Notes on Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

1. Background
    a. In 1791, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord delivered his 'Report on Public Instruction' to the National Assembly in France. There he made the case that—even on revolutionary principles—women should receive only enough education as suits their domestic purposes. It is for men—not all human beings, just the male ones—to occupy the political stage, and so it is for men that higher education must be conducted.
    b. Wollstonecraft, taking part in the general English reaction to revolutionary events in France (cf. Burke, etc.), composed a strongly worded counterargument to the Report. Her goal, then, was to argue for the higher education of women as a core feature in any enlightened society. The basis for this lay not in tradition (of course), but in the rational nature of women as fully capable human beings.
2. Key Values Communicated in the Dedication
    a. Reason, virtue, freedom, and independence are foundational notions that recur again and again throughout Wollstonecraft's work. Yet despite her emphasis on all of these trans-historical qualities, she doesn't seem to want to throw tradition completely out the window. This seems to be especially the case regarding traditional values like modesty.
    b. Women's emancipation, according to Wollstonecraft, need not necessarily involve an inversion of traditional mores. In fact, it might be the case that giving women independence will allow them to more fully realize their virtue, since they'll be able to realize that virtue freely, according to their own liberty to use reason.
    c. Women, then, should be free to rationally apprehend the value and efficiency of morality, rather than simply following moral dictates derived from some patronizing authority.
    d. Traditionally, men have justified their subjugation of women by arguing that it was for women's own moral benefit. It was 'for their own good.' But Wollstonecraft contends that the subjugation of women has the contrary effect of rendering them incapable of attaining full and free virtue.
    e. As she writes in her dedication to Talleyrand-Périgord: "Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice." (68)
    f. The initial point, then, is this: woman's equality with man is rooted in their shared human capacity for reason. And it is this reason which is meant to ground virtue and even traditional morality (insofar as that morality is actually derived from virtue proper). This in turn might imply for us that an enlightened, democratic constitution should give women the freedom to rationally choose moral lives, rather than placing them under the restrictive authority of a patronizing over-class of free men.
        i. Question: Is there a risk, in Wollstonecraft's approach, of failing to reflect on whether the content of traditional morality is truly in the best interest of women? Wollstonecraft seems more concerned with the rationale behind women's being-moral, rather than whether those mores are themselves rationally defensible or not. (E.g., is 'modesty' always good?)

3. Beyond Man's View on Woman
    a. Early on in her Introduction, Wollstonecraft laments the fact that what little has been written about the place for women in politics has been written by men. The result of this is that the social role of women is circumscribed by men's expectations of what women are meant to do.
    b. Thus we wind up with descriptions of women's qualities and capabilities that emphasize their potential for seduction or grace, rather than reason or virtue. Too much male writing about women has failed to appreciate the rational equality that binds the human species together. Even though both men and women are surely human, it might take a woman author to be able to write about women as fully capable human beings.
    c. But when men hear about women wanting to exercise freedom and rationality, many categorize this as a desire to become more 'masculine.' (p. 78) Here Wollstonecraft hits upon an ambiguity in how we talk about sexuality and gender. Certain qualities (like reason), she notices, are coded as manly or masculine, even though women exhibit them as well. The fallout from this is that, whenever women aim to make use of their reason or enter into the political arena, they are accused of being manly or wanting to be men. But this is to project onto them a whole logic of gender that seems foreign to the fact of human rationality, which is shared across sexual boundaries.
    d. Wollstonecraft's aim is to get beyond these "prejudices that give a sex to virtue." (78) She wants to get back to a more fundamental starting point: the shared rational nature of human beings. If we're to find a place for women in modern society, she argues, we'll have to start by acknowledging their capacity for reason, which affords them a seat at the socio-political table.
4. Chapter 1: the Rights & Involved Duties of Mankind
    a. Wollstonecraft begins the main portion of her work by reaffirming her key terms. Reason is what makes humans human. Virtue is what humans acquire by means of reason. And knowledge is what humans gain when they rationally and virtuously combat their sensual passions. (p. 79)
    b. But even though these rational capacities are natural to human beings, they aren't necessarily fully formed from the very start. Instead, humankind must develop and even perfect its rationality over time. In the long run, this development of rational virtue occurs by means of the history of human communities. It is the formation of civil societies that brings rational human nature toward its completion.
    c. Against the State of Nature
        i. This picture of Wollstonecraft's is meant to conflict with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Though she writes admiringly of Rousseau, Wollstonecraft finds his idea of an ideal 'state of nature'—from which sensual simplicity humankind fell into sinful complexity—to be wrongheaded. (p. 81)
        ii. Against Rousseau, Wollstonecraft sees the move from nature to culture not as a fall but as a leap forward. Civil society is not an aberration or the advent of evil, but the natural evolution of God's teleological providence. Reason and virtue build up human perfection by building up society. Humanity, including women, finds its *telos*—its end or goal or purpose—in this process.
        iii. As she writes on p. 81: "Reared on a false hypothesis, his [i.e. Rousseau's] arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible, but unsound. I say

unsound; for to assert that a state of nature is preferable to civilization, in all its possible perfection, is, in other words, to arraign supreme wisdom…"

iv. Unlike Rousseau, then, Wollstonecraft's critique of the present situation is not rooted in nostalgia for some lost golden age, but is instead turned toward a radically progressive future: "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* now right; and I, that all *will be* right." (p. 82)

d. The Order of Society

i. Wollstonecraft next turns to the question of social order. She is suspicious not simply of the power of unjust authorities, but of the very idea of fixed rank or hierarchy. Such structural inequality would seem to undermine the natural rationality that should grant human beings their principled equality.

ii. Though she was not the first to criticize the tyrannical potential of absolute monarchies, Wollstonecraft extends her critique of kings to the general phenomenon of subordination in general: "After attacking the sacred majesty of kings, I shall scarcely excite surprise by adding my firm persuasion that every profession, in which great subordination of rank constitutes its power, is highly injurious to morality." (p. 84)

iii. Society shapes character. It does so not in some amorphous way, but by the concrete reality of the division of labor. Employment and the professions teach humans to act certain ways. For many in society, what they learn is to act in a subordinate fashion toward their bosses and rulers. Though this is a fact of tradition, however, it need not dictate our sense of what human beings are each fundamentally capable of achieving. In fact, the project of a rationally free democracy would seem to depend on the idea that previously subjugated people can learn how to act on the basis of their own liberty.

iv. This partly explains where Rousseau went wrong. He fled to the state of nature because he failed to see the potential perfection of humanity in society—*provided that society was properly ordered*. Contra Rousseau, it is not society itself that corrupts, but rather political hierarchy and fixed authority. If we can overcome this unjust manipulation of authority—as seen in monarchy or other relations of subjugation—then we can bring humanity to completion in community. And that would mean fostering freedom while unsettling rank. (p. 86)

5. Chapter 2: the Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character

a. If unjustified subordination is a hindrance to the development of free society, then those interested in political liberty would likely want to root such subordination out wherever they find it. But where is subordination more prevalent than in the married household? Wollstonecraft takes issue with the domestic norms of her day, according to which the virtue of the wife largely consisted in subjugation to her husband's will.

b. The subordination of wife to husband was usually justified not only by tradition, but also by certain ideas about what was 'natural' to women as opposed to men. Women might be taken to have a certain 'character,' which their behavior was then seen to embody. This character might be described in different ways, but often it was associated with idealized notions of graciousness, docility, timidity, or sexual submissiveness.

c. In her second chapter, Wollstonecraft begins the monumental task of challenging the very idea of a 'sexual character.' She begins to ask the reader to consider if prevailing notions of women's nature might instead be rooted in cultural and social conditioning. Perhaps it is not nature, but rather education that is responsible for shaping women according to some kind of 'sexual character.'
d. Natural Capacity vs. Educational Opportunity
    i. If women are truly equal to men with regard to their reason, then this would seem to be the deciding factor in what their 'character' was truly capable of achieving. Still, since women are not often afforded the same social and educational opportunities as men, they might be said to have contingently developed tendencies which keep them from perfecting their reason in virtue. Yet they always retain the capability of doing so. As Wollstonecraft writes on p. 89: "It is… sufficient for my present purposes to assert that, whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its reason…" In other words: context matters, but it can never eradicate what makes women fully human.
    ii. Women, then, remain rationally capable of thoughtfulness and virtue. They just aren't given the educational opportunities to hone their reason. Because of this, we might say that society won't let them become truly free. The difference between men and women is not one of given nature, but of liberty granted. (p. 92)
    iii. Wollstonecraft clearly grounds her sense of sexual equality in a divine standard: "I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues [i.e., those of men and women] should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God." (p. 95)
    iv. But when opponents of equality refer to 'natural' distinctions between the sexes, they are often mistaken. What they refer to are not natural facts but rather culturally and educationally imposed tendencies. The notion that women are innately more inclined to romantic love than to scientific understanding, for example, has less to do with women's nature than with the strategies women have adopted in the past to attain what little measure of power they can. (p. 96-97)
    v. After critiquing Rousseau for again glossing over the subtlety involved in these issues of equality, Wollstonecraft reminds us that her argument for women's liberation is in fact the most 'Christian' of options. She invokes the idea of an eschatological 'future state,' which would represent the final culmination of human perfectibility. While men have been groomed in reason and virtue to prepare for this approach to the divine, women, she says, have been relegated to the doldrums of everyday present reality. Rendering women free in society would then also serve a kind of religious function, allowing the other half of humanity to strive for a superhuman goal. (p. 103)
        1. The dark side of this Christian grounding to Wollstonecraft's radical argument is that it makes use of Islam as a foil. Often, she'll caricature Muslim society as embodying the polar opposite of her vision of women's liberation. What might this say more broadly

about the tensions involved in bringing religion—traditional or otherwise—in to support one's politics—progressive or otherwise? How effective would we consider Wollstonecraft's merging of Christianity with emancipatory politics to be? How destructive?

vi. Finally, Wollstonecraft concludes that the fact that women have always been subjugated does not at all prove that they are inferior to men in reason or virtue. Just as the new politics of liberty are overturning the old hierarchies of unjustified authority, so sexual inequality must be overthrown in turn. Only by giving women a chance at freedom and education will we be able to discover their role in the overarching (even supernatural) drama of human perfection.

vii. And as she herself puts it: "as sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including woman, will become more wise and virtuous." (p. 108)

1. Big question: given what we've read thus far, how might we evaluate Wollstonecraft's intimate linking of political freedom to intellectual and moral progress? How can we be sure that guaranteeing the value of liberty must lead to a corresponding increase in the 'wisdom' or 'virtue' of humankind as a whole?