

Mary Wollstonecraft, **Vindication of the Rights of Woman** (1792)

in the dark? for surely, Sir, you will not assert, that a duty can be binding which is not founded on reason? If indeed this be their destination, arguments may be drawn from reason: and thus augustly supported, the more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty—comprehending it—for unless they comprehend it, unless their morals be fixed on the same immutable principle as those of man, no authority can make them discharge it in a virtuous manner. They may be **convenient slaves**, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.

The civilization of the bulk of the people of Europe is very partial, nay, it may be made a question, whether they have acquired any virtues in exchange for innocence, equivalent to the misery produced by the vices that have been plastered over unsightly ignorance, and the freedom which has been bartered for splendid **slavery**. The desire of dazzling by riches, the most certain pre-eminence that man can obtain, the pleasure of commanding flattering sycophants, and many other complicated low calculations of doting self-love, have all contributed to overwhelm the mass of mankind, and make liberty a convenient handle for mock patriotism. For whilst rank and titles are held of

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extending the reign of virtue. Eager to support his system, he stigmatizes, as vicious, every effort of genius; and, uttering the apotheosis of savage virtues, he exalts those to demi-gods, who were scarcely human—the brutal Spartans, who, in defiance of justice and gratitude, sacrificed, **in cold blood**, the slaves who had shewn themselves heroes to rescue their oppressors.^a

concealing its deformity under gay ornamental drapery. An air of fashion, which is but a **badge of slavery**, and proves that the soul has not a strong individual character, awes simple country people into an imitation of the vices, when they cannot catch the slippery graces, of politeness. Every corps is a chain of despots, who, submitting and tyrannizing without exercising their reason, become dead weights of vice and folly on the community. A man of rank or fortune, sure of rising by interest, has nothing to do

Many are the causes that, in the present corrupt state of society, contribute to **enslave women** by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses. One, perhaps, that silently does more mischief than all the rest, is their disregard of order.

distinctions established in civilized life. Riches and hereditary honours have made cyphers of women to give consequence to the numerical figure; and idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism into society, which leads the very men who are the slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. This is only keeping them in rank and file, it is true. Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind

Let us examine this question. Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her **natural cunning**, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself.

The question is, whether it procures most pain or pleasure? The answer will decide the propriety of Dr Gregory's advice, and shew how absurd and tyrannic it is thus to lay down a **system of slavery**; or to attempt to educate moral beings by any other rules than those deduced from pure reason, which apply to the whole species.

The inference that follows is just, supposing the principle to be sound. 'The superiority of address, peculiar to the female sex, is a very equitable indemnification for their inferiority in point of strength: without this, woman would not be the companion of man; but **his slave**: it is by her superiour art and ingenuity that she preserves her equality, and governs him while she affects to obey. Woman has every thing against her, as well our faults, as her own timidity and weakness; she has nothing in her favour, but her subtilty and her beauty. Is it not very reasonable, therefore, she should cultivate both?'^c Greatness of mind can never dwell with

But peace to his manes! I war not with his ashes, but his opinions. I war only with the sensibility that led him to degrade woman by making her the **slave** of love.

Woman in particular, whose virtue⁸ is built on mutable prejudices, seldom attains to this greatness of mind; so that, becoming the **slave** of her own feelings, she is easily subjugated by those of others. Thus degraded, her reason, her misty reason! is employed rather to burnish than to snap her chains.

I have observed that young people, to whose education particular attention has been paid, have, in general, been very superficial and conceited, and far from pleasing in any respect, because they had neither the unsuspecting warmth of youth, nor the cool depth of age. I cannot help imputing this unnatural appearance principally to that hasty premature instruction, which leads them presumptuously to repeat all the crude notions they have taken upon trust, so that the careful education which they received, makes them all their lives the **slaves** of prejudices.

This habitual **slavery**, to first impressions, has a more baneful effect on the female than the male character, 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 made women of when they are mere children, and brought back to childhood when they ought to leave the go-cart for ever, have not sufficient strength of mind to efface the superinductions of art that have smothered nature.

This is one of the many instances in which the sexual distinction respecting modesty has proved fatal to virtue and happiness. It is, however, carried still further, and woman, weak woman! made by her education the **slave** of sensibility, is required, on the most trying occasions, to resist that sensibility. 'Can any thing,' says Knox, 'be more absurd than keeping women in a state of ignorance, and yet so vehemently to insist on their resisting temptation?'^a – Thus when virtue or honour make it proper to

exercise of a common sympathy. Women then having necessarily some duty to fulfil, more noble than to adorn their persons, would not contentedly be the **slaves** of casual lust, which is now the situation of a very considerable number who are, literally speaking, standing dishes to which every glutton may have access.

But, to have done with these episodic observations, let me return to the more specious slavery which chains the very soul of woman, keeping her for ever under the bondage of ignorance.

The preposterous distinctions of rank, which render civilization a curse, by dividing the world between voluptuous tyrants, and cunning envious dependents, corrupt, almost equally, every class of people, because respectability is not attached to the discharge of the relative duties of life, but to the station, and when the duties are not fulfilled the affections cannot gain sufficient strength to fortify the virtue of which they are the natural reward. Still there are some loop-holes out of which a man may

common centre. But, the private or public virtue of woman is very problematical; for Rousseau, and a numerous list of male writers, insist that she should all her life be subjected to a severe restraint, that of propriety. Why subject her to propriety – blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality? Is sugar always to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? Is not this indirectly to deny woman reason? for a gift is a mockery, if it be unfit for use.

Women are, in common with men, rendered weak and luxurious by the relaxing pleasures which wealth procures; but added to this they are made slaves to their persons, and must render them alluring that man may lend them his reason to guide their tottering steps aright. Or should they be ambitious, they must govern their tyrants by sinister tricks, for without rights there cannot be any incumbent duties. The

Woman, however, a slave in every situation to prejudice, seldom exerts enlightened maternal affection; for she either neglects her children, or spoils them by improper indulgence. Besides, the affection of some women for their children is, as I have before termed it, frequently very brutish; for it eradicates every spark of humanity.

parents, in every sense of the word, than boys. The duty expected from them is, like all the duties arbitrarily imposed on women, more from a sense of propriety, more out of respect for decorum, than reason; and thus taught slavishly to submit to their parents, they are prepared for the slavery of marriage. I may be told that a number of women are not slaves in the marriage state True, but they then become tyrants; for it is not rational freedom, but a lawless kind of power resembling the authority exercised by the favourites of absolute monarchs, which they obtain by debasing means. I do not, likewise, dream of insinuating that either boys or girls are always slaves, I only insist that when they are obliged to submit to authority blindly, their faculties are weakened, and their tempers rendered imperious or abject. I also lament

Besides, in great schools, what can be more prejudicial to the moral character than the system of tyranny and abject slavery which is established amongst the boys, to say nothing of the slavery to forms, which makes religion worse than a farce? For what

Nothing, indeed, can be more irreverent than the cathedral service as it is now performed in this country, neither does it 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

History brings forward a fearful catalogue of the crimes which their cunning has produced, when the weak **slaves** have had sufficient address to over-reach their

Master.

When, therefore, I call women **slaves**, I mean in a political and civil sense; for, indirectly they obtain too much power, and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway

It is plain from the history of all nations, that women cannot be confined to merely domestic pursuits, for they will not fulfil family duties, unless their minds take a wider range, and whilst they are kept in ignorance they become in the same proportion the **slaves** of pleasure as they are the slaves of man. Nor can they be shut out of great enterprises, though the narrowness of their minds often make them mar, what they are unable to comprehend.

So far is this first inclination carried, that even the hellish yoke of **slavery** cannot stifle the savage desire of admiration which the black heroes inherit from both their parents, for all the hardly earned savings of a slave are commonly expended in a little tawdry finery. And I have seldom known a good male or female servant that was not particularly fond of dress. Their clothes were their riches; and, I argue from analogy, that the fondness for dress, so extravagant in females, arises from the same cause – want of cultivation of mind. When men meet they converse about business, politics,

Besides, how can women be just or generous, when they are the **slaves** of injustice?

I CAN indeed very well imagine, that to man and woman precisely in the state in which Adam and Eve are described to have been, such a submission as is enjoined the woman, might have been neither impracticable nor unreasonable. When she saw her husband daily toiling for her support and that of her offspring; when she saw that by the order of the Almighty thorns and thistles were produced by the earth, if he on his part were not a slave for her sake;

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ARGUMENTS ADDUCED FROM REASON
AGAINST THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN.

I SHALL introduce this part of the subject by a quotation from an excellent author. He indeed is talking of reason in religious matters, for I wish not to pervert, but to apply what so exactly fits; indeed so exactly, that we have only to apply it without altering a single word. "In the tumultuous scenes of life the voice of Reason is too weak to be heard, or too difficult to be understood. In the indulgent anarchy of fancy, her language is too simple or too severe to persuade; but where authority bears sway, she is enjoined compliance or reduced to silence. Thus we see in one quarter she is stared at as a stranger, in another she alarms as an enemy, and in the third she is treated as a **slave**. Here indeed her case is at the worst. She may familiarize herself to the sensual man, she may be reconciled to the visionary, but with authority she can come to no composition. And yet it is against this last foe to Reason that the following sheets are chiefly directed."

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IN fine, it seems to be expected that women should in a manner cease to exist, in a rational and mental point of view, before they resign life; by giving up along with their name every title to judge or act for themselves, but when their masters chuse to bestow such privileges

upon them. Were it possible however for women to fulfil such implicit articles of slavery, it were, perhaps, wrong to oppose any thing, which not being of itself absolutely immoral, might contribute to the peace of society. But women being formed by the power of the Almighty, so nearly to resemble man in their desire after happiness, they must be supposed equally selfish in their pursuit of it; and having upon the same principles with men, wills and opinions of their own, they will of course ever be promoting the attainments of their own ends, either directly or indirectly. That the latter system is the one that women find themselves under the necessity of adopting, is but too evident; but if men persist in thinking it the only one suitable to their characters and situation, they have no right to expect that beings so unfortunately circumstanced, and so unfairly treated, should under such disadvantages act up to the perfection of their nature, nor do I pretend to allege that they do so. If they did, all attempts at reformation were vain and unnecessary.

ly under their eye; and if those who by their necessities, are compelled to serve, were made friends as well as domestics—which gentle treatment seldom fails to do,—it would contribute more to the comfort and security of masters, than any other mode of conduct that can be devised. It is impossible indeed, that good consequences can arise, either from the thoughtless, extravagant, and often debauched stile, in which the servants of great families are permitted to live; and where after all, they are considered only as trappings to the state, and the vanity of their employers—Or from the equally faulty conduct with regard to servants, of those families; where they are treated with narrow minded suspicions, watched like thieves, or considered at best, but as necessary evils, rather than positive blessings.

UNGRATEFUL! thoughtless! and pampered race!—Is it not enough that thy fellow creature must bear thy burthen, without adding to it, insult and contempt?—Are not the virtues and

vices of domestics and dependents, in a great measure the consequence—as in every other case—of education and circumstances?—Are they a different race, born with slavery and servitude, and their imputed concomitant vices, stamped on their fronts? No—what is their fate to day, it is not impossible may be ours to morrow. And at all events it is much more than probable, that our posterity, whom we fondly cherish by anticipation—who are dear to us in imagination as our own souls—‘dear as the ruddy drops that warm the heart’—that *our* posterity shall in the sad ‘vicissitude of things’ be to *theirs*, what those we too often trample upon, are now to us. We talk of equality. The affairs of human life are never equal. Neither, however, does one scale always kick the beam. Let us beware then, how we carry the cup when it is full.

The female advocate; or an attempt to recover the rights of women from male usurpation. By Mary Anne Radcliffe.

Radcliffe, Mary Ann.

London, 1799. 177 pp. *Social Sciences*

AUTHOR:

DETAILS:

THE FEMALE ADVOCATE. 95

How far the wife was intended to be the **slave** to her husband, I know not, but certain we are, she was designed to be his friend, his companion, and united part; or, according to the gentlemen's phrase, his *better part*; and yet how often do we see her sinking under the burden of a household load, whilst the unfeeling husband is lavishing away the substance which ought to be for the comfort and support of a family? Yet such unnatural beings there are, who, by giving way to some unlawful passion, can, without scruple or remorse, trample under foot all laws, divine and human, and with impunity bring wretchedness upon those he is bound to support: notwithstanding St. Paul tells us, "if any one provide not for his own, and especially those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel."

Have we not had sufficient proofs, that the happiness and welfare of mortals have at all times been thought worthy the attention of a Briton. Witness the poor slaves; what exertions have not been used by the humane friends of liberty in their behalf? Yet less, much less, are their sufferings to be lamented than the poor females I speak of, who have been bred up and educated in the school of Christianity, and fostered by the tender hand of Care.

The slave is little acquainted with the severe pangs a virtuous mind labours under, when driven to the extreme necessity of forfeiting their virtue for bread. The slave cannot feel pain at the loss of reputation, a term of

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which they never heard, and much less know the meaning. What are the untutored, wild imaginations of a slave, when put in the balance with the distressing sensations of a British female, who has received a refined, if not a classical, education, and is capable of the finest feelings the human heart is susceptible of. A slave, through want of education, has little more refinement than cattle in the field; nor can they know the want of what they never enjoyed, or were taught to expect; but a poor female, who has received the best instruction, and is endowed with a good understanding, what must not she feel in mind, independent of her corporeal wants, after the adversity of fate has set her up as a mark, for the ridicule, the censure, and contempt of the world? Her feelings cannot be described, nor her sufferings sufficiently lamented.

I recollect some observations, made some years ago, by a late honourable, humane, learned, and truly worthy member of the House of Commons*, respecting the business

* Mr. Burke.

of the slave-trade, which doubly confirms my opinion of the great necessity there is for an investigation into the grievances I have been speaking of, since it leads to a clear demonstration, that the most judicious and benevolent may still remain in the dark, as to the sufferings of our Christian slaves at home.

"There is," said the honourable gentleman, "no state in human nature but had its compensations. What was a slave? a happy slave was a degraded man; his happiness consisted in having no thought of the past, or the future, and this deficiency of mind it was which lessened the dignity of man, and conferred happiness on the African."

A very striking and just observation, with regard to the African, it must be granted; yet I cannot but differ in opinion, when it is said, that all mankind are capable of a compensation. For, admitting the same mode of reasoning to stand good, if the oppressions of one part of the creation are moderated through their ignorance, how much must the other be heightened by their sensibility and the refinements of education. Nor can I see the small

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est trait of compensation remaining for these miserable females, since the very education they have received in youth, redounds to their misfortunes in maturity.

Then, if an investigation into the business of the slave-trade has been founded on such humane and generous principles, how much greater pleasure must it give the feeling heart, to patronize the poor, unfortunate women of our own nation, who labour under the very worst kind of slavery, and must continue to languish under the fetters of a painful bondage, till death, or the kindly hand of interference, has severed the chain?

But the justice of retribution taking place, shall we not see these poor, helpless, and forlorn women set on a level with their fellow-creatures, and not be under the shocking and cruel necessity of starving in a land of plenty? And when the face of sorrow is enlivened with the smile of happiness and content, and the weary tradesman can lie down in peace, without fear or danger of being annoyed, by the lawless plunderer; when all are united in the bands of mutual benefit and preservation, and

Mary Robinson, A letter to the women of England on the Injustice of Mental subordination (1799)

p. 3 : Supposing that destiny, or interest, or chance, or what you will, has united a man, confessedly of a weak understanding, and corporeal debility, to a woman strong in all the powers of intellect, and capable of bearing the fatigues of busy life: is it not degrading to humanity that such a woman should be the passive, the obedient slave, of such an husband? Is it not repugnant to all the laws of nature, that her feelings, actions, and opinions,

p. 12-13 By the same rule, man exclaims, if we allow the softer sex to participate in the intellectual rights and privileges we enjoy, who will arrange our domestic drudgery? who will reign (as [Stephano](#) says, while we are vice-roys over them) in our household establishments? who will rear our progeny; obey our commands; be our affianced vassals; the creatures of our pleasures? I answer, women, but they will not be your slaves; they will be your associates, your equals in the extensive scale of civilized society; and in the indisputable rights of nature *.

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Misled by CUSTOM, Folly's fruitful heir,
Told that their charms a monarch may enslave,
That beauty, like the gods, can kill and save;
And taught the wily and mysterious arts,
By ambush'd dress, to catch unwary hearts

p. 69: And I should not be surprized, if the present system of mental subordination continues to gain strength, if, in a few years, European husbands were to imitate those beyond the Ganges. There, wives are to be purchased like slaves, and every man has as many as he pleases. The husbands and even fathers are so far from being jealous, that they frequently offer their wives and daughters to foreigners

p. 93: O! my unenlightened country-women! read, and profit, by the admonition of Reason. Shake off the trifling, glittering shackles, which debase you. Resist those fascinating spells which, like the [petrifying torpedo](#), fasten on your mental faculties. Be less the slaves of vanity, and more the converts of Reflection. Nature has endowed you with personal attractions: she has also given you the mind capable of expansion.