
Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, and the Proto-feminists

The Romantic period was one marked by turmoil and deep unrest within England. The morality of the slave trade was questioned, the Industrial Revolution deepened the rift between the working class and aristocracy, and the French Revolution was on the rise in France, drawing the attention of those in England who felt oppressed. In the midst of these various revolutions and uprisings, women also began to question their place in society, aligning themselves with slaves and the implications that came with being deemed property. Two women, Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Letitia Barbauld, took to writing in order to proclaim their incredibly opposing views on the topic of women's rights. While Wollstonecraft argued for education of women in *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*, Barbauld used her poem "The Rights of Woman" to outline the consequences of ambition. In *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the need for female education in order to better unite men and women.

This idea is made clear from the beginning of *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman* when Wollstonecraft states in her dedication, "if [woman] not be prepared by education to become the companion to man, she will stop progress of knowledge and virtue," making the claim that both the hindrance of comprehension and moral indecency are caused by the poor education women receive (211). She also highlights the fact that women are not properly cultivated to be companions to man, but that an education would allow man and woman to better connect. The highlights of a woman's education do little in regard to preparation to share a life together as partners, but focus on being a submissive showpiece.

Wollstonecraft describes the characteristics girls are taught to adopt: Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives (217). Emphasis of female education, which is passed along by an equally uneducated mother, includes shallow traits that breed girls into docile women who do not question their place in society. Furthermore, beauty is held in high regard, meaning that beautiful girls need not acquire any knowledge, but rather focus on maintaining their beauty, as it will bring them the protection and affection of a husband.

Wollstonecraft goes on to condemn the infantile education women receive and how that futile education leads to infidelity in marriage. She compares the effectiveness of the skills women learn to the passing of the seasons, indicating that they are not life skills, but a form of flattery that soon becomes ineffective. The diminishing effectiveness of charm is outlined when Wollstonecraft writes, "the woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her

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charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone," indicating that the inability to be anything but endearing will soon be ineffective in maintaining the relationship between husband and wife (224). Once charm no longer woe the husband, women possess no other skills or intellect to keep their husband's loyalty, and the husband may become unfaithful. The inability for a couple to communicate on a more intimate level eventually leads to infidelity by the husband and unwavering compliance by the wife, further weakening the marriage.

According to Wollstonecraft, the way to combat this phenomenon is to educate women. She gives the advice, "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 endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing," simultaneously advocating for the education of women and addressing the misogyny present in society (Wollstonecraft 221). In this passage, Wollstonecraft is drawing attention away from women, and to the patriarchal structure that leads to oppression, and how that structure is corrupt. The use of the words tyrant and sensualist are extremely powerful accusations because they indicate moral indecency in a society that holds virtue in such high regard.

Barbauld uses her poem "The Rights of Woman" as a response to Wollstonecraft, arguing that if women were to attain more rights, they would reign over men, causing a reversal of roles, rather than a gaining of equality. She takes an extreme stance, essentially claiming that men and women cannot obtain equality in society because male rights would diminish if women were to attain more liberties. This ideology has the implication that rights are limited in quantity, and that granting one group of people more rights would result in fewer rights of another. This belief can be seen when Barbauld writes, "Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign, / And kiss the golden sceptre of thy reign" indicating that men would have to forfeit their liberties in order for women to be of equal standing (7-8). This passage also addresses the way Barbauld believes Wollstonecraft views men, which is as tyrannical rulers who dominate over women rather than as people she wishes to call her equal.

Furthermore, Barbauld argues that women wishing to become educated and the counterpart of men are simply following a whim of fancy, and that the aspiration of equality will soon pass. She indicated that the nature of women is to be "Subduing and subdued, thou soon shalt find / Thy coldness soften, and thy pride give way," indicating that the longing for equality is a fleeting emotion rooted in pride (Barbauld 27-28). The use of the words subduing and subdued also imply that the negative emotions being felt by women such as Wollstonecraft are irrational and can be overcome by the comfort and convincing of other women who do not agree with movement for women's rights.

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Moreover, Barbauld accuses women that long for more freedom to be cold, which is not a quality women would wish to possess since men sought tender and affectionate women to make their wives. While Wollstonecraft used images of the home in her works, Barbauld describes violence and war throughout her poem in order to discourage readers from partaking in a potential movement for women's rights. The third stanza of "The Rights of Woman" are particularly evident of violence when Barbauld writes, "Go, gird thyself with grace; collect thy store / Of bright artillery glancing from afar; / Soft melting tones thy thundering cannon's roar, / Blushes and fears thy magazine of war," depicting a battle scene in which women, plated in armor, use weaponry to demand their rights from men (9-13). Aligning the movement for a better education with war, particularly at the time, will be incredibly effective in turning people away from the movement because of the violence that occurred during the French Revolution. By aligning Wollstonecraft and the other women seeking quality education with the Revolutionaries in France, both women and men alike will be reluctant to join the movement since the Reign of Terror specifically caused many Englishman to lose support in the revolution.

As with all movements, two distinct sides surfaced, one being that of Mary Wollstonecraft, in favor of the education and empowerment of females, and one being that of Anna Letitia Barbauld who believed that a movement for women's equality would result in a violent revolution headed by irrationality. Nearly 200 years later, women must still fight for equality in a patriarchal society. While women are better educated than they have been in the past, double standards, societal expectations of gender roles, and inequality in the workplace are dominant issues that plague females throughout the United States. On a global scale, women struggle throughout the world to gain control of their bodies, education, and to find worth in society. While women have come a long way since Wollstonecraft and Barbauld, without the unrest of Wollstonecraft, or the resentment of Barbauld, women may not be able to experience all the freedoms that they do in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

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