

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S PROJECT FOR A REFORM OF THE MINDS\*

Gianluigi SEGALERBA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *In my investigation, I analyse aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought regarding the traditional education of women, her programme of education, the question of women's rights, and the condition of women. I moreover investigate Mary Wollstonecraft's proposal of new theological foundations for religious belief. Mary Wollstonecraft aims to propose a revolution in female manners. Her revolution is a revolution of minds: she aims to reach a complete reform in the education and the formation of individuals, in general, and of women, in particular. Mary Wollstonecraft's revolution is a revolution for the spiritual independence of individuals. To reach the condition of independence, traditional education ought to be criticised and refused since traditional education is the system through which women are transformed into dependent entities. Power over oneself, liberation from passions, and autonomy of judgment are the main targets of Mary Wollstonecraft's programme of education. The correct foundation of the individual ought to be reason. Mary Wollstonecraft proves to be a deeply religious thinker: she steadily connects the promotion of the dignity of mankind to a new way of worship of Deity. The centrality of reason profoundly influences her theological assumptions: Mary Wollstonecraft refuses all forms of reverence based on blind submission to God. The main texts of my inquiry are A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Men.*

**Keywords:** *Wollstonecraft, Vindication, education, virtue, reason, independence, wisdom.*

## a) Preamble

In my study, I shall analyse some aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on education. The main goal of Mary Wollstonecraft's education programme could be synthesised, in my opinion, in the promotion of individual's reason, virtue and inde-

---

\* I should like to thank very much Professor Adriana Neacșu, Professor Cătălin Stănciulescu, Mr. Darius Persu, and all the members of the editorial board of the *Analele Universitatii din Craiova*, Seria: Filosofie for accepting my study for publication. The responsibility for the interpretation which I expose in my paper is, of course, mine alone. The present essay is the revision of the text which I used on 28<sup>th</sup> August 2018 for the lecture held at the 55th Societas Ethica Annual Conference. The Annual Conference of the Societas Ethica took place at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Louvain-la-Neuve, from 23<sup>rd</sup> – to 26<sup>th</sup> August 2018. The title of the Conference was: “Feminist Ethics and the Question of Gender – Feministische Ethik und die Frage nach dem Geschlecht”, The title of my lecture was: “‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’: Mary Wollstonecraft's Feminist Manifesto”. I wish to thank very much the members of the organising committee of the Conference for accepting my lecture proposal.

<sup>1</sup> IEF – Instituto de Estudos Filosóficos, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.

pendence: Mary Wollstonecraft aims to give individuals, in general, and women, in particular, a moral structure. The faculty of reason in the individuals ought to be continuously cultivated. Correspondingly, individuals should be taught to dominate their own passions. Individuals, in general, and women, in particular, ought to achieve, through a new system of education, a solid rational constitution.

In the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft, education regards the whole dimension of the individual, thus also including the theological attitudes of the individual. Therefore, Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of education proves to be not exclusively connected to the school formation and to the times of the school formation: education regards the whole life of the individual<sup>2</sup>.

Before beginning my inquiry into the aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought which I have chosen for my text, I would like to begin my investigation by quoting a passage which, in my opinion, reveals basic characteristics of Mary Wollstonecraft's personality and her criticism of the traditional education of women:

'But the system of education, which I earnestly wish to see exploded, seems to presuppose what ought never to be taken for granted, 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 Emilius 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.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 162)

Mary Wollstonecraft's message expressed in these sentences represents a demythologisation of some formulas regarding education: traditionally, it is said that virtue will give prizes, and fortune will be favourable to the individual because of his being virtuous. Against these common positive formulas regarding the consequences of being virtuous, Mary Wollstonecraft contends that an individual cannot expect any reward from being virtuous while the individual is facing the difficulties of life<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Sapiro in her volume *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* expresses an opinion which is analogous to the interpretation which I am supporting: education involves the whole social dimension; it is not limited to the school time (see the paragraph 'Education' in chapter 7., 'Toward the New Order', pp. 237–249, in particular pp. 237–238).

<sup>3</sup> As regards biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft, I used the following studies: Moira Ferguson – Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*; Diane Jacobs, *Her Own Woman: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*; Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*; Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*. For a reconstruction of the positions which characterise the beginning of feminism, I consulted M. Ferguson's volume *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578 – 1799*. For an investigation on the condition of women in

I intentionally begin my study with these assertions of Mary Wollstonecraft, since these assertions give in the best way – at least in my opinion – a presentation both of Mary Wollstonecraft’s intents and of Mary Wollstonecraft’s character. Thanks to the quoted passage, we can observe Mary Wollstonecraft’s refusal of the traditional ways of education, her criticism of the illusions given by traditional education, her disenchantment as regards the possibility that being virtuous can protect from the hardships of life, her awareness that there is no reward for being virtuous, and, finally, her conviction that women must cope with troublesome conditions of life. Mary Wollstonecraft points out that women’s life is hard, extremely hard: no illusion as regards the trials which life will present is possible. On closer inspection, the woman’s condition proves to be a condition of loneliness. We can thereby obtain the living portrait of a resolute person who is, on the one hand, bitterly aware of the tribulations which women will find in their own life, but who, on the other hand, is ready to struggle against every adversity with all her own energy. Furthermore, we can see the significance which Mary Wollstonecraft aims to assign to education: education ought to produce a spiritual armour in women, in order that they could be prepared to successfully resist the trials of life.

As we shall see, the main subject which comes out from Mary Wollstonecraft’s meditation on education is reason: reason should be the constitution of the individual, and reason ought to be the principle of education<sup>4</sup>. Mary Wollstonecraft denounces that women are transformed, through the traditional system of education, into entities which are slaves of their passions: her revolution consists, among other things, in the elimination of the traditional system of education<sup>5</sup>. In Mary

---

the age of Enlightenment, I used the volume of Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*. For a reconstruction of the different components which merge into Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought, I recommend the study of Timothy J. Reiss *Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women, and Reason*.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to the different subjects of Mary Wollstonecraft’s works, I deeply recommend *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft’s reform programme is synthesised in the famous assertions: ‘It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore them their lost dignity – and make them, as a part of the / human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 114) Further considerations of Mary Wollstonecraft are in my view interesting: ‘That women at present are by ignorance rendered 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.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 264–265) The reform of society can come about only through a previous reform of the minds: reform of the minds brings about a reform of the world. Ignorance is the cause of the negative condition of women.

Wollstonecraft's view, it is high time to propose a kind of education which, by teaching women to master their passions, frees women from their slavery<sup>6</sup>.

## b) Introduction

In my essay, I would like to analyse some aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought regarding the education of individuals, the formation of individuals, women's rights, and human rights. I shall moreover investigate Mary Wollstonecraft's proposal of new theological foundations for religious belief. For my analysis, I am going to use *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*<sup>7</sup>.

Mary Wollstonecraft aims to propose a 'revolution in female manners'. Her revolution is a revolution of minds: she aims to reach a complete reform in the education and the formation of individuals, in general, and of women, in particular. Mary Wollstonecraft's revolution is a revolution for the spiritual independence of individuals. To reach this objective, traditional education ought to be criticised and to be abandoned. Power over oneself<sup>8</sup>, liberation from passions, and autonomy

---

<sup>6</sup> As regards a comparison between Mary Wollstonecraft and contemporary women writers, I refer to the essay of Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the women writers of her day*.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations from the works of Mary Wollstonecraft's passages are taken from the following edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's works: *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by J. Todd & M. Butler, assistant editor: E. Rees-Mogg, Volume 5., *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Hints*. As regards the quotations, I adopted the editorial policy of the mentioned edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's works (I refer to the chapter 'Editorial Policy' of the first volume of this edition, pp. 29–30). In my text, I am going to prevalently refer to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It is nonetheless to be noticed that, despite *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*'s being undoubtedly the most famous of Mary Wollstonecraft's works, all the works of Mary Wollstonecraft deserve great attention, in order that, among other things, variety, development, richness and depth of her thought could be analysed and reconstructed. Quotations from the works of Richard Price are taken from the following editions of Richard Price's works: *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, By Richard Price, edited by D. D. Raphael; *Richard Price Political Writings*, edited by D. O. Thomas.

<sup>8</sup> In particular, Mary Wollstonecraft's intent is that women have power over themselves; she proves to be not interested at all in women's having power over men. Polemising against some ideas of Rousseau, she asserts: "Educate women like men," says Rousseau, "and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us." This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 131) The scheme as such of having power over somebody else is refused. Mary Wollstonecraft's aim consists in giving women back the dignity that has been lost because of false models of education imposed on women. Having power over oneself means the attainment, or the recovery of one's dignity (i.e., of one's independence). Mary Wollstonecraft always proves to be interested in building and promoting the independence of individuals: she wants, therefore, to prevent people from taking possession of other peo-

of judgment prove to be the main targets of Mary Wollstonecraft's programme of education<sup>9</sup>.

Power is, for Mary Wollstonecraft, power over oneself: this interpretation of power is connected to the right form of education, which ought to teach the control of passions<sup>10</sup>. This interpretation of power is connected to Mary Wollstonecraft's search for the autonomy of the mind. An individual who is enslaved by passions is not autonomous; autonomy is dominance over one's character.

To criticise the system of education of a society means criticising the cultural foundations of society: the system of education is the instrument for moulding a society. On closer inspection, Mary Wollstonecraft's project of transformation of the education system proves to be a project of transformation and of reform of the whole society. The revolution in education will produce a complete change in society; the change in the minds of women and in the consideration of women will bring about a change in the minds of the whole society. Since the kind of education proposed by a specific society is connected to the orientation and to the interests of that specific society, in order to achieve the reform of any society a complete reform of education is necessary. If education is correct, society will be correct. Mary Wollstonecraft's thought turns out to be a project for the reform of the minds: there

---

ple. The concept of power is not interpreted by Mary Wollstonecraft as power over other people: power means, for instance, dominance over one's passions. Her assertion, which could seem to be limited to a particular context, entails a radically different vision of power as such. The traditional logic of power is therewith completely modified: power is power over the weakness represented by one's passions. Power is, therefore, the result of the correct education, which ought to be directed to the dominance over passions.

<sup>9</sup> The volume of V. Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, exposes a detailed interpretation of the various aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought. For the analysis of the contents of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, I refer to chapter 3., 'Natural and Unnatural Distinctions', pp. 77–116, and to chapter 4., 'The Same Subject Continued', pp. 117–165. V. Sapiro's whole volume deserves great attention for the richness of V. Sapiro's observations and for the depth of V. Sapiro's analysis. As regards the aspect of Mary Wollstonecraft's political philosophy, I deeply recommend the study of Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

<sup>10</sup> I refer to the study of Graham J. Barker-Benfield *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* for an analysis of the connections between sensibility, society, and literature. Mary Wollstonecraft's positions are mainly analysed at the beginning of chapter one, 'Sensibility and the Nervous System', pp. 1–36, and in the seventh chapter of the book, 'Wollstonecraft and the Crisis over Sensibility in the 1790s', pp. 351–395. For a study on Mary Wollstonecraft's analysis of the language of sensibility, I deeply recommend the book of S. McMillen Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*: in particular, the opposition between the cultivation of sensibility in women and the development of the rights of women is investigated in chapter 7., 'The Rights of Woman and the Wrongs of Sensibility', pp. 112–129.

will be no reform of the society without a reform of the minds; a reform of the minds can be reached only through a complete reform of the orientation of the way of thinking and of the priorities of society: the authentic values of society ought to be reason – instead of passions and of blind obedience –, and virtue instead of reverence for tradition.

The change in the education of women is related, in Mary Wollstonecraft, to the change in the interpretation of women's nature: women are not that which the traditional society wants women to be. In Mary Wollstonecraft's view, women ought not to be subjected to a kind of education which makes them dependent entities. Women are something else than that which the traditional structures have considered them to be and have imposed them to be. After having been submitted to an appropriate inquiry, the traditional way of education proves to be, as such, an abuse of the nature of women: it is unmasked as an instrument of deformation of the women's minds. Since the authentic women's nature is different from the interpretation of women's nature which is given in the traditional society, and since the interpretation of the women's nature given by the traditional society represents a fundamental component of the traditional society itself, the traditional society may not exist any longer if an authentic change is to come about: i.e., the change of the interpretation of the woman's nature means delegitimizing the traditional order of the society: Mary Wollstonecraft is shaking the pillars of the society represented by the traditional interpretation of women, by the submission of women and by the kind of education of women which brings about the submission of women.

The centrality of reason in the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft profoundly influences her theological assumptions: Mary Wollstonecraft refuses all forms of worship based on blind submission to God. She aims at a form of faith based on rationality. Mary Wollstonecraft's thought on religion refuses the interpretation of God as an omnipotent entity whose moral rules are mysterious: the moral order established by God can be understood by the individual. God is not only omnipotence but also wisdom: there is no divine omnipotence separated from divine wisdom. Moreover, Mary Wollstonecraft refuses any religious attitude inspired by conformation to traditions. In her view, the right faith ought to be inspired by rationality, understanding, and comprehension of the sense of the norms.

We shall see that Mary Wollstonecraft develops a strategy of unmasking all conceptions which aim to present the results of a particular form of education for women as the essence of women themselves. Mary Wollstonecraft unmasks, as the product of a precise strategy of diminution of the value of women, all those programmes of education which present themselves as based on women's nature, whereas they only correspond to a precise power strategy aiming to subdue women. These programmes are not based on the nature of women: they correspond to the ideology of society. The right education and the right formation of individuals will not come into being alone, though: nobody can expect that the right education

will arise without his intervention. Building a new system of education is, therefore, necessary.

I furthermore wish to show in my analysis that many aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought are actual nowadays too: her absolute refusal of blind obedience, her insistence on the development of reason, her defence of individual independence, and her religious thought can give suggestions both for the development of autonomy in individuals and for a rational way of worship, i.e., for a rational kind of faith strongly opposed as such to any form of faith based on irrationality and on blind obedience, on fear and on fanaticism.

The structure of society depends on mind orientation. Mind orientation depends on education; therefore, in order that a change in society could come about, education needs to be changed. Mary Wollstonecraft does not direct her attention to a mythological past since the past has been characterised by false education. The future will be right; the past is useful exclusively to understand the falsity of the past:

'Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will *be* right.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 84)

Mary Wollstonecraft is oriented towards the future. The change of education will produce correct conditions in society. The thought of Mary Wollstonecraft is not directed to nostalgia or to an attitude of acceptance of the present. Future is the dimension of time which is at the centre of her interest: since society is to be reformed and can be reformed Mary Wollstonecraft's attention is directed to the future<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> For a reconstruction of the foundations of both *Vindications*, I deeply recommend Mary Poovey's study *Man's Discourse, Woman's Heart: Mary Wollstonecraft's Two Vindications*, contained in the volume *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. In this introduction, I mentioned the concepts "education" and "formation" together, whereas in the development of my essay, I shall mainly use "education". The aim of mentioning "education" and "formation" together consists in pointing out that Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of education does not regard exclusively school education. In Mary Wollstonecraft's view, the concept "education" rather involves the whole development of the person; it corresponds to the complex of all those instructions that produce the formation of an individual, his way of being, his kind of behaving, his interpretation of society, his values, his orientation in life, his attitudes, his dispositions, and so on. It is the process, in other words, which leads to the constitution of the whole individual's mind. The right education is necessary for the correct kind of life in society, as it can be seen in the following quotation: 'Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge [and virtue]; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she

### c) First examples

Mary Wollstonecraft's constant aim throughout her works is to improve the moral level of individuals and of society. To give a first presentation of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas, I would like to quote a short passage in which Mary Wollstonecraft expresses her awareness of the effects caused on individuals by unjust environments:

'The being who patiently endures injustice, and silently bears insults, will soon become unjust, or unable to discern right from wrong<sup>12</sup>.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 153)<sup>13</sup>

---

ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good? If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 66) The model of the relation between woman and man proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft is a model of companionship and cooperation. This model will not come about unless the right form of education is established in society. The knowledge of the grounds why a woman ought to be virtuous is indispensable in order that women could understand that they ought to co-operate in society. Mary Wollstonecraft points out that women are excluded from the acquisition of this knowledge. The knowledge of the moral and civil interest of society too proves to be essential in her view. Without this knowledge, a real modification of the condition of women and of the whole society is not possible.

<sup>12</sup> Generally speaking, the condition of women at the time of Mary Wollstonecraft should not be forgotten: this condition was characterised by a complete absence of rights for women. I refer, for this subject, to the formerly mentioned book of V. Sapiro; see, for instance, p. 7: 'Women who suffered from their husbands' abuse had virtually no options, largely because of the state-supported patriarchal rule of families by the male head of the household. By law, married women could not own property and they had no legal control over their children. Divorce was all but impossible until the Divorce Act of 1857, and only with parliamentary acts of 1878 and 1895 could abused women obtain legal separation. Parliamentary acts of 1873 and 1886 gave mothers the possibility of obtaining custody over their minor children.' For a reconstruction of the whole political situation in England at the time of Mary Wollstonecraft, I refer, for instance, to the introduction of Miriam Brody in her edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

<sup>13</sup> I refer, for further editions of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to the edition of M. Brody, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to the edition of Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which is enriched by studies concerning the background, the contexts and the criticism of the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, to the edition of D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, *The Vindications: The Rights of Men – The Rights of Woman*, which contains very useful appendixes with passages from writings of Olaudah Equiano, Richard Price, Edmund Burke, Olympe de Gouges, Talleyrand, Catherine Macau-



To be hit by injustice causes the incapability to distinguish between right and wrong. Injustice, therefore, worsens the moral condition of the victims of injustice. This general principle can be applied to women:

'Besides, how can women be just or generous, when they are the slaves of injustice?'  
(*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 261)

Women cannot be just if they undergo an atmosphere of injustice. In general, enduring injustice morally corrupts individuals. In particular, women cannot be just since they are slaves of injustice. To endure injustice represents, therefore, no value at all. As we can see, the environment in which an individual lives is decisive for the development of the moral level of the individual. If injustice dominates, human beings will become worse, not better. Mary Wollstonecraft pays attention to the moral deterioration of an individual who is compelled by the events of life to bear injustice: to bear forms of injustice will render individuals worse than they originally were. If an individual is exposed to continuous abuses at home, he will lose the faculty of distinguishing right and wrong.

A reform of society is necessary to have better individuals; conditions of abuse of individuals correspond to the conditions of deterioration of the moral level of individuals; just conditions in a society correspond to positive moral conditions in the individuals. The right social conditions turn out to be, in the opinion of Mary Wollstonecraft, indispensable to reaching the correct moral formation of individuals. In a further passage, we can see that a correct system of education is the basis for a correct society; reform of education is the foundation of a global reform of society:

'I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the managements of schools; but what has been the result? – a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove / that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 73)

Due to the traditionally received education, individuals are not in a healthy mental condition. The analysis of the system of education shows that lack of education is the origin of the minority condition in which women are compelled to live. The problems for society derive from a wrong education: the traditional model of edu-

cation for women is, as such, a form of abuse. Herewith, we do not have a case of abuse in the lives of women or of a series of abuses in their lives. Through this kind of education, we have a system of life, i.e., a programme of life that is as such an abuse of women's nature: this programme represents the complete deformation of women's capabilities.

Mary Wollstonecraft expresses the strong conviction that liberty is indispensable for the development of virtue:

'Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women [be], by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature [].' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 105)

Liberty is defined by Mary Wollstonecraft as the mother of virtue: without liberty, there is no way to become virtuous. Liberty is indispensable for the moral development of individuals. Individuals cannot reach an appropriate moral development without liberty<sup>14</sup>. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* proves to be a programme of reform of society: Mary Wollstonecraft proposes in her works, among other things, the following subjects:

- a new model of education and formation for all individuals and, in particular, for women,
- a new role of women in society,
- a new proposal for the organisation of family life,
- political representation for women<sup>15</sup>,

---

<sup>14</sup> The quoted passage has a direct relation to the position of women: if women are not educated to freedom and in freedom, any moral development for women turns out to be impossible. In general, if there is no freedom in a society, any moral development is impossible; we have slaves, and we have no morally developed individuals. Consider, as a confirmation of the indispensability of liberty for virtue and for the individual's achievement of virtue, the following passage: '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.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 264) The principle of conduct ought to be reason: if reason is not the principle and the aim of education, then an individual cannot be considered as rational or as virtuous. Liberty turns out to be indispensable for virtue: without liberty, virtue cannot reach the appropriate stability. Reason – and not, for instance, tradition – is the authority to be obeyed in order to become virtuous. To say that reason is the principle of conduct implies that reason is the evaluation criterion of all existing moral practices (this entails that tradition has no place if it is not compatible with reason's principles). Reason is the principle which legitimates moral conduct.

<sup>15</sup> The possibility of the vote for women is not extraneous to Mary Wollstonecraft's meditation. As regards this subject, we can consider, for instance, the following assertions of Mary Wollstonecraft which regard political representation for women:

- the foundation of a national system of education<sup>16</sup>,
- a common education for girls and boys<sup>17</sup>,
- a modification of the theological assumptions describing the nature of God

in order to promote a conception of God based on rationality and not on mystery.

As regards Mary Wollstonecraft's meditation on the female dimension, it could be said that the strategy of Mary Wollstonecraft consists, among other things, in putting in doubt the existence of an essence of women: Mary Wollstonecraft refuses the very notion of an essence of women. Women are made to have precise characteristics in correspondence with the kind of women which a particular kind of society wants to produce. There is no determined essence of women: women are transformed into that which the orientation of society wants them to become. Likewise, there is no neutrality in education. Education is always directed to a precise goal: it is functional to the affirmation and to the conservation of specific values of a society. Mary Wollstonecraft's inquiry into the structure of society shows that the leading cultural disposition of society has a precise programme of education for all individuals, in general, and for women, in particular. Every individual, on closer inspection, becomes that which the specific traditions dominating a society have as a programme for the development of the individuals. Therefore, education is not neutral: it is functional to precise goals. The process of uncovering

---

'I may excite laughter, by dropping a hint, which I mean to pursue, some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government. But, as the whole system of representation is now, in this country, only a convenient handle for despotism, they need not complain, for they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard working mechanics, who pay for the support of royalty when they can scarcely stop their children's mouth with bread.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 217) Mary Wollstonecraft is convinced of the indispensability of political representation for women; she is also aware, though, that the vote for women would not solve all problems in the female dimension, since, in order that political representation for women can produce real changes in society, other aspects of society need to be previously changed. Mary Wollstonecraft is aware that women's being deprived of a civil life means that women lose every interest in the community and in the public sphere, thus retiring themselves in the private sphere.

<sup>16</sup> See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chapter XII, 'On national education'. The study of Alan Richardson, *Mary Wollstonecraft on education* proves to be extremely useful for the reconstruction and for the analysis of Wollstonecraft's meditation on education. Richardson underlines, among other things, the importance of the influence of the Rational Dissenters on Mary Wollstonecraft's thought about education (see, for instance, p. 25 of his essay). A. Richardson points out, however, the differences too between Mary Wollstonecraft's favouring a national school system, on the one hand, and some Dissenters' being against a national system of education, on the other hand, since, in the view of these Dissenters, a national system of education could easily have been controlled by the Anglican church, so that the programme of education of the Rational Dissenters would have been compromised.

<sup>17</sup> See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chapter XII, 'On national education'.

the aims of society which Mary Wollstonecraft fulfils consists in showing that an individual becomes the kind of individual which society has programmed and prescribed for him. Women acquire precise characteristics since women are moulded to have these characteristics by the policy orientation which dominates in society. Mary Wollstonecraft's strategy proves to be, on closer inspection, a study of the ideology dominating society.

The system of education which is reserved for women is a kind of education which aims to assign women to a specific place and position within society. In other words, the education system of a society is not independent of the power strategy of the dominant group in society. On the contrary, the education system is directly functional to the affirmation of the values and of the interests of the dominant groups of society. Since the interest of the dominant groups of society consists in assigning women to a subaltern position in society, the model of education proposed by the dominant groups aims to render women subaltern. The education of women is the foundation of the whole structure of society: changing the system of education of women means changing the whole society. The presence of a non-submissive woman who is master of herself implies a different structure of the family, a different interpretation of the relationships which hold between individuals, a different vision of marriage, a different conception of society, a different conception of citizenship, and so on. Therefore, to say that the education of women ought to be different is to say that the whole society ought to be different.

Individuals have precise dispositions since a particular kind of society wants them to have these dispositions. All the characters that are habitually assigned to women are characters produced by a particular kind of education which aims to acquire power over women: if women are educated to be the prey of their passions, this kind of education, in truth, corresponds to a precise programme of a particular kind of society which aims to make women the prey of passions. Women's being the prey of passions is, therefore, not natural, but artificial: it is the result of a kind of education which aims to render women slaves of passions and, therefore, dependent beings. The individual who is the slave of his passions and cannot dominate them is an individual who is exposed to the dominance of other individuals. The individual who is master of himself is a being which is mentally independent of other beings.

There is no essence of women, at least as regards their lack of reason and their being slaves of passions. It is a precise scheme of society, and it is a precise organisation of the society that wants to have women considered as essentially consisting in emotions, feelings, and passions. Every form of passion is, for Mary Wollstonecraft, a form of dependence: the first abuse exercised against an individual is to render that individual dependent on his passions. Passions are a phenomenon through which a person is no longer able to dominate herself, to have power over herself and to use reason. Mary Wollstonecraft's strategy of unmasking traditional education consists in showing that the whole traditional programme of edu-

cation of women is an instrument of empowerment over women since it deprives them of reason, independence, and liberty. That which is presented as women's nature proves to be a product of a specific kind of society which has specific aims: therefore, it is not something that derives from an eternal nature. Through her project of reform of women's education and through her strategy of uncovering the concealed interests which are at the basis of a specific education programme, Mary Wollstonecraft shows that another society is possible, that society, as regards the way in which it is concretely organised, is not the only possible model of society, and that the leading values of a society correspond to the particular interests of precise power groups.

To obtain a complete description of the model of education due to which women become the prey of passions, the whole chapter 4, 'Observations on the state of degradation to which woman is reduced by various causes' of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is to be analysed. Let us consider, for instance, the following observations, in which the symptoms of women who receive the traditional education are described (pp. 129–131):

'Their senses are inflamed, and their understanding neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling (...) Ever restless and anxious, their over exercised / sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering – not the wavering produced by deliberation or progressive views, but by contradictory emotions. (...) Miserable indeed, must be that being whose cultivation of mind has only tended to inflame its passions! A distinction should be made between inflaming and strengthening them. The passions thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue? – Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly!

(...) This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station: for the exercise of the understanding, as life advances, is the only method pointed out by nature to calm the passions.

(...) Yet, to their senses, are women made slaves, because it is by their sensibility that they obtain present power.

(...) It would be an endless task to trace the variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows, into which women are plunged by the prevailing opinion, that they were created rather to feel than reason, and that all the power they obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness...'

Mary Wollstonecraft points out that the development of sensibility and the development of reason exclude each other: education to the slavery of passions is education to general enslavement. Women are a product of a specific education strategy which aims to render them permanently slaves of their character: the enslavement

and the self-enslavement of women are the goals of this education system. Women will become enslaved by their character: consequently, they will always be dependent entities. Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism of the mental environment of passions in which girls and women are intentionally relegated by the social structures is clear: any development of reason for women proves to be impossible in these conditions. Women's senses are inflamed so that women's understanding is made weaker. Mary Wollstonecraft supports a model of education of the soul which brings about a condition in which reason subdues passions: not sensibility, but reason and intellect ought to be improved and strengthened. Senses and passions gain the upper hand in the individual and deteriorate the nature of the individual if the individual is not educated to oppose passions. The correct way of development for the individual is the development of reason and intellect.

If the faculty of understanding is weak, individuals are not able to oppose passions. The cultivation of the mind of women inflames the passions of women. The excitement of the senses and the neglect of the cultivation of the intellect bring about a situation in which women become the prey of passion. If the intellect is not strong, passions will gain the upper hand. Mary Wollstonecraft sees an opposition between understanding and passion: if the intellect is cultivated, then passions are under control. If, on the contrary, the intellect is weak, passions gain the dominance of the individual. Stability is given only by the education of the intellect.

#### **d) Education and independence**

The value of independence is a foundational aspect of the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Wollstonecraft asserts on the condition of independence:

'I plead for my sex – not for myself. Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis / of every virtue – and independence I will ever secure by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren heath.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 65)

Independence represents, for Mary Wollstonecraft, the basis for every virtue, or it represents the most important virtue. Without independence, there cannot be a basis for virtues<sup>18</sup>. Independence implies, in the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft, independence in thought, independence in education, and independence in life: future citizens ought to be put in the condition of becoming and being independent in all aspects of their existence. This involves a transformation of education, of

---

<sup>18</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft exhorts women to acquire wisdom. See, for instance, the following passage: 'Happy would it be for the world, and for individuals, of course, if all this unavailing solicitude to attain worldly happiness, on a confined plan, 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.' – 'How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity, and hate knowledge?' Saith Wisdom to the daughters of men.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 170)

property relations<sup>19</sup>, of marriage organisation<sup>20</sup>, and of political institutions. It does not matter what field of society is taken into consideration: the degree of inde-

---

<sup>19</sup> In many passages of her works, Mary Wollstonecraft shows interest to social questions: she resolutely supports greater equality and a better distribution of property in society. The continuous attempt at imitation of the upper class by the middle class is a source of vice and misery (see, for instance, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, pp. 23–24; see *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chapter IX, 'Of the pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society', pp. 211–220). Throughout these passages, we can observe the presence of a mutual contraposition of models of society. Mary Wollstonecraft aims at the promotion of virtues as the principles directing the orientation of society: virtues ought to constitute the directives which organise society. Consequently, she criticises the model of society based on the imitation of the way of life of specific classes. The authentic aim of society should consist in instilling virtues, not in promoting the imitation of the upper class. Mary Wollstonecraft proposes a new model for society and a change of orientation as regards the priorities of society. I would like to quote the following passage in order to give an idea of Mary Wollstonecraft's radical criticism of the British system: 'The whole system of British politics, if system it may courteously be called, consisting in multiplying dependents and contriving taxes which grind the poor to pamper the rich ...' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 214) The passage is interesting as such. It is also interesting if it is compared with some criticism directed against Mary Wollstonecraft. For example, Zillah R. Eisenstein analyses some aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought in the fifth chapter, *Mary Wollstonecraft: the feminist embrace and criticism of liberalism* of her book *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (pp. 89–112): Eisenstein is of the opinion that Mary Wollstonecraft was limited in her observations by the liberal individual dispositions of the contemporary thought, thereby not showing a strong interest for any form of criticism directed to social aspects. I think that, on the contrary, in Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism of the organisation of society a social criticism of the economic relationships too can be found. I do not think, therefore, that Mary Wollstonecraft is not interested in the social questions of the time.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft strongly criticises, for instance, the traditional structure of marriage, since it is based on the obedience of women towards their husbands (see *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 141). She proposes, as a model for marriage relationships, the companionship and cooperation between women and men (see *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 66); furthermore, she expresses her favour for a condition of friendship between wives and husbands and, at the same time, her refusal of a condition of dependence of wives on husbands (see *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 98). The adoption of a relationship between women and men based on fellowship instead of obedience will improve the spiritual condition of women: 'Would men but generously snap 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.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 220). Mary Wollstonecraft's view implies a programme of education for men too: men ought not to want to subdue women. There is a female question consisting in women's being educated to be inferior, but there is also a male question, consisting in men's aiming to reach power over women and to bring about the submission of women. Men ought to interpret marriage as fellowship instead of interpreting marriage as a form of dominance; see also p. 250: 'make women rational crea-

pendence of the citizens is a criterion to be used in order that the progress of a society could be evaluated.

The previously quoted passage could give the impression that the concept of independence is exclusively referred to the female dimension; it could seem, in other words, that Mary Wollstonecraft mentions “independence” as a condition which exclusively regards a target which women ought to reach. In truth, the concept “independence” is, in Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought, the basis of every virtue. It does not matter what the specific field dealt with is. The promotion of independence regards the whole society and all the spheres of the individual life: it does not matter whether an individual is male or female. Independence involves, for instance, the whole sphere of education. Mary Wollstonecraft supports a system of education in which children are taught to think for themselves:

‘In order to open their faculties they should be excited to think for themselves; and this can only be done by mixing a number of children together, and making them jointly pursue the same objects.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 229)

The following criticism of traditional education too deserves consideration:

‘The child is not left a moment to its own direction, particularly a girl, and thus rendered dependent – dependence is called natural.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 110)

The problem with the model of education of the times of Mary Wollstonecraft consists in children’s being made dependent instead of being made independent. Dependence is presented as a natural condition, whereas it is the result brought about by a specific system of education.

We can obtain further elements on the importance of the acquisition of an autonomous attitude thanks to the following passage:

‘The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing / themselves, – the only way women can rise in the world, – by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act – they dress; they paint, and nickname

---

tures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers; that is – if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.’) Mary Wollstonecraft’s model of marriage consists in rational fellowship. The basis of the new form of marriage consists in women being educated to and through reason: if women become, through education, rational creatures, they will be good wives and mothers. Education as rational creatures and as free citizens will bring about all the correct dispositions. Any change in society depends on the change of minds.



God's creatures. – Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! Can they [be expected to] govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?' (*A Vindication of the Right of Woman*, p. 76)

There is no point in wondering why women have no or only a little faculty of judgment if the education which they undergo tends in every way to transform them into beings which do not possess any capacity of judgment. For a new system of education to be thought out, women ought to be considered as individuals to be educated to autonomy, independence, self-conduct, and responsibility. The way of considering women ought to be completely changed. We can find in the just quoted passage the following points:

- Women are considered as a frivolous and, therefore, inferior sex.
- The education of women is dedicated, or better said, is limited and restricted, in the first years of their own lives, to a smattering of accomplishment. The education of women is, therefore, completely insufficient. It is insufficient since women must remain inferior creatures.
- The cultivation of the mind is abandoned in order to instil in women libertine notions of beauty, which only promote the passions of women, while at the same time preventing the development of knowledge, of virtue and of reason.
- The education which women undergo only aims at the strengthening of passions in women, thus rendering women unstable characters and unstable individuals. Unstable entities are entities which can be easily dominated.
- Women are considered as inferior and the system of education renders them inferior.
- The system of education, which proves to be a system of dis-education, moves in the opposite direction to the direction of cultivating reason, of cultivating the capacity for self-conduct, for independence and for reflection.
- The education of women aims to build in women the desire to establish themselves through marriage. This system of education closes all the perspectives for women; only marriage remains as a life perspective for women.
- Education to passions deprives women of the attainment of reason, which is the only quality that differentiates mankind from animals and from brutes.
- The enchilding<sup>21</sup> process which women undergo produces a situation in which women become the prey of their own passions.

The education for women has always interpreted the nature of women as something which is already given, established, and determined once and for all. This system has given women a role, a function, and a duty in society. It has prevented, at the same time, women from apprehending other functions. Education for wom-

---

<sup>21</sup> For the adoption of the word "enchilding", I am indebted to Cora Kaplan's essay *Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism* (see p. 48). I deeply recommend C. Kaplan's study *Mary Wollstonecraft's reception and legacies* since it is a very deep inquiry into the influence exercised by Mary Wollstonecraft.

en has represented, first of all, the binding of women to determined functions and the connected exclusion of women from other functions<sup>22</sup>. The image of women ought to change: this change can come about only in an environment which is ready to consider women as rational beings and is ready to educate women to develop their potentiality as rational beings. A reform of minds is therefore needed in order that the environment could change. The reform of minds is difficult since it involves the change of the entire system of traditional education. On closer inspection, the programme of the reform involves all aspects of society.

Mary Wollstonecraft points out that the only way for women to ascend in society is marriage: there is no other way than marriage as a possibility of ascent in society for women. She is therewith criticising any organisation of society which does not give women any other chance to elevate their position in society than marriage.

Further elements on the relations between education and independence can be gained through the following quotations:

'By individual education, I mean, for the sense of the word is not precisely defined, such an attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity; so that the man may only have to proceed, not to begin, the important task of learning to think and reason. (...)

Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 90)

The promotion of independence in children ought to be the aim of education: education ought to produce independent individuals who are capable of autonomous thinking. The following points of the passage are to be underlined, in my opinion:

- Education is an exercise of understanding, i.e., education is connected to rational exercise. It has no relation with the stimulation of passions or with the excitation of emotions; it has no connection with emotionalism or with sentimentalism.
- Any virtue derives from the exercise of reason; there is no virtue without reason.

---

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, the following considerations of Mary Wollstonecraft as regards the aims of the traditional education: 'Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues / of the sex; and, disregarding the arbitrary economy of nature, one writer has declared that it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy. She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 102).

- The only source of virtue is reason: there is no possibility that virtue arises without reason.

Mary Wollstonecraft clearly situates the cause of the problems in the traditional education of women, since this education completely deforms the faculties of women:

‘One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men<sup>23</sup> who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than [affectionate wives and rational mothers]<sup>24</sup>...’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 73)

Mary Wollstonecraft is criticising the system of education. The organisation of a society lies in its system of education: if the system is wrong, it cannot but produce wrong effects.

- Responsible for the wrong system of education are books in which women are considered as having an essence which is completely different from the essence of men, instead of being considered as human creatures that have the same characteristics as any other human creature.

- The authors of these works aim to separate men from women, aim to separate the system of education dedicated to men from the system of education dedicated to women, and aim to produce an organisation of the society in which women are assigned different duties and a different way of life from the duties and the way of life assigned to men.

- These works have proposed as a model for women the model of alluring mistresses instead of the model of affectionate wives and rational mothers<sup>25</sup>. The pro-

---

<sup>23</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft is alluding to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile*, to John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*, and to James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* and *The Character and Conduct of the female sex*. These authors are investigated and criticised in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

<sup>24</sup> A. Richardson in his essay *Mary Wollstonecraft on education* observes, as regards the model for mother proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft (see p. 33): ‘The proper mother is not an amiable, fashionable house-slave but a reasonable, liberated intellectual.’ Through Mary Wollstonecraft’s programme of education for women, the dimension of motherhood too radically changes: for a right motherhood an independent mind is needed, whereas to be independent is impossible for all women entirely depending on their husbands (see *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, pp. 222–223; see also pp. 211–212, where Mary Wollstonecraft considers as incompatible, for women, being virtuous and being dependent on husbands).

<sup>25</sup> The model of marriage which is proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft is interesting: the model of marriage is fellowship. In order that marriage could be an authentic fellowship, women need to become enlightened citizens:

‘If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women

gramme of these works is a programme of devaluation of women in comparison to men. The aim of these works is to transform women into entities which are completely dependent on men.

- Women's education is organised to instil in women passions in order that women are always dependent on their feelings. To be the prey of passions is to be unstable and inconstant; it means having a mind which is without a direction, without inner structure and organisation.

- An individual is educated to be the prey of passions in order that he is the prey of the individuals who educate him to have specific characteristics. Passions oppose the formation of stability of mind, of character, of a stable psychic constitution. An individual who is educated to be the prey of his passions is an individual who is the prey of the individuals who have educated him to be the slave of his passions and to be the prey of the system which wants him to be educated that way.

- Unstable individuals can be directed. Therefore, all those who want to direct individuals aim to render the individuals unstable.

- Passions enslave the individual, whereas reason gives the individual an autonomous structure.

- To contend that women have a determined nature is to say that society ought to be organised in a way which corresponds to the nature of women. Since women are considered as entities which are liable to passions, society should correspondingly be organised in a way which reckons with the mental fragility of women, so that women are put in a condition of submission to men.

- To contend that women do not have the specific nature which has been used as a principle of organisation of society is to say that society can be different from the way it is. To say that women do not have the nature which traditional society attributes to them is, as such, an attack against the traditional view of society. If the

---

ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own / subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner, I mean, to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another. Nay, marriage will never be held sacred till women, by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions rather than their mistresses; for the mean doublings of cunning will ever render them contemptible, whilst oppression renders them timid. So convinced am I of this truth, that I will venture to predict that virtue will never prevail in society till the virtues of both sexes are founded on reason; and, till the affections common to both are allowed to gain their due strength by the discharge of mutual duties.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 237) Mary Wollstonecraft considers as an indispensable condition for the affirmation of the model of marriage as a fellowship between wife and husband that women become enlightened citizens and that they are economically independent of men. Women ought to be brought up with men; thus, they ought not to be separated from them. Furthermore, Mary Wollstonecraft contends that virtue cannot prevail in society unless virtue is founded on reason. Reason is the basis of the virtues of men and women.

nature of women is different from the way which has been traditionally adopted, society ought to be different from the way in which it has been traditionally organised.

- Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism of the traditional interpretation of women's nature proves to be, on closer inspection, both an uncovering of the ideological grounds of the traditional society and a delegitimisation of the traditional order of society. Since the traditional order of society is based on the separation of duties for men and women – which is grounded on the assumption of the different nature of men, on the one hand, and of women, on the other hand – to say that the idea of the difference of nature has no authentic ground means delegitimising the whole structure of society.

- The first way of rendering women dependent entities is to transform them into beings dependent on their passions. To educate women to be the prey of passions is the first form of violence and of abuse on women: if a girl is educated in a way which considers passions as if they were the natural condition of the woman as such and, consequently and as if they were positive for women, this is to orientate the preferences of women towards the slavery of passions. The education of women as such is an abuse since the education of women destroys every possibility of autonomous development of women.

As regards the way of positive action of parents in relation to the education of children, Mary Wollstonecraft observes:

'The parent who sedulously endeavours to form the heart and enlarge the understanding of his child, has given that dignity to the discharge of a duty, common to the whole animal world, 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 advanced in life, demands serious consideration.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 225)

To form the heart and to enlarge the understanding of the child ought to be the goal of the parents. The objective of the correct education consists in the development of the mind of the child. The aim of education, therefore, does not lie in transmitting to the children an attitude of blind obedience. Mary Wollstonecraft clearly expresses that obedience is due exclusively to the directive of reason. The promotion of blind obedience should never be the goal of education:

'Females, it is true, in all countries, are too much under the dominion of their parents; and few parents think of addressing their children in the following manner, though it is in this reasonable way that Heaven seems to command the whole human race. It is your interest to obey me till you can judge for yourself; and the Almighty Father of all has implanted an affection in me to serve as a guard to you whilst your reason is unfolding; but when your mind arrives at maturity, you must only obey me, or rather respect my opinions, so far as they coincide with the light that is breaking in on your own mind.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 226)

Mary Wollstonecraft is aware that there is a problem with the use of authority. The traditional structure of society foresees that females obey their parents: they are subjected to the authority of their parents. This submission is not related, though, to a period of formation of reason; it is a submission of entities which are considered as inferior beings. Since women are considered as inferior beings, women must remain submissive.

Mary Wollstonecraft accepts that individuals are submissive to their parents when they are still in the process of development of reason: until their reason has not reached the condition of maturity, a person remains submissive to the authority of reason represented by their parents. When their reason has reached the condition of maturity, they are free. The condition of submission holds since the reason has not reached the due development. Therefore, submission is not due to a natural hierarchy but is due to the stewardship of parents over children until children reach a developed level of reason.

#### e) Reason, Virtue, Knowledge

Reason, virtue, and knowledge prove to be the foundations of the individual's education for life. We shall now see the way in which Mary Wollstonecraft interprets them.

'The being who can think justly in one track, will soon extend its intellectual empire ...' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 249)

The correct way of thinking is indispensable. In order to give elements regarding the targets which human nature ought to reach, I would like to quote a passage in which Mary Wollstonecraft individuates in reason, virtue, and knowledge the criteria through which the development and the perfection of our nature can be evaluated. Thanks to the following text we shall see, moreover, that Mary Wollstonecraft considers reason, virtue and knowledge as the principles that ought to direct society:

'In the present state of society it appears necessary to go back to first principles in search of the most simple truths, and to dispute with some prevailing prejudice every inch of ground. To clear my way, I must be allowed to ask some plain questions, and the answers will probably appear as unequivocal as the axioms on which reasoning is built; though, when entangled with various motives of action, they are formally contradicted, either by the words or conduct of men.

In what does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than the whole; in Reason.

What acquirement exalts one being above another? Virtue<sup>26</sup>; we spontaneously reply.

---

<sup>26</sup> As regards virtues, it is to be said that Mary Wollstonecraft refuses the division of virtues into virtues for men and virtues for women; virtues are virtues. Virtues are virtues; no further specification is needed, and any further specification whatsoever would be wrong. See, for instance, the following passage: 'I here throw down my gauntlet, and deny the existence

For what purpose were the passions implanted? That man by struggling with them might attain a degree of knowledge denied to the brutes; whispers Experience. Consequently the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively.<sup>27</sup> (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 81)

The perfection of the individual's nature depends on the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge which the individual manages to reach. Virtue is the evaluation criterion of the value of the citizens. Reason, virtue, and knowledge – and not, for instance, tradition – are the values to be promoted. Mary Wollstonecraft considers them as the foundations of both individual education and of the structure of society – provided, of course, that the education of individuals and the structures of the society are well organised. The justification of education and laws ought to consist in their correspondence to reason, knowledge, and virtue. Furthermore, the real foundation of the correct mind disposition is reason: from reason both virtue and knowledge derive.

This passage represents a true declaration of the intents of Mary Wollstonecraft:

---

of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 120; see also *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 95) Consider, on this subject, the following observations of A. Richardson in his study *Mary Wollstonecraft on education*, p. 33: 'Her uncompromising dismissal of uniquely "feminine" virtues – which would facilitate her demonization in the reactionary period soon to follow – allowed Wollstonecraft to revise the existing system of female socialization, from the cradle up.' Equality in virtue between man and woman is a precise sign of Mary Wollstonecraft's aim to eliminate, in society, all institutions that separate men and women from each other and that, consequently, assign men and women different duties for their own lives. See, for instance, the following passage: 'Ignorance is a frail base for virtue! Yet, that it is the condition for which woman was organized, has been insisted upon by the / writers who have most vehemently argued in favour of the superiority of man; a superiority not in degree, but essence; though, to soften the argument, they have laboured to prove, with chivalrous generosity, that the sexes ought not to be compared; man was made to reason, woman to feel: and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 132). Women are considered as entities which feel rather than reason: traditional education follows this conviction. The refusal, in Mary Wollstonecraft, of specific female and male virtues and of specific female and male faculties belongs to a precise programme of reform of society aiming at the affirmation of a new kind of relation between the sexes which is founded on companionship, equality and cooperation.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's conviction that no morality is possible without knowledge is expressed, for instance, in the following assertions: 'Without knowledge there can be no morality!' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.132), and: 'Ignorance is a frail base for virtue!' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 132)

- The superiority of men in comparison to brutes consists in possessing reason.
- The presence of passions is to be explained as a kind of exercise: struggling with their passions, human beings can obtain a degree of knowledge that brutes cannot reach. Individuals become better by struggling with passions: this means, among other things, that individuals ought to have control of their passions, and that individuals ought to fight against them.
- The perfection of our nature and the capability of happiness which individuals can reach depend on the degrees of reason, of virtue, of knowledge which individuals can obtain. In order to improve their nature, individuals ought to develop their reason, their virtue, and their knowledge<sup>28</sup>.

Mary Wollstonecraft's presentation of virtue, reason and knowledge is, as such, a programme for the aims of education. An education promoting the development of virtue, reason, and knowledge in the individuals is the appropriate education; all other forms are false. Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas constitute, at the same time, a revolutionary programme towards a future society and a criticism of the present society. Reason, virtue, and knowledge are the measures which ought to be used in order to evaluate the principles of a society.

The traditional society is, in Mary Wollstonecraft's opinion, not a morally well-organised society, since reason, virtue and knowledge are not the basis of the traditional society. The new society ought to be organised to instil these principles as principles of the society. A new society ought to be founded on these principles<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, education for women should be changed, since the education

---

<sup>28</sup> If reason is the guide of a moral system, morality has the same foundation in every society: it does not matter which kind of society is considered. The principles of morality are identical: 'The manners of men may change without end; but, wherever reason receive the least cultivation – wherever men rise above brutes, morality must rest on the same base. And the more man discovers of the nature of his mind and body, the more clearly he is convinced, that to act according to the dictates of reason is to conform to the law of God.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 51) The morality of mankind changes only if reason is not the guide of morality. If reason is the guide of morality, morality is the same for the whole mankind.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft clearly expresses that the education of women goes in the opposite direction to the promotion of virtue: 'To give an example of order, the soul of virtue, some austerity of behaviour must be adopted, scarcely to be expected from a being who, from its infancy, has been made the weathercock of its own sensations. Whoever rationally means to be useful must have a plan of conduct; and, in the discharge of the simplest duty, we are often obliged to act contrary to the present impulse of tenderness or compassion.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 136–137) Women are made by traditional education to be the weathercock of their passions: they are completely dominated by their passions since no education founded on the stability of reason has been given to them. If an individual has been educated to be the prey of one's passions, there will not be any possibility for this indi-



of women does not have as its aim the promotion of reason in women: the promotion of passions and of dependence are the goals which the correct education for women aims to reach.

To put reason, knowledge, and virtue as the correct foundations of individuals and of the laws of society means that all that does not promote or respect reason, knowledge and virtue in society is false. Education, society, and social relationships should be evaluated through the criteria of reason, knowledge, and virtue. Mary Wollstonecraft considers knowledge as being a necessary condition for the development of morality in individuals: without knowledge, morality cannot arise. Mary Wollstonecraft is convinced that morality can be reached only after a process of correct education<sup>30</sup>. The condition of reason will not arise by itself. A system of education is needed in which reason is developed:

‘Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever / sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing.’<sup>31</sup> (Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 93)

---

vidual to learn to dominate his passions. Wollstonecraft insists on the necessity of having a plan of conduct in order to be able to act rationally: this means, though, that a subject ought to act against passions. Passions ought not to be the aim of education: passions are to be fought against through the right kind of education.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft is able to express severe judgments on society: ‘It would be an arduous task to trace all the vice and misery that arise in society from the middle class of people apeing the manners of the great. All are aiming to procure respect on account of their property; and most places are considered as sinecures that enables men to start into notice. The grand concern of three parts out of four is to contrive to live above their equals, and to appear to be richer than they are. How much domestic comfort and private satisfaction is sacrificed to this irrational ambition! It is a destructive mildew / that blights the fairest virtues; benevolence, friendship, generosity, and all those endearing charities which bind human hearts together ...’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 23) Since within society, the model of behaviour is given by the upper class, the middle class tries with every effort to adopt the manners of the upper class. The goals which the middle class wants to reach are property and richness. Virtues such as benevolence, friendship and generosity are therewith forgotten.

<sup>31</sup> In general, Mary Wollstonecraft’s meditation is always characterised by the criticism of all positions aiming to present a particular, historically determined order as a divine, unchangeable, and unquestionable order. Reasonableness is the criterion on which institutions are to be founded: if an institution refuses to justify itself through reasonable argumentations, while pretending to substitute the reasonableness of its existence with its being given by God, this institution is not justified. See, for instance, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 228: ‘But, till society is very differently constituted, parents, I fear, will still insist on being obeyed, because they will be obeyed, and constantly endeavour to settle that power on a

The development of minds corresponds to the diminution and elimination of blind obedience: the improvement of minds is a precise political choice of Mary Wollstonecraft since this development eliminates blind obedience. The development of minds in women will prevent tyrants from having slaves, on the one hand, and sensualists from having play-things, on the other hand. Mary Wollstonecraft aims to eliminate blind obedience and to promote the development of the mind in women. The development of women's minds is, as such, a struggle against political power, if the political system is dominated by tyrants.

The fact that reason is the basis of the correct education and that the degree of perfection of human nature consists in the degrees of reason, of knowledge and of virtue shows that Mary Wollstonecraft considers, as the goal of a correct education, the autonomy of the individual. Individuals can obtain autonomy through the process of education itself. Education ought not to be oriented to the conservation of determined values. Education ought not to produce a form of dependence towards tradition; education ought to enable individuals to live an autonomous life<sup>32</sup>. It is essential, in my opinion, to observe Mary Wollstonecraft's definition of reason; moreover, the connection that reason represents between God and created entities needs to be considered since this point can introduce us to Mary Wollstonecraft's theology:

---

Divine right which will not bear the investigation of reason.' Furthermore, Mary Wollstonecraft expresses the hope that both the divine right of husbands and the divine right of kings might be contested without danger for those denying it (see *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 110).

<sup>32</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft expresses hard criticism of the veneration of antiquity: 'Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, / the slave trade ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country, and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured. – Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed. – The Briton takes place of the man, and the image of God is lost in the citizen!' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, pp. 14–15). Antiquity is not a dimension which should be venerated; antiquity can be criticised as any other dimension. Antiquity is not a value as such. The veneration of antiquity leads to accepting the slave trade. Mary Wollstonecraft moreover criticises the consideration of property as a central value to which all is subordinated and sacrificed. On closer inspection, Mary Wollstonecraft is criticising two pillars of the order of society such as the veneration of tradition, on the one hand, and the security of the property, on the other hand. Thus, she proves to be much more radical in her criticism of society than how it could appear at first sight. Tradition may not be, in her view, the value upon which to build society; moral principles may not be sacrificed for the security of property. For a study which specifically deals with Mary Wollstonecraft's positions on slavery, I deeply recommend M. Ferguson's inquiry *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery*.

'The stamen of immortality, if I may be allowed the phrase, is the perfectibility of human reason; for, were men created perfect, or did a flood of knowledge break in upon him, when he arrived at maturity, that precluded error, I should doubt whether his existence would be continued after the dissolution of the body. But, in the present state of things, every difficulty in morals that escapes from human discussion, and equally baffles the investigation of profound thinking, and the lightning glance of genius, is an argument on which I build my belief of the immortality of the soul. Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 122)

Reason brings individuals towards a divine condition since reason as emanation of divinity connects the individual to divinity. Reason is defined by Wollstonecraft as the power of improvement; reason is the power of discerning truth. It is a nature common to every individual since it is an emanation of divinity. Since reason is the emanation of divinity, it is the tie that connects the creature with the Creator. The connection between Creator and creature is reason. Deity is, therefore, an Entity which is not completely extraneous to the individuals. As we shall see, God is not interpreted by Mary Wollstonecraft under the attribute of mystery; God is reason. Therefore, God is not an Entity which is completely different from the members of mankind. The development of one's reason is the way of reaching the divinity.

Mary Wollstonecraft expresses the conviction that the degree of virtue which is present in an individual corresponds to the degree of knowledge which the individual has reached. The superiority which is attributed by someone to women ought to consist in women's possessing a greater intellect than men and not in other characteristics of women:

'Women, weak women, are compared with angels; yet, a superior order of beings should be supposed to possess more intellect than man; or, in what does their superiority consist? In the same strain, to drop the sneer, they are allowed to possess more goodness of heart, piety, and benevolence. – I doubt the fact, though it be courteously brought forward, unless ignorance be allowed to be the mother of devotion; for I am firmly persuaded that, on an average, the proportion between virtue and knowledge, is more upon a par than is commonly granted.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 121, footnote 1)

Virtue corresponds to knowledge.

The rules of education ought to be deduced from the truth. If the rules of education do not derive from truth, virtue is degraded to a convention:

'Greatness of mind can never dwell with cunning, or address; for I shall not boggle about words, when their direct signification is insincerity and falsehood, but content

myself with observing, that if any class of mankind be so created that it must necessarily be educated by rules not strictly deducible from truth, virtue is an affair of convention.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 155)

Since the orientation of society is founded on a lawless kind of power, taking power by women would not amount to freedom. To bring women to power would not mean the liberation of women, since the attitude of society is tyranny: there would not be a change in the attitude, but only a change in the individuals who exercise the tyranny. Reform of society is not a question of changing the individuals who possess power, since, unless there is a reform of minds the leading values of a society will not change. The authentic question is to change the mental attitude of individuals.

'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 that parents, indolently availing themselves of a supposed privilege, damp the first faint glimmering of reason, rendering at the same time the duty, which they are so anxious to enforce, an empty name; because they will not let it rest on the only basis on which a duty can rest securely: for unless it be founded on knowledge, it cannot gain sufficient / strength to resist the squalls of passion, or the silent sapping of self-love.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 226)

Rational freedom is the disposition of mind to be learned and to be taught. Reason is indispensable for morality. Knowledge ought to be the basis of duty. If duty is not based on knowledge, duty will not resist passions. Without knowledge, there cannot be an authentic disposition to duty. Submission to the parents is the preparation for the slavery of marriage. Women are treated as property. Within traditional marriage, either the individual is dominated, or he dominates. The interpretation as such of marriage should therefore be completely changed; it should not be based on power.

Blind submission weakens the reason since it teaches that one ought not to think autonomously. Moral education ought to be based on knowledge. If moral education is not based on knowledge, then moral education cannot resist passions. Only knowledge can give to the individual that kind of formation which duly structures the individual.

It is not sufficient that women have power: if women have power in society without having previously received the correct education, they will become tyrants since the model of society is that of domination. They will simply occupy the place

of the tyrants. The model of domination will perpetuate itself unless a new form of education is proposed in society. Unless there is an education for freedom, there is no real change in society. Minds must change in order that society can really change. Rational freedom ought to be the leading value of society.

Mary Wollstonecraft insists that teaching to think is the kind of education which can be regarded as the cultivation of the mind:

‘... but only that education deserves emphatically to be termed cultivation of mind, which teaches young people how to begin to think.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 234–235)

Education ought to promote the capability of thinking. Education ought to be common to the two sexes, i.e., the two sexes ought to be educated together:

‘My observations on national education are obviously hints; but I principally wish to enforce the necessity of educating the sexes together to perfect both ...’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 245)

If education changes, society changes. Mary Wollstonecraft sees that the values of society determine the roles of individuals in society. She sees that society assigns values and ways of behaviour to its members: women are regarded as having specific characteristics and a specific nature by society.

The order of society is presented as natural, whereas it is a precise historical construct. The traditions of society build the character of the woman; traditions dictate the order of society. The way of life of women in society is a social product, it is not a natural component of society. It is indispensable to distinguish between that which is natural and that which is exclusively the product of a particular order of society.

#### **f) Mary Wollstonecraft on divinity**

Mary Wollstonecraft’s interest in the reform of society involves the sphere of theology<sup>33</sup>: her criticism of traditional worship and her proposal of a new relationship with God are indispensable for the comprehension of her strategy. We can observe in her thought the intention of substitution of aspects of the traditional theology with new proposals of interpreting God and His relation to creation. In particular, Mary Wollstonecraft is interested in the nature of the practical directives of God and in the ways of worshipping the divinity.

---

<sup>33</sup> For a profound analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft’s theological observations, I deeply recommend the essay of Barbara Taylor *The religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminism*. For further observations on Mary Wollstonecraft’s position on religion, I refer to the chapter ‘For the Love of God’, pp. 95–142, in B. Taylor’s book *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. I furthermore wish to refer to the analyses of V. Sapiro (see the paragraph ‘Religion, God, and Nature’, pp. 44–52, in chapter two, ‘The Reasoned, Passionate Self’) for the analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft’s theological convictions and of their consequences for Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideas.

Mary Wollstonecraft's intents concerning the theological foundations of faith and concerning the proposal for a new vision of Deity are connected to the programme of the reform of individual education and of reform of society. The theological aspects of her thought have an immediate relevance for and an immediate connection to the political and social aspects of her thought. Since religion gives a general orientation on reality, the reform programme of Mary Wollstonecraft involves the religious sphere too<sup>34</sup>. The reform of minds involves the reform of theology and of society. Theology proves to have precise connections to the way in which society is organised.

To begin with, Mary Wollstonecraft expresses herself against every form of blind submission to God<sup>35</sup>; consider, for instance, the following passage, in which the contraposition between traditional religions and rational religion comes to the fore:

‘I know that many devout people boast of submitting to the Will of God blindly, as to an arbitrary sceptre or rod, on the same principle as the Indians worship the devil. 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<sup>36</sup>. Rational religion, on the contrary, is

---

<sup>34</sup> On closer inspection, Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism strategy involves the whole traditional order: marriage, education of women, property, relationship with the tradition, interpretation of divinity, antiquity, and education system.

<sup>35</sup> Generally speaking, Mary Wollstonecraft proves to be strongly against every form of blind submission to whichever institution, authority, person, power and so on. Moreover, she does not agree with any form of blind obedience towards authorities. Consider, for instance, the following assertions: ‘Formed to live with such an imperfect being as man they ought to learn from the exercise of their faculties the necessity of forbearance: but all the sacred rights of humanity are violated by insisting on blind obedience; or, the most sacred belong *only* to man.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 153) There is no compatibility between the rights of mankind, on the one hand, and blind obedience, on the other hand. An individual who adopts an attitude of blind obedience is a person who has already renounced her human rights.

<sup>36</sup> Traditional attitudes concerning religion have an obvious connection to traditional education. For instance, if girls are educated to be dependent persons, they will be educated to accept every content transmitted by the traditional religion in which they are educated: ‘With respect to religion, she never presumed to judge for herself; but conformed, as a / dependent creature should, to the ceremonies of the Church which she was brought up in, piously believing that wiser heads than her own have settled that business: – and not to doubt is her point of perfection.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 118) Wollstonecraft expresses here her criticism of conformist positions in religion: girls having been educated in the traditional way will be educated to be dependent as regards religious questions too. Traditional education does not admit the development of an independent, autonomous attitude in creatures destined to be dependent. The aims of this kind of education consist in instilling a disposition of dependence in the educated person. The educated person ought to feel dependent. She ought not to develop an attitude of independence; she is educated not to

a submission to the will of a being so perfectly wise, that all he wills must be directed by the proper motive – must be reasonable<sup>37</sup>.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 255)

The connection between kinds of faith and political attitudes emerges: Mary Wollstonecraft puts a connection between blind worshipping of God, on the one hand, and submission to power, on the other hand. On closer inspection, blind submission to God corresponds to blind submission to power. Blind obedience is common to both cases; the attitude of submission is a common characteristic of individuals, independently of the field in which this attitude is expressed.

As we have seen, Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideas and proposals consist in promoting independence in the individuals: this excludes a blind submission in all the spheres of individual life, including worship.

Mary Wollstonecraft proposes the model of a rational religion: rational religion is, for Mary Wollstonecraft, the submission of one’s own will to a being that is so perfectly wise that all He wills is reasonable. God’s wisdom is the guarantee that every directive of God is rational: since God is wise, His will cannot be irrational. The reverence of the believer, therefore, is the reverence due to wisdom, not to absolute power.

Rational religion turns out to be an alternative form of religion in comparison with the traditional religion. The conception of God as reason and as wisdom is opposed to the conception of God as absolute power. Wollstonecraft refuses, therefore, the interpretation of a God who, because of His omnipotence, is beyond any human reasonableness and is beyond any human ability to understand the cause of events or the cause of His directives. In this view – with which Mary Wollstonecraft does not agree – individuals cannot but simply blindly submit to God.

The aim of those who plead for submission to God as a mysterious entity consists in convincing the individual to blindly submit to orders. The aim of those who plead for submission to God as wisdom and reasonableness is to show the

---

question traditional prescriptions. Wollstonecraft’s criticism in this particular text regards theological questions. Education ought to have as its aim independence and responsibility. We can observe, furthermore, that Mary Wollstonecraft does not appreciate conformism in religion either: nobody should accept traditional prescriptions because they belong to a traditional heritage.

<sup>37</sup> See also this passage: ‘I love man as my fellow; but his scepter, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man. In fact, the conduct of an accountable being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason; or on what foundation rests the throne of God?’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 105) The connection between God and reason is evident. Reason ought to be the foundation of all our deeds. Moreover, the source of conduct does not depend on the directives of traditions; reason is the source of conduct. The correct submission is exclusively to reason.

believer that God's dispositions can be understood. There is no value in blind submission: since God's dispositions are reasonable there is no point in saying that the believer cannot understand God's decisions and ought to simply accept God's norms.

Blind obedience is the annulment of reason: therewith it represents the annulment of all the rights of the individuals. Blind obedience is an attitude contrary to the rights of humanity. The strategy of insisting on the mystery of God aims to prepare individuals to the blind acceptance of orders of power. On the contrary, the reasonableness of God is the foundation of the idea that power ought to be reasonable.

The unfathomable ways of God serve to justify the unfathomable ways of power. God's dispositions cannot be questioned. Against these positions, Mary Wollstonecraft's strategy consists in showing that the mystery of God exclusively regards speculative truths; God's practical dispositions are not mysterious. The first character of the Deity is, in Mary Wollstonecraft's view, wisdom. The dispositions of Deity are reasonable: they cannot but be reasonable since they derive from wisdom. Rational religion is submission exclusively to God as reason. In other words, the God to which the faith of rational religion is due is a rational, not a mysterious God (at least as regards the practical norms).

Mary Wollstonecraft's intention of presenting a divinity that operates with wisdom is clear; her intention of refusing every presentation of a Deity operating in a not understandable way is clear too. Mary Wollstonecraft is trying to put believer and Deity near to each other: she refuses a vision of a mysterious God in relation to whom the believer can only show blind submission. The whole strategy of Mary Wollstonecraft concerning her alternative way of theology is to present a Deity of whom the believer ought not to be afraid. Mary Wollstonecraft's divinity is not a divinity of mystery: Her Deity is power and wisdom<sup>38</sup>.

A further interesting passage can give us elements in order to enlarge our acquaintance with Mary Wollstonecraft's theological ideas. In this passage too, we can observe the contraposition between traditional theological assumptions and Mary Wollstonecraft's proposals. In this passage the opposition between the conceptions of God as light and of God as mystery deserves attention:

---

<sup>38</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's conception of Deity is, of course, interesting as such, i.e., it is interesting independently of connections with other fields such as society or politics. Mary Wollstonecraft's refusal of God as absolute power whose directives do not correspond to our concept of reasonability can find some correspondence, though, in her refusal of every form of power which is not founded on reasonableness. No power without reasonableness has or can have a correct foundation. As regards the interpretation of God's attributes, Mary Wollstonecraft tries to find a balance and an interaction between the different attributes of God. Mary Wollstonecraft refuses every form of power that requires blind obedience. Mary Wollstonecraft is against all interpretations of God as inscrutable.



'I have already very frequently had occasion to observe, that vicious or indolent people are always eager to profit by enforcing arbitrary privileges; and, generally, in the same proportion as they neglect the discharge of the duties which alone render the privileges reasonable. This is at the bottom a dictate from common sense, or the instinct of self-defence, peculiar to ignorant weakness; resembling / that instinct, which makes a fish muddy the water it swims in to elude its enemy, instead of boldly facing it in the clear stream. From the clear stream of argument, indeed, the supporters of prescription, of every denomination, fly; and, taking refuge in the darkness, which, in the language of sublime poetry, has been supposed to surround the throne of Omnipotence<sup>39</sup>, they dare to demand that implicit respect which is only due to His unsearchable ways. But let me not be thought presumptuous, the darkness which hides our God from us, only respects speculative truths – it never obscures moral ones<sup>40</sup>, they shine clearly, for God is light, and never, by the constitution of our nature, requires the discharge of a duty, the reasonableness of which does not beam on us when we open our eyes.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 225)

In this passage the contraposition between two mutually completely different, mutually opposed ways of interpretation of God is evident; let us analyse the words used by Mary Wollstonecraft in this particular context. The method of interpreting God and His prescriptions<sup>41</sup> as mysterious is characterised by the following expressions:

---

<sup>39</sup> Consider, for instance, the expression "the throne of Omnipotence": the use of this expression reveals the intent of presenting God first of all under the attribute of power: God is power; directives of God are directive of the Omnipotence to which exclusively blind obedience is due.

<sup>40</sup> To be noticed in this passage is the difference expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft between speculative truths and moral truths regarding God. If speculative truths can represent a mystery, the same cannot be said of moral truths: if God poses duties, these duties are reasonable. No blind obedience is due to the duties imposed by God since these duties are always understandable. The believer ought not to be silent and ought not to simply obey. On the contrary, the believer ought to understand God's directives: he ought to arrive, through his reason, at the foundation of God's decision.

<sup>41</sup> Consider, furthermore, the following passage illustrating Mary Wollstonecraft's opinions on natural rights: 'It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 14). Mary Wollstonecraft's thought concerning natural rights is clear: no prescription whatsoever can undermine natural rights. Natural rights are given to mankind directly by God: therefore, they have an absolute status. They do not find their validity in a particular tradition; their validity is given by God. No country gives natural rights: natural rights are not conceded by countries. Natural rights do not depend on a particular community or on a particular nation: natural rights exist independently of particular historical configurations. The fact that natural rights are received at birth excludes that belonging to a group, to a commu-

- "Fly from the clear stream of argument"; "taking refuge in the darkness"; "unsearchable ways".

The first position is characterised by the refusal of rational argumentation and by the search for refuge in the mysteriousness of God. His prescriptions should be accepted without any discussion. Only blind obedience is, in this way of thinking, the right kind of behaviour. God is, in this religious perspective, the Wholly Other. The characteristic of the corresponding religious attitude is the wish to have absolute power above oneself: God's decisions lie beyond every possibility of comprehension.

Mary Wollstonecraft's position regarding God, His manifestation and the directives ordered by God is portrayed by the following expressions:

- "they<sup>42</sup> clearly shine"; "God is light"; "reasonableness".

Mary Wollstonecraft's position is characterised by the conviction of the reasonableness of God's prescriptions. God is not regarded, first of all, as being exclusively absolute power; the manifestation of God is wisdom. Mary Wollstonecraft is not interested in power and in the affirmation of power, but in wisdom, in reason, and in the affirmation of wisdom and reason in the essence of God. She is aware that the speculative truths about God are a mystery; she does not agree, though, with all positions interpreting God's moral directives too as mysterious.

One of the usual instruments of power of traditional religion consists, in Mary Wollstonecraft's opinion, in not presenting any rational argumentation defending determined prescriptions: a moral directive has precise contents and cannot but have these contents since it derives from, corresponds to, and fulfils an order of God. A prescription has precise contents because God wants it to have these contents; a prescription is right because God wants it. There is no further foundation for God's disposition; quite on the contrary, the presence of determined dispositions is explained through the mystery of God's decisions. The traditional religion seeks and finds its refuge and its solutions in the mystery. In this view, God's directives cannot be understood by us since God belongs to a completely different dimension in comparison to our dimension. Mankind is, in this conception, not able to understand God's decisions; mankind should accept them. Every other attitude would be a kind of rebellion or a kind of opposition to the directives of God. There is no mediation, no common point, and no connection between God and believers. The legitimation of any divine directive consists in God's power: there is no need for another form of legitimation of an order. The reasonableness of the order has no relevance.

Even though Mary Wollstonecraft appears to admit that the speculative truths regarding God cannot be reached by us, she does not admit, notwithstand-

---

nity, or to a nation can be conditions for having these rights. Natural rights belong to individuals independently of their position in society.

<sup>42</sup> I.e.: "moral truths".

ing, that the moral truths may not be investigated. Moral truths are reasonable; therefore, they are understandable to us. God is light. As regards moral truths, God's directives are understandable. Thus, there is no moral prescription that cannot be understood on the basis of rational analysis. God's prescriptions are grounded on His reasonableness.

The quoted passage expresses more than it could appear at first sight: in truth, Mary Wollstonecraft is contraposing two ways of interpreting Deity, she is contraposing two completely different theological models. One interpretation proposes a mysterious, unknowable, unfathomable God, in relation to whom there can be only silent submission: the subject should only show blind obedience. The alternative interpretation of God, which is supported by Mary Wollstonecraft, sees God as an Entity whose decisions are understandable. Not only God's directives are rational: they are rational for us. They can be understood. Individuals have a connection to divinity through reason: individuals are not completely extraneous to divinity. The conception of divinity proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft represents a conception for education to divinity: divinity ought not to be seen as a mystery but as wisdom.

Further elements regarding the opposition between a conception of God as a rational Entity and a conception of God as a mysterious power can be gained with the help of the following passage:

'It seems natural for man to search for excellence, and either to trace it in the object that he worships, or blindly to invest it with perfection, as a garment. But what good effect can the latter mode of worship have on the moral conduct of a rational being? He bends to power; he adores a dark cloud, / which may open a bright prospect to him, or burst in angry, lawless fury, on his devoted head – he knows not why. And, supposing that the Deity acts from the vague impulse of an undirected will, man must also follow his own, or act according to rules, deduced from principles which he disclaims as irreverent. Into this dilemma have both enthusiasts and cooler thinkers fallen, when they laboured to free men from the wholesome restraints which a just conception of the character of God imposes. It is not impious thus to scan the attributes of the Almighty: in fact, who can avoid it that exercises his faculties? For to love God as the fountain of wisdom, goodness, and power, appears to be the only worship useful to a being who wishes to acquire either virtue or knowledge. A blind unsettled affection may, like human passions, occupy the mind and warm the heart, whilst, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, is forgotten.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 115)<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> A passage taken from the texts of Richard Price can give us elements in order to understand the possible influences of Richard Price on Mary Wollstonecraft: 'The necessary perfections of the Deity; the infinite excellencies of his nature as the fountain of reason and wisdom; the entire dependence of all beings upon him, and their deriving from his bounty existence and all its blessings and hopes – from hence, and not merely from his almighty power, arises his SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY' (Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Ques-*

The individual who worships God in the described way has a relationship to God which is similar to the relation of the individual who is submitted to power; God is first of all power, i.e., His first attribute is power. In the traditional form of faith, the individual adores a dark cloud, i.e., his faith concerns a mysterious power. It is interesting too that Mary Wollstonecraft puts a direct connection between the kind of religion and its effects on the moral education of individuals. Mary Wollstonecraft expresses her ideas about the kind of faith which can be useful, if an individual aims to reach virtue or knowledge: faith ought to consist in loving God as the source of wisdom, goodness, and power. In this context, Wollstonecraft mentions a series of attributes for God without conceding a prevalence to none of these attributes. God is not seen as being exclusively power: God is wisdom and goodness too. God's attributes are mutually equivalent.

The connection of this conception of God with the spiritual development of the individual is, moreover, particularly important: only the faith in God as the source of wisdom, of goodness and of power can prove to be useful for a subject aiming to acquire virtue or knowledge. Any other kind of faith would not promote virtue or knowledge in the individuals. Mary Wollstonecraft puts a connection between the conception of God and the moral development of individuals, or, in other words, between the conception of God and the education of individuals. Faith is, as such, already a form of education (or of miseducation). The way of worship is not neutral as regards the way of behaving. From a rational God, rational rules of conduct will be derived. From an unfathomable God, these rules will not be derived. Wollstonecraft is, furthermore, distrustful towards a kind of worship based on pure affection; sentimentalism is not a kind of relationship with God that particularly attracts her favour.

The rational kind of devotion is connected to the development of the subject. The individual who aims to acquire virtue or knowledge ought to love God as a source of wisdom. To have a specific form of reverence means having a specific life attitude and a specific moral orientation. Reverence for God as wisdom corresponds to an individual's attitude aiming at knowledge and virtue. Reverence for

---

*tions in Morals*, p. 113) Price points out the presence of a plurality of attributes in God; moreover, he sees as foundations of God's authority not only power but reason and wisdom too. I am indebted to the study of B. Taylor, *The religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism*, for the discovery of this passage (see, in the mentioned study, p. 111, and footnote 23, p. 117). For a reconstruction of the influences exercised by the Rational Dissenters on Mary Wollstonecraft's thought, I refer to the essay of G.J. Barker-Benfield, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthwoman*, and to the essay of Chris Jones, *Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindications and their political tradition*. For the reconstruction of the social and political milieu of the Rational Dissenters, see the book of Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (in particular the chapter 'Religion and Radicalism: The Political Theory of Dissent').

God as an entity which is exclusively unfathomable and absolute power corresponds to an attitude of blind affection. The following text can give us new elements about the connection between the interpretation of the Supreme Being and the foundation of morality in Mary Wollstonecraft:

'The only solid foundation for morality appears to be the character of the supreme Being; the harmony of which arises from a balance of attributes; – and, to speak with reverence, one attribute seems to imply the *necessity* of another. He must be just, because he is wise; he must be good, because he is omnipotent. For to exalt one attribute at the expense of another equally noble and necessary, bears the stamp of the warped / reason of man – the homage of passion. Man, accustomed to bow down to power in his savage state, can seldom divest himself of this barbarous prejudice, even when civilization determines how much superior mental is to bodily strength; and his reason is clouded by these crude opinions, even when he thinks of the Deity. – His omnipotence is made to swallow up, or preside over his other attributes, and those mortals are supposed to limit his power irreverently, who think that it must be regulated by his wisdom. I disclaim that specious humility which, after investigating nature, stops at the author. – The High and Lofty One, who inhabiteth eternity, doubtless possesses many attributes of which we can form no conception; but reason tells me that they cannot clash with those I adore – and I am compelled to listen to her voice.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 114–115)

Passions ought not to influence the interpretation of God's attributes. If one attribute of God is privileged, the equilibrium is put in danger. Passions are the cause and the origin of a false veneration of God. Mary Wollstonecraft polemises against and criticises the presence of passions and of the warped reason in the reverence of God. Her theological conception foresees an equilibrium between the attributes of God: justice, wisdom, goodness, and omnipotence are all attributes of God. They constitute harmony in the essence of God; there is no attribute which is superior to another attribute. No attribute of God is more important than another attribute of God: there is no point in giving priority to one attribute over the other attributes. A right conception of God should consider all these attributes. Any conception of God that gave greater importance to one of these attributes than to another one would be false.

The cause of the mistake in the conception of God's essence is due to the predominance of one or another passion in the minds of men. In particular, the predominance given to the attribute of omnipotence is due to the men's habit of bowing down to power: the conception of an omnipotent God, whose omnipotence is given a particular value in comparison with the other attributes, corresponds, within the theological field, to the organisation of the society. The conception of God is a mirror of the values of society. A society which is organised on the basis of submission to power will privilege a vision of God as omnipotent. A society which is organised on the basis of the blind acceptance of power will be based on a conception of God who is omnipotent and mysterious.

Mary Wollstonecraft considers bowing to God as a sign of a savage state. Individuals bow to power when they are not civilised. Individuals are the prey of the attitude of bowing down even when it has become clear that the authentic value of the individual is the reason. Reason needs a long time to affirm itself. Religion, if it is interpreted as a source of affection and imagination, does not make the individual a more moral being. This kind of religion is not something that improves the individual's morality.

The characteristics of the political absolute power are transposed in the attributes of the Deity: the omnipotence of God corresponds to the omnipotence of power. There is, in this conception of divinity, no idea of a direction of omnipotence through wisdom: all theological conceptions which aims to point out the compresence of omnipotence and wisdom are rejected, in this conception, as irreverent towards the nature of God, since these theological conceptions are accused of limiting the power of God. Since individuals are submissive to the power of other men, individuals interpret God as absolute power. Ways of interpreting God correspond to ways of interpreting society. The weight given to the attribute of omnipotence without consideration for the other attributes is a sign of the values dominating society.

Through the relation between the submission to power in society and the submission to the omnipotence of God, Mary Wollstonecraft seems to suggest that modification of theology and modification of society will go together: the new age of enlightenment will bring about a change both in theology and in society. Any criticism of society involves a criticism of theology too: the unjust relations between individuals in society have produced an unjust theology. Both traditional society and traditional theology need to be changed; there cannot be a modification of only one aspect, since everything is bound together. The diversity in theological attitudes is a difference in political attitudes too: one should not obey without understanding. Blind obedience is not a virtue.

Faith in God is connected to reverence for the rights of men:

'I reverence the rights of men. – Sacred rights! for which I acquire a more profound respect, the more I look into my own mind; and, professing these heterodox opinions, I still preserve my bowels; my heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies – and I FEAR God! I bend with awful reverence when I enquire on what my fear is built. – I fear that sublime power, whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good; and I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces from this view of my dependence on him. – It is not his power that I fear – it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring *reason* I submit.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 34)<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> On Mary Wollstonecraft's positions regarding the French Revolution, I refer, for instance, to the study of Tom Furniss, *Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution*.

Mary Wollstonecraft's reverence for God is submission to an unerring reason, not to a mysterious will. The reason is the foundation of faith. God is not arbitrary will. Mary Wollstonecraft asserts that her submission to God is not a submission to God as absolute power to whom absolute obedience is due. Her submission is a submission to God as reason, to God's being reason<sup>45</sup>.

'It is, however, sufficient for my present purpose to assert that, whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason; for if but one being was created with vicious inclinations, that is positively bad, what can save us from atheism? or if we worship a God, is not that God a devil?' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 90)

Wollstonecraft is convinced that every being can become virtuous through the exercise of reason. Reason is the disposition thanks to which individuals can become virtuous: the way of reason is the way to virtue. Wollstonecraft refuses the

---

<sup>45</sup> A further passage of Richard Price that could have been relevant to Mary Wollstonecraft's theological thought is the following one, in which Price expresses his opinions about the right way to speak with believers: 'Convince them that the Deity is a righteous and benevolent as well as omnipotent being, who regards with equal eye all his creatures, and connects his favour with nothing but an honest desire to know and to do his will; and that zeal for mystical doctrines which has led men to hate and harass one another will be exterminated. Set religion before them as a rational service, consisting not in any rites and ceremonies, but in worshipping God with a pure heart and practising righteousness from the fear of his displeasure and the apprehension of a future righteous judgment, and that gloomy and cruel superstition will be abolished which has hitherto gone under the name of religion, and to the support of which civil government has been perverted. Ignorance is the parent of bigotry, intolerance, persecution and slavery. Inform and instruct mankind; and these evils will be excluded.' (*A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, p. 181–182) As we can see, Price's reform of thinking is not limited to the representation of the civil government: Price's reform proposals involve the interpretation of the Deity: In Price's opinion, the conception of the Deity ought to be presented with particular characters:

- Deity is righteous.
- Deity is benevolent.
- Deity is omnipotent.
- Deity regards with equality all creatures.
- Superstition is not religion.
- Superstition ought not to be the basis for a civil government.
- Instruction is the remedy against ignorance, intolerance, persecution, and slavery.

Righteousness, benevolence, and omnipotence are co-present in the Deity; an identification of Deity with omnipotence would be, for instance, a clear mistake in the representation of the Deity. It ought not to be accepted, on the other hand, that the worship of God brings men to hate each other. Furthermore, Price underlines that religion ought to be a rational service; superstition ought to be abolished. Price points out that a false conception of religion consisting in superstition and in ignorance has misled many governments: a civil government should be based on a rational religion.

idea that subjects are created with vicious inclinations. If the doctrine that men are created with vicious inclinations is accepted, the way towards atheism is open. The conception that God creates men with vicious inclinations is a conception that transforms God into a devil.

As a conclusion of this section, I would like to propose the following passage, in which Mary Wollstonecraft clearly describes that religion has exclusively reason as its true foundation:

‘I hope I shall not be misunderstood when I say, that religion will not have this condensing energy, unless it be founded on reason. If it be merely the refuge of weakness or wild fanaticism, and not a governing principle of conduct, drawn from self-knowledge, and a rational opinion respecting the attributes of God, what can it be expected to produce? The religion which consists in warming the affections, and exalting the imagination, is only the poetical part, and may afford the individual pleasure without rendering it a more moral being. It may be a substitute for worldly pursuits; yet narrow, instead of enlarging the heart: but virtue must be loved as in itself sublime and excellent, and not for the advantages it procures 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 which they meet in this; if they turn their thoughts from relative duties to religious reveries.’ (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 184)

As we can see, religion ought not to become a kind of substitution of the present life: religion should not propose a future life of completeness as compensation for the delusions which individuals experience in their lives. Religion should give a moral constitution to the individual. Mary Wollstonecraft expresses her refusal of fanaticism. Religion ought to organise a principle of conduct. If religion is fanaticism, it cannot express moral conduct.

- Religion should be founded on reason if religion should produce the correct moral conduct.
- Religion should not be the refuge of weakness or of fanaticism.
- Religion should render the individual a more moral being.
- Religion should promote virtue for itself and not for the advantages which can come from being virtuous.
- Religion should not be a form of compensation for the failures of the average life.
- Mary Wollstonecraft refuses all forms of religion which warm the affections and enlarge the imagination: these forms can exclusively represent an excitement of the passions. Therewith the individual is not made a more moral man<sup>46</sup>.

---

<sup>46</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought is not extraneous to the respect for animals: ‘Humanity to animals should be particularly inculcated as a part of national education, for it is not at present one of our national virtues. Tenderness for their humble dumb domestics, amongst the lower class, is oftener to be found in a savage than a civilized state. For civilization prevents



### g) **Synthesis**

- Mary Wollstonecraft proposes a complete reform of the mind orientation.
- Women have no fixed nature: women assume the dispositions which the society wants them to assume.
  - The behaviour which women show is not a natural disposition; it is a social product.
    - At the basis of the false education, there is the conception that women have a different nature from men. Mary Wollstonecraft aims to show that women have no separate nature from men. The education should be based on awareness of the commonality of nature.
      - There is no immutable system of values. The order of society is not the immutable result of immutable values. Precise interests of groups of society lead to a particular form of society.
        - Education and formation of individuals are essential for the structure of society; the structure of society depends on the system of education and formation. Likewise, society gives a specific model of education in order to promote and conserve itself.
          - Reform of education is reform of minds; reform of minds is reform of society.
            - The common mental attitude is the principle of society: therefore, in order to change society, the common mental attitude needs to be changed. Since the mental attitude is given through education, the change of education is the indispensable process to achieve the change of society.
              - Mary Wollstonecraft's programme turns out to be, on closer inspection, a global reform of society, since it is a reform of the minds: she is thus directing her attention to the foundation of society itself.
                - There is no neutral education: education is always oriented to the individuals and to the citizens that the specific society wants to have.

---

that intercourse which creates affection in the rude hut, or mud [hovel], and leads uncultivated minds who are only depraved by the refinements which prevail in the society, where they are trodden under foot by the rich, to domineer over / them to revenge the insults that they are obliged to bear from their superiors. This habitual cruelty is first caught at school, where it is one of the rare sports of the boys to torment the miserable brutes that fall in their way. The transition, as they grow up, from barbarity to brutes to domestic tyranny over wives, children, and servants, is very easy. Justice, or even benevolence, will not be a powerful spring of action unless it [extend] to the whole creation; nay, I believe that it may be delivered as an axiom, that those who can see pain, unmoved, will soon learn to inflict it.' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 243–244) Mary Wollstonecraft considers as indispensable that the feeling of justice and benevolence is extended to all the entities of creation. She does not limit the application of positive feelings exclusively to human beings.

- The reform of education proves to be essential for a true reform of society. Without the reform of education, a real change in society is not possible.
- The promotion of independence ought to be the first target of a correct system of education.
- Blind obedience is, in social and family life, never to be accepted: it represents a danger to the development of free individuals.
- There is no fixed nature for individuals, in general, and for women, in particular.
- The way of thinking and of behaving of individuals, in general, and of women, in particular, is a product of the system of values and of the system of education accepted and adopted in a society; it is not dictated by an immutable nature.
- The unmasking of intents of domination over individuals (in particular, but not only, over women) that are concealed behind the idea of a supposed essence of individuals (of women) are indispensable processes for the reform of society.
- Virtue can only come from liberty and knowledge. Ignorance does not represent a good basis for virtue. Knowledge alone can be the basis for virtue.
- A faith which is based on passions is refused; a model of worship based on rationality is proposed.
- Any conception of God as a mysterious power, lying behind our possibility of understanding, is strongly refused. A model of submission to God as wisdom and goodness is pleaded for.
- Faith is a form of education; there is a correspondence between a particular kind of faith and a particular kind of education.

#### **h) Conclusion**

I would like to conclude my exposition with the quotation from a passage in which Mary Wollstonecraft underlines that the improvement of both sexes cannot take place if both sexes do not cooperate towards this improvement. There cannot be an authentic moral improvement involving only one sex:

*'The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other. This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending 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, or they will be cultivated to little effect (A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, p. 209)*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARKER-BENFIELD, G.J., Mary Wollstonecraft: Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthwoman, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50 (1979), pp. 95–115, or in: *Mary Wollstonecraft*, Edited by Jane Moore, Farnham, England – Burlington, USA, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 47–67.
- BURKE, E., *Reflections on the revolution in France and on the proceedings in certain societies in London relative to that event*, edited with an introduction by Conor Cruise O'Brien, London, Penguin Books, 1986.
- BURKE, E., *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the first Letter on a Regicide Peace*, edited by Iain Hampsher-Monk, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- EISENSTEIN, Z.R., *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, New York & London, Longman, 1981.
- FERGUSON, M. – Todd, J., *Mary Wollstonecraft*, Boston, Massachusetts, Twayne Publishers, 1984.
- FERGUSON, M. (ed.), *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578 – 1799*, edited and with an Introduction by Moira Ferguson, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985.
- FERGUSON, M., Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery, in: Ferguson, M., *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993 pp. 8–33, 145–149, or in: *Mary Wollstonecraft*, Edited by Jane Moore, Farnham, England – Burlington, USA, 2012, Ashgate, pp. 393–423.
- FURNISS, T., Mary Wollstonecraft' French Revolution, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 59–81.
- JACOBS, D., *Her Own Woman: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, New York, NY, Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- JOHNSON, C.L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- JONES, Ch., Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindications* and their political tradition, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, 2002, Cambridge University Press, pp. 42–58.
- KAPLAN, C., *Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism*, in: *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*, London, 1986, Verso, pp. 31–56.
- KAPLAN, C., Mary Wollstonecraft's reception and legacies, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, 2002, Cambridge University Press, pp. 246–270.
- KAUFFMAN, L. (ed.), *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, edited by Linda Kauffman, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- KELLY, G., *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*, New York, N.Y., St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1992.
- KNOTT, S. – Taylor, B. (eds.), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- KRAMNICK, I., *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1990
- LANDES, J.B., *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1988.

- MCMILLEN Conger, S., *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*, Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press – London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994.
- MELLOR, A.K., *Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the women writers of her day*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 141–159.
- MOORE, J. (ed.), *Mary Wollstonecraft, Edited by Jane Moore*, Farnham, England – Burlington, USA, Ashgate, 2012.
- POOVEY, M., *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- PRICE, R., *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals by Richard Price*, edited by D. D. Raphael, Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1974.
- PRICE, R., *Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Improvement of it*, in: *Political Writings*, edited by D.O. Thomas, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 1–13.
- PRICE, R., *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, in: *Political Writings*, edited by D.O. Thomas, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp 176–196.
- PRICE, R., *Political Writings*, edited by D.O. Thomas, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- REISS, T.J., *Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women, and Reason*, in: *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, edited by Linda Kauffman, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 11–50.
- RICHARDSON, A., *Mary Wollstonecraft on education*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 24–41.
- SAPIRO, V., *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- TAYLOR, N. Fuehrer, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera: The Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, UMI Dissertation Services; From:ProQuest Company, 2004.
- TAYLOR, B., *The religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 99–118.
- TAYLOR, B., *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- TOMALIN, C., *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Reprinted with revisions, illustrations and revised notes and bibliography, London, Penguin Books, 1992.
- WOLLSTONECRAFT, M., *The Vindications: The Rights of Men – The Rights of Woman*, edited by D.L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, Broadview Press, 1997.
- WOLLSTONECRAFT, M., *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd & Marylin Butler, assistant editor: Emma Rees-Mogg, Volume 1, *Mary, a Fiction – The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria – The Cave of Fancy*, London, William Pickering, 1989.
- WOLLSTONECRAFT, M., *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd & Marylin Butler, assistant editor: Emma Rees-Mogg, Volume 5, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men – A Vindication of the Rights of Woman – Hints*, London, William Pickering, 1989.

WOLLSTONECRAFT, M., *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited with an introduction by Miriam Brody, reprinted with new notes, London, Penguin Books, 1992.

WOLLSTONECRAFT, M., *A Vindication of the Rights of Men with A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*, edited by Sylvana Tomaselli, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

WOLLSTONECRAFT, M., *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. An Authoritative Text – Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*, edited by Deidre Shauna Lynch, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, New York – London, Norton, 2009.