that, for them as for anyone else, their rank must have been purchased either by sweat or by blood? If the young nobleman is instructed in how to support the dignity of his rank, and to make himself worthy of the superiority over his fellow-citizens that he has acquired through the virtue of his ancestors, *what* accomplishments is he told to acquire for this purpose? Is he to make himself worthy of his rank by knowledge, hard work, patience, self-denial, or any other kind of virtue? Because his least move is *noticed*, he acquires a habit of care over every detail of ordinary behaviour, and tries to perform all those small duties with the most exact propriety. Being conscious of how much he is observed, and of how much people are disposed to allow him to have whatever he wants, he acts—even in utterly ordinary situations—with the freedom and loftiness that are naturally inspired by the thought of how the populace view him. Everything about his conduct marks an elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority—something that those who are born lower down the social scale can hardly ever achieve. *These* are the arts [here = 'the devices' or even 'the tricks'] by which he proposes to make mankind more easily submit to his authority and govern *their* inclinations

according to *his* wishes; and in this he usually succeeds. . . . During most of his reign Louis XIV ·of France· was widely regarded as the most perfect model of a great prince. What were the talents and virtues by which he acquired this great reputation? The scrupulous and inflexible rightness—the danger and difficulty—the tireless energy—of everything he did? His broad knowledge, his exquisite judgment, his heroic valour? It was none of these. What he *did* have was the status of the most *powerful* prince in Europe, which gave him the highest rank among kings; and then, says his historian. . . [and Smith gives a long quotation (MW includes some of it) about Louis XIV's grand and imposing personal manner, his fine voice, his handsomeness, and so on. Then:] These trivial accomplishments—supported by his rank and no doubt by some degree of other talents and virtues, though not an outstanding degree—established this prince in the esteem of his own age and later generations' respect for his memory. Compared with this kingly manner, no other virtue appeared to have any merit. . . . Knowledge, industry, valour, and beneficence were abashed, trembling, and lost all dignity before them.

·END OF QUOTATION FROM ADAM SMITH·

In the middle rank of life (to continue the comparison) men in their youth are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whereas women have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the extensive flights of ambition that engross their attention. . . . To rise in the world and be free to run from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and their time is sacrificed and their persons [see Glossary] often legally prostituted [MW's word] to this objective. When a man enters a profession, he has his eye steadily fixed on some future advantage (and the mind gains great strength by having all its efforts directed

to one point) and. . . he regards pleasure as mere relaxation; while women seek pleasure as the main purpose of existence. In fact, from the education they receive from society, the love of pleasure may be said to govern them all; but does this prove that there is a sex [see Glossary] in souls? It would be just as rational to declare that the courtiers in France, where a destructive system of despotism had formed their character, were not men because liberty, virtue, and humanity were sacrificed to pleasure and vanity—fatal passions that always domineered over the *whole* race!

The same love of pleasure, encouraged by the over-all trend of their education, has a trivialising effect on women's conduct in most circumstances: for instance, they are always anxious about secondary things, and on the watch for adventures instead of being occupied by duties.

[MW develops this thought in a contrast between a man's thoughts and a woman's at the start of a journey: he is thinking about the journey's purpose, she is thinking about clothes, how she will impress people, troubles that may be met on the road. She continues:] In short, women in general and the rich of both sexes have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed its useful fruit. (Here as always in my generalisations about women, I mean to be allowing for a few exceptions.) Their senses are inflamed and their understandings neglected; so they become the prey of their senses—delicately called their 'sensibility'—and are blown around by every momentary gust of feeling. Thus, civilised women are so weakened by false refinement that their moral condition is much lower than it would have been if they had been left in a state nearer to nature, ·i.e. in a less 'civilised' state·. Always restless and anxious, their over-used 'sensibility' makes them not only uncomfortable in themselves but also troublesome (to put it mildly) to others. All their thoughts are about things that are likely to arouse

emotion; their conduct is unstable because they *feel* when they should *reason*; and their opinions are wavering because of contradictory emotions (quite different from the wavering produced by deliberation or development in one's thinking). By fits and starts they are eager in many pursuits, but this eagerness is never concentrated into perseverance, and soon exhausts itself. Sometimes it just wears itself out; sometimes it meets with some other fleeting passion to which reason has never given any specific gravity, so that neutrality ensues. [That is a joke involving physics. When one moving body collides with another, their post-collision movements depend in part on their specific gravities; but a trivial passion doesn't have any specific gravity—reason hasn't supplied it with one—so that when two of them collide they both come to a halt right there.] Miserable, indeed, must someone be whose cultivation of mind has tended only to inflame his or her passions! (Don't confuse inflaming passions with strengthening them.) When the passions are pampered in this way while the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue? Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly!

These remarks don't apply only to the 'fair' sex; but at present I am talking only about them.

Novels, music, poetry and gallantry all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed during the time they are acquiring accomplishments [see Glossary], the only improvements that their place in society motivates them to acquire. This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, preventing the intellect from achieving the sovereignty that it needs to attain to make a rational creature useful to others and content with his or her own role in life; because as one grows older the only natural method for calming the passions is through the exercise of reason. . . .

Will moralists claim that *this* is the condition in which half the human race should be encouraged to remain, with listless inactivity and stupid acquiescence? Kind instructors! what were we created for? 'To remain innocent' they may say—meaning to remain in a state of childhood. We might as well never have been born, unless our creation was needed for *man* to be able to acquire the noble privilege of •reason, •the power of distinguishing good from evil, while *we* lie in the dust from which we were taken, never to rise again.

It would take for ever to trace the variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows that women are plunged into by the prevailing opinion that they were created feel rather than to reason, and that the only way they can obtain any power is through their charms and weakness: 'Fine by defect, and amiably weak!' [Pope, *Of the Characters of Women*] And having been made by this 'amiable weakness' entirely dependent. . . . on man not only for protection but also for advice, is it surprising that women,

neglecting the duties that only reason points out and shrinking from trials that would be likely to strengthen their minds, exert themselves only to give their defects a graceful covering that may serve to •heighten their charms in the eye of the voluptuary, though it sinks them below the scale of moral excellence?

*Fragile* in every sense of the word, they're obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trivial dangers they cling to their support with a parasite's grip, piteously demanding help; and their *natural* protector extends his arm or raises his voice to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a *rat* would be a serious danger! In the name of reason and even of common sense, what can save such beings from contempt, even if they are soft and fair?

When these fears are genuine they may be very pretty, but they show a degree of imbecility that degrades a rational creature in a way women are not aware of—for love is a very different thing from esteem.

I'm sure that we would hear no more of these infantile airs if girls were allowed to have enough ·physical· exercise and weren't confined in close rooms until their muscles are relaxed and their powers of digestion destroyed. I would go further: if fear in girls, instead of being valued and perhaps created, were treated in the same way as cowardice in boys, we would quickly see women looking more dignified. It's true that they couldn't then be described as 'the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man', but they would be more respect-worthy members of society, performing 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.' That is exactly the point I am making; I don't want women to have power over men; I want them to have power over themselves.

Similarly, I have heard men argue against instructing the poor. . . . 'Teach them to read and write,' they say, 'and you take them out of the role in life assigned them by nature.' An eloquent Frenchman has answered them; I will borrow from him. They don't realise that if they make man a lower animal they can expect to see him at any moment transformed into a ferocious beast. [An aristocrat named Riqueti, who supported the revolution, said in the Constitutional Assembly: 'You have loosed the bull—do you expect that he won't use his horns?'] Without knowledge there can be no morality!

Ignorance is a frail basis for virtue! Yet woman was built to be ignorant, according to the writers who have most energetically argued in favour of the superiority of man. They mean this to be a superiority in essence, ·in kind·, not merely

in degree; though to soften the argument they have tried with chivalrous generosity to prove that the sexes ought not to be compared:

man was made to reason, woman to feel; and together—spirit and flesh—they make the most perfect [see Glossary] whole, by happily blending reason and sensibility into one character.

And what is sensibility? 'Quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy.' That is how Dr. Johnson defines it; and all I get from the definition is an idea of the most exquisitely polished instinct. I don't see a trace of the image of God in either sensation or matter. Refined seventy times seven, they are still material; intellect dwells not there. and fire won't turn lead into gold!

I come around to my old argument; if woman has an immortal soul she must have—as the employment of her life—an understanding to improve. And when. . . .she is incited by present gratification to forget her grand destination, then •nature is counteracted or else •woman was born only to procreate and to rot. [In that sentence, 'to rot' is a vivid way of saying 'to be mortal' (see Glossary).] Or here is another possibility:

All the lower animals have a soul, though not a reasonable one; and their use of instinct and sensibility is the step they have to take in this life towards the attainment of reason in the next.

If that is how things stand, ·and if in this respect woman is in the same boat as the lower animals·, she and they will be one step behind man through all eternity; and we can't explain why man was enabled to attain reason in his first mode of existence.

When I discuss the special duties of •women in the way that I would discuss the special duties of a •citizen or a •father, you'll see that I don't mean to imply that women in general should be taken out of their families. Bacon says:

He who has •wife and •children has given hostages to fortune; for •they are impediments to great enterprises, good and bad. Certainly the achievements that have done the most public good have been the work of unmarried or childless men.

I say the same of women. But the welfare of society isn't built on extraordinary efforts; and if society were more reasonably organized there would be still less need for great abilities or heroic virtues. In running a family and educating children one has a special need for strength both of body and of mind. . . ., and yet the men who in their writings have worked hardest to domesticate women have tried. . . .to weaken their bodies and cramp their minds. But even if these writers really *persuaded* women—by working in an underhand way on their feelings—to stay at home and fulfil the duties of a mother and mistress of a family, this would be a bad way of getting women to do the right thing—bad because it would be an insult to reason. I appeal to experience to confirm that if by neglecting the understanding women are actually more detached from these domestic duties than they could be by the most serious intellectual pursuit. . . ., I may be allowed to infer that reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I'll say it again: sensibility is not reason.

The comparison with the rich still occurs to me: when men neglect the duties of humanity, women will follow their example; a common stream hurries them both along with thoughtless speed. Riches and honours prevent a man from enlarging his understanding, and slacken all his powers by reversing the order of nature, which has always made true pleasure the reward of labour. Pleasure—enervating pleasure—is similarly within woman's reach without earning it. But until hereditary possessions are distributed throughout society, how can we expect men to be proud of virtue?

And until they are, women will govern them by the most direct means, neglecting their dull domestic duties so as to catch the pleasure that is on the wing of time. . . .

Another argument that has had a great weight with me, must, I think, have some force with every considerate benevolent heart. Girls who have been thus weakly educated are often cruelly left by their parents without any provision [MW means that through a cruelty of fate they become penniless orphans], and of course are then dependent not only on the reason but also on the generosity of their brothers. In the best cases these brothers are good men, and they give as a favour what children of the same parents had an equal right to. An easy-going female may fairly comfortably remain for some time in this ambiguous and humiliating situation; but when the brother marries, as he probably will, the sister will move from being considered as the mistress of the family to being viewed as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house and his new partner.

Who can describe the misery that many unfortunate beings, whose minds and bodies are equally weak, suffer in such situations—unable to work and ashamed to beg? The wife is likely to be a cold-hearted, narrow-minded woman; for the present style of education doesn't tend to enlarge the heart any more than to enlarge the understanding. This wife will be jealous of the little kindness that her husband shows to his relations; and because her sensibility doesn't rise to the level of humanity, she will be displeased at seeing *her* children's property being lavished on a helpless sister.

These are matters of fact that I have seen for myself again and again. The upshot is obvious: the wife resorts to cunning to undermine the habitual affection •of her husband for his sister•, which she is afraid to oppose openly; she uses tears and caresses relentlessly, until 'the spy' is worked out of her home, and •thrown on the world, unprepared for



its difficulties; or—as a great effort of generosity, or from some regard to propriety—•sent with a small pension and an uncultivated mind into joyless solitude.

These two women—the sister and the wife—may be much on a par with regard to reason and humanity; and it may be that if their situations had been switched so would their behaviour have been. But if they had been differently educated [see Glossary] the upshot would also have been very different. The wife wouldn't have had the sensibility of which self is the centre, and reason might have taught her not to expect—and not even to be flattered by—her husband's affection if it led him to violate pre-existing duties. She would want to love him not merely because he loved her but on account of his virtues; and the sister might have been able to struggle for herself instead of eating the bitter bread of dependence.

I am convinced that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation [i.e. has its scope widened by being developed and attended to], and also by strengthening the organs, though that is less obvious. I'm not talking of momentary flashes of sensibility, but of •durable• affections. And in the education of both sexes it may be that the most difficult task is to adjust the instruction in such a way that •the understanding and the affections are in a proper balance. That involves• not letting the understanding

- be narrowed while the heart is warmed by the generous juices of spring. . . ., or
- engage itself in investigations that are remote from life, thereby drying up the feelings.

When women get a careful education, they come out of it either as •fine ladies, brimful of sensibility, and teeming with capricious fancies, or as •mere notable women. [This uses 'notable' in a now obsolete sense in which it means 'capable and industrious in household management'.] The latter are often friendly, honest

creatures, and have a shrewd kind of good sense joined with worldly prudence—a combination that often makes them more useful members of society than the fine sentimental lady although they don't have any greatness of mind or of taste. The intellectual world is shut against them; take them out of their family or neighbourhood and they come to a halt, finding nothing for their minds to do; for they have never tried to enjoy the fund of amusement that literature provides; often they have despised it. The sentiments and taste of more cultivated minds appear ridiculous, even in those whom chance and family connections have led them to love; but in mere acquaintance they think it all affectation.

If a man of sense [see Glossary] loves a woman like that, it can only be on account of her sex, and if he respects her it is because she is a trusty servant. To preserve his own peace he lets her scold the servants, and go to church in clothes made of the best materials. A man with only her level of understanding would probably not suit her so well, because he might wish to encroach on her territory and manage some domestic concerns himself. Yet women, whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or in whom the natural selfishness of sensibility hasn't been expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family, because they always stretch their power and use tyranny to maintain a superiority that rests on nothing but the arbitrary distinction of fortune. The evil is sometimes more serious than that, and domestic servants are deprived of innocent pleasures and made to work beyond their strength, in order to enable the notable woman to keep a better table, and outshine her neighbours in finery and parade. If she attends to her children, it is usually to dress them expensively—and whether she does this out of vanity or out of fondness for the children, it is pernicious either way.

Many women of this sort pass their days, or at least their evenings, discontentedly. Their husbands acknowledge that they are good managers, and chaste wives; but they leave home to seek for more agreeable and stimulating society; and the patient drudge who fulfils her task like a blind horse in a mill is defrauded of her just reward, for the wages due to her are the caresses of her husband; and women who have so few resources in themselves don't patiently bear being deprived of a natural right in this way.

A fine lady on the other hand has been taught to look down with contempt on common vulgar [see Glossary] employments of life; though she is in no position to be so haughty, because the only accomplishments she has been motivated to acquire are ones with next to no intellectual content; for even bodily accomplishments can't be acquired with any precision unless the understanding has been strengthened by exercise. Without a foundation of principles, taste is superficial; and grace must arise from something deeper than imitation. . . .

[In case you are interested, the ellipsis at the end of that paragraph replaces the sentence: 'The imagination, however, is heated, and the feelings rendered fastidious, if not sophisticated; or, a counterpoise of judgment is not acquired, when the heart still remains artless, though it becomes too tender.']

These women are often amiable; and their hearts are more sensitive to general benevolence, more alive to the feelings that civilize life, than the sturdy family drudge; but because they are deficient in reflection and self-government, they only inspire love; and for as long as they have *any* hold on their husbands' affections it is as their mistresses. . . . These women are the 'fair defects' in nature—the women who seem to be created not to enjoy the fellowship of man, but •to save him from sinking to the merely animal level by •rubbing off the rough angles of his character; and •to

give some dignity to the appetite that draws man to them by •playful teasing. Gracious Creator of the whole human race! have you created such a being as woman—who can trace your wisdom in your works, and feel that you alone are by your nature exalted above her—for no better purpose than this? Can she believe that she was made only to submit to man, who is her equal—a being sent into the world to acquire virtue, as she was? Can she consent to be wholly occupied in pleasing him; merely to adorn the earth when her soul is capable of rising to you? And can she slackly depend on man for reason, when she ought to climb the difficult slopes of knowledge alongside him? . . .

To fulfil domestic duties one needs a serious kind of perseverance that requires a firmer support than emotions can give, however lively and true to nature they are. *Order* is the soul of virtue; to give an example of it a person has to adopt some austerity of behaviour, and this can hardly be expected from a being who, from his or her infancy, has been made the weathercock of his or her own sensations. Whoever rationally means to be useful must have a plan of conduct; and in performing the simplest duty we are often obliged to act *against* the present impulse of tenderness or compassion. Severity is often the clearest. . . .proof of affection; and the lack of this power over the feelings, and of the dignified affection that makes a person prefer the future good of the beloved object to a present gratification, is the reason why so many fond mothers spoil their children. Which is more damaging—negligence or indulgence? I am inclined to answer 'Indulgence'.

Mankind seem to agree that children should be left under the management of women during their childhood. Judging by what I have seen, women of sensibility—i.e. women in whom feelings are uppermost—are the least fit for this task because they are bound to be carried away by their

feelings, and spoil a child's temperament. The management of the temperament, the first and most important branch of education, requires the sober steady eye of reason ·so as to form and stick with· a plan of conduct that is equally distant from ·tyranny and ·indulgence. Yet ·these are the extremes that people of sensibility fall into—first on one side, then on the other, always shooting beyond the mark. These thoughts and the further development of them that I have gone through lead me to conclude that a person of genius [see Glossary] is the least suitable person to be employed in education, whether public or private. Minds of this rare species see things too much in masses, and seldom if ever have a good temperament. The habitual cheerfulness that we call 'good humour' is perhaps as seldom united with great mental powers as it is with strong feelings. And people who admiringly follow the flights of ·genius, or with cooler approval drink in the instruction elaborately prepared for them by ·a profound thinker, ought not to be upset if they find ·the former bad-tempered and ·the latter gloomy; because liveliness of imagination and a tenacious comprehension of mind are hardly compatible with the smooth politeness which leads a man at least to ·bend to the opinions and prejudices of others instead of ·roughly confronting them.

[MW now switches abruptly from thoughts about highly intelligent people as teachers to the question of what should be done about them as pupils.] When we are thinking about education or manners, minds of a superior class can be left to take care of themselves. It is the middlingly able multitude who need instruction and ·are at risk because they· catch the colour of the atmosphere they breathe [those eight words are MW's]. This body of men and women should be respected, and should not have their sensations heightened in the hot-bed of luxurious idleness at the expense of their understanding; for unless there's a ballast of understanding they will never

become virtuous or free. ·Why won't they be free? Because· an aristocracy based on property or on solid talents will always overwhelm the alternately timid and ferocious slaves of feeling.

I now switch to look at our topic from a different angle. Men have used countless arguments in support of morally and physically degrading the · female· sex. The arguments are brought forward with a show of reason, because they are supposed to be derived from *nature*. I must discuss a few of them.

The female understanding has often been spoken of with contempt, as reaching maturity sooner than the male. I shan't answer this argument by mentioning the early proofs of reason—and indeed genius—in Cowley, Milton, Pope and many others. I merely appeal to experience to decide whether young men who are early introduced into company. . . .don't acquire the same precocity. . . .

Some natural scientists have said that men don't attain their full growth and strength until thirty, whereas women reach maturity by twenty. I think they are reasoning on false premises, having been led astray by the male prejudice that regards beauty as the perfection of woman, taking 'beauty' in the everyday sense in which it refers only to features and complexion, while male beauty is regarded as having some connection with the mind. Strength of body, and the facial character that shows maturity and moral strength, is something that women don't acquire before thirty, any more than men do. The artless little tricks of children are indeed particularly pleasing and attractive; but when the pretty freshness of youth has worn off, these 'artless' graces become careful poses, and they disgust every person of taste. In the faces of girls we look only for vivacity and bashful modesty; but when the springtide of life is over we look for a more sober sense in the face, and for traces of passion,

instead of the dimples of animal spirits, expecting to see individuality of character, which is the only thing that can fasten the affections.<sup>6</sup> We then want to converse, not to fondle; to give scope to our imaginations as well as to the sensations of our hearts.

... The French, who admit more *mind* into their notions of beauty, give the preference to women of thirty. This means that they allow women to be in their most perfect state when vivacity gives way to reason and to the majestic seriousness of character which signifies maturity. . . . Between twenty and thirty the solid parts of the body become denser and the flexible muscles grow more rigid, giving character to the face; i.e. they trace the operations of the mind with the iron pen of fate, and tell us not only what powers the person has but how they have been employed.

Animals who arrive slowly at maturity are the longest lived, and of the noblest species. But men can't claim any natural superiority from the grandeur of longevity, for in this respect nature has not distinguished the male.

Polygamy is another physical degradation, a custom that blasts every domestic virtue; and a plausible argument for it is drawn from the well-attested fact that in the countries where polygamy is established more females are born than males. [This was widely believed at MW's time; it isn't true.] Nature seems to be telling us something here, and apparently reasonable theories must yield capitulate to nature. And a further conclusion obviously presents itself: if polygamy is necessary, woman must be inferior to man, and made for him.

We know very little about the formation of the foetus in the womb, but it seems to me probable that an accidental physical cause may explain this phenomenon of the unbalanced

birth ratio, proving it not to be a law of nature. [She quotes a writer who says that the birth ratio results from polygamy, not vice versa: it comes from the fact that in the countries in question 'the men are enervated by the use of so many women', and the women have a 'hotter' constitution partly because they are aggrieved at not having their husbands to themselves. 'So the necessity of polygamy does not appear', MW writes, and then in mid-sentence she launches on a new aspect of the degradation of women, namely seduction.]

When a man seduces a woman, I think this should be called 'a left-handed marriage', and the man should be *legally* obliged to support the woman and her children unless adultery—a natural divorce—cancels the obligation. And this law should remain in force for as long as women's weakness causes the word 'seduction' to be used as an excuse for their frailty and lack of principle—indeed, for as long as they depend on man for subsistence, instead of earning it by the use of their own hands or heads. But these women shouldn't be called 'wives' in the full sense of that word; otherwise the very purpose of marriage will be subverted, and all those endearing charities that flow from *personal fidelity* would melt into selfishness. [MW builds into that sentence that the 'endearing charities' in question 'give the marriage tie a sanctity even where there is neither love nor friendship between the parties'.] A woman who is faithful to the father of her children demands respect, and shouldn't be treated like a prostitute; though I readily grant that if it is necessary for a man and woman to live together in order to bring up their offspring, nature never intended any man to have more than one wife.

Still, highly as I respect marriage as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I can't help feeling the most lively compassion for the unfortunate females who are broken off

<sup>6</sup> The strength of an affection is generally proportional to the extent to which, in the beloved object, the character of the •species is lost in the character of the •individual.

from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind. In many cases it doesn't even deserve to be called an 'error'; because many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere affectionate heart, and even more girls are—to put it vigorously—*ruined* before they know the difference between virtue and vice. Their education has prepared them to become infamous, and that is exactly what they do. Refuges and shelters are not the proper remedies for these abuses. what the world is short of is not charity but justice!

A woman who has lost her honour imagines that she can't fall any lower, and as for recovering her former status—that is impossible; no exertion can wash away this stain. Losing thus every motivation, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and her character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power unless she is uncommonly intelligent and high-spirited. Necessity never makes prostitution the business of men's lives, but countless women are rendered systematically vicious in this way. But this arises largely from the state of idleness in which women are educated—always taught to look up to man for maintenance, and to consider their persons [see Glossary] as the proper payment for his exertions to support them. . . . It is usually thought that when chastity is lost everything worthy of respect in a woman is lost. Her character depends on one virtue, but the only passion fostered in her heart is love.

Indeed, a woman's honour is not even made to depend on her will. When ·in his novel *Clarissa*· Richardson makes Clarissa tell Lovelace that ·by raping her· he has robbed her of her honour, he must have strange notions of honour and virtue. The condition of someone who could be degraded without his or her [see Glossary] own consent is miserable beyond all names of misery! . . .

Most of life's evils arise from a desire for present enjoyment that gallops out of control. The obedience required of women in the marriage state comes under this description. [That is verbatim MW: she presumably means that a wife's obedience consists in reining in her desires for present enjoyment.] A mind that is naturally weakened by depending on authority never exerts its own powers, so that the obedient wife is turned into a weak, idle mother. And even if this doesn't happen, ·there is a different kind of moral degradation inherent in this situation·. When only negative virtues are cultivated, almost no thought is given to a future state of existence, ·i.e. to life after death·. Writers on morals, especially when writing about women, have too often considered virtue in a very limited way, basing it solely on what will produce benefits in *this* life; indeed, the stupendous structure that is *virtue* has been given an even more fragile base, in that the wayward fluctuating feelings of men have been made the standard of virtue. . . .

[MW writes now about the 'vain absurdities' of men who degrade the sex that they claim is the source of their chief pleasure. She targets men who—turning away from prostitutes either because they •prudently want to avoid diseases or because they •are worn out from all their uses of prostitutes—get married in order to have 'a safe companion', viewing their wives (MW implies) as merely safer and more convenient prostitutes.]

Love considered as an animal appetite can't feed on itself for long without dying. This *extinction in its own flame* could be called the violent death of love. But a wife who has been made licentious in this way will probably try to fill the void left by the loss of her husband's attentions; because after being treated like a goddess she won't settle for becoming merely an upper servant. She is still handsome, and instead of transferring her fondness to her children she only dreams

of enjoying the sunshine of life. Besides, many husbands are so lacking in sense and parental affection that during the first effervescence of voluptuous fondness they refuse to let their wives breast-feed their children. . . .

Personal attachment is a fine basis for friendship; but when two young people marry—even virtuous ones—it might also be fine if some circumstance checked their passion; if the memory of some prior attachment or disappointed affection made it, on one side at least, a match based on esteem rather than love. That would have them looking beyond the present moment, trying to make the whole of life worthwhile by making plans to regulate a friendship which ought to last until death.

Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is based on principle and cemented by time. The very reverse may be said of love. In a great degree, love and friendship can't exist together in the same heart: even when it's love for one person and friendship for someone else, they weaken or destroy each other; and for just one person you can't have love and friendship at the same time—they have to take turns. The vain •fears and foolish •jealousies—when managed with wisdom or cunning they are the winds that fan the flame of love—are •both incompatible with the tender confidence and sincere respect of friendship.

•A PARAGRAPH ABOUT LOVE AS PORTRAYED BY GENIUS•

Love of the kind that the glowing pen of genius has described doesn't exist anywhere on earth except perhaps in the exalted, feverish imaginations that have sketched such dangerous pictures. Dangerous? Yes, because they not only •provide a plausible excuse for the voluptuary who disguises sheer sensuality under a sentimental [see Glossary] veil, but also •spread insincerity and detract from the dignity of virtue. •Virtue should have an appearance of seriousness, if not

austerity; and to try to doll •her up in the garb of pleasure because 'virtue' has been used as another name for pleasure, is to raise •her up on a foundation of quicksand; a most underhand attempt to hasten her fall by apparent respect. Virtue and pleasure are not in fact as closely related in this life as some eloquent writers have tried to prove. Pleasure prepares the fading wreath, and mixes the intoxicating cup; but the fruit that virtue gives is the reward for hard work; and when it is seen as it gradually ripens, all it provides is calm satisfaction—indeed, appearing to be the result of the natural tendency of things, it is hardly noticed. *Bread*, the common food of life and seldom thought of as a blessing, supports the constitution and preserves health; but *feasts* delight the heart of man although disease and even death lurk in the cup that elevates the spirits or the morsel that tickles the palate. The lively heated imagination likewise. . . .draws the picture of love, as every other picture, with the glowing colours stolen from the rainbow by a daring hand that is directed by a mind condemned, in a world like this, to prove its noble origin by panting after unattainable perfection; always pursuing what it admits to be a fleeting dream. An imagination of this vigorous cast can give existence to unsubstantial forms, and stability to the shadowy day-dreams which the mind naturally falls into when it is bored by reality. It can then depict love with heavenly charms, and dote on the grand ideal object; it can imagine

a degree of mutual affection that will refine the soul. . . .and make it absorb every less noble affection and desire. In each other's arms, as though in a temple with its summit lost in the clouds, the world is to be shut out and along with it every thought and wish that doesn't nurture pure affection and permanent virtue.

Permanent virtue! alas! Rousseau, good visionary! your

paradise would soon be violated by the entrance of some unexpected guest. Like Milton's, it would contain only angels and men sunk below the dignity of rational creatures. Happiness is not material, it cannot be seen or felt! Yet the eager pursuit of the good that everyone imagines for himself proclaims man to be the lord of this lower world, and to be a thinking creature whose role is not to •be given happiness but to •acquire it. So those who complain of the delusions of passion forget that they are exclaiming against a strong proof of the immortality of the soul.

I shall leave superior minds to correct themselves, and pay dearly for their experience! What I want to guard the female heart against by •getting women to• exercise the understanding is not •strong, persevering passions but •romantic, wavering feelings—daydreams that result from idleness more often than from a lively imagination.

[MW blames women's education for their tendency to be 'romantic and inconstant', because it takes them away from 'nature and reason'. But, she continues:] their reason will never be strong enough to be able to regulate their conduct while the first wish of the majority of mankind is *to make an appearance in the world*. [Note: the majority of *mankind*.] The natural affections and the most useful virtues are sacrificed to this weak wish. Girls marry merely to 'better themselves' (to borrow a significant common phrase), and they have such perfect power over their hearts that they don't allow themselves to 'fall in love' until a wealthy man shows up. I'll say more about this in a later chapter; at present I need only to drop a hint. . . .

From the same source comes the opinion that young girls ought to spend much of their time on needle-work, though this contracts their faculties more than any other that could have been chosen for them, by confining their thoughts to their bodies. Men order their clothes to be made,

and have done with the subject; women make their own clothes—both the •necessary and the •ornamental—and are continually talking about them; and their thoughts follow their hands. What weakens the mind is not the making of •necessaries but the •frippery of dress. When a woman in the lower rank of life makes her husband's and children's clothes, she is doing her duty: this is part of her business. But when women sew only so that they can dress better than they could otherwise afford, it is worse than sheer loss of time. For the poor to become virtuous, they must be employed, and •women in the middle rank of life could employ them while •they managed their families, instructed their children, and exercised their own minds. They could, but they don't, because they are aping the fashions of the nobility without having the nobility's means to have those fashions easily. Gardening, experimental science and literature would provide them with subjects to think and talk about—subjects that would give some exercise to their understandings. French women are not so rigidly nailed to their chairs. . . .; their conversation is often superficial but it's not half as insipid as the conversation of those English women who spend their time making caps, bonnets, and the whole nonsense of trimmings, not to mention shopping, bargain-hunting, etc. These practices are most degrading to decent, prudent women, because the motive of the practices is simply vanity. The wanton, who exercises her taste to make her person alluring, has something more in view. [To make sure that these two sentences are understood: Martha and Mary are both making clothes for themselves. Martha is a prudent decent woman, doing something whose only point is to satisfy vanity—a thin, trivial project, unworthy of her. Mary is a promiscuous woman who is doing something to make herself sexually more attractive—a more contentful motive than mere vanity, and a better fit for Mary than vanity is for Martha.]

[Admitting that she is repeating herself, MW says that how a person thinks affects his or her character. Her present topic has been one special case of this general truth, namely the harm that women do to themselves by spending so much time thinking about 'their persons', e.g. what sort of effect they will have when they next appear in public.] Women of quality [MW's phrase] seldom do any of the actual dress-making: all they exercise is their taste. And because they think less about the finery, when the business of their toilet is over they can put it behind them and be at ease in a way that is usually not open to women who dress merely for the sake of dressing. In fact, the observation that the middle rank of society is the one in which talents thrive best doesn't apply to women. [If MW means her own observation on page 39, then she isn't quite accurate. What she referred to back there was the well-known fact that 'the middle rank contains most virtue and abilities'.] Women of the superior class do at least pick up a smattering of literature, and they converse more with men on general topics, so they acquire more knowledge than the women who ape their fashions and faults without sharing their advantages. As for *virtue* (using the word in

a comprehensive sense): I have seen most virtue in low life. Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered; but gentlewomen are too lazy to be actively virtuous, and are softened rather than refined by civilization. Indeed the good sense I have met with among poor women who have had few advantages of education yet have acted heroically has strongly confirmed my opinion that trivial activities have made women trivial. . . .

In tracing the causes that I think have degraded woman, I have confined myself to ones that universally act on the morals and manners of the whole sex; and it seems clear to me that they all arise from lack of understanding. Does this weakness of the faculties arise from physical or from accidental causes? [That is: is it causally determined by the constitutions of women as such, or is it caused by their circumstances?] Time alone can tell. I shan't lay any great stress on the example of a few women<sup>7</sup> who were given a masculine education from which they acquired courage and resolution; I only contend that *men* who have been placed in similar situations have acquired a similar character. . . .

<sup>7</sup> Sappho, Héloïse, Catherine Macaulay, Catherine the Great of Russia, Madame d'Eon, etc. These and many more can be counted as 'exceptions'; and aren't all heroes *and heroines* exceptions to general rules? I want to see women neither as heroines nor as lower animals, but as reasonable creatures. [Catherine Macaulay was a contemporary of MW's, a much respected thinker and writer; Madame d'Eon was in fact a man who passed as a woman through most of his life.]



## Chapter 5: Writers who have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt

We now have to examine the opinions on the female character and education that have been plausibly argued for in some modern publications, and have given the tone to most of the briefer and more casual things said about the sex [see Glossary].

### 1: Rousseau

I shall begin with Rousseau, giving a sketch of the character of women in his own words and interspersing comments and reflections. My comments will all spring from a few simple principles, and could be derived from what I have already said; but his argument has been constructed with so much ingenuity that I think I have to attack it in a more detailed manner, and make the application of my principles myself rather than leaving it to the reader.

Sophie, says Rousseau, should be as perfect a woman as Émile is a man, and to make her so he has to examine the character that nature has given to the female sex.

He then proceeds to argue that woman ought to be weak and passive because she has less bodily strength than man; from which he infers that she was formed to please him and be subject to him, and that making herself *agreeable* to her master is the grand purpose of her existence. Still, to give a little mock dignity to lust he insists that when a man goes to a woman for pleasure he should not use his strength and should depend on her will.

[In quotations from Rousseau's *Émile*, three centered asterisks mean that the next quotation comes from a few pages later than the preceding one.]

•ROUSSEAU•

So we deduce a third conclusion from the different constitutions of the sexes, namely: The stronger should be master •in appearance but should depend on the weaker •in fact. . . . This is because of an invariable law of •nature, which goes like this:

Nature gives woman a greater ability to arouse desires •in man• than it has given man to satisfy them; so it—•nature—makes the man dependent on the good pleasure of the woman, and forces him to try to please her in his turn, *in order to obtain her consent that he should be stronger*.<sup>8</sup>

On these occasions, the most delightful circumstance that a man finds in his victory is to be unsure whether she has yielded to his superior strength or whether her inclinations spoke in his favour. The females are usually artful enough to leave this in doubt. Women's understanding in this matter corresponds exactly to their constitution: far from being ashamed of their weakness, they glory in it; their tender muscles make no resistance; they pretend to be unable to lift the smallest burdens, and would blush to be thought robust and strong. What is the purpose of all this? Not merely for the sake of appearing delicate, but. . . also to prepare the way for being feeble whenever that suits their purposes.

•WOLLSTONECRAFT•

. . . If Rousseau is right about woman's duty—if *pleasing man* is the iron bed of fate that her character should be made to fit, stretching or contracting it regardless of moral and physical

<sup>8</sup> What nonsense! [That is MW interrupting; and it was she who put that last clause in italics.]

distinctions—then it does indeed follow that woman ought to sacrifice every other consideration to make herself agreeable to man. . . . But I think it can be shown that practical rules built upon this ignoble base would undermine the purposes of even this life ·as distinct from the after-life·; and that gives me room to doubt whether woman *was* created for man. ·This means, of course, that I don't accept every sentence of the Bible as literally true. But· if the cry of 'irreligion' or even 'atheism' is raised against me, I will simply declare that if an angel from heaven told me that Moses' beautiful, poetical account of the beginning of the world cosmogony and of the fall of man is literally true, I ·still· couldn't believe what my reason told me was derogatory to the character of the Supreme Being. And having no fear of the devil before my eyes, I venture to call this a suggestion of reason, instead of resting my weakness on the broad shoulders of the first seducer of my frail sex.

·ROUSSEAU·

Once it has been demonstrated that man and woman aren't and oughtn't to be constituted alike in temperament and character, it follows of course that they should not be educated in the same manner. In pursuing the directions of nature they ought indeed to act in concert [= 'their sexual intercourse ought to be a collaborative joint enterprise'], but they shouldn't be engaged in the same employments: the final goal of their activities should be the same, but the means they take to accomplish them, and thus their tastes and inclinations , should be different.

\* \* \*

. . . .Men depend on women only because of their desires; women depend on men because of their desires and also because of their needs. We could survive without them better than they could without us.

\* \* \*

For this reason, the education of women should always be relative to men. To

please us,  
be useful to us,.  
make us love and esteem them,  
educate us when we are young,  
take care of us when we are grown up,  
advise us,  
console us,  
make our lives easy and agreeable—

those are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy. Whenever we lose touch with this principle, we run wide of the mark and all the precepts that are given to them contribute neither to their happiness nor to ours.

\* \* \*

Girls are from their earliest infancy fond of dress. Not content with •being pretty, they want to •be thought to be pretty. . . . They are to be governed by talking to them of what 'people will think' of their behaviour; this thought—this control-device—works with them almost as early as they are capable of understanding anything that is said to them. But it. . . .doesn't have the same effect with boys. They don't care much what people think of them, as long as they can pursue their amusements without interference. Time and care are necessary to get boys to be motivated by the thought of what 'people will think'.

This first lesson, wherever girls get it from, is a very good one. As the body is in a way born before the soul, our first concern should be to care for the body; this order—body first, then soul—is the same for both sexes, but the object

of that care is different. In the male sex it is the development of bodily powers; in the female sex, the development of personal charms. I'm not saying that either strength or beauty should be confined exclusively to one sex, but only that the priorities for them should be reversed in the two sexes. Women certainly need enough strength to be able to move and act gracefully, and men need enough address [see Glossary] to be able to act with ease.

\* \* \*

[A paragraph about the kinds of play that children like: tops, drums, and carts for one sex, mirrors, trinkets and dolls for the other.]

\* \* \*

Here then we see a basic propensity firmly established; all you ·as a parent· need to do is to go with it and regulate it. The little girl will doubtless want to know how to dress up her doll, to make its sleeve knots, its flounces, its head-dress, etc. She needs a lot of help from members of the household; so much help that it would be much more agreeable to her to do all this for herself. That provides a good reason for the first lessons that are usually taught to these young females: in which we seem not to be setting them a task but doing them a favour by instructing them in something immediately useful to themselves. They nearly all learn *with reluctance* to read and write, but they *very readily* apply themselves to the use of their needles. They imagine themselves already grown up, and think with pleasure that such qualifications will enable them to decorate themselves.

·WOLLSTONECRAFT·

This is certainly an education only of the body; but Rousseau isn't the only man who has indirectly said that merely

the person [see Glossary] of a young woman—without any mind...—is very pleasing. To make it weak and what some may call 'beautiful', the understanding is neglected and girls are forced to sit still, play with dolls, and listen to foolish conversations; the effect of ·habit is insisted on as an undoubted indication of ·nature. I know it was Rousseau's opinion that the first years of youth should be employed in forming the body, though in educating Émile he deviates from this plan. But the body-strengthening on which strength of mind largely depends is very different from the body-strengthening that enables the person to move easily.

Rousseau's observations...were made in a country where the art of pleasing...

**how MW went on:** ... was refined only to extract the grossness of vice. He did not go back to nature, or his ruling appetite disturbed the operations of reason, else he would not have drawn these crude inferences.

**what she seems to have meant:** ... was developed only so as to make vice [see Glossary] more elegant. He wouldn't have drawn these crude conclusions if he had gone back to nature and his thinking about it hadn't been disturbed by his dominating sex-drive.

In France boys and (especially) girls are educated only to please, to manage their persons, and regulate their exterior behaviour; and their minds are damaged at an early age by the cautions—some worldly, some pious—that they are given to guard them against immodesty. In past times, the confessions that mere children were obliged to make, and the questions asked by the confessors (I have good authority for this), were enough to impress a sexual character—i.e. to reinforce the society's idea of femininity in the girls, and its idea of masculinity in the boys. The education

of society was a school of flirting and art [here = 'the skillful management of the other sex']. At the age of ten or eleven—even sooner, indeed—girls began to flirt, and to talk (without being reproved for it) of establishing themselves in the world by marriage.

In short, almost from their very birth they were treated like *women*, and were given compliments instead of instruction. Compliments weaken the mind. When society treated girls in this way, it was assuming that •Nature acted like a *step-mother* when •she formed this after-thought of creation.

Not allowing them understanding, however, it was only consistent to subject them to authority independently of reason; and to prepare them for this subjection Rousseau gives the following advice:

•ROUSSEAU•

As well as being active and diligent, girls should be early subjected to restraint. This misfortune, if that's what it is, is inseparable from their sex; and if they *ever* throw it off they will suffer evils much crueller than that. They must throughout their lives be subject to the most constant and severe restraint, which is that of *decorum*; so they must get used to it early, so that it won't hit them too hard later on. They should also get used to the suppression of their caprices, so that they will be readier to submit to the will of others •later on•; even if it is work that they are most fond of, they should be sometimes compelled to lay it aside. If their upbringing is too permissive, their basic propensities will give rise to dissipation, levity, and inconstancy. To prevent this abuse, we should teach them above all things to restrain themselves properly. Our absurd institutions reduce the life of a modest woman to a perpetual conflict with herself, though it is fair that this sex should share in the sufferings arising from the evils it has caused us.

•WOLLSTONECRAFT•

And *why* is the life of a modest woman a perpetual conflict? Because this very system of education makes it so. Modesty, temperance, and self-denial are the sober offspring of reason; but when sensibility is developed at the expense of the understanding, such weak beings must be restrained by arbitrary means [i.e. not by nature but by rules devised by humans], and so be subjected to continual conflicts. If you give more scope to their activity of mind, nobler passions and motives will govern their appetites and sentiments; •and this government will be less conflicting because it will come from within the woman rather than from outside•. . . .

•ROUSSEAU•

Women ought not to have much liberty. When something is permitted to them, they are apt to indulge in it excessively. Addicted in everything to extremes, they are even more carried away in their diversions than boys.

•WOLLSTONECRAFT•

Well, slaves and mobs have always gone to excesses in that way once they have broken loose from authority. The bent bow straightens with violence when the hand that is forcibly holding it is suddenly relaxed; and sensibility, the plaything of outward circumstances, must be subjected to authority or moderated by reason. Rousseau continues:

•ROUSSEAU•

This habitual restraint makes women tractable in a way that they'll need throughout their lives: they are constantly under subjection either to the men •who are their partners or husbands• or to the opinions of mankind, and they are never permitted to set themselves above those opinions. The most important qualification in a woman is good-nature or sweetness of temperament. Formed to obey such an imperfect being as man is—often full of vices and always full

of faults—she ought to learn even to suffer injustice and to bear her husband's insults without complaint. This is for her sake, not his: if she becomes stubborn and hostile this will make her husband worse. . . .

·WOLLSTONECRAFT·

. . . .The being who patiently endures injustice and silently puts up with insults will soon become unjust, i.e. unable to tell right from wrong. Anyway, the factual premise is wrong: this is *not* the true way to form or improve the temperament; for in general men have better temperaments than women because they are occupied in pursuits that interest the head as well as the heart, and the head's steadiness gives a healthy temperature [MW's word] to the heart. People of sensibility seldom have good temperaments. The formation of the temperament is the cool work of reason, which brings helpful skill to bear on bringing together jarring elements. I never knew a weak or ignorant person who had a good temperament, though the constitutional good humour and the docility that fear causes in the behaviour if often *called* 'good temperament'. Note: 'causes in the *behaviour*'—because genuine meekness reaches the heart or mind only as an effect of reflection. The simple restraint ·arising from fear· produces a number of unpleasant moods in domestic life, as many sensible men would agree after finding some of these gentle irritable creatures to be very troublesome companions. Rousseau goes on to argue:

·ROUSSEAU·

Each sex should preserve its own special tone and manner: a meek husband may make a wife behave badly, but mildness of disposition on her part will always bring him back to reason—at least if he isn't absolutely a brute—and will sooner or later triumph over him.

·WOLLSTONECRAFT·

Perhaps the mildness of reason might sometimes have this effect; but abject fear always inspires contempt, and tears are eloquent only when they flow down fair cheeks.

A heart that can melt when insulted, and instead of revolting at injustice can kiss the rod—what materials can it be made of? If a woman can caress a man with true feminine softness at the very moment when he treats her tyrannically, isn't it fair to infer that her virtue is built on narrow views and selfishness? Nature has never dictated any such insincerity. You may call prudence of this sort a virtue; but morality becomes vague when any part of it is supposed to rest on falsehood. These are mere expedients, and expedients are only useful for the moment ·whereas the good in virtues is everlasting·.

Let the husband beware of trusting too completely in this servile obedience; for if his wife can sweetly •caress him when she is and ought to be angry. . . .she may •do the same after parting with a lover. These are all preparations for adultery! If fear of the world or of hell restrains her desire to please other men when she can no longer please her husband, what alternative is there for this being who was formed by nature and art only to please man? What can compensate her for this privation? Where is she to look for a fresh employment? Where can she find sufficient strength of mind to decide to begin the search, when her habits are fixed and her chaotic mind has long been ruled by vanity?

But this biased moralist ·Rousseau· makes a plausible case, based on his own system, in favour of *cunning*.

·ROUSSEAU·

Daughters should always be submissive, but their mothers should not be inflexible. To make a young person tractable, she shouldn't be made unhappy; to make her modest, she shouldn't be made stupid. On the contrary, I wouldn't be

displeased at her being permitted to use some skill not to escape punishment if she has disobeyed but to exempt herself from the necessity of obeying. . . . Subtlety is a talent that is natural to the ·female· sex; and in line with my view that all our natural inclinations are right and good in themselves, I hold that subtlety should be cultivated as well as the others. All we need is to prevent it from being abused.

·WOLLSTONECRAFT·

A little later he triumphantly proclaims: ‘Whatever is is right.’ Granted; but perhaps no aphorism ever contained a more paradoxical assertion than this. It is a solemn truth with respect to God. He . . . sees the whole at once; but man, who can inspect only the disconnected parts, finds many things wrong; and it is . . . right that he should try to alter what appears to him to be wrong, even while bowing to his Creator’s wisdom and respecting the darkness he is working to disperse.

Given the principle that whatever is is right, Rousseau is correct in what he infers from it.

·ROUSSEAU·

The female sex’s superiority in •address is a very fair pay-back for their inferiority in •strength: without this ·superiority· woman would be man’s slave, not his companion. Her superior skill and ingenuity lets her preserve her equality, and governs man while she pretends to obey. Woman has everything against her—our faults as well her own timidity and weakness. She has nothing in her favour except her subtlety and her beauty. Isn’t it very reasonable that she should cultivate both?

·WOLLSTONECRAFT·

Greatness of mind can never cohabit with cunning or address [see Glossary]. Those words really refer to *insincerity* and *falsehood*; but I shan’t go on about that, and merely point

out that if any class of mankind is so created that it has to be educated by rules that aren’t strictly deducible from truth, then virtue is an affair of convention. . . .

Men have superior strength of body; but if it weren’t for mistaken notions of beauty, women would become strong enough •to be *able to earn enough to live on*, which is the true definition of ‘independent’; and •to bear the bodily inconveniences and exertions that are needed to strengthen the mind. . . .

·ROUSSEAU·

Beauty can’t be acquired by dress, and flirting is an art not so early and speedily attained. But even when girls are young they can work to have

- agreeable gestures,
- a pleasing tone of voice,
- an easy way of walking and moving, and
- skill in gracefully suiting their looks and attitudes to time, place, and occasion.

. . . .I would like a young Englishwoman to cultivate her agreeable talents in order to please her future husband with as much care and persistence as a young Circassian woman cultivates hers so that she will be ready to be in the harem of an Eastern potentate.

The tongues of women are very voluble; they speak earlier, more readily, and more agreeably than the men. They are accused also of speaking much more; but so they should, and I am willing to convert this reproach into a compliment. Their lips and eyes have the same activity ·as men’s·, and for the same reason. A man speaks of what he knows, a woman of what pleases her; the man’s speech requires knowledge, the woman’s requires taste; a man’s discourse should aim mainly at being useful, a woman’s at being agreeable. Their different conversations should have nothing in common but truth.

We should restrain the prattle of boys with the severe question ‘What is the purpose of what you are saying?’, but for girls’ prattle we need a different though equally difficult question, ‘How will what you are saying be received?’ In infancy, when they can’t yet tell good from evil, girls ought to observe it as a law never to say anything that the listener will find disagreeable. Not an easy law to obey, and made all the harder by having always to be subordinate to the former law against ever telling an untruth.

•WOLLSTONECRAFT•

[She has introduced Rousseau’s ‘The tongues of women’ passage with the words: ‘To make women completely insignificant, he adds. . .’.]

To govern the tongue in this manner must require great address indeed; and it is too much practised both by men and women. How few people speak out of the abundance of the heart! So few that I, who love simplicity, would gladly give up •politeness for a quarter of the virtue that has been sacrificed to •it. Politeness is an equivocal quality which at most should only be the polish of virtue.

But to complete the sketch:

•ROUSSEAU•

It’s easy to see that if male children can’t form any true notions of religion, those ideas must be thoroughly out of the reach of female children. For that very reason, I would begin talking to them about religion earlier; if we waited until they were able to discuss such profound questions in a disciplined way we would risk never speaking to them on this subject. Reason in women is *practical* reason: it enables them to use skill in finding the means of achieving a known

end, but could never enable them to discover that end itself. The social relations between the sexes are truly admirable: what results from their union is a moral person, of which woman could be called ‘the eyes’ and man ‘the hand’—from the man the woman learns what she is to see, and from the woman the man learns what he ought to do. If woman could get back to the first principles of things as well as man, and if man could go into details as well as woman, neither would depend on the other for anything; they would live in perpetual discord, and their union could not survive. But in the harmony that in fact naturally exists between them, their different abilities tend to one common end, and it’s hard to say which of them contributes more: each follows the impulse of the other; each is obedient and both are masters.

Just because a woman’s conduct is subservient to public opinion, her faith in matters of religion should be subject to authority. Every daughter ought to be of the same religion as her mother, and every wife to be of the same religion as her husband. Even if the religion she acquires is false, God does not see her acceptance of it as wrong behaviour, because of the docility that induces the mother and daughter to submit to the order of nature.<sup>9</sup> As they can’t judge for themselves, they ought to abide by the decision of their fathers and husbands as confidently as by that of the church.

. . . .There’s no great need to explain to women the reasons for their •religious• belief, but there is a need to state precisely the tenets they are to believe: a creed that presents only obscure ideas to the mind will lead to fanaticism; and a creed that presents absurdities will lead to loss of faith.

<sup>9</sup> MW interjects: What if the mother’s and husband’s religions *happen* to be different? An ignorant person cannot be •reasoned out of an error, and if she is merely •persuaded to give up one prejudice for another her mind will be unsettled. And what if the husband doesn’t have any religion to teach her? In that case she •won’t have any religion, and therefore• will lack something she need to support her virtue independently of worldly considerations.

•WOLLSTONECRAFT•

[MW comments briefly on this, in a manner you could now predict from what she has said up to here. What follows—at a length that would occupy about four pages of the present version—is a series of shorter quotations from Rousseau interspersed by MW's comments. Their over-all theme is the conflict between •Rousseau's wish to make women physically attractive and obedient and •MW's wish that women should above all be thoughtful and self-controlled. She fiercely attacks his emphasis on the need for a woman to be physically attractive so that she can be her husband's 'mistress' [see Glossary], especially in the light of his thesis that *that* relationship won't last for long in the marriage. She speaks of this whole emphasis in Rousseau as 'the reveries of fancy and refined licentiousness', meaning roughly that he is supplying himself with soft pornography. She continues:]

The man who can be contented to live with a pretty and useful companion who has no mind has lost in voluptuous [see Glossary] gratifications a taste for more refined pleasures; he has never felt the calm and refreshing satisfaction. . . .of being loved by someone who could understand him. In the society of his wife he is still alone, except when the man is sunk in the brute [here 'brute' = 'lower animal'; she means 'except when the man uses her for sexual satisfaction']. 'The charm of life', says a grave philosophical reasoner [Adam Smith], is 'sympathy; nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast.'

But, according to the line of thought by which women are kept from the tree of knowledge,

the important years of youth,

the usefulness of age, and

the rational hopes of a future life

are all to be sacrificed to making woman an object of desire for a short time. Besides, how could Rousseau expect them

to be virtuous and constant when they aren't allowed to base their virtue on reason or direct their inquiries towards truth?

Rousseau's errors in reasoning all arose from sensibility [see Glossary], and women are very ready to forgive sensibility to their charms! When he should have reasoned he became impassioned, and his thoughts inflamed his imagination instead of enlightening his understanding. Even his virtues led him astray: born with a warm constitution and lively imagination, he was naturally drawn toward the other sex with such eager fondness that he soon became lascivious. If he had given way to these desires, the fire would have extinguished itself in a natural manner; but virtue and a romantic kind of delicacy made him practise self-denial; but when he was restrained ·in his behaviour·—by fear, delicacy, or virtue—he let his imagination run riot, and the glowing images that it came up with sank deep into his soul.

. . . .And so warmly has he painted what he forcibly felt that readers' hearts have been drawn in and their imaginations inflamed; the stronger the readers' imaginations are, the more sure they are that they have been convinced of something intellectually, when really they have only shared the feelings of a poetic writer who skilfully exhibits the objects of sense, voluptuously shadowed or gracefully veiled; and by thus making us •feel when we think we are •reasoning he leaves a deposit of error in the mind.

Why was Rousseau's life divided between •ecstasy and •misery? It has to be because the effervescence of his imagination produced •both. If he had allowed his imagination to cool, he might have acquired more strength of mind. . . .

But peace to his spirit! I am at war not with his ashes but with his opinions. I am fighting only the sensibility that led him to degrade woman by making her the slave of love. Let us, my dear contemporaries, rise above such narrow prejudices! If wisdom is desirable on its own account,



if virtue properly so-called must be based on knowledge, then let us try to strengthen our minds by reflection, until our heads become a balance for our hearts; let us not confine all our thoughts to everyday trivial occurrences, or our knowledge to an acquaintance with our lovers' or husbands' hearts; rather, let the carrying-out of every duty be subordinate to the grand duty of improving our minds and preparing our affections for a more exalted state! . . .

If we really were created only to flutter our hour out and then die, then let us give full play to sensibility and laugh at the severity of reason! But even then this wouldn't be satisfactory, because we wouldn't have strong bodies or minds, and life would be lost in feverish pleasures or wearisome idleness.

But the system of education that I earnestly want to see exploded seems to presuppose something that ought never to be taken for granted.

•WHAT MW SAYS IN THE REST OF THIS PARAGRAPH•

The presupposition has two parts. **(1)** A woman who is well brought up by the standards of the system I am attacking will be protected from any mishaps; Fortune, the blindfolded goddess, will take off her blindfold and smile on this woman, bringing her an admirable male partner. **(2)** A woman who is devoted to virtue (and thus isn't well brought up by those standards) will get benefits only to her own frame of mind; she is likely to have to cope with serious worldly difficulties, and to put up with the vices and moods of people she can never regard as friends.

•HOW MW SAID THIS (VERBATIM)•

. . . .namely, that virtue shields us from the casualties of life; and that fortune, slipping off her bandage, will smile on a well-educated female, and bring in her hand an Émile or a Telemachus. Whilst, on the contrary, the reward which

virtue promises to her votaries is confined, it seems clear, to their own bosoms; and often must they contend with the most vexatious worldly cares, and bear with the vices and humours of relations for whom they can never feel a friendship.

[The next paragraph **continues the statement of the 'presupposition' that MW has been attacking**, by saying more about the misfortunes of **(2)** the woman who devotes herself to virtue.]

Many women, instead of being supported by the reason and virtue of their fathers and brothers, have strengthened their own minds by struggling with their vices and follies; but they have never met with a hero in the shape of a husband. If they did have a husband, he might . . .manage to bring their reason back to its natural dependent state, and restore to *man* the privilege of rising above opinion—the privilege that had been usurped by the woman.

[•The second woman isn't rewarded much by virtue, although she is devoted to it. The upshot for the first woman is better, and we understand its being brought by fortune, luck; but it's not clear why in the verbatim passage it is also said to be worked by virtue. •In the second paragraph MW says that a husband might 'pay the debt that mankind owed' to the woman . . . etc. But Rousseau & co. don't think that mankind owes the second woman anything. Perhaps MW meant ' . . .paying the debt that **the woman thinks** mankind owes her'.]

## 2: Fordyce

[James Fordyce, a Scottish Presbyterian minister and poet, had written two enormously popular books about the upbringing of young women. MW makes no secret of her contempt for these works—both for their overlap with Rousseau's views and for their style. He isn't worth discussing, she says; but he has to be attended to because he is so influential. This section would run to about five pages,

but it won't be presented here. A sense of why Fordyce isn't worth quoting, and of what MW thought of him, can be gathered from a few of her expressions regarding him:

- a most sentimental rant
- I have heard rational men use the word 'indecent' when they mention Fordyce's writings
- a display of cold artificial feelings. . . .the mark of a little vain mind
- lover-like phrases of pumped-up passion
- The lover has a poetic licence. . . .but why should a grave preacher interlard his discourses with such fooleries?]

### 3: Gregory

[Dr John Gregory, a Scottish physician, wrote *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, for the benefit of his motherless daughters; it was published posthumously two decades before the present work.]

Dr Gregory's legacy to his daughters is full of such paternal care that I embark on the task of criticism with affectionate respect. But just because this little volume has many attractions to recommend it to the notice of the most respect-worthy part of my sex, I can't silently let pass some arguments in it that make a plausible case for opinions that I think have had the most harmful effect on the morals and manners of the female world.

His easy familiar style is particularly suited to the over-all line of his advice, and the melancholy tenderness which his respect for the memory of a beloved wife diffuses through the whole work brings us onto its side; but our sympathy is disturbed by the trim elegance of many passages in the book—passages where, expecting to meet the •father, we are suddenly confronted by the •author.

Another drawback is that he has two purposes and doesn't often stay steadily with either of them. He wants to make his daughters lovable; but he doesn't want to give them sentiments that might make them unhappy by drawing them out of the track of common life without enabling them to act with appropriate independence and dignity. So he checks the natural flow of his thoughts, and advises neither one thing nor the other.

In the preface he tells them a sad truth: 'At least once in your lives you will hear the genuine sentiments of a man who has nothing to gain from deceiving you.' [Presumably the 'once' is the occasion of reading their father's book; what is sad is the implication that this may be the only occasion.]

Hapless woman! what can be expected from you when the beings on whom you are said naturally to depend for reason and support all have something to gain from deceiving you! This is the root of the evil that has shed a corroding mildew on all your virtues. Blighting in the bud your opening faculties, it has made you the weak thing that you are! This divergence of interests—this difference between what brings gain to a male and what brings gain to a female—is an insidious state of warfare that undermines morality and divides mankind!

If love has made some women wretched, how many more have been made vain and useless by the cold unmeaning interplay of 'gallantry'! Yet this heartless attention to the •female• sex is regarded as so manly, so polished, that I'm afraid this vestige of gothic manners won't be replaced by a more reasonable and affectionate mode of conduct until society is very differently organized. Also, to strip •gallantry' of its imaginary dignity, I should point out that in the most civilized European states •this lip-service is most prevalent where morals are extremely dissolute. I'm thinking of Portugal, where gallantry takes the place of the most serious moral

obligations—for in that country it seldom happens that a man is assassinated when he is in the company of a woman! The savage hand of murder is unnerved by this chivalrous spirit; and if the stroke of vengeance can't be delayed, the killer asks the lady to pardon the rudeness and to leave in peace, perhaps spattered with her husband's or brother's blood.

I shall pass over what Dr Gregory says about religion, because I mean to give religion a chapter to itself. [In the upshot, she didn't. Perhaps the chapter was to have been in a projected second volume, which didn't get written.]

Although many of the remarks about behaviour are very sensible [see Glossary], I entirely disapprove of them all, because they strike me as starting at the wrong end, so to speak. A cultivated understanding and an affectionate heart won't have any need for starched rules of decorum; without such rules they will lead to something more substantial than seemliness [= 'conventional properness of behaviour']. And on the other hand, obedience to such rules without understanding would be outright pretence. ·In Gregory's scheme of things·, decorum is the one thing that is needed! Decorum is to supplant nature, and banish all simplicity and variety of character out of the female world. But what good can come of this superficial advice? It is easier •to list modes of behaviour ·that are required or forbidden· than •to set reason to work; but once the mind has been stored with useful knowledge and strengthened by being *used*, the regulation of the behaviour may safely be left to its guidance ·without the aid of formal rules·.

Consider for example this caution that Gregory gives to his daughters:

Be cautious even in displaying your good sense. ·If you don't·, you'll be seen as regarding yourself as superior to the rest of the company. And if you

happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret—especially from men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on any woman who has knowledge, skill and a cultivated understanding.

Why should that warning be given, when artfulness of every kind must contaminate the mind; and why entangle the grand motives of action—motives supported by reason and religion equally—with pitiful worldly devices and sleight-of-hand tricks to gain the applause of gaping tasteless fools? . . .

If it were always proper to adopt the tone of the company one is in, there would be no end to rules for behaviour. With the key changing all the time ·in tune with the company·, it would often happen that a *flat* was taken to be a *natural* note. [The adjectives are meant in their musical sense—e.g. mistaking a *b♭* for a *b♮*.]

Surely it would have been wiser to advise women to improve themselves until they rose above the fumes of vanity; and then let the public opinion come around ·to seeing them for what they are. If they have to adjust themselves to the company they are in·, where are rules of accommodation to stop? The narrow path of truth and virtue doesn't veer to the right or the left: it is a straightforward business, and those who are earnestly travelling this road can leap across many. . . . prejudices without leaving modesty behind. Make the heart clean, and give the head work to do, and I predict that there will be nothing offensive in the behaviour.

The air of fashion that many young people are so eager to achieve always strikes me as being like the studied attitudes [MW's phrase] of some modern prints, copied slavishly and tastelessly from ancient works of art: the soul is left out, and none of the parts are tied together by *character* properly so-called. This varnish of fashion. . . . may dazzle the weak; but leave nature to itself, ·unvarnished·, and it will seldom disgust the wise. Besides, when a woman has enough sense

not to pretend to anything that she doesn't understand in some degree, she has no need to hide her talents; let things take their natural course, and all will be well.

It is this system of pretence all through Dr Gregory's book that I despise. Women are always to *seem* to be this and that; but virtue might speak in Hamlet's words: 'Seems! I know not seems!—Have that within that passeth show!'

In another place, after indiscriminately recommending delicacy, he adds:

The men will complain of your reserve. They will assure you that a franker behaviour would make you more lovable. But, trust me, they aren't sincere when they tell you that. I acknowledge that on some occasions it [= a more open and forthright manner] might make you more agreeable as companions, but it would make you less lovable as women. And that is an important distinction, which many of your sex are not aware of.

This desire of always being women is the very frame of mind that degrades the 'female' sex. Except with a lover, it would (I repeat) be well if they were *only* agreeable or rational companions. But in this respect Gregory's advice is inconsistent with something else he says, which I now quote with strong approval:

The view that a woman may allow all innocent freedoms provided her virtue is secure is both grossly indelicate and dangerous, and has proved fatal to many of your sex.

I agree with this. A man or woman of any feeling must always wish to convince a beloved object that what he or she is getting and returning with pleasure are caresses of the individual, not of the sex; and that the heart is moved rather than the senses. Without this natural delicacy, love becomes a selfish personal gratification that degrades the character.

I take this view further. When love is out of the question, affection authorises many personal endearments that flow naturally from an innocent heart and give life to the behaviour; but the personal interplay of appetite, gallantry, or vanity, is despicable. Suppose a man is helping a pretty woman into a carriage—a woman he doesn't know—and he squeezes her hand: if she has any true delicacy she will regard this impertinent freedom as something like an insult, rather than being flattered by this meaningless homage to beauty. . . .

Wanting to feed the affections with what is now the food of vanity, I would like to persuade my sex to act from simpler principles. Let them merit love, and they will obtain it, though they may never be told that. 'I like Dr Gregory's remark: 'The power of a fine woman over the hearts of very able men is beyond what she conceives.'

I have already remarked on the narrow cautions Gregory offers relating to deceit, female softness, delicacy of constitution; for these are the themes that he keeps endlessly coming back to. He handles them in a more decorous manner than Rousseau does; but basically he agrees with Rousseau on these matters, and if you take the trouble to analyse these opinions 'of Gregory's' you'll find that the first principles are not quite so delicate as the superstructure!

You'll see in due course that my views about friendship, love, and marriage are non-trivially different from Gregory's. I don't want to get ahead of myself and talk about that now, important as it is. I want here merely to remark on the over-all spirit of Gregory's treatment of them, on his cautious family prudence, on his limited views of partial unenlightened affection. These views exclude pleasure and improvement by vainly wanting to fend off sorrow and error—and by thus guarding the heart and mind, destroy all their energy. It is far better to be often deceived than never to

trust; to be disappointed in love, than never to love; to lose a husband's fondness, than forfeit his esteem.

It would be a good thing for the world—and for individuals, of course—if all this useless care to attain a limited and limiting worldly happiness were turned into an anxious desire to improve the understanding.

—Wisdom is the principal thing: therefore get wisdom; and with all thy gettings get understanding. (*Proverbs* 4:7)

—How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity and hate knowledge? (*Proverbs* 1:22)

That is Wisdom speaking to the daughters of men!

#### 4: Some women

I shan't mention all the writers who have written on the subject of female manners—it would in fact be only beating over the old ground, for they have in general said the same things; but I'm on the attack against man's. . . . *iron sceptre of tyranny*, and I declare against all power built on prejudices, however ancient.

If women's submission is to be based on justice, that is the highest court of appeal, for God is justice itself. So let us as children of the same parent. . . . reason together and learn to submit to the authority of •reason when •her voice is distinctly heard. And if it is proved that this throne of prerogative rests on nothing but a chaotic mass of prejudices that aren't kept together by

- any inherent principle of order, or
- any elephant or tortoise or even
- the mighty shoulders of a son of the earth,

anyone who still holds on to them will be guilty of a breach of duty, of sinning against the order of things. . . . [The middle one of those three refers to an old Indian theory about what holds the world

up, and the third refers to Greek myths about Atlas.]

The being who can govern him- or herself [see Glossary] has nothing to fear in life; but if anything is dearer to someone than his or her own respect, the price for that must be paid to the last farthing. Virtue, like everything valuable, must be loved for herself alone or she won't come to live with us. She won't impart the peace 'which passeth understanding' [Philippians 47] if she is •used merely as the stilts of reputation and •respected with pharisaical exactness because 'honesty is the best policy'.

It can't be denied—and it never is denied—that the plan of life that enables us to carry some knowledge and virtue into the after-life is the plan with the best chance to ensure contentment in this life; yet few people act according to this principle. This sober conviction is swept aside by present pleasure or present power. . . . How few—how very few!—have enough foresight or resolution to endure a small evil at the moment so as to avoid a greater evil hereafter.

Woman in particular, whose virtue is built on mutual prejudices, seldom attains to this greatness of mind; so that she becomes the slave of her own feelings and is thus easily subjugated by the feelings of others. When it is thus degraded, her reason—her misty reason!—is employed in polishing her chains rather than breaking them. I have indignantly heard women argue along the same lines as men, and adopt the sentiments that treat them as animals, doing this with all the stubborn persistence of ignorance. I shall illustrate this assertion with a few examples.

[MW then briefly discusses things that had been said about women by three women: these discussions add nothing to what she has already said, and they are mostly omitted here. The women in question are

**Hester Piozzi**, who before her second marriage was the Mrs Thrale who is still remembered for her long, close friendship with Samuel Johnson.

**Baroness de Staël**, who has been described as ‘the first woman of Europe’; prominent for literary and political activities, and for her personal life—one of her lovers was Talleyrand. As a young woman she had written a tribute to Rousseau, and that is what MW fastens on here.

**Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis**, wife of an aristocrat who was beheaded during the Terror; author of, among other things, books for children. MW’s main complaint concerns Madame Genlis’s ‘absurd manner of making parental authority supplant reason’; and she also throws in this: ‘I shall pass over her vehement argument in favour of the eternity of future punishments, because I blush to think that a human being should ever argue vehemently in such a cause. She concludes this section with a tribute to:]

**Catherine Macaulay**, who is certainly the woman of the greatest abilities that this country has ever produced. Yet she has been allowed to die without sufficient respect being paid to her memory. But posterity will be more just, and will remember that Catharine Macaulay was an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex. No sex appears in her style of writing, for it is like the sense it conveys, strong and clear.

I won’t say that she has a ‘masculine’ understanding, because I don’t accept that there is anything masculine about reason; but I contend that her understanding was sound and that her judgment—the mature fruit of profound thinking—was a proof that a woman can acquire *judgment* in the full extent of that word. . . . She writes with sober energy and tightness of argument; yet her sympathy and benevolence draw us to her side, and the vital heat of her arguments that forces the reader to weigh them.

When I first thought of writing the present work, I anticipated Mrs Macaulay’s approval with a little of the hopeful eagerness that it has been the business of my life to suppress; then I heard that she had died—hearing this with the sickly spasm of disappointed hope and the steady seriousness of regret.

## 5: Chesterfield

. . . . Lord Chesterfield’s *Letters to his Son* must not be silently passed over. Not that I mean to analyse his unmanly, immoral system, or even to select any of the useful shrewd remarks that occur in his letters. No, all I intend to offer are a few thoughts about the purpose that the author says the letters have, namely **the art of acquiring an early knowledge of the world**. This is an art that •preys secretly, like the worm in the bud, on the •young person’s• expanding powers, and •turns to poison the abundant juices that should mount with vigour in the youthful frame, inspiring warm affections and great resolves. [There is no further mention of Chesterfield, by name or description, in this work.]

•AGAINST EARLY EDUCATION IN THE WAYS OF THE WORLD•  
‘For everything there is a season’, says the wise man [*Ecclesiastes* 3:1]; and who would look for the fruits of autumn during the genial months of spring? But this is mere rhetoric •on my part•, and I mean to *reason* with those worldly-wise instructors who, instead of cultivating the •young person’s• judgment, instil prejudices and •harden the heart that gradual experience would only have •cooled. An early confrontation with human infirmities—what is called ‘knowledge of the world’—is in my view the surest way to shrink the heart and dampen the natural youthful ardour which produces not only great talents but great virtues. The vain attempt to bring forth the fruit of experience before the

sapling has come into leaf only exhausts its strength and prevents it from taking on a natural form. . . . Tell me, you who have studied the human mind, isn't it a strange way to fix principles by showing young people that principles are seldom stable? And how can they be strengthened by habits when they are shown examples in which the habits work out badly? Why is the ardour of youth thus to be damped, and the luxuriance of imagination cut right back? It's true that this dry caution about how badly people sometimes behave *may* guard a character from worldly mischances, but it *certainly will* rule out excellence in virtue and in knowledge. The stumbling-block thrown across every path by suspicion will prevent any vigorous exertions of genius [see Glossary] or benevolence, and life will be stripped of its most alluring charm long before its calm evening when man should retire to contemplation for comfort and support.

A young man who has grown up in a family who are his friends, and has stored his mind with as much theoretical knowledge as can be acquired by reading and the natural reflections that youthful outbursts of animal spirits and instinctive feelings inspire, will enter the world with warm *and erroneous* expectations. But this seems to be the course of nature; and in morals as well as in works of taste we should obey nature's sacred pointers, and not presume to lead when we ought humbly to follow.

Few people act from principle; the grand springs of action are present feelings and early habits; but the feelings would be deadened, and the habits turned into rusting fetters, if young people were shown the world just as it is. What will make them uncensorious and forgiving is the knowledge of mankind and of their own hearts that can be slowly obtained through experience. If they have that, they will see their fellow creatures as frail beings, like themselves, condemned to struggle with human infirmities; sometimes displaying the

light side of their character and sometimes the dark, giving rise to alternate feelings of love and disgust. But the early warning system guards them against their fellow creatures, as against beasts of prey, until every enlarged social feeling is eradicated, i.e. until their humanity was eradicated.

In life, on the other hand, as we gradually discover the imperfections of our own nature we also discover virtues; and various circumstances attach us to our fellow creatures when we mix with them and view the same objects—circumstances that are never thought of in acquiring a hasty unnatural knowledge of the world such as Lord Chesterfield's indoctrination. We see a folly swell into a vice by almost imperceptible degrees, and we pity the person while we also blame him or her; but, if the hideous monster—the vice—burst suddenly on our sight, our fear and disgust would make us more severe than man ought to be, and might lead us in our blind zeal to put ourselves in God's place and pronounce damnation on our fellow mortals, forgetting that we can't read their hearts and that we have seeds of the same vices lurking in our own.

We expect more from instruction (I repeat) than mere instruction can produce. Instead of preparing young people to confront life's evils with dignity, and to acquire wisdom and virtue through the use of their own faculties, precepts are heaped on precepts and blind obedience to them is required, when conviction should arise from the use of reason.

Suppose, for instance, that a young person in the first ardour of friendship *deifies* the beloved object [i.e. regards him or her as a god]—what harm can arise from this mistaken enthusiastic attachment? It may indeed be better than merely harmless, because it may be necessary for virtue to appear first in a human form to impress youthful hearts; the ideal model, which a more mature and elevated mind

looks up to and shapes for itself, would elude their sight. 'He who loves not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God?' asked the wisest of men [1 *John* 4:20]... .

Our trees are now allowed to spread with wild luxuriance, and we don't expect by force to combine the majestic marks of time with youthful graces; rather, we wait patiently until the trees have driven their roots down deep and braved many a storm. Well, then, is the mind...to be treated with less respect? To argue from analogy: everything around us is in a progressive state; and when an unwelcome knowledge of life gives us a sense of having had almost enough of life, and we discover by the natural course of things that everything that happens under the sun is vanity [*Ecclesiastes* 1:14], we are drawing near to the awe-inspiring close of the drama. The days of activity and hope are over, and as for the opportunities that our early years gave us for advancing in the scale of intelligence—we have nearly reached their bottom line. A knowledge of the futility of life is very useful at this late stage of our lives—or earlier, if it is obtained through experience. Useful because it is natural; but when a frail ·young, inexperienced· being is shown the follies and vices of man so as to teach him to •guard prudently against the common casualties of life by •sacrificing his heart—that's the wisdom of this world, contrasted with the nobler fruit of piety and experience.

·THE BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH: ITS EFFECTS ON OUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS·

I will venture a paradox...: if men were born only to form a circle of life and death, it would be wise to take every possible step to make life happy. Moderation in every pursuit would then be supreme wisdom; and the prudent voluptuary [= 'the sexually energetic person who takes care of his own interests'] might enjoy a degree of contentment although he didn't cultivate his understanding or keep his heart pure. If we were

mortal, prudence would be true wisdom; or, to put the point more explicitly, prudence would yield the greatest portion of happiness, considering the whole of life; but knowledge about anything other than the conveniences of life would be a curse, ·or at any rate the pursuit of it would be a curse, as I now proceed to explain·.

Why should we injure our health by close study? The exalted pleasure that intellectual pursuits provide would hardly compensate for the hours of exhaustion that follow, especially if we take into account the doubts and disappointments that cloud our researches. Every inquiry ends with empty hands and annoyance, because the cause that we particularly wanted to discover recedes before us as we advance, like the horizon... Yet, disappointed as we are in our researches, the mind is strengthened through exercise, perhaps becoming strong enough to comprehend the answers which, at another stage of existence, it may receive to the anxious questions it asked ·back in its earthly life· when the understanding with feeble wing was fluttering round the visible effects ·and hoping· to dive into the hidden cause.

The passions also, the winds of life, would be useless or even harmful if the substance that composes our thinking being died with our bodies. The appetites would meet all our earthly needs and would produce more moderate and permanent happiness ·than our passions do·. But the powers of the soul

that are of little use in this life, and probably disturb our animal pleasures even while conscious dignity makes us glory in having them,

prove that ·this· life is merely an education, a state of infancy, to which the only hopes worth cherishing should not be sacrificed. The conclusion I draw from this is that we ought to have a precise idea of what we want to attain by education. •The immortality of the soul is contradicted



by the ·educational· activities of many people who firmly announce that they believe in •it!

If what you primarily want ·for your child· is ease and prosperity on earth, leaving the after-life to provide for itself, then you are acting prudently in giving your child an early insight into the weaknesses of human nature. You may not turn him into a vicious scoundrel, but don't think that he will stick to more than the letter of the law after taking in at a very early age a view of human nature as very low-down; nor will he think he needs to rise much above the common standard. He may avoid gross vices, because 'honesty is the best policy', but he will never aim at attaining great virtues. The example of writers and artists will illustrate this remark.

'It is always wise to regulate one's passions'—this has been thought to be an axiom in morals, but I think it is a dogmatic assertion made by men who have coolly seen mankind through the medium of books. And I don't believe it: I say in direct contradiction to it that the regulation of the passions is *not* always wisdom. On the contrary, one reason why men have better judgment and more endurance than women is that they give a freer scope to the grand passions, and by more frequently going astray they enlarge their minds. If then their use of their own reason leads them to settle on some stable principle, they have probably to thank the force of their passions •nourished by *false* views of life and permitted to jump across the boundary that guarantees contentment. If at the start of life we could soberly survey the scenes before us as...and see everything in its true colours, how could the passions get enough strength to unfold the faculties?

Let me now, as from a mountain-top, survey the world stripped of its false delusive charms. The clear atmosphere lets me to see each object in its true point of view, and I have no passions. I am as calm as the prospect on a morning

when the mists are slowly dispersing and silently unveiling the beauties of nature, refreshed by rest.

What will the world look like now? I rub my eyes and think perhaps that I am just awaking from a lively dream.

I see the sons and daughters of men pursuing shadows, and anxiously squandering their powers to feed passions that have no adequate object. . . .

[In case you are interested, that last ellipsis replaces the words:

—if the very excess of these blind impulses pampered by that lying, yet constantly-trusted guide, the imagination, did not, by preparing them for some other state, render short sighted mortals wiser without their own concurrence; or, what comes to the same thing, when they were pursuing some imaginary present good.

The two pages on the view from the mountain-top have a lot of that sort of obscurity, and are omitted from this version except for the striking half-sentence with which they end:] . . . the governing passion implanted in us by the Author of all good, to call forth and strengthen the faculties of each individual, and enable it to attain all the experience that an infant can obtain, who does certain things, it cannot tell why.

I descend from my mountain-top, and mixing with my fellow creatures I feel myself being hurried along the common stream; ambition, love, hope, and fear exert their usual power, although we are convinced by reason that their present and most attractive promises are only lying dreams. But if the cold hand of circumspection [= 'cautiously looking around'] had damped each warm feeling before it had left any permanent mark or fixed some habit, what could be expected other than selfish prudence and reason barely rising above instinct? Anyone who has read with a philosophical eye Dean Swift's disgusting description of the Yahoos, and his insipid account of the Houyhnhnms, must see the futility of degrading the passions or making man settle for being merely contented.

The youth should *act*. If he had the experience of a grey head, he would be fitter for death than life; his virtues, residing in his head rather than his heart, could produce nothing great; and his understanding, prepared for •this world, wouldn't embark on noble flights showing that it had a right to •a better •world•.

Besides, you can't give a young person a just view of life; he must have struggled with his own passions before he can estimate the force of the temptation that betrayed his brother into vice. Those who are entering life see the world from such a different point of view from that of those who are departing that they can seldom think alike, unless the unfledged reason of the former never attempted a solitary flight.

When we hear of some daring crime, it comes full upon us in the deepest shade of wickedness and raises our indignation; but the eye that saw the darkness gradually thicken—i.e. saw the psychological process that led to the commission of the crime—must observe it with more compassionate forbearance. The world can't be seen by an unmoved spectator: we must mix in the throng, and feel as men feel, before we can judge of their feelings. In short, if we mean to live in the world in order to grow wiser and better, and not merely to enjoy the good things of life, we must acquire a knowledge of others at the same time that we become acquainted with ourselves—knowledge acquired any other way only hardens the heart and puzzles the understanding.

I may be told that knowledge acquired in this way is sometimes purchased at too high a price. I can only answer that I very much doubt whether any knowledge can be acquired without labour and sorrow; and those who wish to spare their children both shouldn't complain if they are neither wise nor virtuous. All the parents aimed at was to

make their children prudent; and prudence, early in life, is simply the cautious craft of ignorant self-love. I have observed that young people to whose education particular attention has been paid have usually been very superficial and conceited, and far from pleasing in any respect; that is because they had neither the unsuspecting warmth of youth nor the cool depth of age. I can't help thinking that the main cause of this unnatural condition is the hasty premature instruction that leads them to repeat, confidently, all the crude notions they have taken on trust, so that the careful education they have been given makes them life-long slaves of prejudices. . . .

[MW now offers a couple of pages on prejudices, which she takes to be beliefs of long-standing that are held by people who have no reasons for them. This is aimed at theorists—she mentions Burke—who defend certain principles on the grounds that they are of great antiquity. She closes the chapter with a brief restatement of her basic view about education, followed by some remarks on religion:]

The senses and the imagination give a form to the character during childhood and youth; and in later years the understanding gives firmness to the first fair purposes of sensibility—until virtue, arising from the clear conviction of reason rather than the impulse of the heart, •creates a• morality that stands on a rock against which the storms of passion beat in vain.

I hope I shan't be misunderstood when I say that religion won't have this condensing energy—giving firmness, establishing a rock—unless it is based on reason. If it is merely the refuge of weakness or wild fanaticism, and not a governing principle of conduct drawn from self-knowledge and a rational belief about the attributes of God, what can it be expected to produce? The 'religion' that consists in warming the affections and exalting the imagination is only

the poetical part of religion; it may give pleasure to the individual, but it won't make him or her a more moral being. It may be a substitute for worldly pursuits, but it is no good because it narrows the heart instead of enlarging it. Virtue must be loved as something inherently sublime and excellent, and not for the advantages it brings or the evils it averts, if any great degree of excellence be expected. Men will not become moral when they only build airy castles in a future world to compensate for the disappointments that

they meet with in this world—turning their thoughts from relative duties to religious daydreams.

Most prospects in life are harmed by the shuffling worldly wisdom of men who try to blend contradictory things, forgetting that they *can't* serve God and mammon. If you want to make your son rich, pursue one course; if all you care about is making him virtuous, you must take another; but don't imagine that you can jump across from one road to the other without losing your way.

## Chapter 6: The effect that an early association of ideas has on the character

Educated in the enervating style recommended by the writers I have been criticising, and being deprived by their subordinate social status from recovering their lost ground, is it surprising that women everywhere appear to be a defect in nature? When we consider what a definite effect an early association of ideas has on the character, is it surprising that women neglect their understandings and turn all their attention to their persons? [see Glossary]

Storing the mind with knowledge naturally brings great advantages, as is obvious from the following considerations. The association of our ideas is either habitual or instantaneous; and instantaneous association seems to depend on the mind's original temperature [MW's word] rather than on the will. When the ideas and matters of fact are once taken in, they are stored for subsequent use, until some chance happening makes the information dart into the mind

with illustrative force—this being information that has been received at very different periods of our lives. Many recollections are like lightning: one idea assimilates and explains another, with astonishing rapidity. I am not now talking about the quick perception of truth which is so intuitive that it baffles research, and leaves us at a loss to discover whether what has opened the dark cloud is •reminiscence or •thinking which we don't detect because of its speed. Over *those* instantaneous associations we have little power: when the mind is enriched in some way, the raw materials will to some extent *arrange themselves*. The understanding, it is true, may keep us from going out of drawing when we group our thoughts, or transcribe from the imagination the warm sketches of fancy; but the •animal spirits [see Glossary], the individual character, give the colouring. We have little power over this •superfine electric fluid, and our reason has

little control over that power! These fine intractable spirits appear to be the essence of genius, and shining in its eagle eye they produce in the highest degree the happy energy of associating thoughts that surprise, delight, and instruct. These are the glowing minds that concentrate pictures for their fellow-creatures, forcing them to take an interest in objects reflected from the impassioned imagination—objects that they hadn't attended to in nature.

Let me explain. Most people cannot see or feel *poetically*; they lack imagination, so they fly from solitude in search of objects they can sense; but when an author lends them his eyes, they can see as he saw, and be entertained by images that they couldn't select for themselves, although they were lying before them.

Education thus only supplies the man of genius with knowledge to give variety and contrast to his associations; but there is an habitual association of ideas that develops along with us, and has a great effect on the moral character of mankind. Such associations give the mind a slant that commonly remains throughout life. So ductile is the understanding, and yet so stubborn, that the associations that depend on chance happenings before the body arrives at maturity can seldom be disentangled by reason. One idea calls up another, its old associate, and memory—faithful to the first impressions, especially when the intellectual powers are not employed to cool our sensations—retraces them with mechanical exactness.

This habitual slavery to first impressions has a more harmful effect on the female character than on the male, because business and other dry employments of the understanding tend to deaden the feelings and break associations that do violence to reason. But females—who are •turned into women when they are mere children, and •brought back to childhood when they ought to leave the go-cart

forever—haven't enough strength of mind to erase the overlay of *art* that has smothered *nature*.

Everything they see or hear serves to fix impressions, call up emotions, and link ideas, giving the mind its feminine character. . . . And the first idea-associations that are forced on them by every surrounding object are allowed to run wild instead of being examined. •Given how females are educated•, how could they attain the vigour that is needed to be able to throw off their factitious character [= 'free themselves from the character-traits that have been *constructed* for them']? Where could they find the strength to resort to reason and rise above a system of oppression that blasts the fair promises of spring? This cruel association of ideas, which everything conspires to twist into all their habits of thinking (or, more accurately, of feeling) receives new force when they begin to act a little for themselves; for that's when they see that their only route to pleasure and power is through their skill in arousing emotions in men. Besides, the first impressions on their minds come from •books that offer to instruct them, and •they all teach the same lessons. It is unreasonable as well as cruel to scold women for faults that they—educated as they are in worse-than-Egyptian bondage—can hardly avoid, unless there are some who have a degree of native vigour that very few among mankind are blessed with. [The idea is that *native* vigour would be built into the person's constitution, making it safe from being undermined by education.]

For instance, the severest sarcasms have been levelled against the •female• sex, ridiculing them for repeating 'a set of phrases learnt by rote' [Swift] when nothing could be more natural, considering •the education they receive, and •the widespread opinion• that their 'highest praise is to obey, unargued' [Milton] the will of man. If they aren't allowed to have enough reason to govern their own conduct then of course everything they learn must be learned by rote!

And when they are led to spend all their ingenuity on their clothes, 'a passion for a scarlet coat' [Swift] is so natural that it never surprises me; and supposing that Pope's summary of their character is just, namely 'that every woman is at heart a rake', why should they be bitterly censured for seeking a congenial companion and preferring a rake to a man of sense? [A rake is a person—usually a man—whose way of living is stylish and fashionable but also morally lax and dissolute.]

Rakes know how to work on women's feelings, while the modest merit of reasonable men has less effect on their feelings and can't reach their heart via the understanding, because they—men and women—have few sentiments in common.

It seems a little absurd to deny women the uncontrolled use of their reason while still expecting them to be more reasonable than men in their *likings*. When do men *fall in love* with sense? When do they, with their superior powers and advantages, turn from the person to the mind? And how can they then expect women, who are only taught to observe behaviour and to acquire manners rather than morals, to despise what they have spent their lives struggling to acquire? Where are they suddenly to find judgment enough to weigh patiently the sense of an awkward virtuous man, when... his conversation is cold and dull because it doesn't consist of pretty repartees or well-turned compliments? In order to admire or esteem anything for long, we must at least have our curiosity aroused by knowing something about it; we can't estimate the value of qualities and virtues that are above our comprehension. When such a respect is felt, it may be very sublime; and the admirer's confused feeling of humility may have some tendency to draw people to her; but human love must also have cruder ingredients, and the woman's person very naturally will come in for its share—and what a big share it usually is!

Love is to a large extent an arbitrary passion, and—like some other stalking mischiefs—it will reign by its own authority, without bringing in reason; and it's easy to distinguish love from esteem—the foundation of friendship—because love is often aroused by fleeting beauties and graces; though love won't have much energy unless something more solid deepens the impression made by those beauties and graces, setting the imagination to work to make the loveliest the best.

Common passions are aroused by common qualities. Men look for beauty and the simper of good-humoured docility; women are captivated by easy manners—a gentlemanly man seldom fails to please them, and their thirsty ears eagerly drink in the suggestive nothings of politeness, while they turn away from the unintelligible sounds of the other charmer—reason—however wisely he produces his charm. When it comes to superficial accomplishments, the rake certainly has the advantage; and females can form an opinion about these because this is their own ground. Rendered gay and giddy by the whole tenor of their lives, the very look of wisdom or of the severe graces of virtue must strike them as gloomy, and produce a kind of restraint from which they and the playful child *love* naturally revolt. Without taste... which is the offspring of judgment, how can they discover that true beauty and grace must arise from the play of the mind? and how can they be expected to enjoy in a lover something that they so very imperfectly possess themselves? The sympathy that unites hearts and invites to confidence is so very faint in them that it can't catch fire and thus rise to the level of passion. No, I repeat it, the love cherished by such minds must have cruder fuel!

The conclusion is obvious: until women are led to exercise their understandings, they shouldn't be satirised for their attachment to rakes; nor even for being rakes at heart them-

selves, when that seems to be the inevitable consequence of their education. Those who live to please must find their enjoyments, their happiness, in pleasure! We never do anything well unless we love it for its own sake—a trite remark, but a true one.

Pretend for a moment that at some future time women will become what I sincerely wish them to be. Then love will acquire a more serious dignity, and be purified in its own fires; and because virtue will give true delicacy to women's affections they will turn with disgust from a rake. When that time comes they will •reason as well as •feel—whereas feeling is all they can do at present—so that it will be easy for them to guard against surface graces, and learn to despise •the sensibility that had been aroused in the ways of women and then grown stale there, the sensibility whose trade is vice; and •allurement's wanton airs. They will recollect that the flame. . . .they wanted to light up has been exhausted by lust, and that the sated appetite, losing all taste for pure and simple pleasures, can be aroused only by licentious arts of variety. What satisfaction could a woman of delicacy promise herself in a union with such a man, when the very artlessness [here = 'sincerity'] of her affection might appear insipid?. . . . One grand truth women haven't yet learned, though it would do them a lot of good if they acted on it, namely: In the choice of a husband they should not be led astray by the qualities of a lover—because a husband, even a wise and virtuous one, can't remain a lover for long.

If women were more rationally educated and could take a more comprehensive view of things, they would be content to love only once in their lives; and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship—into that tender intimacy which is the best refuge from care. Friendship is built on such pure, calm affections that idle jealousies aren't allowed to •disturb the performance of the sober duties of life or •take up thoughts that ought to be otherwise employed. This is a state in which many men live, but *very* few women. It is easy to explain this difference without recurring to a sexual character [i.e. without supposing that there are basic, natural psychological differences between the sexes]. [MW devotes the final two pages of this chapter to the explanation in question. It doesn't add any content to things she has said already, except for this sad footnote about the fate of those 'who have not sufficient mind to be amused by innocent pleasure' and who, for one reason or another, have withdrawn from the scene of *uninnocent* pleasure:]

I have frequently seen this exemplified in women whose beauty could no longer be repaired. They have retired from the noisy scenes of dissipation; but, unless they became Methodists, the solitude of the select society of their family connections or acquaintance has presented only a fearful void; consequently nervous complaints and all the vapourish train of idleness rendered them quite as useless as, and far more unhappy than, they were when they joined the giddy throng.

## Chapter 7: Modesty comprehensively considered and not as a sexual virtue

Modesty! Sacred offspring of sensibility and reason!—true delicacy of mind! I hope you won't blame me if I investigate your nature and track to its lair the mild charm, the mellowing of each harsh feature of a character, that makes *lovely* something that would otherwise only inspire cold admiration. You who smooth wisdom's wrinkles and soften the tone of the more elevated virtues until they all melt into humanity! You who spread the ethereal cloud that encircles love and heightens every beauty that it half-shades. . . . Modulate for me the language of persuasive reason until I rouse my sex from the flowery bed on which they supinely sleep life away! [MW is here asking modesty to be with her, so that the reasoning she is going to present to the female sex will be found acceptable.]

. . . .In defining modesty we should distinguish these two:

- (1) The purity of mind that is an effect of chastity;
- (2) a simplicity of character that leads us to form a just opinion of ourselves, equally distant from vanity or presumption, but compatible with a lofty awareness of our own dignity.

Modesty in sense (2) is the soberness of mind that teaches a man not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think. It should be distinguished from humility, because humility is a kind of self-abasement. A modest man often conceives a great plan, and tenaciously sticks to it, conscious of his own strength, until it is crowned with success. Milton was not arrogant when he let slip a judgment that proved to be a prophesy; nor was General Washington arrogant when he accepted of the command of the American forces. [When Milton was 17 years old, someone told him he would some day be famous, and Milton agreed. When Washington was called to lead

the revolutionary army in the American war of independence, he firmly declared that he was not good enough for the job.] Washington has always been described as a modest man; but if he had been merely *humble* he would probably have shrunk back, afraid of trusting to himself the direction of an enterprise on which so much depended.

A modest man is steady, a humble man is timid, and a vain one is presumptuous—or so my observation of many characters has led me to believe. Jesus Christ was modest, Moses was humble, and the apostle Peter was vain.

Modesty is different not only from humility but also from bashfulness. Bashfulness is so distinct from modesty, indeed, that the most bashful lass or raw country lout often becomes the most impudent; for their bashfulness is merely the instinctive timidity of ignorance, and custom soon changes it into assurance.

·A BIT OF VERSE THAT MW PUT INTO A FOOTNOTE HERE·

Such is the country-maiden's fright,  
When first a red-coat is in sight;  
Behind the door she hides her face,  
Next time at distance eyes the lace:  
She now can all his terrors stand,  
Nor from his squeeze withdraws her hand,  
She plays familiar in his arms,  
And every soldier hath his charms;  
From tent to tent she spreads her flame;  
For custom conquers fear and shame.  
(John Gay, 'The Tame Stag')

The shameless behaviour of the prostitutes who infest the

streets of London, causing alternate emotions of pity and disgust, illustrate this remark. They trample on virgin bashfulness with a sort of bravado, and glorying in their shame they become more audaciously lewd than men. . . . ever appear to be. But these poor ignorant wretches never had any modesty to lose when they consigned themselves to infamy; for modesty is a virtue, not a quality. No, they were only bashful, shame-faced innocents; and when they lost their innocence their shame-facedness was roughly brushed off; whereas a *virtue*, if sacrificed to passion, would have left some traces in the mind to make us respect the grand ruin.

Purity of mind—i.e. the genuine delicacy that is the only virtuous support of chastity—is near kin to the refinement of humanity that resides only in cultivated minds. It is something nobler than innocence; it is the delicacy of reflection, and not the coyness of ignorance. The reservedness of reason—which like habitual cleanliness is seldom seen in any great degree unless the soul is active—can easily be distinguished from rustic shyness or wanton skittishness; and far from being incompatible with knowledge, it is its fairest fruit. Someone who wrote this had a gross idea of modesty:

The lady who asked ‘Can women be instructed in the modern system of botany, consistently with female delicacy?’ was accused of ridiculous prudery; but if she had asked me I would certainly have answered ‘No, they cannot’.

Thus is the fair book of knowledge to be shut with an everlasting seal! On reading things like that I have reverentially

lifted up my eyes and heart to God and said, ‘O my Father, have you by the very constitution of my nature forbidden me to seek you in the fair forms of truth?’ . . . .

A woman who has dedicated much of her time to purely intellectual pursuits, and whose affections have been exercised by humane plans of usefulness, must as a natural consequence have more purity of mind than the ignorant beings whose time and thoughts have been occupied by gay pleasures or schemes to conquer hearts.<sup>10</sup> The regulation of one’s behaviour is not modesty, though those who carefully obey rules of decorum are generally described as ‘modest women’. Make the heart clean, let it expand and feel for everything human instead of being narrowed by selfish passions; and let the mind frequently contemplate subjects that exercise the understanding without heating the imagination; and artless modesty will give the finishing touches to the picture.

Anyone who sees herself as immortal [see Glossary] will respect, as a sacred temple, the body that enshrines such an improvable soul. True love also spreads this kind of mysterious sanctity around the beloved object, making the lover most modest when in her presence. . . .

As a sex, women are more chaste than men, and as modesty is the effect of chastity they may deserve to have this virtue—modesty—ascribed to them. . . . , but I must be allowed to add a hesitating *if*, revising the above statement to ‘*If* modesty is the effect of chastity. . . .’; because I am not sure whether chastity *will* produce •modesty, though it may produce •propriety of conduct, when it is merely a respect

<sup>10</sup> I have conversed with medical men on anatomical subjects, conversing as man with man; and I have discussed the proportions of the human body with •male• artists; but I met with such modesty that I was never reminded by word or look of •my sex or of •the absurd rules that make modesty a pharisaical cloak for weakness. And I am convinced that in the pursuit of knowledge women would never be insulted by sensible men—and rarely by men of any description—if they didn’t by mock modesty remind them that they were women. . . . Men are not always men in the company of women; and women wouldn’t always remember that they are women if they were allowed to acquire more understanding.



for the opinion of the world. (The immodest behaviour of many married women who are nevertheless faithful to their husbands' beds will illustrate this remark.). . . . Indeed, my experience and my reason lead me to expect to find more modesty among men than among women, simply because men exercise their understandings more than women do.

But when it comes to propriety of behaviour, women obviously have the advantage (except for one class of females). What can be more disgusting than that impudent dross of 'gallantry', thought to be so manly, which makes many men stare insultingly at every female they meet? Is this respect for the 'female' sex? No. This loose behaviour shows such habitual depravity, such weakness of mind, that we can't expect to see much public or private virtue until both men and women grow more modest. . . .and treat each other with 'more' respect—I mean the modest respect of humanity and fellow-feeling, not the libidinous mockery of gallantry or the insolent condescension of protectorship.

The sexual distinction respecting modesty is carried still further, and woman—weak woman!—whose education has made her the slave of sensibility, is required on the most difficult occasions to resist that sensibility. 'Can anything', says Knox, 'be more absurd than keeping women in a state of ignorance, and yet vehemently insisting that they resist temptation?' Thus, when virtue or honour make it proper to check a passion, the burden is thrown on the weaker shoulders, contrary to reason and true modesty which should at least make the self-denial mutual. . . .

When men boast of their victories over women, what are they boasting of? Truly the creature of sensibility was surprised by her sensibility into folly—into vice; and the dreadful reckoning falls heavily on her own weak head, when reason wakes. Where will you find comfort, forlorn and disconsolate one? The man who ought to have directed your reason and supported your weakness has betrayed you! In a dream of passion you consented to wander through flowery lawns and, carelessly stepping over the precipice to which your 'guide' lured you, you awake from your dream and find yourself faced by a sneering, frowning world. You are alone in a wasteland, for the man who triumphed in your weakness is now pursuing new conquests; but for you there is no redemption on this side the grave!. . . .

But if the sexes are really to live in a state of warfare—if that's what nature has indicated—then let men act nobly, or let pride whisper to them that when they merely conquer sensibility that is a tawdry victory. The real conquest is that over affection not taken by surprise—when like Héloïse a woman deliberately gives up all the world for love. I am not discussing the wisdom or virtue of such a sacrifice; I merely contend that it was a sacrifice to affection and not merely to sensibility, though she had her share of that. I call her a modest woman. . . .

Now for another view of the subject, this time purely about women.

Mistaken notions of modesty lead people to tell children ridiculous falsehoods<sup>11</sup> that tend very early to inflame their

<sup>11</sup> Children very early see cats with their kittens, birds with their young, etc. Then why shouldn't they be told that *their* mothers carry and nourish them in the same way? As there would then be no appearance of mystery, they wouldn't give any more thought to the subject. Truth can always be told to children if it is told gravely; but it is *the immodesty of affected modesty* that does all the harm—it is a smoke that vainly tries to obscure certain objects but only succeeds in heating the imagination. If indeed children could be kept entirely from improper company, we need never talk to them about such subjects; but as this is impossible, it is best to tell them the truth, especially as such information won't impress itself on their imaginations because they won't be much interested in it.

imaginations and set their little minds to work on topics that nature never intended them to think about until their bodies arrived at •some degree of maturity. At •that stage, the passions naturally begin to take place of the senses as instruments to unfold the understanding and form the moral character.

Girls are first spoiled in nurseries and boarding schools, especially the latter. A number of girls sleep in the same room, and wash together. I wouldn't want to contaminate an innocent creature's mind by instilling false delicacy, or the indecent prudish notions that naturally arise from early cautions regarding the other sex; but I would be very anxious to prevent their acquiring indelicate or immodest habits; and as many girls have learned very indelicate tricks from ignorant servants, it is very improper to mix the girls in this indiscriminate way.

The fact is that women are in general too familiar with each other, which leads to that gross degree of familiarity that so frequently renders the marriage state unhappy. Why are sisters, female intimates, or ladies and their waiting women so grossly familiar as to forget the respect that one human creature owes to another? The squeamish delicacy that shrinks from the most disgusting offices—helping with urination and defecation—when affection or humanity lead us to care for a sick person is despicable. But why are healthy women more familiar with each other than men are, when they (the women) boast of their greater 'delicacy'? I have never been able to answer this.

In order to preserve health and beauty I earnestly recommend frequent ablutions (I'm putting this in words that won't offend the fastidious ear); and girls ought to be taught to wash and dress alone; and if they need some little assistance, they shouldn't ask for it until they have finished that part of the business that ought never to be done before a fellow-

creature because it is an insult to the majesty of human nature. Not because of modesty, but because of *decency*. . . .

[This is followed by about two pages on the subject of women's tendency to be too 'familiar' with one another, lacking in 'reserve' in a way that leads to talk and actions that are 'disgusting'. MW continues:] You may think that I am laying too great a stress on personal reserve; but it is always the hand-maid of modesty. If I were asked 'What are the graces that ought to adorn beauty?' I would immediately exclaim •cleanliness, •neatness, and •personal reserve. I hope it is obvious that the reserve I am talking about is equally necessary in both sexes. . . .

[This modulates into a couple of pages on the importance of being clean, neatly dressed, brisk in manner. Among other things, MW reports that she has 'often felt hurt, not to say disgusted' when a friend she has arranged to meet in the morning shows up in a state showing that she had stayed in bed until the last possible moment. Eventually she works her way back to the announced topic of this chapter:]

I need hardly add that I consider as *immodest* all those airs of grown women. . . .to which truth is sacrificed, to secure the heart of a husband or rather to force him to be still a lover when nature (if left alone) would have replaced love by friendship. The tenderness that a man will feel for the mother of his children is an excellent substitute for the ardour of unsatisfied passion; but it is indelicate, not to say immodest, for a woman to prolong that ardour by feigning an unnatural coldness of constitution. [This is one of several places where MW implies that a man's wish for sexual relations with his partner can be intensified by her pretending not to be interested.] Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature; they are animal-like only when not controlled by reason; but the obligation to control them is the duty of mankind, not of one sex rather than the

other. In these respects, nature can safely be left to itself; let women acquire knowledge and humanity, and love will teach them modesty. There is no need for disgusting and futile falsehoods, because calculated rules of behaviour impose only on shallow observers; a man of sense soon sees through such an affectation and despises it. . . .

My sisters. if you really want to possess modesty, you must remember that the possession of *any* virtue is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! You must acquire the soberness of mind that can only come from the performance

of duties and the pursuit of knowledge; without it, you will remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and you will be loved only while you are beautiful! The downcast eye, the rosy blush, the retiring grace, are all proper in their season; but modesty is the child of reason, and can't co-exist for long with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection. Besides, if you devote your lives to love, even innocent love, your hearts will be too soft to provide for modesty the tranquil retreat where she delights to dwell in close union with humanity.

## Chapter 8:

### Morality undermined by sexual notions of the importance of a good reputation

I realized long ago •that advice about behaviour and about all the various ways of preserving a good reputation—advice that has been so strenuously forced on the female world—is a glittering poison that forms a crust around morality and eats away its substance. And •that this measuring of shadows produces a false calculation, because the length of a shadow depends so much on the height of the sun and other external circumstances.

The easy false behaviour of a courtier—where does it come from? From the fact that the courtier needs dependents, so that he has to learn the arts of •denying without giving offence, and of •evasively feeding hope with the chameleon's food. [The chameleon's tongue moves faster than the eye can see; so it used to be said that the chameleon feeds on air.] That is how politeness plays with truth and—eating away the sincerity and humanity natural to man—produces the fine gentleman.

Women in the same way acquire, from a supposed necessity, an equally artificial way of behaving. But you can't with impunity play with truth, because the experienced dissembler eventually becomes the dupe of his own arts, and can no longer quickly perceive common truths, which means that he loses his common sense. Those are truths that are constantly accepted as true by the unsophisticated mind, though it might not have had enough energy to discover them itself when local prejudices got in the way. Most people take their opinions on trust, to avoid the trouble of using their own minds, and these lazy beings naturally adhere to the letter of the law rather its spirit, whether the law be divine or human. Some author (I forget who) wrote: 'Women don't

care about things that only heaven sees.' Why indeed should they? It is the eye of man that they have been taught to dread—and if they can lull their Argus to sleep, they seldom think of heaven or themselves, because their reputation is safe; and it is not •chastity but •reputation that they are working to keep free from spot, not as a virtue but to preserve their status in the world. [Argus in Greek mythology was a guardian god with a hundred eyes.]

To prove the truth of this remark, I need only mention the intrigues of married women, particularly in the upper social ranks and in countries where women are suitably married according to their respective ranks by their parents. If an innocent girl become a prey to love [i.e. if she has a sexual affair before marriage], she is degraded forever, even if her mind wasn't polluted by the arts that married women practise under the convenient cloak of *marriage*; and she hasn't violated any duty except her duty to respect herself. In contrast with that, if a married woman is a false and faithless wife, she breaks a most sacred contract and becomes a cruel mother. If her husband still has an affection for her, the tricks she must use to deceive him will make her the most contemptible of human beings; and the contrivances necessary to preserve appearances will keep her mind in that childish or vicious tumult that destroys all its energy. . . .

I have known a number of women who, if they did not love their husbands, loved nobody else,

devoting themselves entirely to vanity and dissipation, neglecting every domestic duty, even squandering the money that should have been saved for their helpless younger children,

and priding themselves on their spotless reputation, as if the whole extent of their duty as wives and mothers was to preserve *that*. . . .

It would have been better if superficial moralists had said less about behaviour and outward observances, and more about the underlying frame of mind; for unless virtue of any kind is built on knowledge, it will produce only a kind of insipid decency. Yet respect for the opinion of the world has been explicitly claimed to be woman's principal duty, for Rousseau declares:

Reputation is as indispensable as chastity. A man, secure in his own good conduct, depends only on himself, and can brave public opinion; but a woman in behaving well performs only half her duty; the other half is to be well thought of, because •what is thought of her is as important to her as •what she really is. So the system of a woman's education should in this respect be directly contrary to that of men's education. Opinion is virtue's grave among the men but its throne among women.

It is strictly logical to infer from this that virtue depending on opinion is merely worldly, and that it is the virtue of a being to whom reason has been denied. But even with respect to the opinion of the world I am convinced that this class of reasoners—ones who think as Rousseau did about the matter—are mistaken.

This regard for reputation, independent of its being one of the natural rewards of virtue, arose from a cause that I have already deplored as the grand source of female depravity, namely the impossibility of regaining respectability by a return to virtue, although men preserve theirs *during* the indulgence of vice. This made it natural for women to try to preserve something that when lost can never be regained, namely reputation for chastity; this became the one thing

needed by the female sex, and the concern for it swallowed up every other concern. But. . . .neither religion nor virtue, when they reside in the heart, require such a childish attention to mere ceremonies, because the behaviour must on the whole be proper when the motive is pure.

To support my opinion I can produce very respectable authority; and the authority of a cool reasoner ought to have weight—not to establish an opinion but to make one take it into consideration. Dr Smith observes:

By some very extraordinary and unlucky circumstance, a good man may come to be suspected of a crime of which he was altogether incapable, and on that account be most unjustly exposed for the rest of his life to the horror and aversion of mankind. By an accident of this kind he may be said to 'lose his all' despite his integrity and justice, in the same way that a cautious man may be ruined by an earthquake or a flood, despite all the care he has taken. Accidents of the first kind are rarer—more contrary to the common course of things—than accidents of the second kind; and it still remains true that the practice of truth, justice and humanity is a certain and almost infallible method of acquiring what those virtues chiefly aim at, the confidence and love of those we live with. A person may be easily misrepresented with regard to a particular action; but it is hardly possible that he should be misrepresented with regard to the general tenor of his conduct. An innocent man may be believed to have done wrong; but this won't often happen. On the other hand, the established opinion that his behaviour is innocent will often lead us to absolve him in cases where he has really been at fault. . . . [Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*]

I entirely agree with this writer, for I believe that few people of

either sex were ever despised for certain vices without deserving to be despised. I'm not talking about the short-term libel that hangs over someone's character, like a dense November morning fog over London, until it gradually subsides before the common light of day; my point is just that the daily conduct of the majority of people stamps their character with the hallmark of truth. The clear light, shining day after day, quietly refutes the ignorant suspicion or malicious tale that has thrown dirt on a pure character. . . .

Many people. . . obtain a better reputation than, strictly speaking, they deserve, for if you work hard enough you will reach your goal in almost any race. Those who strive only for this paltry prize—like the Pharisees who prayed at street-corners so as to be seen by men—do indeed get the reward they seek, for the heart of man cannot be read by man! But the fair fame that is naturally reflected by good actions, when the man is trying only to do the right thing, regardless of the lookers-on, is in general not only more true but more sure.

It's true that there are trials when the good man must appeal to God from the injustice of man, and to the accompaniment of the. . . hissing of envy, erect a shelter in his own mind to retire into until the rumour has passed; and indeed the darts of undeserved blame may pierce an innocent tender bosom with many sorrows; but these are all exceptions to general rules. And it is according to these common laws that human behaviour ought to be regulated. . . .

So I venture to assert that after a man has reached maturity, the general outline of his character in the world is just, allowing for the before mentioned exceptions to the rule. I don't deny that a prudent, worldly-wise man with only negative virtues and qualities may sometimes obtain a

smoother reputation than a wiser or a better man. . . . But the hills and dales, clouds and sunshine, that are conspicuous in the virtues of great men set each other off; and though they afford envious weakness a better target to shoot at, the real character will still work its way into the light even if it is bespattered by weak affection or ingenious malice.<sup>12</sup>

. . . .Morality is very insidiously undermined in the female world by the attention being given to the •show instead of to the •substance. This turns a simple thing into something strangely complicated; indeed, sometimes virtue and its shadow are set at variance. We might never have heard of Lucretia if she had she died to preserve her chastity instead of her reputation. [A heroine of early Rome who, according to legend, killed herself after being raped.] If we really deserve to think well of ourselves we shall commonly be respected in the world; but if we pant after higher improvement and higher attainments, it is not sufficient to view ourselves as we suppose that •others view us, though this has been ingeniously argued—by Adam Smith—to be the foundation of our moral sentiments. Why not? Because each bystander may have his own prejudices in addition to those of his age or country. We should rather try to view ourselves as we suppose that •God views us. . . .

[We are then given two pages of flowery prose on the theme of an honest person examining himself in the presence of God, seeing that he is far from perfect, and being led by this discovery to a less harshly blaming attitude to his fellow-mortals. Here is a one-sentence sample of the style of this passage: 'Virtues, unobserved by men, drop their balmy fragrance at this cool hour, and the thirsty land, refreshed by the pure streams of comfort that suddenly gush out, is crowned with smiling verdure; this is the living green on which that eye may look with complacency that is too pure

<sup>12</sup> I have in mind various biographical writings, particularly Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

to behold iniquity!’ Eventually MW comes to the end of this ‘reverie’, as she calls it, and gets back to her proper topic:]

The leading principles that run through all my discussions would make it unnecessary to go on about this subject if it weren’t for the fact that a constant attention to keep the *varnish* of the character fresh and in good condition is often taught as the sum total of female duty; the fact that moral obligations are often pushed into second place by rules to regulate behaviour and preserve reputation. But with regard to reputation the attention is confined to a single virtue—chastity. If a woman’s ‘honour’—as it is absurdly called—is safe, she may neglect every social duty; even ruin her family by gambling and extravagance; yet still present a shame-free front—for truly she is an honourable woman!

Mrs. Macaulay has rightly remarked that ‘there is only one fault that a woman of honour can’t commit without being punished’. She then justly and humanely adds:

This has given rise to the foolish observation that the first fault against chastity in woman has a radical power to deprave the character. But no such frail beings come out of the hands of nature. The human mind is built of nobler materials than to be so easily corrupted; and with all their disadvantages of situation and education, women seldom become entirely abandoned until they are thrown into a state of desperation by the venomous rancour of their own sex.

But in proportion as this regard for the reputation of chastity is prized by women, it is despised by men: and the two extremes are equally destructive to morality.

[Two paragraphs on ‘beastly’ over-eating by the rich, and their lack of shame about it. Then from talking about this ‘appetite’ she moves to another:]

The depravity of the appetite that brings the sexes together has had a still more fatal effect. Nature must always be the standard of taste, the gauge of appetite—yet nature is grossly insulted by the voluptuary. ‘I’ll discuss this’, leaving the refinements of love out of the question. Nature makes the gratification of this appetite. . . . a natural and imperious law to preserve the species; and by so doing, it exalts the appetite and mixes a little **(1)** mind and affection into **(2)** the sensual appetite. The **(1)** feelings of a parent mingling with **(2)** a merely animal instinct give the latter dignity; and because the man and the woman often interact on account of the child, a mutual interest and affection is aroused by the exercise of a shared sympathy. So mothers, having necessarily some duty to fulfil more noble than to adorn their persons, would not contentedly be the slaves of casual appetite. Yet many women are just that: they are, literally speaking, standing dishes to which every ‘sexual’ glutton can have access.

I may be told that bad as this sexual promiscuity is, it affects only one cursed part of the sex—cursed for the salvation of the rest. Well, it’s easy to prove that it is never right to allow a small evil in order to produce a greater good; but that’s not the end of the matter. The moral character and peace of mind of the more chaste part of the sex is undermined by the conduct of the very women to whom they allow no refuge from guilt. These are women whom the chaste women inexorably consign to the practice of skills and tricks that lure their husbands from them and debauch their sons. And they also force the modest women (who may be surprised to read this!) to become to some extent like themselves. For I will venture to assert that all the causes of female weakness or depravity that I have already discussed branch out from one grand cause—the lack of chastity in men.

[A paragraph introducing the extremely voluptuous man, 'the lustful prowler', and his ways of satisfying his sexual appetite. Then:]

To satisfy this type of man, women are made systematically voluptuous, and though they may not all take their libertinism as far as the man does, still this heartless interaction with males that they allow themselves depraves both sexes: the taste of men is vitiated, and women of all classes naturally adapt their behaviour to gratify the taste by which they obtain pleasure and power. In this way women become weaker in mind and body than they ought to be. . . .and don't have enough strength to discharge the first duty of a mother; so they sacrifice to lasciviousness the parental affection that ennobles instinct, and either destroy the embryo in the womb or throw it out when it has been born. [MW also builds into that sentence the thesis that 'bearing and nursing children is one of the grand ends of women's existence'.] Nature demands respect in everything, and those who violate her laws seldom violate them with impunity. The weak enervated women who particularly catch the attention of libertines are unfit to be mothers, though they may conceive; so that the rich sensualist who has rioted among women, spreading depravity and misery, when he wants to perpetuate his name receives from his wife only a half-formed being that inherits both its father's and mother's weakness. [That sentence is verbatim MW.]

. . . .I have already remarked that men ought to maintain the women whom they have seduced; this would be one means of reforming female manners and ·by giving disgraced women an alternative to prostitution· stopping an abuse

that has an equally fatal effect on population and morals. Another ·means of reforming female manners·—an equally obvious one—would be to turn the attention of woman to the real virtue of chastity. A woman's reputation may be white as the driven snow, but she hasn't much claim to respect for her modesty if she smiles on the libertine while spurning the victims of his lawless appetites and their own folly.

Besides, she has a taint of the same folly when she studiously adorns her person [see Glossary] only to be seen by men, to excite respectful sighs and all the idle homage of what is called 'innocent gallantry'. Women who really respect virtue for its own sake won't look for compensation in ·the coin of· vanity for the self-denial they have to practise to preserve their reputation, nor will they associate with men who set reputation at defiance.

The two sexes corrupt each other and improve each other. I believe this to be an indisputable truth, and I extend it to every virtue. Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind—otherwise they will be cultivated to little effect. And instead of providing vicious or idle people with a pretext for violating some sacred duty by saying that it is a duty for only one of the sexes, it would be wiser to show that nature has not drawn any line here, for the unchaste man doubly defeats the purpose of nature by rendering women barren and destroying his own constitution, though he avoids the shame that pursues the crime in the other sex. [MW is implying here that the unchaste man defeats the purpose of nature by getting syphilis and by spreading it.]. . . .



## Chapter 9:

### The pernicious effects of the unnatural distinctions established in society

Most of the evils and vices that make this world such a dreary scene to the contemplative mind flow—as from a poisoned fountain—from the respect paid to *property*. For it is in the most polished society that stinking reptiles and venomous serpents lurk under the nasty foliage; and there is voluptuousness pampered by the still sultry air, slackening every good disposition before it has time to ripen into virtue.

One class presses on another; for they are all aiming to get respect on account of their property; and once they have *that* it will bring them the respect that is really due only to talents and virtue. Men neglect their human duties, yet are treated like demi-gods; religion is also separated from morality by a ceremonial veil; yet men are surprised that the world is, almost literally speaking, a den of cheats or oppressors.

There's a shrewd truth in the homely proverb that whoever the devil finds idle he will employ. And what can hereditary wealth and titles produce except habitual idleness? Man is so constituted that he can attain a proper use of his faculties only by using them, and he won't use them unless the wheels are first set in motion by some kind of necessity. Virtue also can be acquired only by the performance of one's duties to others; but the importance of these sacred duties will hardly be felt by someone who is cajoled out of his humanity by the flattery of sycophants. There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground; and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind are chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride. [That sentence is verbatim MW.]

You can't expect virtue from women until they are to some extent independent of men; indeed, you can't expect the strength of natural affection that would make them good wives and good mothers. While they absolutely depend on their husbands, they will be cunning, mean, and selfish, and the men who can be gratified by the fawning fondness of spaniel-like affection don't have much delicacy—because love is not to be bought. . . .; its silken wings are instantly shrivelled up when anything is sought other than a return in kind. But while wealth enervates men, and women live (so to speak) by their personal charms, how can we expect them to perform the ennobling duties that equally require exertion and self-denial? Hereditary property perverts the mind, and the unfortunate victims of hereditary property (if I may call them 'victims'), swathed from their birth, seldom get either body or mind moving; so they view everything through one medium, and that a false one; so they can't tell what true merit and happiness consist in. False, indeed, must be the light when the drapery of situation hides the man, and makes him stalk in masquerade, dragging from one scene of dissipation to another the nerveless limbs that hang with stupid listlessness, and rolling round the vacant eye that plainly tells us that there is no mind at home. [That splendid sentence is verbatim MW.]

My point is that a society isn't properly organized if it doesn't *compel* men and women to perform their respective duties, by making that their only route to being viewed by their fellow creatures in the way that every human being wants. So the respect that is paid to wealth and mere personal charms is a true north-easterly blast that blights the

tender blossoms of affection and virtue. Nature has wisely attached •affections to •duties, to make the work sweeter and to give to the exertions of reason the vigour that only the heart can give. But when someone who doesn't perform the duties that go with a certain affection nevertheless *puts on* the affection merely because it is the trade-mark of a certain •kind of• character, this is one of the empty compliments that vice and folly are obliged to pay to virtue and the real nature of things.

For example: when a woman is admired for her beauty, and allows herself to be so intoxicated by the admiration she receives that she neglects to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to develop an affection that would *equally* tend to make her useful and happy. True happiness—I mean all the contentment and virtuous satisfaction that can be snatched in this imperfect state—must arise from well regulated affections; and an affection includes a duty. Men aren't aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they encourage, by only inciting women to make themselves pleasing; they don't consider that they are making natural and artificial duties clash by sacrificing the comfort and respectability of a woman's life to voluptuous notions of beauty, when in nature they all harmonize.

It would be a cold-hearted husband, or one made unnatural by early debauchery, who didn't feel more delight at seeing his child breast-fed by its mother than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise; yet wealth leads women to spurn this natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie and weaving esteem in with fonder recollections. . . . The maternal care of a reasonable affectionate woman puts us on her side; and the chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his position is not

only worthy of respect but is a beautiful sight. . . . I have viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and performing the duties of her position with, perhaps, merely a servant maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business. I have seen her prepare herself and children, with only the luxury of cleanliness, to receive her husband who, returning home weary in the evening, found smiling babes and a clean hearth. . . .

While my benevolence has been gratified by contemplating this artless picture, I have thought that a couple of this description. . . . possessed all that life could give. Raised above abject poverty enough not to be obliged to think about every farthing they spend, and having enough to save them from having to manage a frigid system of economy that narrows both heart and mind. In my plain thoughts I don't know what else is needed to make this the happiest as well as the most respect-worthy situation in the world—except for •a taste for literature, to throw a little variety and interest into conversation, and •some surplus money to give to the needy and to buy books. . . .

Riches and inherited honours are destructive to the human character, and are even worse for women than for men, because men can still to some extent unfold their faculties by becoming soldiers and statesmen.

[MW goes on to say that soldiering has lost its glory and been reduced to mere fine-tuning of the balances of power on the European continent. Statesmen can do a little better, moving from gambling to government, and using the same skills for each. Then:] The whole system of British politics—calling it a 'system' is mere politeness—consists in multiplying dependents and contriving taxes that grind the poor to pamper the rich; thus a war or any wild-goose-chase is a bit of good luck for the minister, whose chief merit is the art of keeping himself in place.

[Then a scornful paragraph about how a minister can ply his trade, pretending to care about the poor and unfortunate but doing nothing for them. MW continues:] Let me return to the more specious slavery that chains the very soul of woman, keeping her for ever under the bondage of ignorance.

The preposterous distinctions of rank that make civilization a curse by dividing the world between •voluptuous tyrants and •cunning envious dependents corrupt every class of people almost equally; because the respect a person gets depends only on his rank, and not to his performance of his duties to others; and when the duties are neglected the affections can't gain enough strength to fortify the virtue of which they are the natural reward. There are some loop-holes out of which a man may creep, and dare to think and act for himself; but for a woman it is a Herculean task because the female sex faces difficulties of its own that require almost superhuman powers to overcome.

A truly benevolent legislator always tries to make it in the interests of each individual to be virtuous; this makes private virtue become the cement of public happiness, so that an orderly whole is consolidated by the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre. But the private or public virtue of women is very problematic because many male writers, including Rousseau, insist that a woman should throughout her life be subjected to the severe restraint of *propriety*. Why subject her to propriety—blind propriety—if she is capable of acting from a nobler spring, i.e. if she has inherited immortality [see Glossary]? . . .

[MW returns to her old theme of women being given the wrong kind of attention by men etc. One item in this is new: 'The laws respecting woman, which I mean to discuss in a future part, make an absurd unit of a man and his wife; and then by the easy transition of considering only him as responsible she is reduced to a mere cipher, •a nothing•.

[Then a great deal more of the old theme. In the course of dealing with Rousseau's statement that women's lower status is shown by the fact that they can't fight in wars, MW remarks in passing that 'defensive war' is 'the only justifiable war'. And she works her way around to a brief consideration of the poor:] What can be a more melancholy sight to a thinking mind than to look into the numerous carriages that drive helter-skelter about London in a morning, full of pale-faced creatures who are flying from themselves. I have often wished, with Dr Johnson, to place some of them in a little shop with half a dozen children looking up to their languid countenances for support. If that happened, I think that some latent vigour would soon give health and spirit to their eyes; and some lines drawn by the use of reason on the blank cheeks. . . . might restore lost dignity to the character, or rather enable it to attain the true dignity of its nature. . . .

Besides, when poverty is more disgraceful even than vice, isn't morality cut to the quick? Still to avoid misconstruction, though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called by religion and reason to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, I can't help lamenting that women higher up the social scale don't have a road along which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence. . . . I really think (don't laugh!) that women ought to have •parliamentary• representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without being allowed any direct share in the deliberations of government. This is just a hint; I mean to pursue it at some future time.

But the whole system of 'representation' in this country is at present only a convenient label for despotism; so women needn't complain, because they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard-working mechanics who pay for the support of royalty when they can scarcely put bread in their children's mouths. Men whose very sweat •supports

the splendid horses of the heir apparent to the throne, or •varnishes the chariot of some female favourite •of the king's—who looks down on shame—how are they *represented*? Taxes on the very necessities of life enable an endless tribe of idle princes and princesses to pass with stupid pomp before a gaping crowd, who almost worship the very parade that costs them so dear. This is mere barbarous grandeur, something like the useless parade of sentinels on horseback at Whitehall, which I could never see without a mixture of contempt and indignation.

How strangely must the mind be sophisticated when this sort of state impresses it! But until these monuments of folly are levelled by virtue, similar follies will leaven the whole mass. For the same character, in some degree, will prevail in the aggregate of society: and the refinements of luxury, or the vicious repinings of envious poverty, will equally banish virtue from society, considered as the characteristic of that society, or only allow it to appear as one of the stripes of the harlequin coat worn by the 'civilized' man.

In the upper ranks of society every duty is performed by deputies (as though duties could be transferred!), and the pointless pleasures that the resulting idleness forces •the rich to pursue appear so enticing to the next rank that the numerous scramblers for wealth sacrifice everything to tread on •their heels. . . . Women, in particular, all want to be ladies. Which is simply to have nothing to do except listlessly to go they hardly care where, for they cannot tell what.

'But what have women to do in society' I may be asked 'but to loiter with easy grace? Surely you wouldn't condemn them all to breast-feed fools and keep household accounts!' No. Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be •well paid• physicians as well as •very poorly paid• nurses. And there is also midwifery.

They might also study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis; for the reading of history will hardly be more useful than the reading of romances if the history is read as mere biography and the character of the times, the political improvements, arts, etc. are not observed. The profitable approach to history regards it as the history of *man*, and not of *particular men* who filled a niche in the temple of fame and then dropped into the black rolling stream of time that silently sweeps all before it. . . .

Women might also pursue business of various kinds if they were educated in a more orderly manner, and that might save many from common or legal prostitution [i.e. from actual prostitution or marrying in order to have economic security]. . . .

[MW remarks that an unmarried woman may have had honourable reasons for choosing not to marry, and others may have been unable to marry. She continues:] So it's a very defective government—one that entirely neglects the happiness of one half of its public—that doesn't provide for honest, independent women by encouraging them to occupy respectable positions in society. But to make their private virtue a public benefit, they must—whether married or single—have a civil existence in the state. . . .

The most respect-worthy women are the most oppressed; this is a melancholy truth about the blessed effects of civilization! Treating them like contemptible beings will make them become contemptible, unless they have understandings much above the average for humanity (both sexes). Many women waste life away, the prey of discontent, when they might have practised as physicians, run a farm, or managed a shop, and stood upright supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads. . . .

The woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling some duty deserves much more respect than the most accomplished beauty!. . . . I sigh to think how few women try to

attain this respect-worthiness by withdrawing from the giddy whirl of pleasure, or the lazy calm that stupefies the good sort of women it sucks in.

Proud of their weakness, however, they must always be protected (·they think·), guarded from care and all the rough toils that dignify the mind. If this is what fate ordains—if they choose to make themselves insignificant and contemptible, sweetly wasting life away, let them not expect to be valued when their beauty fades, for the fairest flowers are pulled to pieces by the careless hand that plucked them. . . .

The most useful writers, in my opinion, are the ones who make man feel for man, independent of his social position and of the drapery of false sentiments. So I would like to convince reasonable men of the importance of some of my remarks, and prevail on them to weigh dispassionately the

over-all position that I have been defending. I appeal to their understandings; and as a fellow-creature I claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion to make her a *helpmate* for them!

If only men would generously break our chains and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We would then love them with true affection, because we would learn to respect ourselves; and a worthy man's peace of mind wouldn't be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, and his babes wouldn't be sent to nestle in a strange bosom because they never found a home in their mother's.

## Chapter 10: Parental Affection

Parental affection is perhaps, the blindest kind of perverse self-love. Parents often love their children in the most brutal [see Glossary] manner, and sacrifice every duty to anyone else in order to promote their children's advancement in the world. The aim to promote the future welfare of the very beings whose present existence they embitter by the most despotic stretch of power—that's a sign of how perverse an unprincipled prejudice can be.

In fact, every kind of power. . . .wants to reign without control or inquiry. Its throne is built across a dark abyss that

no eye must dare to explore, for fear that the baseless fabric might totter under investigation. Obedience, unconditional obedience, is the catch-word of tyrants of every description, and to make 'assurance doubly sure,' one kind of despotism supports another. Tyrants would have cause to tremble if reason were to become the rule of duty in any of the relations of life, for the light might spread until perfect day appeared. And when it did appear, men would smile at the sight of the bugbears that had made them jump during the night of ignorance or the twilight of timid inquiry. . . .

If man's great privilege is

- the power of reflecting on the past, and
- peering speculatively into the future,

it must be granted that some people enjoy this privilege in a very limited degree. Everything now appears to them wrong; and not able to distinguish what could happen from what couldn't, they fear where there should be no place for fear, running from the light of reason as if it were a firebrand. . . .

Woman, however, being in every situation a slave to prejudice, seldom exerts enlightened maternal affection; for she either •neglects her children or •spoils them by undue permissiveness. Also, the affection of many women for their children is (I repeat) very brutish, because it eradicates every spark of humanity. Justice, truth, *everything* is sacrificed by these Rebekahs, and for the sake of their own children they violate the most sacred duties, forgetting the common relationship that binds the whole family on earth together. [MW is echoing the story in *Genesis* 27, where Rebekah schemes with her favourite son Jacob to cheat his brother Esau.] Yet reason seems to say that someone who allows •one duty or affection to swallow up the rest doesn't have enough heart or mind to fulfil •that one conscientiously. . . .

As the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties that naturally fall to the female character, this duty—if it were properly considered—would provide many forcible arguments for strengthening the female understanding.

The formation of the mind must be begun very early, and the temperament (in particular) requires the most judicious attention; and that attention *can't* be paid by women who love their children only because they are their children, and don't try to base their duty on anything deeper than the feelings of the moment. It is this lack of reason in their affections that makes so many women be the most foolishly attentive mothers or—at the other extreme—the most careless and unnatural ones.

To be a good mother a woman must have •sense and also •the independence of mind that is possessed by few women who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are usually foolish mothers, wanting their children to love them best, and to side with them in a secret conspiracy against the father, who is held up as a scarecrow—the one who must punish them if they have offended the mother, the one who must be the judge in all disputes: but I'll discuss this subject more fully when I deal with private education. At present I want only to insist that unless woman's understanding is enlarged and her character made more firm through her being allowed to govern her own conduct, she will never have enough sense or command of temperament to manage her children properly. A woman who doesn't breast-feed her children hardly counts as *having* parental affection, because the performance of this duty contributes equally to maternal and filial affection; and it is the indispensable duty of men and women to fulfil the duties that give rise to affections that are the surest preservatives against vice. So-called *natural affection* is a very weak tie, I think; affections •that strongly bond people together• must grow out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy; and a mother who sends her babe to a nurse, and only takes it from a nurse to send it to a school—what sympathy does *she* exercise?

In the exercise of their natural feelings, God has provided women with a natural substitute for love: when the lover becomes only a friend, and mutual confidence replaces overstrained admiration, a child then gently twists the relaxing cord •thereby tightening it up again•, and a shared care produces a new mutual sympathy. But a child. . . won't enliven the parents' affections if they are content to transfer the charge to hirelings; those who 'do their duty' by having someone do it for them shouldn't complain if they miss the reward of duty, namely the child's dutifulness towards them.

## Chapter 11: Duty to Parents

Man seems to have a lazy tendency to make prescription [see Glossary] always take the place of reason. . . . The rights of kings are deduced in a direct line from the King of kings; and that of parents from our first parent.

Why do we thus go back for principles that should always rest on the same base and have the same weight to-day that they had a thousand years ago—and not a jot more? If parents do their duty, they have a strong hold and sacred claim on the gratitude of their children; but few parents are willing to receive the respectful affection of their offspring on those terms. They demand *blind* obedience, because they don't deserve a reasonable service that their children might willingly provide with their eyes open; and to make these demands of weakness and ignorance more binding, a mysterious *sanctity* is spread around the most arbitrary principle. 'Arbitrary'? Well, what other name can be given to the blind duty of obeying vicious or weak beings merely because they obeyed a powerful instinct? [MW is referring to the parents' sexual 'instinct': their 'obedience' to that led to the coupling that caused the children to come into existence.] The simple definition of the two-way duty that naturally holds between parent and child can be stated in a few words:

The parent who pays proper attention to helpless infancy has a right to require the same attention when the feebleness of age comes upon him.

But to subjugate a rational being to the mere will of another when he is old enough to answer to society for his own conduct is cruel and improper; and it may be as harmful to morality as are the religious systems that make God's will the sole source of the line between right and wrong.

I never knew a parent who had paid more than common attention to his children who was then disregarded by the children; on the contrary, the early habit of relying almost unquestioningly on the opinion of a respected parent is not easy to shake off, even when mature reason convinces the child that his father is not the wisest man in the world. This is an attractive weakness, but it is a weakness, and a reasonable man should steel himself against it, because the all-too-common belief that one is obliged to obey a parent just because he is one's parent shackles the mind and prepares it for a slavish submission to any power but reason.

I distinguish the natural duty to parents from the accidental duty to parents.

The parent who carefully tries to form the heart and enlarge the understanding of his child has given to the performance of a duty that is common to the whole animal world a dignity that only reason can give. This is the parental affection of humanity, and leaves instinctive natural affection far behind. Such a parent acquires all the rights of the most sacred friendship, and his advice—even when his child is fully adult—demands serious consideration.

With respect to marriage: after 21 years a parent seems to have no right to withhold his consent for any reason, but twenty years of parental care deserve something in return, and the son ought at least to promise not to marry for two or three years if the woman of his choice doesn't entirely meet with the approval of his first friend.

But respect for parents is generally speaking a much lower cause of action, namely a selfish respect for property. The father who is blindly obeyed is obeyed from sheer weak-

ness or from motives that degrade the human character.

Much of the misery that wanders in hideous forms around the world is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents; and yet these are the people who cling most tightly to what they call a 'natural right', though it undermines man's birthright, the right to act as his own reason directs.

I have already often pointed out that vicious or idle people are always eager to profit from the enforcement of arbitrary privileges, usually in proportion to their neglect of the duties that might make the privileges reasonable. This is basically a dictate of common sense—i.e. the instinct of self-defence—that is typical of ignorant weakness, resembling the instinct that makes a fish muddy the water it swims in to escape its enemy, instead of boldly facing it in the clear stream.

The supporters of any kind of prescription do indeed fly from the clear stream of argument. Taking refuge in the darkness that . . . has been supposed to surround God's throne, they dare to demand the immediate and total respect that is due only to his unsearchable ways. (Don't misunderstand me: the darkness that hides our God from us only concerns speculative truths—it never obscures moral ones, which shine clearly. . . .)

Females in all countries are too much under the dominion of their parents; and few parents think of addressing their children like this:

It is your interest to obey me until you can judge for yourself; and ·God·, the Almighty Father of all, has implanted in me an affection to serve as your guardian while your reason is unfolding; but when your mind arrives at maturity, you must obey me—or rather respect my opinions—only to the extent that they coincide with the light that is breaking in on your own mind.

A slavish bondage to parents cramps every faculty of the

mind. Locke was right when he said that 'if the mind is curbed and humbled too much in children—if their spirits are abased and broken by too strict a hand over them—they lose all their vigour and industry'. This strict hand may to some extent explain the weakness of women; because girls are for various reasons more kept *down* by their parents, in every sense of the word 'down', than boys are. The duty expected from them is, like all the duties arbitrarily imposed on women, based less on reason than on a sense of propriety, on respect for decorum; and by being taught slavishly to submit to their parents girls are prepared for the slavery of marriage. [MW concedes that some married women are not slaves, but they, she says, become tyrants. She also says that not all boys and girls are slaves to their parents, but continues her campaign on behalf of those who are. She emphatically contrasts parents who 'have allowed a natural parental affection to take root in their hearts' with those who are motivated by selfish pride'. The former, she says, will be rewarded by 'filial reverence'.]

Why should the minds of children be warped when they are just beginning to expand, only to favour the laziness of parents who insist on a privilege without being willing to pay the price for it fixed by nature? . . . A right always includes a duty; and I think we can fairly infer from this that those who don't perform the duty don't retain the right.

. . . I believe that in general the affection we inspire ·in others· always resembles the affection that we cultivate ·in ourselves·; so that natural affections—which have been supposed to be almost distinct from reason—are more nearly connected with judgment than is commonly allowed. Indeed, the affections that merely reside in the heart ·with no input from the head· seem to have a kind of animal capriciousness; I offer that as another proof of the necessity of cultivating the female understanding.



It is the irregular exercise of parental authority that first injures the mind, and girls are more subject to these irregularities than boys are. The will of those who never allow their will to be disputed except when they happen to be in a good mood is almost always unreasonable. [MW describes and deplores the tricks that little girls practice in order to cope with this kind of parental authority. Then:] I have been led into a melancholy train of reflection about females, concluding that when their first affection must •lead them astray or •make their duties clash until they rest on mere whims and customs, little can be expected from them as they grow older. How indeed can an instructor remedy this evil? for to teach children virtue on any solid principle is to teach them to despise their parents. Children ought not to be taught to make allowance for their parents' faults, because every such allowance weakens the force of reason in their minds, and makes them still more indulgent to their

own faults. It is a sublime virtue of maturity that leads us to be hard on ourselves and forbearing towards others; but children should be taught only the simple virtues, for if they begin too early to make allowance for human passions and manners, they'll wear off the fine edge of the criterion by which they should regulate their own. . . . [A few years before this was written, Mary Wollstonecraft had been governess to the children of Lord and Lady Kingsborough. Many facts could help to explain why her relationship with Lady Kingsborough went sour, so that eventually she was dismissed; the content of this paragraph may be part of the story! There is another side-light on it on page 98.]

The affections of children and weak people are always selfish: they love their relatives because they are loved by them, not because of their virtues. But until esteem and love are blended together in the •first affection, and reason is made the basis for the •first duty, morality will stumble at the threshold. . . .

## Chapter 12: National education

The good effects of private education will always be very limited; the parent who really puts his own hand to the plough will always be somewhat disappointed until education becomes a grand national concern. A man can't retire into a desert with his child; and if he did, he couldn't bring himself back to childhood and become the proper friend and playmate of an infant or youth. When children are confined to the society of men and women, they soon acquire a kind of

premature manhood that stops the growth of every vigorous power of mind or body. In order to develop their faculties they should be stimulated to think for themselves; and this can be done only by mixing a number of children together and making them jointly pursue the same objects.

[MW continues with this theme. •If children are to be openly inquiring they need time with their peers rather than with parents who stand—however wisely—in authority over

them. •There are affections amongst children that are unlike the affection a child may have for his parents, and a child needs practice in the former, because 'in youth the seeds of every affection should be sown'. •A frank openness of speech and feeling is possible between child and child but not between child and parent; and this matters because it 'first opens the heart to friendship and confidence' and leads on to 'more expansive benevolence'. •A little further down she levels a further charge against home-schooling: it leads to the children's acquiring 'too high an opinion of their own importance', to their 'being allowed to tyrannize over servants', and to their becoming 'vain and effeminate' because they are treated like men when they are still boys'.

[Considerations like these, MW says, have affected her former preference for private education; and yet she still has that preference, because:] I still think that schools as they are now regulated are hot-beds of vice and folly, and that the only knowledge of human nature that could be learned from them is merely cunning selfishness.

[She now holds forth strenuously against the schools: at them 'boys become gluttons and slovens', and rush into the libertinism that 'hardens the heart as it weakens the understanding'. Children at boarding-schools spend at least 'half of the time' longing for vacations, and when these come 'they are spent in total dissipation and beastly indulgence'. A little further on she refers to 'the system of tyranny and abject slavery that is established among the boys'.]

The only way to avoid two extremes that are equally harmful to morality would be to contrive some way of combining a public and private education. Thus to make men citizens, two natural steps might be taken that seem to lead directly to the desired point: cultivating the domestic affections that first open the heart to the various modifications of humanity, while also allowing the children to spend great part of their

time on terms of equality with other children. [MW follows this up with a lyrical reminiscence of 'a country day school', whose pupils had the desirable daily mixture of childhood friends and family influence. She contrasts this fiercely with the evils of 'close confinement in an academy near London', ending with '... to say nothing of the slavery to forms that makes religion worse than a farce'. This launches her on an attack first on religious services in schools and then cutting with a wider swathe through religious practices more generally.]

•A DIATRIBE AGAINST RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN ENGLAND•

What good can be expected from the youth who receives the sacrament of the Lord's supper so as to avoid paying a fine? Half the employment of the youths is to elude the necessity of attending public worship; and well they may, for such a constant repetition of the same thing must be a very irksome restraint on their natural vivacity. These ceremonies

- have the most fatal effect on their morals,
- are a ritual performed by the lips when the heart and mind are far away, and
- are no longer stored up by our •Protestant• church as a bank to draw on for the fees of the poor souls in purgatory;

so why shouldn't they be abolished?

[This next paragraph is addressed to the situation of any school or college which was founded by someone who provided a financial endowment and laid down rules for how the institution was to be run. There were and still are many of these.]

But in this country there is a fear of *any* innovation. This hidden fear is really the apprehensive timidity of idle slugs who guard the snug place that they view as an hereditary estate—eating, drinking and enjoying themselves instead of fulfilling the duties (except a few empty forms) for which the 'estate' was endowed. How do they guard it? By sliming

it over! These are the people who most strenuously insist on conforming to the will of the founder, crying out against every reform as if it were a violation of justice. [MW is especially indignant, she explains, about institutions that are now Protestant but were founded by Roman Catholics and still hold onto 'the relics of popery' that remain from their foundation. She continues:] These Romish customs have the most baneful effect on the morals of our clergy; for the idle vermin who two or three times a day sloppily perform a service that they think is useless, but call their 'duty', soon lose their sense of duty. Having been forced at college to attend or evade public worship, they acquire an habitual contempt for the very service the performance of which will enable them to live in idleness. . . .

Nothing can be more irreverent than the cathedral service as it is now performed in this country, and England doesn't contain a set of weaker men than those who are the slaves of this childish routine. A disgusting skeleton of the former state is still exhibited; but all the solemnity—which engaged the imagination even if it didn't purify the heart—is stripped off. The performance of 'Roman Catholic' high mass on the 'European' continent must impress anyone who has a spark of imagination with that solemn melancholy, that sublime tenderness, which is so near a kin to devotion. I don't say that these devotional feelings do more moral good than any other emotion of taste; but I do say that the 'French Roman Catholic' theatrical pomp that gratifies our senses is preferable to the 'English Protestant' cold parade that insults the understanding without reaching the heart.

These remarks can't be misplaced in a discussion of national education, especially given that the supporters of these puerile establishments pretend to be the champions of religion. Religion, pure source of comfort in this vale of tears! how has your clear stream been muddied by the dabblers

who have presumptuously tried to confine in one narrow channel the living waters that always flow toward God—the sublime ocean of existence! What would life be without the peace that can't be had except through the love of God, built on humanity? . . .

·END OF THE DIATRIBE·

[There are several more paragraphs expressing scorn and disgust for boarding schools and what they do to the morals of their pupils. Then:]

I have heard several masters of schools maintain that their role was connected not with boys' morals but only with their learning Latin and Greek; and that they had done their duty by sending some good scholars to college.

A few good scholars, I grant, may have been formed in this way; but to bring forward these clever boys, the health and morals of a number of others have been sacrificed. . . . It is not for the benefit of society that a few brilliant men should be brought forward at the expense of the multitude. It is true that great men seem to start up. . . .at proper intervals, to restore order and blow away the clouds that thicken over the face of truth; but if more reason and virtue prevailed in society, these strong winds wouldn't be necessary. [MW now returns to the main theme of this chapter, taking it to the declaration that 'children ought to be educated at home'. She adds some warnings about the danger of this, and then:]

This train of reasoning brings me back to a subject that I want to discuss at length, the need for proper day-schools.

But these should be *national* establishments; schoolmasters in private schools depend on the whims of parents, and as long as that is so they can't be expected to exert themselves any more than is necessary to please ignorant people. A schoolmaster has to give the parents some sample of the boy's abilities, which during the vacation is shown to every visitor to his home; and this does more harm than

would at first be supposed. For these purposes the master winds the poor machine up to some extraordinary exertion that injures the wheels and stops the progress of gradual improvement, or alternatively the master does much of the work himself, thus going along with falsehoods. . . .

[MW goes on with her indictment of most private schools; e.g. they have too many children in each class, because that is the only way the school can stay solvent. This eventually brings her to the first mention of girls in this chapter:]

With what disgust have I heard sensible women. . . .speak of the wearisome confinement they endured at school. . . . Obligated to walk with steady deportment stupidly backwards and forwards, holding up their heads, turning out their toes, with shoulders braced back, instead of moving vigorously and naturally in the ways that are so conducive to health. . . .

[She adds a little about the harm that separate schooling does to the characters of girls and (a different harm) the characters of boys, and draws from these facts a conclusion] that I have had in view throughout—namely that **to improve both sexes they ought to be educated together**, not only in private families but also in public schools. . . . If boys and girls were permitted to pursue the same studies together, they might early learn the graceful decencies that produce modesty. . . . Lessons of politeness and decorum (that rule-book that treads on the heels of falsehood!) would be made useless by habitual propriety of behaviour. . . .

[In case you are wondering about the frequency of ellipses in this chapter, it should be explained that they replace material that •essentially repeats things already said earlier in the work, or •provides details that we can supply for ourselves, given our knowledge of MW, or •is like this: ‘Until more understanding preponderate in society, there will always be a want of heart and taste, and the harlot’s rouge will supply the place of that

celestial suffusion that only virtuous affections can give to the face.’ Enough already!]

[Much more about the harm done to girls by their upbringing—notably harm to their grasp of what real virtue is and their ability to respond appropriately to the fine arts; MW thinks that these two are connected. As an example of the latter, she reports being made almost breathless by the beauty of music she was listening to, and ‘a lady asked me where I bought my gown’. She then moves back into her theme of women being deprived of power and therefore developing cunning; plus remarks about the harms that have been done by women partly manipulating the men who had power.]

When I call women ‘slaves’, I mean this in a political and civil sense; for *indirectly* they obtain *too much* power, and their efforts to get this illicit power debase them.

So let an enlightened nation run an experiment to discover how far *reason* would bring women back to nature and their duty; let them share the advantages of education and government with man, and see whether they become •better as they grow •wiser and become •free. They can’t be injured by the experiment, because it’s not in the power of man to make them more insignificant than they are at present.

To make this practicable, day schools for particular ages should be established by government, in which boys and girls might be educated together. The school for the younger children, from five to nine years of age, ought to be absolutely free and open to all classes.<sup>13</sup> A sufficient number of masters should be chosen by a select committee in each parish, to whom complaints of negligence etc. could be made if signed by six of the children’s parents. . . .

<sup>13</sup> Treating this part of the subject, I have borrowed some hints from a very sensible pamphlet on Public Education, written by M. Talleyrand. [see page 1]

I am advocating the creation of elementary day-schools where boys and girls, rich and poor, would meet together. To prevent any of the distinctions of vanity, they should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline. The school-room ought to be surrounded by a large piece of ground in which the children could have exercise, because at this age they shouldn't be confined to any sedentary task for more than an hour at a time. But these relaxations could all be made a part of elementary education, for many things improve and occupy the senses when introduced as a kind of show—things that children would turn a deaf ear to if their principles were dryly laid down. For instance, botany, mechanics, and astronomy could all be taught in practical ways, out-of-doors. Reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy could fill up the rest of the day; but these pursuits should never encroach on gymnastic play in the open air. The elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics could be taught by conversations in the Socratic form.

After the age of nine, girls and boys who are intended for domestic employment or mechanical trades should be transferred to other schools and be given instruction that is to some degree adapted to the destination of each individual pupil; the two sexes should still be together in the morning, but in the afternoon the girls should attend a school where simple sewing, dressmaking, millinery, etc. would be their employment.

Young people of superior abilities, or fortune, might now be taught—in another school—the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and more on history and politics, on a more extensive scale that wouldn't exclude literature. 'Girls and boys still together?' I hear some readers ask. Yes! And I wouldn't fear any consequence except that there might be some early girl-boy attachment that didn't perfectly agree

with the views of the parents though it had an excellent effect on the moral character of the young people. I'm afraid that we are a long way from having a world that is so enlightened that parents, anxious only to make their children virtuous, will let them choose companions for life themselves.

Besides, this would be a sure way to promote early marriages, and from early marriages the most salutary physical and moral effects naturally flow. [Then a long page of praise for the advantages, very much in the spirit of things said in earlier chapters. A notable episode in this is MW's treatment of the 'coming out' of debutantes in the fashionable world. [That was where and when girls of 17+ from wealthy families were for the first time taken to adult balls and parties and so on.] MW writes: 'What can be more indelicate than a girl's coming out in the fashionable world? That is the process of bringing to market a marriageable miss whose person [see Glossary] is taken from one public place to another.' [She comes close to describing a debutante ball as a slave auction where the merchandise is ogled by potential buyers. 'Indelicate' indeed!]]

What I am offering here is only an outline of the plan I have in mind, not the fully detailed plan. But I must include one detail that I highly approve of in the regulations presented in M. Talleyrand's pamphlet, mentioned earlier. It is the proposal to make the children and youths independent of the masters respecting punishments. They should be tried by their peers, which would be an admirable method of fixing sound principles of justice in the mind, and might have an excellent effect on a child's temperament, which is very early soured or irritated by tyranny until it becomes peevishly cunning or ferociously overbearing. . . .

I know it will be said that woman would be 'unsexed' by acquiring strength of body and mind, and that beauty—soft bewitching beauty!—would no longer adorn the daughters of men. I think, on the contrary, that we would then see

•dignified beauty and •true grace, arising from many powerful physical and moral causes. It wouldn't be •relaxed beauty or •the graces of helplessness; but rather the beauty and grace that appears to make us respect the human body as a majestic structure that is fit to receive a noble inhabitant, in the relics of antiquity.

[MW moves now into a discussion of ancient Greek sculpture, why and how we admire it and why and how it was made. She takes this opportunity to re-work her themes of virtue, intelligence, and so on. The last sentence of this passage is a pivot note on which she modulates into a new topic:] Judgment can be acquired only by reflection, affection only by the discharge of duties, and humanity only by the exercise of compassion to every living creature.

Humanity to animals should be particularly taught as a part of national education, for it is not at present one of our national virtues. Gentleness towards their domestic animals, among the lower class, is more often found in savage states than in civilized ones. For civilization •prevents the dealings with animals that create affection in the crude hut or mud cabin, and •leads uncultivated minds—who are only depraved by the refinements of a society where they are trodden down by the rich—to domineer over their animals to revenge the insults they have to bear from their •social superiors.

This habitual cruelty is first caught—like catching a

disease—at school, where the boys have great sport tormenting the miserable animals that they come across. As they grow up they easily shift from barbarity towards animals to domestic tyranny over wives, children, and servants. Justice won't be a powerful spring of action unless it extends to the whole creation, nor will benevolence. Indeed, I believe it can be accepted as an axiom that *those who can •see pain without being moved will soon learn to •inflict it.*

[MW attacks not only people who treat animals cruelly but also ones who let sentimental affection for domestic pets supplant the feelings they should have for human beings, e.g. their children. She includes in this a portrait of her former employer, Lady Kingsborough [see note on page 93], lisp[ing] coy nothings to her lap-dogs and neglecting her children. She adds:]

I don't like to make a distinction without a difference, and I have to say that I have been as much disgusted by •the fine lady who took her lap-dog to her bosom instead of her child as by •the ferocity of a man who beat his horse and declared that the horse knew when he did wrong just as a Christian would.

[Then more about the troubles that would not occur if boys and girls were educated, in the right way, together. Followed by a three-page sweep through the theme of the moral harm done to women by the way they are treated by men.]

## Chapter 13: Examples of the harm done by women's ignorance

There are many follies that are to some extent *women's* follies—sins against reason, of commission as well as of omission—but all flowing from ignorance or prejudice. I shall point out only five of them that appear to be harmful to the woman's moral character. In criticizing them I want especially to show that the weakness of mind and body that men have tried to perpetuate in •women prevents •them from discharging the special duty of their sex; for when weakness of body won't let them breast-feed their children, and weakness of mind makes them spoil their tempers—is woman in a natural state?

### 1: Charlatans

One glaring instance of the weakness that comes from ignorance calls for severe reproof.

**1.** In this city a number of lurking leeches wickedly make their living by exploiting women's credulity, claiming to 'cast nativities', to use the technical phrase [= 'to draw up horoscopes, making predictions on the basis of astrology']; and many females who are proud of their rank and fortune, and look down on the vulgar [see Glossary] with sovereign contempt, show by their credulity that the distinction •between themselves and the vulgar• is arbitrary, and that they have not sufficiently cultivated their minds to rise above vulgar prejudices. Because women haven't been led •to regard the knowledge of their duty as the one thing necessary to know, or •to live in the present moment by doing their duty, they are anxious to peep into the future, to learn what they have to expect to make life interesting, and to break the vacuum of ignorance.

If any of these ladies who are not ashamed to drive in their own carriages to the door of the cunning man should read this work, I beg them to answer the following questions, remembering that they are in the presence of God.

- Do you believe that there is only one God, and that he is powerful, wise, and good?
- Do you believe that all things were created by him, and that all beings depend on him?
- Do you rely on his wisdom (which is so conspicuous in his works, including your own body)? and are you convinced, that he has ordered all the things that don't come within the range of your senses in the same perfect harmony to fulfil his designs?
- Do you acknowledge that the power of looking into the future, and seeing things that are *not* as if they *were*, is an attribute of the Creator? And if he *does* ever want to impart to his creatures a knowledge of some event that hasn't yet happened, to whom would he reveal the secret by immediate inspiration?

The opinion of the ages will answer that last question: he will reveal it to reverend old men, to people distinguished for eminent piety.

[MW says that the priests of the ancient Greek and Roman religions were 'impostors' who were used by politicians to keep the populace quiet and malleable, and in that context there was some excuse for people who tried to learn about the future from oracles.] But can a Christian suppose that God's favourites—the ones he chose •to reveal some of his future plans•—would lurk in disguise, and practise the most

dishonest tricks to cheat silly women out of the money that the poor cry for in vain?

[She rails against the 'foolish women' who resort to astrologers, saying that this conduct is inconsistent with 'your religion, such as it is', adding that these women are so foolish that they probably wouldn't understand her if she tried to show that astrology is 'absolutely inconsistent with the grand purpose of life'. She then tries a different tack, from which she moves on to a different kind of charlatan:]

Perhaps, however, you devoutly believe in the devil, and imagine that he may assist those who are devoted to him? But if you really respect the power of such a being, who is an enemy to goodness and to God, can you go to church after having been under such an obligation to him?

**2.** There is a natural transition from these delusions to the still more fashionable deceptions practised by the whole tribe of magnetisers. [These people used so-called 'animal magnetism'—i.e. hypnotism—as a supposed means to curing various ills. The process was also called 'mesmerism', after the Austrian Dr Mesmer, who popularised it.] With respect to them, also, it is proper to ask women a few questions.

Do you know anything about the construction of the human body? If not, you should be told something that every child ought to know, namely that when the body's admirable system has been disturbed by intemperance or inactivity—I'm talking not about violent disorders, but about chronic diseases—it must be returned to a healthy state by slow degrees. If the functions of life haven't been materially injured—so that recovery is impossible—, the only ways that have yet been discovered for recovering that inestimable blessing, health—or anyway the only ones that will bear investigation—are through a *regimen* of temperance, air, exercise, and a few medicines prescribed by persons who have studied the human body.

Do you believe that these magnetisers, who by hocus-pocus tricks pretend to work a miracle, are •delegated by God, or •assisted by the solver of all these kinds of difficulties—the devil?

When the magnetisers put to flight (so they claim) disorders that have baffled the powers of medicine, are they working in conformity to the light of reason? Or do they bring about these wonderful cures by supernatural aid?

A magnetiser may answer 'We do it by communicating with the world of spirits'. A noble privilege, we must admit!... These men are very fortunate in becoming acquainted with such obliging spirits; but we can't give the spirits much credit for wisdom or goodness in choosing these ignoble instruments as means to show themselves the benevolent friends of man.

It is, however, little short of blasphemy to claim to have such power.

From the over-all way that God runs the world, it seems evident to sober reason that certain vices produce certain effects. Can anyone so grossly insult God's wisdom as to suppose that a 'magnetising' miracle will be allowed to disturb his general laws, restoring intemperate and vicious people to health merely to enable them to go back to their old ways with impunity? 'Be whole, and sin no more', said Jesus [John 5:14]. Are greater miracles to be performed by those who do not follow in the footsteps of him who healed the body in order to reach the mind?

The mention of the name of Christ after such vile impostors may displease you—I respect your warmth, but don't forget that the followers of these 'magnetising' delusions bear his name, and profess to be the disciples of him who said 'By their fruits ye shall know them' [Matthew 7:16], i.e. know who are the children of God and who are the servants of sin. It's certainly easier to •touch the body of a saint or



to •be magnetised than it is to •to restrain our appetites or govern our passions; but health of body or mind can only be recovered by those restraints. If there is another way—through ‘magnetising’—then the Supreme Judge is partial and revengeful. [‘partial’ in the sense of showing favoritism; ‘revengeful’—MW’s premature choice of that word is explained in the next two paragraphs.]

Is God a *man*, that he should change, or punish out of resentment? Reason tells us that God—our common father—wounds only in order to heal; our irregularities produce certain consequences, and that forcibly shows us the nature of vice. In that way we learn from experience to know good from evil, so that we will love one and hate the other in proportion to our degree of wisdom. The poison contains the antidote; and we either •reform our evil habits and stop sinning against our own bodies, to use the forcible language of scripture [1 *Corinthians* 6:18], or a premature death—the punishment of sin—snaps the thread of life.

This raises a question that is frightening to discuss, but why should I conceal my views? Considering God’s attributes, I believe that whatever punishment may follow will tend, like the anguish of disease, to show the malignity of vice, the purpose of all this being *reformation*. Positive punishment—i.e. punishment whose rationale lies wholly within itself rather than in its relation to its consequences—appears to be contrary to the nature of God that we can discover from his works and in our own reason; so contrary that I would find it easier to believe that •the Deity paid no attention to men’s conduct than that •he punished without the benevolent design of reforming. . . .

I know that many devout people boast of submitting blindly to God’s will, as to an arbitrary sceptre or rod. . . . In other words, like people in the common concerns of life they do homage to power, and cringe under the foot that

can crush them. Rational religion, on the other hand, is a submission to the will of a being who is so perfectly wise that all he wills must be directed by the proper motive—must be reasonable.

And if we respect God in this way, can we believe the mysterious insinuations that insult his laws? Can we believe—even if it stares us in the face—that God would work a miracle to authorise confusion by sanctioning an error? Yet we must either allow these impious conclusions, or treat with contempt every promise to **(2)** restore health to a diseased body by supernatural means, or to **(1)** foretell the incidents that can only God can foresee.

## 2: Novel-reading

Another instance of feminine weakness of character that is often produced by a confined education is a romantic twist of the mind that has been very properly called ‘sentimental’.

Women, subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and taught to look for happiness only in love, refine on sensual feelings and adopt metaphysical notions about love that lead them to neglect shamefully the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these lofty refinements they plunge into actual vice.

These are the women who pass their time with the day-dreams of the stupid novelists who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales and describe tarted-up scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon that corrupts the reader’s •taste and draws the •heart away from its daily duties. I don’t mention the •understanding, because it has never been exercised, so that its slumbering energies rest inactive. . . .

Because females are denied all political privileges, and as married women. . . .are denied even a civil existence, their attention is naturally drawn from the interests of the whole

community to the interests of the tiny parts. . . . The mighty business of female life is *to please*, and for them—blocked by political and civil oppression from entering into more important concerns—*sentiments* become ·important· events. When they reflect on these feelings they intensify them; whereas reflection ought to erase them, and would do so if the understanding were allowed to take a wider range.

Confined to trivial activities, women naturally imbibe the opinions expressed in the only kind of reading that can interest an innocent frivolous mind. Unable to grasp anything great, they naturally find the reading of history a very dry task, and find anything that is addressed to the understanding to be intolerably tedious and almost unintelligible. So they have to depend on the novelist for amusement [see Glossary]. When I criticize novels, I'm attacking them as contrasted with works that exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination; ·I'm not saying that the reading of novels is absolutely bad·. I regard *any* kind of reading as better than leaving a blank still a blank, because the mind must be a little enlarged and a little strengthened by the slight exertion of its thinking powers ·that novel-reading may bring·. And even novels that are addressed only to the imagination ·and provide nothing to think about· raise the reader a little above the gross gratification of appetites that haven't been even slightly refined by the mind.

. . . .I knew a woman—as good a woman as her narrow mind would allow her to be—who took care that her three daughters should never see a novel. She was a woman of fortune and fashion, so they had various masters to attend them, and a sort of menial governess to watch their footsteps. From their masters they learned how tables, chairs, etc. are called in French and Italian; but they acquired neither ideas nor sentiments, because the few books thrown in their way were either ·far above their capacities or ·devotional. When

they weren't being compelled to repeat *words* they spent their time in dressing, quarrelling with each other, or secretly conversing with their maids—until at last they were brought into company as marriageable.

Their mother, a widow, was busy in the meantime keeping up her 'connections', as she called her acquaintances, so as to ensure her girls a proper introduction into the great world. And these young ladies, with spoiled temperaments and minds that were *vulgar* in every sense of the word, entered life with puffed-up notions of their own importance and contempt for anyone who couldn't compete with them in dress and parade.

As for *love*: nature or their nurses had taken care to teach them the physical meaning of the word; and as they had few topics of conversation and even fewer refinements of sentiment, they expressed their gross wishes in not very delicate phrases when they had free conversations about marriage. . . .

This is only one instance; but I recollect many other women who, not having been ·led gradually to proper studies or ·permitted to choose for themselves, have indeed been overgrown children. They may have obtained, by mixing in the world, a little of what is called 'common sense', which is a distinct manner of seeing common events as they stand detached—i.e. seeing each event in isolation·. What they didn't have was anything deserving the name 'intellect', the power of gaining general or abstract ideas. . . . Their minds were quiescent, and when they were not roused by sensible objects and employments of that kind they were low-spirited, tearful, or sleepy.

So when I advise my sex not to read such flimsy works ·as novels·, it is to induce them to read something better. . . .

### 3: Dressing up

Ignorance, and the mistaken cunning that nature sharpens in weak heads as a means of self-preservation, make women very fond of dress, and produce the vanity that such a fondness naturally generates, to the exclusion of spirited attempts to grow and improve.

I agree with Rousseau that the physical part of the art of pleasing consists in ornaments; and for just that reason I want to guard girls against the contagious fondness for dress that is so common to weak women, so that they don't remain stuck in the **physical** part. Women who think they can long please without the aid of the mind—i.e. without the **moral** art of pleasing—must be weak indeed. The moral art is never accompanied by ignorance; it is essentially different from and superior to the sportiveness of innocence that is so pleasing to refined libertines of both sexes. (It may indeed be profanation to use the word 'art' in connection with the grace that is •an effect of virtue and not •the motive of action.)

[MW writes that a liking for fine clothes and ornamentation is 'natural to mankind'—common to both sexes and all social levels. (In the most barbarous states only men are allowed to act on this; that our society allows women to take part in this too is 'at least one step in civilisation'.) When the mind is not sufficiently opened to take pleasure in reflection, the body will be adorned with great care, and ambition will appear in tattooing or painting it.

[MW discusses reasons why vanity about dress is in our society more of a feminine than a masculine trait. The main reason is just that men are allowed to have other interests and pursuits, whereas women aren't. Also, a man can avoid clashing with most other men, whereas women]. . . are all rivals. Before marriage it is their business to please men; and after marriage most of them follow the same scent, with

all the persistence of instinct. Even virtuous women never forget their sex in company, for they are always trying to be *agreeable*. A female beauty and a male wit seem to be equally anxious to draw the attention of the company to themselves; and the animosity of contemporary wits is proverbial.

So it's not surprising that the sole ambition of woman centres on beauty. . . and that there are perpetual rivalships. They are all running the same race; they rise above the virtue of mortals if they didn't view each other with a suspicious and even envious eye. . . .

### 4: Sensibility

Women are supposed to have more sensibility [see Glossary] than men and even more humanity, and their strong attachments and instantaneous emotions of compassion are cited as proofs of this. But the clinging affection of ignorance seldom has anything noble in it; like the affections of children and the lower animals it is mostly a form of selfishness. I have known many weak women whose sensibility was entirely taken up by their husbands; and as for their humanity, it was very faint indeed, or rather it was only a transient emotion of compassion, 'Humanity does not consist in a squeamish ear', says an eminent orator [Charles James Fox]. 'It belongs to the mind as well as the nerves.'

This exclusive kind of affection, though it degrades the individual, shouldn't be offered as evidence of the inferiority of the ·female· sex, because it is the natural consequence of confined views. Even women of superior sense, when their attention is focussed on little employments and private plans, rarely rise to heroism. . . . I therefore agree with the moralist [Adam Smith] who says that women seldom have as much generosity as men, and that their narrow affections—often put ahead of justice and humanity—make the sex apparently

inferior. . . ., but I contend that the heart would expand as the understanding gained strength if women were not held down from their cradles.

I know that a little sensibility and great weakness will produce a strong sexual attachment [= 'a strong attachment to members of one's own sex'], and that friendship is made stronger by reason; so more friendship is to be found in the male than the female world, and men have a higher sense of justice. The narrowly focussed affections of women seem to resemble Cato's most unjust love for his country. He wished to crush Carthage, not to save Rome but to promote its vainglory. . . .

Besides, how can women be just or generous when they are the slaves of injustice?

### 5: Ignorance about child-care

As the rearing of children—i.e. the laying a foundation of sound health both of body and mind in the rising generation—has justly been insisted on as the task especially assigned to women, their ignorance about it must be contrary to the order of things. If they are to become sensible mothers, I contend, their minds will have to take in much more than they now do, and they *can* do so. Many men attend to the breeding of horses, and supervise the management of the •stable, and yet would. . . .think themselves degraded by paying any attention to the •nursery; yet ever so many children are absolutely murdered [MW's phrase] by the ignorance of women! And of those who escape that, and are not destroyed by unnatural negligence or blind fondness, very few are managed properly with respect to the infant mind. A child's spirit is allowed to become vicious at home, so the child is sent to school to have his or her spirit broken; and the methods the school uses—and must use to keep a number of children in order—scatter the seeds of almost every vice

in the soil that has been forcibly torn up.

[MW compares this treatment of children with the forceful 'breaking' of a horse. Perhaps the latter is not permanently injurious to the horse, she says, but:] I am certain that a child should never be thus forcibly tamed after it has unwisely been allowed to run wild; for every violation of justice and reason in the treatment of children weakens their reason. They catch a character [MW's phrase] so early—experience leads me to infer—that the base of the moral character is fixed before their seventh year, the period during which women are allowed the sole management of children. Afterwards it too often happens that half the business of education is to try to correct the faults, that the children would never have acquired if their mothers had had more understanding.

One striking instance of the folly of women must be mentioned, namely their treatment of servants in the presence of children, allowing the children to think that the servants ought to wait on them and to put up with their moods. A child should always be made to receive assistance from a man or woman as a *favour*; and as the first lesson of independence they should learn from their mother's example not to require personal attendance that it is an insult to humanity to require (unless one is ill). . . . I have often heard servants imperiously called to put children to bed, and sent away again and again because master or miss hung about mamma so as to stay up a little longer. . . .

[MW concludes this subsection with reflections on how a woman could be a good mother while also engaging in other pursuits that would improve her intellect and her morals.]

## Section 6: Concluding thoughts

[This subsection is presented exactly as Mary Wollstonecraft wrote it (second edition of the work). You can probably think of reasons there might be for doing this.]

It is not necessary to inform the sagacious reader, now I enter on my concluding reflections, that the discussion of this subject merely consists in opening a few simple principles, and clearing away the rubbish that obscured them. But, as all readers are not sagacious, I must be allowed to add some explanatory remarks to bring the subject home to reason—to that sluggish reason, which supinely takes opinions on trust, and obstinately supports them to spare itself the labour of thinking.

Moralists have unanimously agreed, that unless virtue be nursed by liberty, it will never attain due strength—and what they say of man I extend to mankind, insisting, that in all cases morals must be fixed on immutable principles; and that the being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority but that of reason.

To render women truly useful members of society, I argue, that they should be led, by having their understandings cultivated on a large scale, to acquire a rational affection for their country, founded on knowledge, because it is obvious, that we are little interested about what we do not understand. And to make this general knowledge of due importance, I have endeavoured to show that private duties are never properly fulfilled, unless the understanding enlarges the heart; and that public virtue is only an aggregate of private. But, the distinctions established in society undermine both, by beating out the solid gold of virtue, until it becomes only the tinsel-covering of vice; for, while wealth makes a man more respectable than virtue, wealth will be sought before virtue; and, while women's persons are caressed,

when a childish simper shows an absence of mind—the mind will lie fallow. Yet, true voluptuousness must proceed from the mind—for what can equal the sensations produced by mutual affection, supported by mutual respect? What are the cold or feverish caresses of appetite, but sin embracing death, compared with the modest overflowings of a pure heart and exalted imagination? Yes, let me tell the libertine of fancy when he despises understanding in woman—that the mind, which he disregards, gives life to the enthusiastic affection from which rapture, short-lived as it is, alone can flow! And, that, without virtue, a sexual attachment must expire, like a tallow candle in the socket, creating intolerable disgust. To prove this, I need only observe, that men who have wasted great part of their lives with women, and with whom they have sought for pleasure with eager thirst, entertain the meanest opinion of the sex. Virtue, true refiner of joy! if foolish men were to fright thee from earth, in order to give loose to all their appetites without a check—some sensual wight of taste would scale the heavens to invite thee back, to give a zest to pleasure!

That women at present are by ignorance made foolish or vicious, is, I think, not to be disputed; and, that the most salutary effects tending to improve mankind, might be expected from a REVOLUTION in female manners, appears at least, with a face of probability, to rise out of the observation. For as marriage has been termed the parent of those endearing charities, which draw man from the brutal herd, the corrupting intercourse that wealth, idleness, and folly produce between the sexes, is more universally injurious to morality, than all the other vices of mankind collectively considered. To adulterous lust the most sacred duties are sacrificed, because, before marriage, men, by a promiscuous intimacy with women, learned to consider love as a selfish gratification—learned to separate it not only from esteem,

but from the affection merely built on habit, which mixes a little humanity with it. Justice and friendship are also set at defiance, and that purity of taste is vitiated, which would naturally lead a man to relish an artless display of affection, rather than affected airs. But that noble simplicity of affection, which dares to appear unadorned, has few attractions for the libertine, though it be the charm, which, by cementing the matrimonial tie, secures to the pledges of a warmer passion the necessary parental attention; for children will never be properly educated until friendship subsists between parents. Virtue flies from a house divided against itself—and a whole legion of devils take up their residence there.

The affection of husbands and wives cannot be pure when they have so few sentiments in common, and when so little confidence is established at home, as must be the case when their pursuits are so different. That intimacy from which tenderness should flow, will not, cannot subsist between the vicious.

Contending, therefore, that the sexual distinction, which men have so warmly insisted on, is arbitrary, I have dwelt on an observation, that several sensible men, with whom I have conversed on the subject, allowed to be well founded; and it is simply this, that the little chastity to be found among men, and consequent disregard of modesty, tend to degrade both sexes; and further, that the modesty of women, characterized as such, will often be only the artful veil of wantonness, instead of being the natural reflection of purity, until modesty be universally respected.

From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow, makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression.

Were not dissenters, for instance, a class of people, with strict truth characterized as cunning? And may I not lay some stress on this fact to prove, that when any power but reason curbs the free spirit of man, dissimulation is practised, and the various shifts of art are naturally called forth? Great attention to decorum, which was carried to a degree of scrupulosity, and all that puerile bustle about trifles and consequential solemnity, which Butler's caricature of a dissenter brings before the imagination, shaped their persons as well as their minds in the mould of prim littleness. I speak collectively, for I know how many ornaments to human nature have been enrolled among sectaries; yet, I assert, that the same narrow prejudice for their sect, which women have for their families, prevailed in the dissenting part of the community, however worthy in other respects; and also that the same timid prudence, or headstrong efforts, often disgraced the exertions of both. Oppression thus formed many of the features of their character perfectly to coincide with that of the oppressed half of mankind; for is it not notorious, that dissenters were like women, fond of deliberating together, and asking advice of each other, until by a complication of little contrivances, some little end was brought about? A similar attention to preserve their reputation was conspicuous in the dissenting and female world, and was produced by a similar cause.

Asserting the rights that women in common with men ought to contend for, I have not attempted to extenuate their faults; but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society. If so, it is reasonable to suppose, that they will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense.

Let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emanci-

pated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty. If the latter, it will be expedient to open a fresh trade with Russia for whips; a present that a father should always make to his son-in-law on his wedding day, that a husband may keep his whole family in order by the same means; and without any violation of justice reign, wielding this sceptre, sole master of his house, because he is the only being in it who has reason; the divine, indefeasible, earthly sovereignty breathed into man by the Master of the universe. Allowing this position, women have not any inherent rights

to claim; and, by the same rule their duties vanish, for rights and duties are inseparable.

Be just then, O ye men of understanding! and mark not more severely what women do amiss, than the vicious tricks of the horse or the ass for whom ye provide provender, and allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom ye deny the rights of reason, or ye will be worse than Egyptian task-masters, expecting virtue where nature has not given understanding!