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

From every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If, by this appellation, men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be, against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed *mankind*--all those who view them with a philosophical eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine. . . .

Women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence, that I do not mean to add a paradox when I assert that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantile airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire. . . .

It seems scarcely necessary to say that I now speak of the sex in general. Many individuals have more sense than their male relatives; and as nothing preponderates where there is a constant struggle for an equilibrium, without it has naturally more gravity, some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern. (Introduction)

To account for and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character: or to speak explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue. Yet it should seem, allowing them to have souls, that there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead mankind to either virtue or happiness. If then women are not a swarm of *ephemerons* triftlers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence? Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. 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. (ch. 2)

This contempt of the understanding in early life has more baneful consequences than is

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1 *ephemerons*: an insect that lives for a single day; thus, something temporary, of no lasting value.
commonly supposed; for the little knowledge which women of strong minds attain, is from various circumstances of a more desultory kind than the knowledge of men, and it is acquired more by sheer observations on real life, than from comparing what has been individually observed with the results of experience generalized by speculation. Led by their dependent situation and domestic employments more into society, what they learn is rather by snatches; and as learning is with them, in general, only a secondary thing, they do not pursue any one branch with that persevering ardour necessary to give vigour to the faculties and clearness to the judgment. In the present state of society, a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman, and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of discipline. But in the education of women the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment; even while enervated by confinement and false notions of modesty, the body is prevented from attaining that grace and beauty which relaxed half-formed limbs never exhibit. Besides, in youth their faculties are not brought forward by emulation; and having no serious scientific study, if they have natural sagacity it is turned too soon on life and manners. They dwell on effects and modifications, without tracing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behaviour are a weak substitute for simple principles.

As a proof that education gives this appearance of weakness to females, we may instance the example of military men, who are, like them, sent into the world before their minds have been stored with knowledge or fortified by principles. The consequences are similar; soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation, and from continually mixing with society, they gain what is termed a knowledge of the world; and this acquaintance with manners and customs has frequently been confounded with a knowledge of the human heart. But can the crude fruit of casual observation, never brought to the test of judgment, formed by comparing speculation and experience, deserve such a distinction? Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same? All the difference that I can discern arises from the superior advantage of liberty which enables the former to see more of life. . . .

And as for any depth of understanding, I will venture to affirm that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women; and the cause, I maintain, is the same. It may be further observed that officers are also particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule. Like the “fair” sex, the business of their lives is gallantry. They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they do not lose their rank in the distinction of sexes, for they are still reckoned superior to women, though in what their superiority consists, beyond what I have just mentioned, it is difficult to discover. . . . Idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism into society which leads the very men who are the slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. This is only keeping them in rank and file, it is true. Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a plaything. . . .

To speak disrespectfully of love is, I know, high treason against sentiment and fine feelings; but I
wish to speak the simple language of truth, and rather to address the head than the heart. To en-
deavour to reason love out of the world would be to out-Quixote Cervantes, and equally offend
against common sense; but an endeavour to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it
should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers or to usurp the sceptre which the under-
standing should ever coolly wield, appears less wild. (ch. 2)

Highly as I respect marriage, as the foundation of almost every social virtue, I cannot avoid
feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from
society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart
and mind. It does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become
the dupes of a sincere affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed,
RUINED before they know the difference between virtue and vice: and thus prepared by their
education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalens² are not the proper
remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!

A woman who has lost her honour imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her
former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away. Losing thus every spur, and
having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and the character is
quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power, unless she
possesses an uncommon portion of sense and loftiness of spirit. Necessity never makes prosti-
tution the business of men’s lives, though numberless are the women who are thus rendered
systematically vicious. This, however, arises in a great degree from the state of idleness in which
women are educated, who are always taught to look up to man for a maintenance, and to
consider their persons as the proper return for his exertions to support them. Meretricious airs,
and the whole science of wantonness, have then a more powerful stimulus than either appetite or
vanity; and this remark gives force to the prevailing opinion that with chastity all is lost that is
respectable in woman. Her character depends on the observance of one virtue, though the only
passion fostered in her heart – is love. Nay, the honour of a woman is not made even to depend
on her will.

When Richardson makes Clarissa tell Lovelace that he had robbed her of her honour, he must
have had strange notions of honour and virtue. For miserable beyond all names of misery is the
condition of a being who could be degraded without its own consent! (ch. 4)

2 Magdalens: homes for “fallen” women, on the analogy of the penitent Mary Magdalen in the Bible.