

consequence of their education and station in society. If so, it is reasonable to suppose that they will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense.⁵

Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty.—If the latter, it will be expedient to open a fresh trade with Russia for whips; a present which a father should always make to his son-in-law on his wedding day, that a husband may keep his whole family in order by the same means; and without any violation of justice reign, wielding this sceptre, sole master of his house, because he is the only being in it who has reason:—the divine, indefeasible earthly sovereignty breathed into man by the Master of the universe. Allowing this position, women have not any inherent rights to claim; and, by the same rule, their duties vanish, for rights and duties are inseparable.

Be just then, O ye men of understanding! and mark not more severely what women do amiss, than the vicious tricks of the horse or the ass for whom ye provide provender:—and allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom ye deny the rights of reason: for ye will be worse than Egyptian task-masters, expecting virtue where nature has not given understanding!

RESPONSES

*Anna Letitia Barbauld: The Rights of Woman*¹

Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!

Woman! too long degraded, scorned, oppress;

O born to rule in partial^o Law's despite,

one-sided

Resume thy native empire o'er the breast!

5 Go forth arrayed in panoply^o divine;

armor

That angel pureness which admits no stain;

Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign,

And kiss the golden sceptre of thy reign.

Go, gird thyself with grace; collect thy store

10 Of bright artillery glancing from afar;

Soft melting tones thy thundering cannon's roar,

Blushes and fears thy magazine^o of war.

storehouse

5. I had further enlarged on the advantages which might reasonably be expected to result from an improvement in female manners, towards the general reformation of society; but it appeared to me that such reflections would more properly close the last volume. [Wollstonecraft's note; no further volumes were published.]

1. Barbauld wrote *The Rights of Woman* in 1795 in reaction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (it was not published until 1825). She was offended by the revolutionary rhetoric, and the seemingly un-Christian refutation of the "female" virtues of submission and obedience. In Chapter 4 ("Observations on the State of Degradation to Which Woman is Reduced by Various Causes"), moreover, Wollstonecraft cited her as a sorry example of how "even women of superiour sense" can voice sentiments that "rob the sex of its dignity": "How could Mrs. Barbauld write the following ignoble comparison?"

she exclaims, quoting "To a Lady, with some painted flowers" and pointedly italicizing several lines, among them: "Flowers SWEET, and gay, and DELICATE LIKE YOU; / Emblems of innocence, and beauty too . . . this soft family, to cares unknown, / Were born for pleasure and delight ALONE"; "Your BEST, your SWEETEST empire is—TO PLEASE." "So the men tell us," Wollstonecraft counters, "but virtue, says reason, must be acquired by . . . useful struggles with worldly cares." Barbauld's *Rights of Woman* retorts that women gain most from feminine influence of and on the heart. Yet her letters *On Female Studies* (1825) echo many of Wollstonecraft's values, including a lament on novel-reading and an insistence that the best wives, mothers, and family managers are educated in "the general character of a rational being."

For more about Barbauld, see her principal listing on page 65.

Thy rights are empire: urge no meaner^o claim,—
 Felt, not defined, and if debated, lost;
 15 Like sacred mysteries, which withheld from fame,
 Shunning discussion, are revered the most.

lower

Try all that wit and art suggest to bend
 Of thy imperial foe the stubborn knee;
 Make treacherous Man thy subject, not thy friend:
 20 Thou mayst command, but never canst be free.²

Awe the licentious, and restrain the rude;
 Soften the sullen, clear the cloudy brow:
 Be, more than princes' gifts, thy favours sued;—
 She hazards all, who will the least allow.

25 But hope not, courted idol of mankind,
 On this proud eminence secure to stay;
 Subduing and subdued, thou soon shalt find
 Thy coldness soften, and thy pride give way.

Then, then, abandon each ambitious thought,
 30 Conquest or rule thy heart shall feebly move,
 In Nature's school, by her soft maxims taught,
 That separate rights are lost in mutual love.

Ann Yearsley: The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin¹

Colin, why this mistake?
 Why plead thy foolish love?
 My heart shall sooner break
 Than I a minion^o prove;
 5 Nor care I half a rush,
 No snare I spread for thee:
 Go home, my friend, and blush
 For love and liberty.

darling

Remembrance is my own—
 10 Dominion bright and clear,
 Truth there was ever known
 To combat ev'ry care:
 One image there imprest
 Thro' life shall ever be,
 15 Whilst my innoxious^o breast
 Owns love of liberty.

innocent, blameless

2. The tone of this address is perplexing: is Barbauld satirizing what she takes to be the power politics of Wollstonecraft's argument, or has she misread the argument?

1. Ann Yearsley (1756–1806) adds a woman's poem to, and against, a famous late 16th-century dialogue volleyed by Christopher Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* ("Come live with me, and be my love, / And we will all the pleasures prove . . .") and Sir Walter Raleigh's wittily skeptical, *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd* ("If all the world and love were young, / And truth in every

shepherd's tongue . . ."). Her reply has a model in Cervantes' shepherdess Marcela, who defies all lovers to maintain her freedom (*Don Quixote*, pt. 1, chs. 12–14). Published in *The Rural Lyre* (1796), Yearsley's argument and key terms are also tuned to contemporary polemics on tyranny, slavery, and the oppression of women. For her abolition poetry, see page 251. Colin is a conventional name for a shepherd, deriving from Edmund Spenser's pastoral eclogues, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579).

I ever taught thee how
 To prize the soul entire,
 When on the mountain's brow
 20 I tun'd my rural lyre:
 Thou servile art and vain,
 Thy love unworthy me!
 Away! nor hear my strain,^o
 Of love or liberty. song

25 What arts need I display
 To woo a soul like thine?
 Thou ne'er canst know the way
 My mem'ry to confine;
 For my eternal plan
 30 Is to be calm and free.
 Estrang'd from tyrant man
 I'll keep my liberty.

Yon woods their foliage wear,
 Be thou away or nigh;
 35 The warblers of the year
 Instruct me not to sigh:
 My tears ne'er roll the steep,
 Nor swell the restless sea,
 Except for those who sleep
 40 Bereft of liberty.

Slave to commanding eyes!
 Those eyes thou wouldst commend
 My judgment must despise—
 My pity is thy friend:
 45 If eyes alone can move
 A swain so dull as thee,
 They mean but to reprove
 Thy loss of liberty.

I stray o'er rocks and fields
 50 Where native beauties shine:
 All fetter'd fancy yields
 Be, Colin, ever thine.
 Complain no more! but rove—
 My cheek from crimson^o free, shameful blush
 55 Within my native grove
 I'll guard my liberty.

Robert Southey: To Mary Wollstonecraft¹

The lilly cheek, the "purple light of love,"²
 The liquid lustre of the melting eye,—

1. This and a sonnet *To Edith Southey* (his wife), preface his long poem *The Triumph of Woman* (*Poems*, 1797). For more about Southey, see page 268. Southey had not yet met Wollstonecraft.

2. See Thomas Gray, *Progress of Poesy* (1751–1754): "O'er her warm cheek and rising bosom move / The bloom of young desire and purple light of love."

Mary! of these the Poet sung, for these
 Did Woman triumph! with no angry frown
 5 View this degrading conquest. At that age
 No MAID OF ARC³ had snatch'd from coward man
 The heaven-blest sword of Liberty; thy sex
 Could boast no female ROLAND's martyrdom;⁴
 No CORDE's angel and avenging arm⁵
 10 Had sanctified again the murderer's name
 As erst when Caesar perish'd:⁶ yet some strains
 May even adorn this theme, befitting me
 To offer, nor unworthy thy regard.

Bristol, 1795⁷

1797

*William Blake: from Mary*¹

Some said she was proud some call'd her a whore
 And some when she passed by shut to the door
 A damp cold came o'er her her blushes all fled
 20 Her lillies & roses are blighted & shed
 "O why was I born with a different Face
 Why was I not born like this Envious Race
 Why did Heaven adorn me with bountiful hand
 And then set me down in an envious Land
 25 To be weak as a Lamb & smooth as a dove
 And not to raise Envy is call'd Christian Love
 But if you raise Envy your Merits to blame
 For planting such spite in the weak & the tame
 I will humble my Beauty I will not dress fine
 30 I will keep from the Ball & my Eyes shall not shine
 And if any Girls Lover forsakes her for me
 I'll refuse him my hand & from Envy be free."
 She went out in Morning attird plain & neat
 "Proud Mary's gone mad," said the Child in the Street
 35 She went out in Morning in plain neat attire
 And came home in Evening bespatterd with mire
 She trembled & wept sitting on the Bed side
 She forgot it was Night & she trembled & cried
 She forgot it was Night she forgot it was Morn

3. Joan of Arc ("Maid of Orleans") led the Dauphin's army to victory over the British, only to be convicted of witchcraft by the French ecclesiastical court; she was handed over to the British, who burned her at the stake.

4. Mme. Roland, friend of Wollstonecraft, guillotined in 1793 during the Reign of Terror; her famous last words were "O Liberty, how many crimes are committed in thy name!" Southey fleetingly evokes the famous male "Roland," the courageous, self-sacrificing knight of medieval romance epics.

5. Charlotte Corday, French patriot allied with the moderate Girondists, repelled by the Reign of Terror, stabbed Jean Paul Marat to death in his bathtub in 1793; she was guillotined four days later.

6. Julius Caesar's assassination in the Senate (44 B.C.E.) was avenged by the Roman citizenry, led by Mark Antony and Augustus Caesar.

7. Added in Southey's 1837 Poems.

1. In the wake of the scandal of Godwin's *Memoir*, Blake casts "Mary" as a Blakean martyr and exile. For more about Blake, see his principal listing on page 169.

- 40 Her soft Memory imprinted with Faces of Scorn
 With Faces of Scorn & with Eyes of disdain
 Like foul Fiends inhabiting Marys mild Brain
 She remembers no Face like the Human Divine
 All Faces have Envy sweet Mary but thine
- 45 And thine is a Face of sweet Love in Despair
 And thine is a Face of mild sorrow & care
 And thine is a Face of wild terror & fear
 That shall never be quiet till laid on its bier.

c. 1802–1803

1866



THE WRONGS OF WOMAN; OR MARIA Taking a cue from the popular genres that fueled the campaign for abolition in the 1790s, Wollstonecraft decided a novel could convey the arguments of *Rights of Woman*. Even though *Rights* cited “stupid novelists” for corrupting women into creatures of “sensation” and perpetuating damaging gender stereotypes, she was aware of William Godwin’s success in translating the themes of *Political Justice* (1793) into a novel about legal tyranny, *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). She opens *Maria* with its heroine imprisoned in a madhouse by her husband, who has claimed her property and her daughter. “Marriage has bastilled me for life,” Maria says, with a historically resonant verb; “the world is a vast prison” in which women are “born slaves.” Of the several stories of wronged women in *Maria*, one of the longest and most searing is told by Maria’s warder Jemima, hardened by life but pitying Maria and aiding her friendship with another prisoner, Henry Darnford, soon to be her lover. Jemima’s story conveys Wollstonecraft’s concern not just with middle-class women such as Maria but also with those from the margins of society. One of the first “feminist” novels in English literature, *Maria* emphasizes the “wrongs” devolving on “Woman,” regardless of class. As in *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft exposes a social and political text that might be revised. Begun in 1796 and left unfinished, *Maria* was published in 1798 by Joseph Johnson, in Godwin’s *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Square brackets indicate Godwin’s interpolations.

from *The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria*

“My father,” said Jemima, “seduced my mother, a pretty girl, with whom he lived fellow-servant; and she no sooner perceived the natural, the dreaded consequence, than the terrible conviction flashed on her—that she was ruined.¹ Honesty, and a regard for her reputation, had been the only principles inculcated by her mother; and they had been so forcibly impressed, that she feared shame, more than the poverty to which it would lead. Her incessant importunities to prevail upon my father to screen her from reproach by marrying her, as he had promised in the fervour of seduction, estranged him from her so completely, that her very person became distasteful to him; and he began to hate, as well as despise me, before I was born.

“My mother, grieved to the soul by his neglect, and unkind treatment, actually resolved to famish herself; and injured her health by the attempt; though she had not sufficient resolution to adhere to her project, or renounce it, entirely. Death came not at her call; yet sorrow, and the methods she adopted to conceal her condition, still doing the work of a house-maid, had such an effect on her constitution, that she

1. A sexual double standard strongly criticized in *Rights of Woman*.

≡ PERSPECTIVES ≡

The Wollstonecraft Controversy and the Rights of Women

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* challenged an age when women had no legal standing as daughters or wives, being under the coverture (legal identity) of fathers or husbands. They could not own property, form contracts, or conduct business. "Obedience" was expected behavior, sanctioned by religion, law, and custom; a rebellious daughter (one, for instance, refusing her father's choice of her husband) could be disowned; divorce was granted only by husbands, who retained custody of all property (including dowry) as well as the children (a prime reason many women remained in abusive marriages). Female suffrage was so remote that it could not be debated for another century or so. Women had no legal status, no representatives for their concerns in Parliament. It was not until 1870 that the Married Woman's Property Act was passed, allowing a wife to keep her earnings, and not until 1882 that it was amended to allow her to keep the property, including personal property, that she brought to the marriage (dowry) or acquired during it; this act also gave a woman the right to enter contracts and to sue in courts, as well as a legally distinct identity from her husband.

England was not alone in the 1790s in resisting change: even in Revolutionary France advocates for women's rights were sent to the guillotine. French women did not secure the vote until 1944, nearly a century after American feminists presented the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions at Seneca Falls. The way was paved for these changes by the debate from the 1790s onward over female education, women's rights, and social policy—a debate that even among women involved disparate, even opposed, commitments. When Maria Edgeworth proposed to Anna Barbauld that they coedit a periodical featuring "the literary ladies of the present day," Barbauld declined: "There is no bond of union among literary women, any more than among literary men; different sentiments and different connections separate them much more than the joint interest of their sex would unite them. Mrs. Hannah More would not write along with you or me, and we should probably hesitate at joining Miss Hays, or if she were living, Mrs. Godwin [Wollstonecraft]." Our selections suggest the wide range of concerns in this debate and the wide range of responses it involved, in particular to Wollstonecraft—a lightning rod in this charged atmosphere.

— — — — —

Catharine Macaulay

1731–1791

There was scarcely any woman Wollstonecraft esteemed more than Catharine Macaulay. Daughter of a wealthy landowner in Kent and an heiress of a London banker, young Catharine grew up in comfort, and was left well off at the death of her husband, an eminent London obstetrician, in 1776. Her major work is the controversial eight-volume *History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line* (the current monarchy), published over twenty years (1763–1783). Its defense of Cromwell's regicidal government and its generally antimonarchal Whig sympathies endeared her to Wollstonecraft, poet Thomas Gray, and even Prime Minister William Pitt, while earning Edmund Burke's contempt of her as a "republican Virago." Not surprisingly, her political writings were more popular in France and America than in England. In 1785, she visited George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon and later corresponded with them, as well as with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. But as with Wollstonecraft, her politics produced enemies and vicious misogynist attacks on

cultivation, and in modern days have subjected them to the censure and ridicule of writers of all descriptions, from the deep thinking philosopher to the man of ton⁵ and gallantry, who, by the bye, sometimes distinguishes himself by qualities which are not greatly superior to those he despises in women. Nor can I better illustrate the truth of this observation than by the following picture to be found in the polite and gallant Chesterfield. "Women," says his Lordship, "are only children of a larger growth. They have an entertaining tattle, sometimes wit; but for solid reasoning, and good sense, I never in my life knew one that had it, or who acted or reasoned in consequence of it for four and twenty hours together. A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them, as he does an engaging child; but he neither consults them, nor trusts them in serious matters."⁶

Richard Polwhele

1760-1838

Reverend Polwhele was educated at Oxford, first training for the law. He wrote poetry, histories, journalism, theological tracts, and translations of Greek literature, and was a frequent contributor to conservative journals, including the *Anti-Jacobin*. Among his mother's friends were two writers on the situation of women, Hannah More and Catharine Macaulay, whom he met in 1777. For an elaborate birthday celebration for Macaulay, he wrote an ode which he included in his first volume of poetry, 1777. *The Unsex'd Females* appeared in 1798, at the end of a decade of vigorous debate about women's rights inaugurated by Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790) and Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* (1792).

By 1798, both Macaulay and Wollstonecraft were dead, and a reactionary political climate as well as the scandal of Godwin's *Memoirs* had dealt "rights of woman" a serious setback. The safest voices called for female education in modest, virtuous intelligence, trained to piety, obedience, and domestic duty, in order to become good Christian daughters, wives, and mothers. Fresh from reading Godwin's *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft, Polwhele, with tones tipping from nasty to horrified, castigated its scandals in a review for the *European Magazine* and in *The Unsex'd Females*. The poem casts radicals such as Wollstonecraft as "unnatural," "licentious," anti-Christian revolutionaries, driven by godless "Reason." Yet its indictment, in addition to Wollstonecraft and allies Helen Maria Williams and Mary Hays, includes women of quite different views, having in common only a public voice: poet and novelist Charlotte Smith, initially a sympathizer with the French Revolution, but famous by 1793 for *The Emigrants* (see page 91) and by the decade's end, an outspoken reactionary; Anna Barbauld, an abolitionist, but no revolutionary, no fan of Wollstonecraft, and very qualified on women's rights; Mary Robinson, advocate of abolition but no political firebrand; Ann Yearsley, advocate for the poor, abolitionist, but also a voice of sympathy in *Reflections on the Death of Louis XVI* (1793) and *An Elegy on Marie Antoinette* (1795). So as not to seem categorically misogynist, Polwhele ends celebrating conservative eighteenth-century bluestocking women, a "kindred train" who "influence" through "modest virtue," and allied with such conservatives as Horace Walpole, Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson, and Edmund Burke: the "Queen of the Blues" Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800), scholar and poet Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), poet and educational

5. Fashion.

6. *Letters to His Son* no. 294 (16 November 1752), also cited in *Rights of Woman*, ch. 4. Philip Chesterfield (1694–1773), statesman, author, and wit, wrote letters of

advice to his illegitimate son from age five until his own death; published in 1774, these became famous (or infamous) for their comments on sexual behavior and rituals.

Christ Hester Chapone (1727–1801), poet Anna Seward (1743–1809), woman of letters Peter Thrale Piozzi (1741–1821), novelists Frances Burney (1752–1840) and Anne Radcliffe (1764–1823). He ventriloquizes his praise through the voice of their disciple Hannah More, whose views on the “natural” differences of the sexes and their separate spheres he warmly opposes. Polwhele’s voluminous footnotes are an important part of his polemic. We include them, especially on the question of women’s rights and on other writers in this volume.

from *The Unsex’d Females*¹

Thou, who with all the poet’s genuine rage,
Thy “fine eye rolling” o’er “this awful age,”²
Where polish’d life unfolds its various views,
Hast mark’d the magic influence of the muse;
Sever’d, with nice precision, from her beam
Of genial power, her false and feeble gleam;
Expos’d the Sciolist’s³ vain-glorious claim,
And boldly thwarted Innovation’s aim,
Where wirlings wildly think, or madly dare,³
With Honor, Virtue, Truth, announcing war;
Survey with me, what ne’er our fathers saw,
A female band despising NATURE’s law,⁴
As “proud defiance”⁵ flashes from their arms,
And vengeance smothers all their softer charms.

superficially learned

I shudder at the new unpictur’d scene,
Where unsex’d woman vaunts the imperious mien;
Where girls, affecting to dismiss the heart,
Invoke the Proteus of petrific art;⁶
With equal ease, in body or in mind,
To Gallic freaks or Gallic faith⁷ resign’d,
The crane-like neck, as Fashion bids, lay bare,

“Unsex’d” by a rejection of “feminine” decorum. “Come, unsex me here!” cries Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth to the spirits steeling her to regicide (1.5.42 ff). The addressee is another Tory conservative scourge, Thomas James Mathias, whose long satirical poem *The suits of Literature* (1794–1797), also encased in foot-cases, inspired Polwhele’s. In his Preface to the fourth volume of this popular poem (16 editions), Mathias lamented that “our unsexed female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves, in the labyrinth of politics, or in us wild with Gallic frenzy”—French-inspired ideal fashions. He begins representing himself “not unconscious of this awful age” (1.7), echoing Milton’s representation of himself and other visionary poets as chastisers of their own age, “fall’n on evil days” (*Paradise Lost* 7.25). Cressus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream describes “the r’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling” (5.1.12). “Greatly think, or nobly die.” Pope [Polwhele’s note, wrongly misquoting l.10 of *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, a suicide in despair of love]. Nature is the grand basis of all laws human and divine: if the woman, who has no regard to nature, either in

the decoration of her person, or the culture of her mind, will soon “walk after the flesh, in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government” [Polwhele’s note, quoting 2 Peter 2.10; Rousseau and other defenders of sexual inequality routinely invoke “Nature’s” law].

5. “A troop came next, who crowns and armour wore, / And proud defiance in their looks they bore.” Pope. The Amazonian band—the female Quixotes of the new philosophy, are, here, too justly characterised [Polwhele’s note], quoting *The Temple of Fame* (1711, ll.342–343), the troop answering “the direful trump of Slander.” The Amazons, legendary race of warrior women, were fabled to have burnt off the right breast (a, without; *mazos*, breast) to facilitate use of bow or javelin. Quixotes (from Cervantes’ hero) are impractical idealists. The credulous heroine of Charlotte Lennox’s popular novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), expects her life to take shape as a French romance, only to be embarrassed by her folly.

6. Proteus: god able to change shapes at will; petrific: able to turn to stone, as if a Medusa, an unfeeling woman.

7. French fashions and the new (Godless) religion.

wigs

Or frizzle, bold in front, their borrow'd hair;⁹
 Scarce by a gossamery film carest,
 Sport, in full view, the meretricious breast;⁸
 25 Loose the chaste cincture,⁹ where the graces shone,
 And languish'd all the Loves, the ambrosial zone;
 As lordly doines inspire dramatic rage,
 Court prurient Fancy to the private stage;
 With bliss botanic¹ as their bosoms heave,
 30 Still pluck forbidden fruit, with mother Eve,
 For puberty in sighing florets pant,
 Or point the prostitution of a plant;
 Dissect² its organ of unhallow'd lust,
 And fondly gaze the titillating³ dust;
 35 With liberty's sublimer views expand,
 And o'er the wreck of kingdoms⁴ sternly stand;
 And, frantic, midst the democratic storm,
 Pursue, Philosophy! thy phantom-form.
 Far other is the female shape and mind,
 40 By modest luxury heighten'd and refin'd;
 Those limbs, that figure, tho' by Fashion grac'd,
 By Beauty polish'd, and adorn'd by Taste;

8. To "sport a face," is a cant phrase in one of our Universities, by which is meant an impudent obtrusion of a man's person in company. It is not inapplicable, perhaps, to the open bosom—a fashion which we have never invited or sanctioned. The fashions of France, which have been always imitated by the English, were, heretofore, unexceptionable in a moral point of view; since, however ridiculous or absurd, they were innocent. But they have now their source among prostitutes—among women of the most abandoned character [Polwhele's note]. Meretricious: whorish. An 18th-century French aristocratic fashion was a fancy-gown neckline plunged below the bosom, displaying it bare.

9. A wide belt around the waist and sometimes the bosom; it is "chaste" for concealing breasts and hips.

1. Botany has lately become a fashionable amusement with the ladies. But how the study of the sexual system of plants can accord with female modesty, I am not able to comprehend. I had first written: "More eager for illicit knowledge [sic] pant, / With lustful boys anatomize a plant; / The virtues of its dust prolific speak, / Or point its pistill with unblushing cheek." I have, several times, seen boys and girls botanizing together [Polwhele's note]. The immodesty of botanizing was broadcast by Erasmus Darwin's popular poem, *The Botanic Garden*, especially Part II, *The Loves of the Plants* (1789; 1791), explicit about sexual organs and activity.

2. Miss Wollstonecraft does not blush to say, in an introduction to a book designed for the use of young ladies, that, "in order to lay the axe at the root of corruption, it would be proper to familiarize the sexes to an unreserved discussion of those topics, which are generally avoided in conversation from a principle of false delicacy; and that it would be right to speak of the organs of generation as freely as we mention our eyes or our hands." To such language our botanizing girls are doubtless familiarized: and,

they are in a fair way of becoming worthy disciples of Miss W. If they do not take heed to their ways, they will soon exchange the blush of modesty for the bronze of impudence [Polwhele, alluding to Luke 3.9]. He misrepresents Wollstonecraft's statement in "Introductory Address to Parents," *Elements of Morality, For the Use of Children* (1792): concerned with masturbation and other "impure" practices, she contends that "the most efficacious method to root out this dreadful evil, which poisons the source of human happiness, would be to speak to children of the organs of generation as freely as we speak of the other parts of the body, and explain to them the noble use which they were designed for, and how they may be injured." In *Rights of Woman* (ch. 7: "Modesty") she refutes as "absurd" the "gross idea" that botany is inconsistent with female modesty, and lists it among the subjects that boys and girls might study together (ch. 12: "On National Education").

3. "Each pungent grain of titillating dust," Pope; "The prolific dust"—of the botanist [Polwhele's note, alluding to the "Charge of Smuff"—"The pungent Grains of titillating Dust"—Belinda hurls at her adversary in *The Rape of the Lock* (5.84)].

4. The female advocates of Democracy in this country, though they have had no opportunity of imitating the French ladies, in their atrocious acts of cruelty; have yet assumed a stern serenity in the contemplation of those savage excesses. "To express their abhorrence of royalty, they (the French ladies) threw away the character of their sex, and bit the amputated limbs of their murdered countrymen.—I say this on the authority of a young gentleman who saw it.—I am sorry to add, that the relation, accompanied with looks of horror and disgust, only provoked a contemptuous smile from an illuminated British fair-one." See Robinson [Polwhele's note, quoting *Proofs of a Conspiracy*].

That soul, whose harmony perennial flows,
 In Music trembles, and in Color glows;
 45 Which bids sweet Poesy reclaim the praise
 With faery light to gild fastidious days,
 From sullen clouds relieve domestic care,
 And melt in smiles the withering frown of war.
 Ah! once the female Muse, to NATURE true,
 50 The unvalued store from FANCY, FEELING drew;
 Won, from the grasp of woe, the roseate hours,
 Cheer'd life's dim vale, and strew'd the grave with flowers.

But lo! where, pale amidst the wild,⁵ she draws
 Each precept cold from sceptic Reason's⁶ vase;
 55 Pours with rash arm the turbid stream along,
 And in the foaming torrent whelms the throng.⁷

Alas! her pride sophistic⁸ flings a gloom, specious
 To chase, sweet Innocence! thy vernal bloom,
 Of each light joy to damp the genial glow,
 60 And with new terrors clothe the groupe of woe,
 Quench the pure daystar⁹ in oblivion deep, sun
 And, Death! restore thy "long, unbroken sleep."¹⁰

See Wollstonecraft, whom no decorum checks,
 Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex;
 65 O'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim,
 And slight the timid blush¹¹ of virgin fame
 "Go, go (she cries) ye tribes of melting maids,
 Go, screen your softness in sequester'd shades;
 With plaintive whispers woo the unconscious grove,
 70 And feebly perish, as depis'd ye love.
 What tho' the fine Romances of Rousseau
 Bid the frame flutter, and the bosom glow;
 Tho' the rapt Bard, your empire fond to own,
 Fall prostrate and adore your living throne,
 75 The living throne his hands presum'd to rear,
 Its seat a simper, and its base a tear;¹²
 Soon shall the sex disdain the illusive sway,
 And wield the sceptre in yon blaze of day;

5. "A wild, where flowers and weeds promiscuous shoot; / A garden tempting with forbidden fruit." Pope [Polwhele's note, quoting *Essay on Man* (1733): *Epistle I*, 7-8].

6. A troubled stream only, can proceed from the vase of scepticism [Polwhele's note, alluding to the Revolutionary goddess "Reason"].

7. "Raging waves, foaming out their own shame"—St. Jude. Such were those infamous publications of Paine and others, which, like the torrents of December, threatened to sweep all before them—to overwhelm the multitude [Polwhele's note].

8. "We, the great, the valiant and the wise, / When once the seal of death hath clos'd our eyes, / Shut in the hollow tomb obscure and deep, / Slumber, to wake no

more, one long unbroken sleep." Moschus [Polwhele's note; Moschus: 2nd-century B.C.E. Greek pastoral poet, whom Polwhele translated in a well-received publication of 1786].

9. That Miss Wollstonecraft was a sworn enemy to blushes, I need not remark. But many of my readers, perhaps, will be astonished to hear, that at several of our boarding-schools for young ladies, a blush incurs a penalty [Polwhele's note].

1. According to Rousseau, the empire of women is the empire of softness—of address: their commands, are caresses; their menaces, are tears [Polwhele's note, referring to *La Nouvelle Heloise* (1760) and *Émile* (1762), both criticized in *Rights of Woman*].

Ere long, each little artifice discard,
 80 No more by weakness² winning fond regard;
 Nor eyes, that sparkle from their blushes, roll,
 Nor catch the languors of the sick'ning soul,
 Nor the quick flutter, nor the coy reserve,
 But nobly boast the firm gymnastic nerve;³
 85 Nor more affect with Delicacy's fan
 To hide the emotion from congenial man;
 To the bold heights where glory beams, aspire,
 Blend mental energy with Passion's fire,
 Surpass their rivals in the powers of mind
 90 And vindicate *the Rights of womankind*.⁴
 She spoke: and veteran BARBAULD⁴ caught the strain,
 And deem'd her songs of Love, her Lyrics vain;
 And ROBINSON⁵ to Gaul her Fancy gave
 And trac'd the picture of a Deist's grave!
 95 And charming SMITH⁶ resign'd her power to please,

2. "Like monarchs, we have been flattered into imbecility, by those who wish to take advantage of our weakness," says Mary Hays (*Essays and Letters*, p. 92). But, whether flattered or not, women were always weak: and female weakness hath accomplished, what the force of arms could not effect [Polwhele's note, quoting her passionate endorsement of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*]. Hays's feminist *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women* appeared anonymously in 1798.

3. Miss Wollstonecraft seriously laments the neglect of all muscular exercises, at our female Boarding-schools [Polwhele's note].

4. Here . . . I have formed a groupe of female Writers; whose productions have been appreciated by the public as works of learning or genius—though not praised with that extravagance of panegyric, which was once a customary tribute to the literary compositions of women. In this country, a female author was formerly esteemed a Phenomenon in Literature: and she was sure of a favourable reception among the critics, in consideration of her sex. This species of gallantry, however, conveyed no compliment to her understanding. It implied such an inferiority of woman in the scale of intellect as was justly humiliating; and critical forbearance was mortifying to female vanity. At the present day, indeed, our literary women are so numerous, that their judges, w[ai]l[ing] all complimentary civilities, decide upon their merits with the same rigid impartiality as it seems right to exercise towards the men. The tribunal of criticism is no longer charmed into complacency by the blushes of modest apprehension. It no longer imagines the pleading eye of feminine diffidence that speaks a consciousness of comparative imbecillity, or a fearfulness of having offended by intrusion. Experience hath drawn aside the flimsy veil of affected timidity, that only served to hide the smile of complacency; the glow of self-gratulation. Yet, alas! the crimsoning blush of modesty, will be always more attractive, than the sparkle of confident intelligence.—Mrs. Barbauld stands the most conspicuous figure in the groupe. She is a veteran in Literature . . . Her poetry . . . is certainly, chaste and elegant. . . . I was sorry to find Mrs. B. . . . classed with such females as a Wollstonecraft. . . . But though Mrs. B. has lately published several political tracts, which if not discreditable to her talents and virtues, can by no means

add to her reputation, yet, I am sure, she must reprobate, with me, the alarming eccentricities of Miss Wollstonecraft [Polwhele's note].

5. In Mrs. Robinson's Poetry, there is a peculiar delicacy: but her Novels, as literary compositions, have no great claim to approbation—As containing the doctrines of Philosophism, they merit the severest censure. Would that, for the sake of herself and her beautiful daughter (whose personal charms are only equalled by the elegance of her mind) would, that, for the sake of the public morality, Mrs. Robinson were persuaded to dismiss the gloomy phantom of annihilation; to think seriously of a future retribution; and to communicate to the world, a recantation of errors that originated in levity, and have been nursed by pleasure! I have seen her, "glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor and joy!" Such, and more glorious, may I meet her again, when the just "shall shine forth as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever!" [Polwhele, quoting Burke's famous description of his first sight of princess Marie Antoinette; see *Reflections*, page 118.] "Philosophism" is the Enlightenment ideology of progress and human perfectibility through reason.

6. The Sonnets of Charlotte Smith, have a pensiveness peculiarly their own. It is not the monotonous plaintiveness of Shenstone, the gloomy melancholy of Gray, or the meek subdued spirit of Collins. It is a strain of wild, yet softened sorrow, that breathes a romantic air, without losing, for a moment, its mellowness. Her images, often original, are drawn from nature: the most familiar, have a new and charming aspect. Sweetly picturesque, she creates with the pencil of a Gilpin, and infuses her own soul into the landscape. There is so uncommon a variety in her expression, that I could read a thousand of such sonnets without lassitude. In general, a very few Sonnets fatigue attention, partly owing to the sameness of their construction. Petrarch, indeed, I can relish for a considerable time: but Spenser and Milton soon produce somnolence. . . . But why does she suffer her mind to be infected with the Gallic mania? [Polwhele's note. Other references are to the 18th-century poets William Shenstone, Thomas Gray, and William Collins, and to William Gilpin (1724–1804), author of illustrated picturesque tours of Britain, see page 47.]

Poetic feeling and poetic ease;
 And HELEN,⁷ fir'd by Freedom, bade adieu
 To all the broken visions of Peru.
 And YEARSELEY,⁸ who had warbled, Nature's child,
 100 Midst twilight dews, her minstrel ditties wild,
 (Tho' soon a wanderer from her meads and milk,
 She long'd to rustle, like her sex, in silk)
 Now stole that modish grin, the sapient sneer,
 And flippant HAYS⁹ assum'd a cynic leer ***

1798

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Priscilla Bell Wakefield

1751–1832

Of Quaker background, married to a prosperous London merchant, and devoted to philanthropy, Wakefield is best known for the instructional children's books she wrote in the 1790s, with subjects ranging from travel in Europe and the British empire to botany and zoology. Among her projects were "frugality banks" for the working classes and "lying-in" (childbirth) hospitals for poor women. Prison reformer Elizabeth Fry (satirized by Byron) was her niece. Wakefield's one work for adults, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798), vigorously argues for better education and more liberal employment opportunities for women at a time when their vocations were limited to domestic situations as servants, nurses, governesses, housekeepers, or slightly more independent enterprises as schoolmistresses, seamstresses, and shopkeepers.

7. Miss Helen Williams is, doubtless, a true poet. But is it not extraordinary, that such a genius, a female and so young, should have become a politician—that the fair Helen, whose notes of love have charmed the moonlight vallies, should stand forward, an intemperate advocate for Gallic licentiousness—that such a woman should import with her, a blast more pestilential than that of Avernus, though she has so often delighted us with melodies, soft as the sighs of the Zephyr, delicious as the airs of Paradise? [Polwhele's note]. See Williams's *Letters from France* (1792–1796), pages 109–110 and 138–43 her long political poem condemning imperial conquest, *Peru*, was published in 1784. Avernus is a lake in Italy thought to lead to the underworld; zephyr is the spring breeze.

8. Mrs. Yearseley's [sic] Poems, as the product of an untutored milk-woman, certainly entitled her to patronage; and patronage she received, from Miss H. More, liberal beyond example. Yet, such is the depravity of the human heart, that this milk-woman had no sooner her but cheered by the warmth of benevolence, than she spurned her benefactor from her door. . . . My business, however, with Mrs. Y. is to recall her, if possible, from her Gallic wanderings—if an appeal to native ingenuousness be not too late; if the fatal example of the Arch-priestess of female Libertinism, have any influence on a mind once stored with the finest moral sentiment [Polwhele's note]. For the falling out with More, see headnote to Yearsley, page 251; the "fatal example" is Wollstonecraft.

9. Mary Hays from her "Letters and Essays" . . . is evidently a Wollstonecraftian. "I cannot mention (says she) the admirable advocate for the rights of women, without pausing to pay a tribute of grateful respect, in the name of my sex, to the virtue and talents of a writer, who with equal courage and ability, hath endeavoured to rescue the female mind from those prejudices which have been the canker of genuine virtue. . . . The rights of woman and the name of Wollstonecraft, will go down to posterity with reverence." Mary Hays ridicules "the good lady who studied her Bible, and obliged her children to say their prayers, and go stately to church." Her expressions respecting the European Governments are, in a high degree, inflammatory [Polwhele's note]. The attacks on Wollstonecraft continue in the notes, recounting her infatuation with the married Fuseli, her affair with Imlay, her suicide attempts despite a young daughter, her premarital affair with Godwin, and her lack of church attendance or death-bed conversion. "I cannot but think, that the Hand of Providence is visible, in her life, her death and in [Godwin's] Memoirs. . . . As she was given up to her 'heart's lusts,' and let 'to follow her own imaginations,' that the fallacy of and the effects of an irreligious conduct, might be manifested to the world; and as she died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women and the diseases to which they are liable."

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

A very striking and just observation, with regard to the African, it must be granted; yet I cannot but differ in opinion, when it is said, that all mankind are capable of a compensation. For, admitting the same mode of reasoning to stand good, if the oppressions of one part of the creation are moderated through their ignorance, how much must the other be heightened by their sensibility and the refinements of education. Nor can I see the smallest trait of compensation remaining for these miserable females, since the very education they have received in youth, redounds to their misfortunes in maturity.

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

1795

Hannah More

1745–1833

Hannah More came from a High Church–Tory family, and though she would turn Evangelical and become a vigorous abolitionist, her politics never swung left. In *Village Politics* (1792), she criticized the French Revolution and the "Rights of Man," hewing to the Evangelical line that the lot of the poor was to be improved by philanthropy and faith in salvation. "Rights of women! We shall be hearing of the Rights of Children next!" she scoffed on hearing of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*. Yet she shared many of its principles: rationality, modesty, chastity, and "practical education" over trivial "accomplishments." Her life, moreover, was not conducted in the "female sphere" of hearth and home. As a child, she learned Latin (a man's language) and mathematics from a father who wanted his daughters to be capable of self-sufficiency as teachers. She later learned French, Italian, and Spanish from her elder sisters. As a young woman, she came to London and entered a lively literary world, becoming friends with Samuel Johnson, actor David Garrick, and Horace Walpole, and frequented the salons celebrated in her long poem *The Bas Bleu* (1786). She was a successful writer even before she gained an annuity of £200 in compensation for a reneged marriage engagement; with this income she was able to live independently, never marrying, and devoting herself to philanthropy and writing, the latter with considerable financial success.

First published in 1799, *Strictures on Female Education* went through thirteen editions and was in demand for decades, selling 19,000 copies. Even more popular (eight editions in its first two months) was her "conduct" novel of 1809, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*—an irresistible target for Byron (*Don Juan* 1.16). Like Wollstonecraft, More was willing to condescend to novel-writing for propaganda. In quest of an ideal wife, young Coelebs auditions several near and not so near Misses until he finds perfection in quiet, proper, prudent Lucilla, skilled in household management and given to visiting the poor to read to them from the Bible. *Strictures* sets the didactic curriculum, arguing for rational education, Christian virtue, the "separate spheres" of male and female life, and the subordination of women to men.

Works by More also appear in *Perspectives: The Rights of Man and the Revolution Controversy*, page 152, and *Perspectives: The Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade*, page 262.

Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education;
with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent
among Women of Rank and Fortune
 from *Introduction*

It is a singular injustice which is often exercised towards women, first to give them a very defective education, and then to expect from them the most undeviating purity of conduct;—to train them in such a manner as shall lay them open to the most dangerous faults, and then to censure them for not proving faultless. Is it not unreasonable and unjust, to express disappointment if our daughters should, in their subsequent lives, turn out precisely that very kind of character for which it would be evident to an unprejudiced by-stander that the whole scope and tenour of their instruction had been systematically preparing them?

Some reflections on the present erroneous system are here with great deference submitted to public consideration. The author is apprehensive that she shall be accused of betraying the interests of her sex by laying open their defects; but surely an earnest wish to turn their attention to objects calculated to promote their true dignity, is not the office of an enemy. So to expose the weakness of the land, as to suggest the necessity of internal improvement, and to point out the means of effectual defence, is not treachery, but patriotism. * * *

Let it not be suspected that the author arrogantly conceives *herself* to be exempt from that natural corruption of the heart which it is one chief object of this slight work to exhibit; that she superciliously erects herself into the impeccable censor of her sex and of the world; as if from the critic's chair she were coldly pointing out the faults and errors of another order of beings, in whose welfare she had not that lively interest which can only flow from the tender and intimate participation of fellow-feeling.

Bath, March 14, 1799

from *Chapter 8. On Female Study*

Will it not be ascribed to a captious singularity, if I venture to remark that real knowledge and real piety, though they may have gained in many instances, have suffered in others from that profusion of little, amusing, sentimental books with which the youthful library overflows? Abundance has its dangers as well as scarcity. In the first place, may not the multiplicity of these alluring little works increase the natural reluctance to those more dry and uninteresting studies, of which, after all, the rudiments of every part of learning *must* consist? And, secondly, is there not some danger (though there are many honourable exceptions) that some of those engaging narratives may serve to infuse into the youthful heart a sort of spurious goodness, a confidence of virtue, a parade of charity? And that the benevolent actions with the recital of which they abound, when they are not made to flow from any source but *feeling*, may tend to inspire a self-complacency, a self-gratulation, a "stand by, for I am holier than thou?" May not the success with which the good deeds of the little heroes are uniformly crowned; the invariable reward which is made the instant concomitant of well-doing, furnish the young reader with false views of the condition of life, and the

nature of the divine dealings with men? May they not help to suggest a false standard of morals, to infuse a love of popularity and an anxiety for praise, in the place of that simple and unostentatious rule of doing whatever good we do, *because it is the will of God*? The universal substitution of this principle would tend to purify the worldly morality of many a popular little story. And there are few dangers which good parents will more carefully guard against than that of giving their children a mere political piety; that sort of religion which just goes to make people more respectable, and to stand well with the world; a religion which is to save appearances without inculcating realities; a religion which affects to "preach peace and good will to men," but which forgets to give "glory to God in the highest."¹

There is a certain precocity of mind which is much helped on by these superficial modes of instruction; for frivolous reading will produce its correspondent effect, in much less time than books of solid instruction; the imagination being liable to be worked upon, and the feelings to be set a going, much faster than the understanding can be opened and the judgment enlightened. A talent for conversation should be the result of instruction, not its precursor: it is a golden fruit when suffered to ripen gradually on the tree of knowledge; but if forced in the hot-bed of a circulating library,² it will turn out worthless and vapid in proportion as it was artificial and premature. Girls who have been accustomed to devour a multitude of frivolous books, will converse and write with a far greater appearance of skill, as to style and sentiment, at twelve or fourteen years old, than those of a more advanced age, who are under the discipline of severer studies; but the former having early attained to that low standard which had been held out to them, become stationary; while the latter, quietly progressive, are passing through just gradations to a higher strain of mind; and those who early begin with talking and writing like women, commonly end with thinking and acting like children.

I would not, however, prohibit such works of imagination as suit this early period. When moderately used, they serve to stretch the faculties and expand the mind; but I should prefer works of vigorous genius and pure unmixed fable to many of those tame and more affected moral stories, which are not grounded on Christian principle. I should suggest the use, on the one hand, of original and acknowledged fictions; and, on the other, of accurate and simple facts; so that truth and fable may ever be kept separate and distinct in the mind. * * *

This suggestion is, however, by no means intended to exclude works of taste and imagination, which must always make the ornamental part, and of course a very considerable part of female studies. It is only intimated, that they should not form them entirely and exclusively. For what is called dry tough reading, independent of the knowledge it conveys, is useful as a habit, and wholesome as an exercise. Serious study serves to harden the mind for more trying conflicts; it lifts the reader from sensation to intellect; it abstracts her from the world and its vanities; it fixes a wandering spirit and fortifies a weak one; it divorces her from matter; it corrects that spirit of trifling which she naturally contracts from the frivolous turn of female conversation and the petty nature of female employments. * * *

Far be it from me to desire to make scholastic ladies or female dialecticians; but there is little fear that the kind of books here recommended, if thoroughly studied, and not superficially skimmed, will make them pedants, or induce conceit; for by

1. An ingenious (and in many respects useful) French Treatise on Education has too much encouraged this political piety [More's note; quoting Luke 2.14].

2. Lending libraries carried stores of popular fiction, much of it written by and for women.

showing them the possible powers of the human mind, you will bring them to see the littleness of their own: and surely to get acquainted with the mind, to regulate, to inform it; to show it its own ignorance and its own weakness, does not seem the way to puff it up. But let her who is disposed to be elated with her literary acquisitions check the rising vanity by calling to mind the just remark of Swift, "that after all her boasted acquirements, a woman will, generally speaking, be found to possess less of what is called learning than a common school-boy."³

Neither is there any fear that this sort of reading will convert ladies into authors. The direct contrary effect will be likely to be produced by the perusal of writers who throw the generality of readers at such an unapproachable distance as to check presumption, instead of exciting it. Who are those ever-multiplying authors, that with unparalleled fecundity are overstocking the world with their quick-succeeding progeny? They are NOVEL-WRITERS: the easiness of whose productions is at once the cause of their own fruitfulness, and of the almost infinitely numerous race of imitators to whom they give birth. Such is the frightful facility of this species of composition, that every raw girl, while she reads, is tempted to fancy that she can also write. And as Alexander, on perusing the Iliad, found by congenial sympathy the image of Achilles stamped on his own ardent soul, and felt himself the hero he was studying; and as Corregio, on first beholding a picture which exhibited the perfection of the graphic art, prophetically felt all his own future greatness, and cried out in rapture, "And I, too, am a painter!" so a thorough-paced novel-reading Miss, at the close of every tissue of hackneyed adventures, feels within herself the stirring impulse of corresponding genius, and triumphantly exclaims, "And I, too, am an author!" The gluttoned imagination soon overflows with the redundancy of cheap sentiment and plentiful incident, and by a sort of arithmetical proportion, is enabled by the perusal of any three novels, to produce a fourth; till every fresh production, like the prolific progeny of Banquo, is followed by "Another, and another, and another!"⁴ Is a lady, however destitute of talents, education, or knowledge of the world, whose studies have been completed by a circulating library, in any distress of mind? the writing a novel suggests itself as the best soother of her sorrows! Does she labour under any depression of circumstances? writing a novel occurs as the readiest receipt for mending them! and she solaces her imagination with the conviction that the subscription which has been extorted by her importunity, or given to her necessities, has been offered as a homage to her genius; and this confidence instantly levies a fresh contribution for a succeeding work. Capacity and cultivation are so little taken into the account, that writing a book seems to be now considered as the only sure resource which the idle and the illiterate have always in their power.

May the Author be indulged in a short digression, while she remarks, though rather out of its place, that the corruption occasioned by these books has spread so wide, and descended so low, as to have become one of the most universal, as well as most pernicious, sources of corruption among us. Not only among milliners, mantua-makers, and other trades where numbers work together, the labour of one girl is frequently sacrificed that she may be spared to read those mischievous books to

3. From *Letter to a Young Lady* (1727) by Jonathan Swift: "Those who are commonly called Learned Women have lost all manner of Credit by their impertinent Talkativeness and Conceit of themselves; but there is an easy remedy for this, if you once consider, that after all the pains you may be at, you can never arrive in point of learning

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showing them the possible powers of the human mind, you will bring them to see the littleness of their own: and surely to get acquainted with the mind, to regulate, to inform it; to show it its own ignorance and its own weakness, does not seem the way to puff it up. But let her who is disposed to be elated with her literary acquisitions check the rising vanity by calling to mind the just remark of Swift, "that after all her boasted acquirements, a woman will, generally speaking, be found to possess less of what is called learning than a common school-boy."³

Neither is there any fear that this sort of reading will convert ladies into authors. The direct contrary effect will be likely to be produced by the perusal of writers who throw the generality of readers at such an unapproachable distance as to check presumption, instead of exciting it. Who are those ever-multiplying authors, that with unparalleled fecundity are overstocking the world with their quick-succeeding progeny? They are NOVEL-WRITERS: the easiness of whose productions is at once the cause of their own fruitfulness, and of the almost infinitely numerous race of imitators to whom they give birth. Such is the frightful facility of this species of composition, that every raw girl, while she reads, is tempted to fancy that she can also write. And as Alexander, on perusing the Iliad, found by congenial sympathy the image of Achilles stamped on his own ardent soul, and felt himself the hero he was studying; and as Corregio, on first beholding a picture which exhibited the perfection of the graphic art, prophetically felt all his own future greatness, and cried out in rapture, "And I, too, am a painter!" so a thorough-paced novel-reading Miss, at the close of every tissue of hackneyed adventures, feels within herself the stirring impulse of corresponding genius, and triumphantly exclaims, "And I, too, am an author!" The gluttoned imagination soon overflows with the redundancy of cheap sentiment and plentiful incident, and by a sort of arithmetical proportion, is enabled by the perusal of any three novels, to produce a fourth; till every fresh production, like the prolific progeny of Banquo, is followed by "Another, and another, and another!"⁴ Is a lady, however destitute of talents, education, or knowledge of the world, whose studies have been completed by a circulating library, in any distress of mind? the writing a novel suggests itself as the best soother of her sorrows! Does she labour under any depression of circumstances? writing a novel occurs as the readiest receipt for mending them! and she solaces her imagination with the conviction that the subscription which has been extorted by her importunity, or given to her necessities, has been offered as a homage to her genius; and this confidence instantly levies a fresh contribution for a succeeding work. Capacity and cultivation are so little taken into the account, that writing a book seems to be now considered as the only sure resource which the idle and the illiterate have always in their power.

May the Author be indulged in a short digression, while she remarks, though rather out of its place, that the corruption occasioned by these books has spread so wide, and descended so low, as to have become one of the most universal, as well as most pernicious, sources of corruption among us. Not only among milliners, mantua-makers, and other trades where numbers work together, the labour of one girl is frequently sacrificed that she may be spared to read those mischievous books to

3. From *Letter to a Young Lady* (1727) by Jonathan Swift: "Those who are commonly called Learned Women have lost all manner of Credit by their impertinent Talkativeness and Conceit of themselves; but there is an easy remedy for this, if you once consider, that after all the pains you may be at, you can never arrive in point of learning

to the perfection of a School-boy."

4. References are to the famous anecdote of Alexander the Great's sympathy with the Greek hero Achilles in Homer's epic of the Trojan War; the Italian Renaissance painter; and to the vision of Banquo's royal heirs that frustrates childless Macbeth (4.1).

the others; but she has been assured by clergymen who have witnessed the fact, that they are procured and greedily read in the wards of our hospitals! an awful hint, that those who teach the poor to read, should not only take care to furnish them with principles which will lead them to abhor corrupt books, but that they should also furnish them with such books as shall strengthen and confirm their principles.⁵

from *Chapter 14. The Practical Use of Female Knowledge, with a Sketch of the Female Character, and a Comparative View of the Sexes*

The chief end to be proposed, in cultivating the understandings of women is to qualify them for the practical purposes of life. Their knowledge is not often, like the learning of men, to be reproduced in some literary composition, and never in any learned profession; but it is to come out in conduct: it is to be exhibited in life and manners. A lady studies, not that she may qualify herself to become an orator or a pleader; not that she may learn to debate, but to act. She is to read the best books, not so much to enable her to talk to them, as to bring the improvement which they furnish to the rectification of her principles and the formation of her habits. The great uses of study to a woman are to enable her to regulate her own mind, and to be instrumental to the good of others. * * *

But there is one *human* consideration which would perhaps more effectually tend to damp in an aspiring woman the ardours of literary vanity—I speak not of real genius, though there the remark often applies—than any which she will derive from motives of humility, or propriety, or religion; which is, that in the judgment passed on her performances, she will have to encounter the mortifying circumstance of having her sex always taken into account, and her highest exertions will probably be received with the qualified approbation *that it is really extraordinary for a woman*. Men of learning, who are naturally disposed to estimate works in proportion as they appear to be the result of art, study, and institution, are inclined to consider even the happier performances of the other sex as the spontaneous productions of a fruitful but shallow soil, and to give them the same kind of praise which we bestow on certain salads, which often draw from us a sort of wondering commendation, not, indeed, as being worth much in themselves, but because, by the lightness of the earth, and a happy knack of the gardener, these indifferent cresses spring up in a night, and therefore we are ready to wonder they are no worse.

As to men of sense, however, they need be the less hostile to the improvement of the other sex, as they themselves will be sure to be gainers by it; the enlargement of the female understanding being the most likely means to put an end to those petty and absurd contentions for equality which female smatterers so anxiously maintain. I say smatterers, for between the first class of both sexes the question is much more rarely and always more temperately agitated. Cooperation, and not competition, is, indeed, the clear principle we wish to see reciprocally adopted by those higher minds in each sex which really approximate the nearest to each other. The more a woman's understanding is improved, the more obviously she will discern that there can be no happiness in any society where there is a perpetual struggle for power; and the more

5. The above facts furnish no argument on the side of those who would keep the poor in ignorance. Those who cannot read can hear, and are likely to hear to worse purpose than those who have been better taught. And that ignorance furnishes no security for integrity either in morals or politics, the late revolts in more than one country, remarkable for the ignorance of the poor, fully illustrate. It is earnestly hoped that the above facts may tend to impress ladies with the importance of superintending the instruction of the poor, and of making it an indispensable part of their charity to give them moral and religious books [More's note].

her judgment is rectified, the more accurate views will she take of the station she was born to fill, and the more readily will she accommodate herself to it. * * *

There is this singular difference between a woman vain of her wit, and a woman vain of her beauty; * * * she who is vain of her genius, more liberal at least in her vanity, is jealous for the honour of her whole sex, and contends for the equality of their pretensions as a body, in which she feels that her own are involved as an individual. The beauty vindicates her own rights, the wit the rights of women; * * * and while the more selfish though more moderate beauty "would but be Queen for life," the public-spirited wit struggles to abrogate the Salique law of intellect, and to enthroné "a whole sex of Queens."¹

At the revival of letters in the sixteenth and the following century, the controversy about this equality was agitated with more warmth than wisdom; and the process was instituted and carried on, on the part of the female complainant, with that sort of acrimony which always raises a suspicion of the justice of any cause; for violence commonly implies doubt, and invective indicates weakness rather than strength. * * * Among the innovations of this innovating period, the imposing term of *rights* has been produced to sanctify the claim of our female pretenders,² with a view not only to rekindle in the minds of women a presumptuous vanity, dishonourable to their sex, but produced with a view to excite in their hearts an impious discontent with the post which God has assigned them in this world.³

But *they* little understand the true interests of woman who would lift her from the important duties of her allotted station, to fill, with fantastic dignity, a loftier but less appropriate niche. Nor do they understand her true happiness, who seek to annihilate distinctions from which she derives advantages, and to attempt innovations which would depreciate her real value. Each sex has its proper excellences, which would be lost were they melted down into the common character by the fusion of the new philosophy. Why should we do away distinctions which increase the mutual benefits and enhance the satisfactions of life? Whence, but by carefully preserving the original marks of difference, stamped by the hand of the Creator, would be derived the superior advantage of mixed society? Is either sex so abounding in perfection, as to be independent on the other for improvement? Have men no need to have their rough angles filed off, and their harshnesses and asperities smoothed and polished by assimilating with beings of more softness and refinement? Are the ideas of women naturally so *very* judicious, are their principles so *invincibly* firm, are their views so *perfectly* correct, are their judgments so *completely* exact, that there is occasion for no additional weight, no superadded strength, no increased clearness, none of that enlargement of mind, none of that additional invigoration, which may be derived from the aids of the stronger sex? What identity could advantageously supersede such an enlivening opposition, such an interesting variety of character? * * *

Natural propensities best mark the designations of Providence as to their application. The fin was not more clearly bestowed on the fish that he should swim, nor the wing given to the bird that he should fly, than superior strength of body and a firmer texture of mind were given to man, that he might preside in the deep and

1. Pope's *Epistle II*, "of the Characters of Women," assumes that "ev'ry Lady would be Queen for life" and shudders at the thought of, "a whole Sex of Queens! / Pow'r all their end" (218-20). Salique (Salic) law, deriving from old French law, excludes females from the line of royal succession.

2. False claimants, especially to a throne; More is also suggesting "fantasizers" and dissemblers.

3. This was written soon after the publication of a work intitled "The Rights of Woman" [More, referring to *Vindication*].

daring scenes of action and of council; in the complicated arts of government, in the contention of arms, in the intricacies and depths of science, in the bustle of commerce, and in those professions which demand a higher reach and a wider range of powers. The true value of woman is not diminished by the imputation of inferiority in those talents which do not belong to her, of those qualities in which her claim to excellence does not consist. She has other requisites, better adapted to answer the end and purposes of her being, from "Him who does all things well;" who suits the agent to the action; who accommodates the instrument to the work.

Let not, then, aspiring, because ill-judging, woman view with pining envy the keen satirist, hunting vice through all the doublings and windings of the heart; the sagacious politician, leading senates, and directing the fate of empires; the acute lawyer, detecting the obliquities of fraud; and the skilful dramatist, exposing the pretensions of folly; but let her ambition be consoled by reflecting, that those who thus excel, to all that Nature bestows and books can teach, must add besides that consummate knowledge of the world to which a delicate woman has no fair avenues, and which, even if she could attain, she would never be supposed to have come honestly by.

In almost all that comes under the description of polite letters, in all that captivates by vivid imagery or warms by just and affecting sentiment, women are excellent. They possess in a high degree that delicacy and quickness of perception, and that nice discernment between the beautiful and defective which comes under the denomination of taste. Both in composition and in action they excel in details; but they do not so much generalise their ideas as men, nor do their minds seize a great subject with so large a grasp. They are acute observers, and accurate judges of life and manners, as far as their own sphere of observation extends, but they describe a smaller circle. A woman sees the world, as it were, from a little elevation in her own garden, whence she makes an exact survey of home scenes, but takes not in that wider range of distant prospects which he who stands on a loftier eminence commands.

Mary Lamb

1764-1847

In a notebook of 1811, Samuel Taylor Coleridge recorded his desire to open "the eyes of the public to the real situation of Needle-workers, and women in general," adding, "Mary Lamb has promised me Facts in abundance." Needlework—an arduous, eye-straining, poorly paid, hand-labor before the invention of sewing machines—was no idle subject for Lamb. After her father lost his position as servant, she and her younger brother Charles supported their invalid mother and increasingly dotty father, he as a clerk at the East India Company and she with needlework. On one trying day in September 1796, her apprentice botched a job that had to be taken out and redone; overwrought, overworked, Mary exploded into a manic rage, chasing the girl with a knife. When her parents interceded, she wounded her father with a flying fork and fatally stabbed her mother in the heart. The intercession of her father's former employer, an attorney, spared her permanent sentencing to a lunatic asylum. She was remanded to the legal custody of Charles, then twenty-two, who lived with her for the rest of his life. Weathering this tragedy and several manic relapses, they