

Women, Education and the Material Body Politic in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*

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[T]hat the science of politics is in its infancy, is evident from philosophers scrupling to give the knowledge most useful to man that determinate distinction.¹

In this talk, I discuss Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as books of philosophy about rational materialism. Based on an analysis of Lockean thought, as applied to the possibility of women's development of reason, Wollstonecraft suggests a new way to develop thought via materialism. She suggests that the mind is formed by experience and education, for women as well as for men.

Drawing on a body of texts by Edmund Burke and James Fordyce that suggested that women were more feeling than men, at the expense of their rationality, and responding to these texts, Wollstonecraft suggested women were rational, given education. She argued for the necessity of an expansion in the rights of education for women. Following an increase in reading, women as well as men would have rational consciousness. Further, she thought, an expanded consciousness for women would mean greater earning power and expanded political participation and representation. At this early, indeed, inceptive point in feminist history, Wollstonecraft perceived that nation-building was, as Iacovetta describes, a process that created "both citizens (or potential citizens) and noncitizens denied rights."² Wollstonecraft sought to address how women might perform nation building based on the connection between the household and the state.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft suggests that the field of political philosophy was in a formative stage in which the material formation of the minds of women should be no longer neglected. In an era that saw philosophers scrupling with a moral hesitation about "the knowledge most useful to man," and, implicitly, the knowledge most useful to women, she sought to promote the viability of women as thinking people, based on ideas from the material body and mind that she gathered from her medical experience and reading in the natural sciences.

In the discourse of rights of the 1790s, discussions of knowledge were at the centre of debates about humanity. Wollstonecraft joined the arguments about expanding rights, as in the writings of Joseph Johnson publishing circle, with a unique, feminist perspective. Her writing pondered the climate as it related to her situation, a literate woman with substantial experience in delivery health care (it was before the time when women might be licensed to practice medicine). She wondered whether, in the present climate, knowledge for women should be further considered. In her writings, she suggests that universal rights, should be those including rights for women.

The moment was crucial, when the definition of knowledge was at the important stage of gaining "determinate distinction" of "the science of politics," a field which she thought might accept expanded ideas of the educable female rationality.³ This was the first step in ensuring that women would be considered fully as persons before the law, in terms of gaining the right and access to own property, to gain employment to attend university and hold a profession, and to vote.

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, in *Mary Wollstonecraft: Vindication of the Rights of Woman; Vindication of the Rights of Men*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1999), 104.

² Iacovetta 110.

³ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 104.

Defining herself as one of the scrupling philosophers working on the question of that ‘most useful’ knowledge to man, and to woman, Wollstonecraft suggested a new way to develop political thought. She points out the present indeterminacy of the “science of politics” to suggest the necessity of a wider participation of intellectuals, including women, in politics. Wollstonecraft’s idea of the intellectual sphere suggested a space more supportive of women’s minds. Wollstonecraft’s philosophy suggested political opinions, including the opinions of women, to be informed by education and reading literature.⁴ With a “science of politics” would involve experimental philosophical rationalism without traditional sentiment, including the traditional sentimentalization of women and their minds.

The idea that women were anatomically capable of learning was a new aspect of the era’s philosophy of materialism. Wollstonecraft’s contributed to Romantic era materialism by stating that the minds of women were material organs. Earlier ideas about the mind, especially the female mind, located it near the heart, the seat of feeling. Instead of this less precise idea about the location of female motivation, Wollstonecraft thought about medical definitions of nerves and the brain. She adapted these ideas in the sphere of literary philosophy.

After Wollstonecraft’s experience with giving support in schools and private homes, she theorized the way that female reason might develop given the appropriate circumstance. In the principle area of development, she found that women’s minds had to be made able to express the faculty of “reason.”⁵ Without training of the mind as a muscle, the brain of a person might demonstrate, instead of reason, “random exertions” of the mind and “instinctive common sense,” a “negligent kind of guesswork.”⁶ Instead, Wollstonecraft stated, “I think, that from their infancy women should [be] educated in such a manner as to be able to think and act for themselves.” Solving a problem of the body or mind meant attention to the circumstances of material formation, and in particular to the period, the nervous complaints of an increasingly materially conceptualized mind.

Despite her encounter with opposing points of view, the crucial aspect of modern self-directed thought was, for Wollstonecraft, the development of a woman’s mind. To attain a situation of development, she believed that women should be instructed in a program of whole bodily and intellectual improvement, similar to men. This would ensure that the material brain of women would develop similarly. “Let us [be] allowed to take the same exercise as boys, not only during infancy, but youth,” she exhorted.⁷ Wollstonecraft profoundly disagreed with the period philosophy that girls were naturally less active than boys. Based on her experience as a governess and as a nurse raising children, and her own daughter, she developed a philosophical materialism of women’s minds.

Several sections of Wollstonecraft’s book are devoted to a discussion with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was a philosopher from the Enlightenment, prior to the Romantic era materialism and feminist intervention, who believed in the physical difference between the bodies and minds of men and women. Wollstonecraft’s philosophical response was situated directly in the realm of a practicability that is informed by her experience with the delivery of Enlightenment medicine in a practice based setting, with her mother and her sister’s illnesses, which was carried out with medical consultation, for the effective delivery of health care. On the education of Sophie in *Émile*, she replied:

⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 83.

⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 88.

⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 88.

⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 158.

I have, probably, had an opportunity of observing more girls in their infancy than J. J. Rousseau—...I have looked steadily around me; yet, so far from coinciding with him in opinion respecting the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to affirm, that a girl, whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp, and the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys, in short, would play harmlessly together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated[.]⁸

Characteristic of her feminist materialism, Wollstonecraft supports the intellectual interests of women to be of the same capacity. She denotes the physical similarity between men and women until differences are learned, or “inculcated.” Philosophically, the difference in mind between men and women is based on the gaining or absence of knowledge. The reaction potential for the minds of women, and the associations that minds will make, are consistent. Because of this, differences in knowledge opportunities affect the mind of any person.

Further, to expand women’s activity, she believed that co-education should be the recommended method. She recommended that this could be accomplished by a sociability, “by allowing the sexes to associate together in every pursuit.”⁹ “Men,” Wollstonecraft described, are “from their infancy” educated so that infancy is “broken into method.”¹⁰ This was to avoid the cultivation of a female feeling instead of a female rationality. She cautioned that women, if educated in feeling only, would be made “the weathercock of [their] own sensations.”¹¹ Instead, women should learn the methods of rationality; for if women were to become active, then their impressions should follow the Lockean method, and also be formed into a logical method.

Reconciling Women’s Bodies with Ideas about the Material Mind

Wollstonecraft stated that women might participate more actively by being clear on how women’s education would help them. To gain a comparable education to men, she suggested that women should be made adept in all the subjects that scholars such as James Fordyce and Edmund Burke suggested were inappropriate for their brains. She cited, “Gardening, experimental philosophy, and literature, would afford [women] subjects to think of and matter for conversation,” among educated people.¹² The categories were capacious in order to recommend the formation of clear thought in areas of intellectual philosophy, broadly considered. Gardening, an acceptable feminine accomplishment, could be succeeded by analytical natural science, including philosophies of the mind, and even literature, which might include a vast range: novels, read frequently by women, and poetry, less so, as well as essays, and political treatises. The philosophical tenor of multiple registers might resonate in the further expansion of women’s minds, and their activity in related fields, including discourse on contemporary issues of importance.

Wollstonecraft’s political philosophy attended to the rights and needs of woman to access the resources necessary for intellectual formation. Of particular concern to Wollstonecraft was the promotion of recommendations for women’s education in natural science and political philosophy. The crucial aspect of modern self-directed thought was, for Wollstonecraft, the development of a woman’s mind. With the understanding that women, such as herself, could develop a reasonable capacity, Wollstonecraft aimed, as a writer-activist, to carry out the vocation of promoting women’s expanded reading. To do so, she entered the political debate about human rights of the 1790s under

⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 110.

⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 264.

¹⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 88.

¹¹ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 84, 139.

¹² Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 147.

the guidance of her publisher, Joseph Johnson, who encouraged the work's production. Though many supported her work, she was entering a field of endeavour in which many, such as James Fordyce and Edmund Burke, believed that women could not be rational. This belief was held to be relevant in a physical sense, as well as in an intellectual one. This context situates the debate about the materialism of the brain, for women.

In writing *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she encountered opposing points of view. James Fordyce's conduct guide, *Sermons to Young Women*, recommended against women's learning of "the abstruser sciences", because natural and political science was "most properly the province of men."¹³ The idea of the superiority of the male mind in the sermons of Fordyce was based on a pre-Lockean idea of the rationality related to the idea of the male as a superior reason which might help men to develop superior minds. Spirit had long been considered the organ of the human body that might be educated. In Daniel Defoe's essay, "The Education of Women," he suggested, "The soul is placed in the body like a rough diamond; and must be polished, or the lustre of it will never appear. And 'tis manifest, that as the rational soul distinguishes us from brutes; so education carries on the distinction, and makes some less brutish than others."¹⁴ Fordyce defined the sciences as rarefied, and to be inadmissible to women. To support limiting access to areas of study to women, Fordyce suggested the physical inability of a proper female body to learn. Expressive of his idea of the development of reason as an exclusively male ability, physically, Fordyce defined any woman who was knowledgeable of these areas as a "masculine wom[a]n."¹⁵ Fordyce's idea about the materiality of the mind as the "province," or arability, only of a male, meant that any woman who might try to learn was developing a male body, in a physical sense. Changes in the mind would lead to changes in behaviour, a masculinization of the muscles and lineaments. Of course, Fordyce's idea was impossible, medically, and yet his opinion can show modern readers how a thought prior to Romantic era materialism might lead.

Fordyce's popular sermons were based on the more spiritual aspect of the mind that ignored the physical counterpart. To promote a social ascendancy of educated men over women, he took up a patently impossible physical circumstance of "masculine" femininity, or the woman who appeared to be developing a material mind. He explained to women that to remain young ladies, women should avoid reading in politics and in natural science: "[T]hose masculine women that would plead for your sharing any part of this province equally with us, do not understand your true interests," he suggested. He was holding up the possibility of a physical masculinization as a disincentive for women to reason.¹⁶

Burke, Wollstonecraft noticed, similarly despaired of a wide dissemination of the political sciences among women. In her *Rights of Woman*, following her earlier writing in *Rights of Man*, she pointed out that Burke suggested that political critique is not properly situated within the sphere of acceptable feminine accomplishments. He commented on the rise of contemporary citizens' political engagement by suggesting the public response in France was mostly composed of working women, who were therefore rude and unfeminine. These French women, he stated, were like 'creatures' who "abuse[d]" their bodies, intended for feminine domestic purposes, by their participation in political critique.¹⁷ In a scene of expanded political rhetoric, he described the women's bodies.

¹³ James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women*, 3rd ed., (London: 1766) 272.

¹⁴ Daniel Defoe, "The Education of Women," 1st edition 1719, *English Essays: From Sir Philip Sidney to Macaulay, with Introductions and Notes* (New York, New York: P. F. Collier, 1968) 148.

¹⁵ James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women*, 3rd ed., (London: 1766) 272.

¹⁶ James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women*, 3rd ed., (London: 1766) 272.

¹⁷ Burke, *Reflections* 61.

Women who claimed a right to some political participation, and who demonstrated a critical scrutiny and disapproval of government spending, and who became publically involved in demonstration, become mere bodies: women self-“abused” by transformative knowledge and action. They were bodies whom he described in profane terms, alternately as “furies,” mythical creatures from hades, and the “vilest women.”¹⁸ In contrast to Burke’s portrayal of Marie Antoinette as a goddess unjustly violated by the multitude, Wollstonecraft pointed out, his critique of the women of the multitude is based on his politicized negation of the women’s humanity due to their low social standing.

The politicized aspect of denial of women’s humanity when possessed of an intellect, essentially in identifying them as abnormal physically, became clear in Wollstonecraft’s analysis of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. As Wollstonecraft assessed, Burke despised the women for their attempt to gain “education” and their social position.¹⁹ Burke desecrated the women for attempting too much rationality, derived from an informal education in affairs of state that has led to their loss of feminine, proper feelings. The crowd’s display of some knowledge of events and the participation of women and men together in politics demonstrated an active rationality that highlighted an aspect of Burke’s own political materialism: that the inductive reason was to be learned only by those in possession of what he believed was sufficient mental capacity.

Development of the Mind and Political Representation

Natural philosophy was significant to Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Women* in terms of embodiment, because it allowed her to discuss the feminine gender of the nation in metaphors of embodiment such as Burke’s. To illustrate the situation of the political state in its present stasis, Wollstonecraft reformed the contemporary trope of the political state as a body. To address and suggest reform for women’s place in the present political state, I argue, Wollstonecraft undertook an analogy of the political state as a developing body that requires liberation to reach maturity.

Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s body was not uniquely female, but a body that she considered to be of equal significance for both sexes, because it comprised men and women. In scholarship, Wollstonecraft’s engagement with the body politic in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has been interpreted previously as a politics of the female person. The body politic, for Ana de Freitas Boe, represents Wollstonecraft’s apprehension of the politicized way in which women’s bodies become aesthetic objects, in Burkean terms.²⁰ Critiquing the “link between loveliness and sociability,” whereby aesthetic categories of beauty are naively assumed to enable domestic civility, de Boe argues that Wollstonecraft shows how the corrupted ideals of beauty damage women’s ability to carry out the domestic functions that beauty is supposed to prepare them to perform.²¹ It is in Wollstonecraft’s discussion of developing rationality in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that Wollstonecraft proposes the greater political participation of men and women. Wollstonecraft makes a point about the repressed development of girls to link the individual female and male body with the repressed development she suggests is the problem with the politics of the nation. That is, her ‘politics’ of the individual body, understood primarily with respect to collective views of the singular body, contributes to her philosophy of the pluralized state. Indeed, Wollstonecraft responds to Burke’s ‘body politic,’ which I understand in the philosophical terms I have outlined in the previous chapter (rather than the aesthetic ones), to

¹⁸ Burke, *Reflections* 61.

¹⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men* 29.

create a distinctive analogy of a potentially more productive state body. In her idea of the perfect state, women's and men's bodies work together as a collective, creating a body politic that is as healthy as the "rational" and "moral" citizens. Her body politic is personified without gender to represent a strength and self-sufficiency indicative of her maxim that 'intellect will govern.'²² Wollstonecraft's state is based upon the cooperation of sexes.

The link between individual and state was in the reality that women compose a significant portion, half, of the body politic, with potentially great influence. Women who might develop their minds could be moved to a great, active productivity, and so she suggested that a problem for women was a problem for the state. Following her statement that every woman and "man is a microcosm," and every 'family a state,' Wollstonecraft wondered how she might suggest a better "morality" to affect "the constituent parts of the body politic."²³ She linked morality with the active consciousness. She supported her argument with stories of productive women, and their moral influence on society. In the family, she found, "Many individuals have more sense than their male relatives."²⁴ Her periphrasis strengthened the merits of her subjects as people in the careful substitution of the word 'individuals' for 'women.'

She presented it as a universally accepted natural philosophical observation that "intellect will always govern."²⁵ She equates intellect with Newton's force of gravity. Just as two weights on a scale will cause motion until the heavier weight tips the balance, the struggle for governance should give weight to intellect, independent of a person's sex. After this analogy, she explained "as nothing preponderates where there is a constant struggle for an equilibrium, without it has naturally more gravity, some women govern their husbands."²⁶ The women govern, she explains, because they have "more sense."²⁷

Regardless of whether the person is a woman or a man, "Intellect will always govern," she believed.²⁸ The literary intellectual, she suggested, was aptly positioned to offer instruction within the analogical framework for the political thought.²⁹ The uncertainty in how to accomplish the goals at hand arose because men of letters such as Burke appeared to question how significant rationality could be in the work of women. Wollstonecraft thought that greater significance should be given to rational decisions in the determinations of moral philosophy for women.

As she was aware, Burke believed the "science of constructing a commonwealth" was "like every other experimental science," although she disagreed with his understanding of the experimental, as it might be a means of carrying improved access of women to knowledge. Philosophy, for Wollstonecraft, was a field where more accurate ideas about nature might be discovered and validated without the influence of feeling. As Burke believed, experimental society was an inherited body of knowledge tested and passed down, carefully, in a way that opened up

²² Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 75.

²³ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 264.

²⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 75.

²⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 75.

²⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 75.

²⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 75.

²⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 75.

²⁹ Wollstonecraft developed experience in children's education through several positions as governess, teacher, and children's author. Her children's book, *the Stories from Real Life; with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind* (London, UK: Joseph Johnson, 1788, 1791), describes the successful teaching of two young girls by a governess, who remediates their minds after their faulty former education.

admissible areas for revision.³⁰ Wollstonecraft took issue with Burke's suggestion that political philosophy was like a natural philosophy of feeling that she saw was based on a patriarchal belief system of aesthetics.

The development of the political state, for Wollstonecraft, was contingent on the education of women for care of the family, including the care of the female self. She states that, in addition to teaching women natural science, "It [wa]s likewise proper" to make "women acquainted with the anatomy of the mind."³¹ Women, she states, should

...observe the progress of the human understanding in the improvement of the sciences and arts; never forgetting the science of morality, or the study of the political history of mankind.³²

In this way, women might eventually gain the ability to argue for their rights. For Wollstonecraft, the rights of women extended to education in the material and political sciences for the purposes of conversation and bestowing this knowledge upon children, as their educators, upon the men in their domestic circle, in conversation, and upon the state, as working physicians, nurses, storekeepers, and in other employed roles. She clarified that women should be aware of "the character of the times, the political improvements, arts."³³ As she stated, when "[women] might, also, study politics, [they might] settle their benevolence on the broadest basis."³⁴ Eventually, she hoped, women might be emancipated sufficiently from their domestic responsibilities to demand a place in politics themselves. Wollstonecraft defined that politics "be not considered as the history of man" alone. She wants the context of each political person's achievement within a framework of developing rights to be acknowledged, so women will understand where they, as individuals, stand in relation to the great development of politics.

Conclusion

While the achievements of political representation remained a long way off, Wollstonecraft encouraged women's expanded role in the economy as productive workers in learned fields such as medicine, political philosophy, and scientific research. Wollstonecraft theorized that the education of women's rationalities and passions would develop the whole state body. She promoted a material "experimental science," as part of a process of improving the mind more generally. Practical, applied education would provide the model and means for a more productive state. "Reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy," as well as "gymnastic plays in the open air" were the activities Wollstonecraft recommended.³⁵ With such opportunity, women might work productively to contribute to their own wellbeing and to the prosperity of the nation. Women might be "supported by their own industry; they might be "practiced as physicians", or "regulate... a farm" or "manage... a shop."³⁶ Merging rationality and economic productivity, Wollstonecraft envisioned a more economically powerful state where the

³⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003), 51. See my discussion in Chapter 2.

³¹ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 264.

³² Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 264.

³³ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 229.

³⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 229.

³⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 235.

³⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 230.

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workforce would be increased, almost by double, if women might become self-sufficient after education.