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Article abstract

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Rational Creatures and Free Citizens: The Language of Politics in the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Women

SUSAN E. BROWN

Résumé:

This paper examines the intersection between the debate on women and the wider political debates of late eighteenth-century England. During this period the meaning of concepts such as liberty, equality, and rights was contested not only with regard to political relationships among men, but also as they applied to civil and domestic relationships between men and women. The language of politics encouraged the definition of women's oppression in terms of the unrepresentative nature of authority exercised by men. The values of rationality, equality, and independence espoused by radicals in the debate on women were part of a larger conception of virtue, which carried with it political as well as moral implications. These political implications came to the fore in the conservative response. Conservatives' ideas on women were part of a larger vision of social and political order in which duty, obedience, and dependence operated as the unifying principles. Within this framework, radical proposals for a more egalitarian family structure were viewed as a potential threat to political order. At the heart of this debate lay not only a dispute regarding the condition of women, but also a struggle between two conflicting visions of the ideal society.

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L'étude veut analyser le lien qui a existé entre les débats sur les femmes et les débats politiques plus généraux dans l'Angleterre de la fin du XVIIIe siècle. A cette époque, on contestait la signification de concepts comme liberté, égalité et droits, non seulement pour les relations politiques entre hommes, mais aussi pour les relations sociales et familiales entre hommes et femmes. Dans le débat politique, on en vint à définir l'oppression des femmes en fonction du caractère non représentatif de l'autorité exercée par les hommes. La valeur des concepts de rationalité, d'égalité et d'indépendance, défendus par les radicaux dans leurs plaidoyers en faveur des femmes, faisaient partie d'une conception plus large de la vertu, qui avait des implications aussi bien politiques que morales. C'est la prise de position des conservateurs qui mettait les implications politiques au premier rang. Leur philosophie sur les femmes faisait partie d'une vision plus large de l'ordre social et politique, dont le devoir, la soumission et la dépendance assuraient l'unité. Dans ce cadre, la revendication des radicaux pour une structure familiale plus égalitaire était perçu comme une menace à l'ordre politique.

> Equal rights equal laws — let every opinion be brought to the crucible! — is the cry of the present age. Our fair countrywomen have caught the contagion: the spirit of insubordination rages!
>
> *Analytical Review* 1 (1799)

The spirit of insubordination was believed by many in England to have reached epidemic proportions by the 1790s. For the past thirty years England had experienced a series of extraparliamentary campaigns for the reform of government and the extension of the franchise. These decades of protest and agitation came to a head in the early years of the French Revolution. Popular radical associations flourished and everywhere the talk was of liberty, equality, and the rights of man. Out of this upheaval emerged a heated debate on the nature of women and their role in society. The intersection between the debate on women and the wider political debates of the period will be the focus of this paper.

Previous studies have portrayed the eighteenth-century debate on women as marking the beginning of the modern feminist movement. While to a certain extent this approach is valid, it has significant limitations resulting primarily from a failure to locate the debate on women within a wider intellectual context. The political controversies of the late eighteenth century, which highlighted competing conceptions of social organization and relationships of power and authority, significantly influenced the debate on women, by shaping ideas about women's role in society and the language in which those ideas were articulated. Previous studies have curiously overlooked this central aspect of the debate on women and have consequently failed to account for the course of its development.

In the late eighteenth century the meanings of concepts such as liberty, equality, and rights, concepts which were applied to a wide variety of human relationships, were fiercely contested. The political issues debated in this period had a peculiar resonance for those concerned with the intellectual and domestic oppression experienced by women. The language of politics exerted a paradigmatic force in this debate, encouraging the definition of the condition of women in society in particular ways and providing a framework within which possible solutions could be found. Neither the radicals nor the conservatives were armed with fully developed arguments at the outset of the debate.[1] However, in the process of articulating their views through the medium of a distinctly political language, both sides emerged with claims as to the proper role of women, claims which were grounded in visions of the ideal society.

Of course other languages, besides that of politics, ran through the debate on women. The language of slavery, for example, was frequently employed by both radicals and conservatives. The language of political economy as well as a religious idiom were other media of expression available to participants in the debate.

1. By radical I mean those persons or ideas which challenged the existing structures of authority, and the assumptions which supported them. By conservative I am referring to those who defended the established social and political order and, while they might consider certain evolutionary reforms, were anxious to keep the existing social and political structures basically intact.

This paper is an exploration of only one of the languages in the debate on women. It was a language which appeared not only in the works of well-known radicals, but in anonymous letters to the editor, in literary reviews such as the *Analytical Review* and the *Critical Review*, in articles in popular magazines such as the *Lady's Monthly Museum* and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and even in novels. Clearly, this debate cannot be dismissed as the concern of a small circle of intellectuals.

A careful reading of the popular periodicals of the day, along with such well-known texts as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Hannah More's *Strictures on Female Education* (1799), reveals certain shared assumptions, as well as areas of disagreement between the radicals and the conservatives. The language of the debate is at times ambiguous and difficult to grasp — what on the surface appear to be shared premises often develop into antithetical positions. Divergent uses of the language of politics by participants in the debate on women provide an important indication of their differing intentions. Their interpretations of the central political concepts of liberty, equality, and independence point not only to opposing views on women but also to contrasting visions of social order.

An understanding of the political controversies themselves is a first step in discerning the impact of the language of politics on the debate on women. The conservative defence of the late eighteenth-century political order, and the nature of the radical critique of that order, both must be grasped if we are to recognize when and how these same arguments were used by conservatives and radicals in the debate on women.

The political order of eighteenth-century England rested on the twin ideals of a balanced constitution and a governing class composed of independent men of landed property. In the 1760s and 70s these tenets of political order increasingly came under attack as certain sections of the manufacturing and mercantile classes began to voice their opposition to their exclusion from the political process.[2] By the 1790s the reform movement had become more radical in its ideology and more influential in its impact on the masses. The anniversary of the Glorious Revolution in 1788 and the French Revolution produced a burst of writing on the issue of reform. The year 1791 saw the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* which was to remain the central text of British radicalism for many years to come.[3] Paine launched an attack on prescriptive authority and hereditary government, insisting that each generation must be free to form a government which suited its own needs. Paine's revolutionary claims were based on the assumption that all men were created equal and possessed inalienable natural rights upon which no government could legitimately infringe. He advocated the creation of a republic as the best method of securing the natural rights of the people. Throughout the *Rights of Man* Paine referred to the key republican concepts of equality and independence, the prerequisites for a virtuous citizenry.

2. For discussions of the political controversies of late eighteenth-century England, see John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976); H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London, 1977), and Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement In the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).
3. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791, rep. Harmondsworth, 1984).

The radical challenge did not go unanswered. In many respects the conservative response was simply a reformulation of an older intellectual and moral defence of the existing political and social order adapted to new threats. The conservative political ideology corresponded to a particular vision of social, and indeed, cosmic order, divinely ordained and hierarchical in organization. Such an arrangement served to hold society together by fostering relationships of mutual obligation, interest, and dependency. Implicit in this vision of social order was a rejection of the radical notions of inalienable natural rights and equality.

The manifesto of the counterrevolution was Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), to which Paine's *Rights of Man* had been a reply.[4] Burke regarded the radicals' reliance upon reason and theory as naive and subversive. The constitution, Burke eloquently argued, was the product of history and experience. Its authority rested, not on known first principles or metaphysical truths, but on the simple fact that it had existed since time out of mind. Burke's emotive defence of the constitution was indicative of the conservatives' disdain for the cold rationality of the radicals. The conservatives preferred instead to hold fast to old traditions and cherish ancient prejudices. The conservative defence of prejudice was a defence of the unexamined assumptions and deeply rooted instincts which constituted the nation's political and moral beliefs, upon which social and political order rested.

Conservatives were convinced that radical demands threatened not only the existing constitution, but would also destroy the entire fabric of society. The horrors of revolution, irreligion, and social anarchy were contrasted with the peace and prosperity enjoyed in Britain under its balanced constitution and established church.

In the face of developments in France and increasing radicalism at home, opponents of political reform produced a flood of conservative literature and counterrevolutionary propaganda. They admonished the lower classes, claiming that what was needed was not political reform but individual moral reform. Reading this literature, one is struck by the conservatives' sensitivity to the language employed by the radicals. To them it appeared that the radicals had invented an entirely new vocabulary. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* referred to it as "this slang of modern philosophy."[5] In their battle against what they viewed as the revolutionary implications of radicalism, the conservatives displayed a particular sensitivity to the concepts of liberty, equality, and rights, as defined by the radicals. These "innovating" doctrines (and the accusation of innovation was a frequently used weapon in the conservative arsenal) would inevitably lead to mob rule, economic levelling, atheism, and the destruction of the family.

While conservatives were on the alert for signs of "innovation," the radicals were hunting down "establishments" and "customs." The term "prejudice" — "a fashionable word of great latitude," noted the *Monthly Magazine*[6] — with its Burkean associations was often employed to describe those attitudes the radicals considered outmoded, irrational, or self-interested.

4. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790, rep. Harmondsworth, 1982).
5. *Anti-Jacobin Review* (henceforth *AJR*) 3 (1799): 55.
6. *Monthly Magazine* (henceforth *MM*) 10 (1800): 31.

Both radicals and conservatives were sensitive, not only to particular words, but to the very nature of the language they and their opponents employed in their writings.[7] Conservatives found the fact that radical political tracts were written in an easily accessible language, a fact which gave the lower orders the mistaken notion that they had an interest in the governing of the nation, as threatening as the ideas contained in the tracts.

Given contemporaries' sensitivity to the vocabulary of the political debates and awareness of the political implications of language, it is not surprising that women were led to apply the language of the political debates to their own situation. The political controversies of the late eighteenth century did not directly address the rights of women; for the most part women were ignored or considered in the same category as children or other dependents. Nevertheless, the political debates acted as an impetus to the debate on women. The issues raised in the political debates — the exercise of authority, the validity of prescription, and the meaning of rights, liberty, and independence — struck a responsive chord in the minds of many women. This is not to imply that previous to this period women had not expressed anger and dissatisfaction with the role assigned to them in society. Rather, the language of politics provided women with an effective means of voicing that dissatisfaction in terms that had common currency. However, the language of politics was not simply a veneer applied to preexisting demands; it served to shape the arguments advanced by both sides in the debate on women. As they explored the possibilities offered by such political concepts as equality, liberty, and independence in terms of their own experience, women came to perceive their situation in ways which they previously had not considered.

The publication, in 1792, of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was to shape fundamentally the arguments advanced in the debate on women for the next ten years.[8] A central figure in the debate, Wollstonecraft symbolized the radical case in the debate on women for radicals and conservatives alike. Furthermore, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* brought the language of politics to the forefront of discussions of women's condition, setting the tone for the remainder of the debate. The title alone served as a challenge to those who refused to extend their egalitarian political philosophy to the concerns of women and forcefully brought home to women the implications of this philosophy in their own sphere. Although Wollstonecraft was certainly not the first to employ a language of politics, her work seems to have popularized the use of a political idiom, as its incidence in discussions of women's condition increases after the publication of the *Rights of Woman*.

A full understanding of Wollstonecraft's arguments requires that they be read in light of late eighteenth-century political radicalism. To begin with, the arguments in the *Rights of Woman* must be understood in relation to Wollstonecraft's own political views as articulated in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). In the *Rights of Men*,

7. In *The Politics of Language: 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984), Olivia Smith examines how ideas regarding refined and vulgar language perpetuated class division.

8. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792, rep. Harmondsworth, 1983).

Wollstonecraft was defending the "rights of humanity," rights which all rational creatures inherited at their birth.[9] Continuing along the same line of reasoning in the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asserted that women, as rational creatures, had rights as well: "if the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of women, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test."[10] She recognized that the rationale for women's oppression was the same as that employed to justify the denial of political rights to all men. She warned those men who were struggling to exercise *their* rights not to succumb to the specious arguments of their opponents when (and if) they considered the position of women: "Let not men then in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so."[11]

Most historians, when they consider the relationship of Wollstonecraft's arguments in the *Rights of Woman* to the political thought of the period, assume that she compared the plight of women to that of politically oppressed men.[12] However, a closer reading of the text reveals that, for the most part, Wollstonecraft took completely the opposite approach. More often than not, she compared women to the titled and privileged rather than to the politically oppressed poor. "Women in general," observed Wollstonecraft, "as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all of the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit."[13] Not only were women compared to the aristocracy but, in the *Rights of Men*, the aristocracy were likened to vain women, whose minds had been warped by a false education. They had been "emasculated by hereditary effeminacy."[14]

The female sex, according to Wollstonecraft, were in the same condition as the idle rich, as they were born with certain privileges due their sex. The so-called privileges granted women included their exemption from arduous mental and physical exertion and their protection from the harsh realities of the public sphere. Wollstonecraft advocated the replacement of all privilege, whether sexual or political, with a meritocracy based on reason. The image of the privileged, uneducated, idle, vain woman served as a symbol of all that was antithetical to the ideal citizen in a virtuous republic.

Wollstonecraft's thoughts regarding politics, as well as her ideas on women, rested on a particular conception of virtue, derived from Dissenting moral philosophy and the political notion of republican virtue. Virtue, according to Wollstonecraft, consisted in submitting not to an arbitrary authority, but to the dictates of reason. Independence and liberty, along with reason, were the prerequisites for virtue. Tyrants of all descriptions, whether they be kings, or husbands and fathers, were eager to crush reason and independence, the very foundation of virtue.

9. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790, rep. Gainsville, 1960), 2.
10. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 87.
11. Ibid., 132.
12. See, for example, Mitzi Myers, "Politics from the Outside: Mary Wollstonecraft's First *Vindication*," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 6 (1977): 113-32.
13. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 151.
14. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 11, 97.

Wollstonecraft's attack on the abuse of power in the home was part of an overall critique of privilege. In the ideal society envisioned by Wollstonecraft, all hereditary power, regardless of its form, would be abolished. In the *Rights of Men* she asserted that "virtue can only flourish among equals."[15] With the publication of the *Rights of Woman*, it became obvious that she intended this to apply to relationships between men and women as well.

Wollstonecraft called for a "revolution in female manners"[16] to be achieved by means of a more rigorous programme of female education. An improved education would enable women to develop their reason in the pursuit of knowledge and, ultimately, independence. She wanted women to be able to struggle for themselves "instead of eating the bitter bread of dependence."[17] Wollstonecraft even went so far as to suggest that women ought to have representatives in government.[18] However, on the whole, she did not intend to take women out of the home. A well-educated woman, she argued, would better fulfill her domestic duties: "make women rational creatures and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers, that is, if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers."[19]

Wollstonecraft's ideal woman was an enlightened citizen in a virtuous republic. Woman's role in the new republic would be one of educating future citizens and instilling in them a love of civic virtue. Her model citizen-family was very much a middle-class ideal. She admitted that her work was addressed to those in the middle classes, as it contained those with the most virtue and abilities.[20]

Despite her emphasis on the centrality of motherhood, Wollstonecraft found herself occupying the extreme radical position in the debate on women due to her demands for political participation. While few radicals voiced concerns regarding women's exclusion from the political process, they readily picked up Wollstonecraft's other demands. Both her arguments and the language in which they were articulated were echoed throughout the debate on women.

However, unlike Wollstonecraft, who likened women to the aristocracy, the majority of radicals compared the plight of women with that of the oppressed masses. In a satirical commentary on a publication entitled *The Deportment of Married Life*, one reviewer wrote: "We are certainly, as a sex, greatly indebted to the author of these letters, for reviving the obsolete doctrine of the *divine right of husbands*, or non-resistance and passive obedience." Assuming a more serious tone a few pages later, he concluded, "This sublime self-annihilating doctrine is a fine theory, but we have never found it practicable either in families or in states."[21] In this manner, radicals offered a critique of those principles which were used to justify the oppression of one party by another, whether in the context of the state or the family.

15. Ibid., 149.
16. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 132.
17. Ibid., 158.
18. Ibid., 260.
19. Ibid., 299.
20. Ibid., 147.
21. *Analytical Review* (*A R*) 28 (1798): 416, 418.

In *Thoughts on the Condition of Woman and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799), Mary Robinson described men as "mental despots."[22] Similarly, Mary Hays, in *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* (1798), described man's "absolute government" of woman and likened the power of a husband to that of a king who was tempted "to stretch his prerogative a little too far." Men maintained their authority over women "by the same law by which the strong oppress the weak, and the rich the poor."[23]

Among the radicals who followed Wollstonecraft, Hays was the most consistent in her use of the language of politics. She noted with regret that "principles of private and domestic justice, do not at least keep pace in the minds of men, with those of a public and political nature."[24] It was through this ironic comparison of civil and domestic government that Hays was able to argue her case with such force. She observed that, like the ruling classes, men have governed women "without representation." Hays proposed that women be allowed "some vote, some right of judgement in . . . the laws and opinions by which they are to be governed."[25] However, it was only within the boundaries of the little family commonwealth that women were to exercise their voting privileges. Hays felt that women could, with reason, be denied political rights.

While the radicals in the debate on women based their arguments on the existence of certain natural rights which women held in common with men, they did not agree on the parameters of those rights. Their definitions of the rights of women could encompass varying degrees of radicalism. For the most part, radicals were making claims to intellectual, rather than political, rights for women. However, the right to knowledge in itself was a radical demand and conservatives in both the political debates and the debate on women feared the insubordination that they believed would result from the assertion of intellectual independence.

The values of independence and rationality asserted by the radicals in the debate on women carried with them political as well as moral implications. Hays noted that the debate on women involved "public and political, as well as private and domestic concerns."[26] It was not enough, the radicals argued, to reform the manners of men and women; society too must be reformed. Virtue could not flourish in a society characterized by vast disparities in wealth and fundamental sexual inequalities.

The proposals put forward by radicals in the debate on women were part of a larger programme of social and political reform. Radicals took the underlying principles of that programme — equality, liberty, and independence — and extended them to an analysis of the condition of women. The language of politics encouraged the definition of the problem of women's oppression in terms of the illegitimate use of power and the

22. Mary Robinson, *Thoughts on the Condition of Woman and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (London, 1799), 55.
23. Mary Hays, *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798, rep. New York, 1974), 95, 289, 28.
24. Ibid., 288.
25. Ibid., 153, 150.
26. Ibid., 100.

unrepresentative nature of authority exercised by men. In adopting the language of politics, however, the radicals elicited a response which contested not only their specific proposals regarding women, but also the very meaning of the political concepts used to support those proposals.

The conservatives' conception of the role of women in society was, like that of the radicals, linked to a broader vision of social order. Conservative ideas regarding women and the family must be understood within a political framework which stressed the principles of duty, obedience, and dependence. An integral component of this conservative ideology was the moral influence of women in the domestic, and by extension, the political sphere.

It is interesting to note that in books on female education and manners, authors frequently compared the family to a little state. The relationships within the family were those of the political order writ small. Conservatives were anxious to maintain the hierarchical organization of both the state and the family, and feared the consequences of radical reform in either sphere. They warned of the dangers involved in any attempts to destroy the chain of subordination which bound together the various orders of society, including those orders within the family. The *Lady's Monthly Museum* cautioned its readers to "beware of those who tell you of your rights, without telling you of your duties."[27]

Along with the notions of duty and obligation, the concept of dependence was central to the political and domestic ideology of the conservatives. In her enormously popular *Strictures on Female Education* (1799), Hannah More observed that the unifying principle of dependence in the state was the same as that at work in the family:

> Now it is pretty clear, in spite of modern theories, that the very frame and being of societies, whether great or small, public or private, is jointed and glued together by dependence. Those attachments, which arise from, and are connected by, a sense of mutual wants, mutual affection, mutual benefit, and mutual obligation, are the cement which secures the union of the family as well as the state.[28]

In the debate on women the conservative response was characterized by a particular sensitivity to the concept of independence. The declaration of moral and intellectual independence was viewed as especially threatening. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* defined independence as "consisting in the right of an individual to pursue selfish impulse without any regard to the opinions or institutions of society."[29]

Obedience to the principles of the Gospel, the performance of the duties corresponding to one's station in life, and the recognition of the concept of mutual dependence, all served to keep the family and the state functioning smoothly. The corruption and misery described by the radicals was not the result of a fault in the

27. *Lady's Monthly Museum* (henceforth *LMM*) 6 (1801): 361.
28. Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 13th ed. (London, 1826), 2: 186.
29. *AJR* 15 (1803): 184.

structure of society, but the consequence of lax morals and inattention to duty. The conservatives argued that what was needed was not political reform but moral reform.

Within this scheme of social order, the domestic sphere took on a new moral, and hence political, significance. Women, as the custodians of virtue within the home, played a crucial role in promoting the moral reform called for by conservatives. Although their involvement in the realm of politics was considered highly indecorous, the influence of women on the moral and political state of society was frequently commented upon. In *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806), Jane West remarked, "though we are not entitled to a place in the senate, we become *legislators* in the most important sense of the word, by impressing on the minds of all around us the obligation which gives force to the statute."[30] Women were to exercise their influence primarily through the education of their children. "For it is by education," wrote John Burton in *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (1793), "that mankind become useful members of the state; so that political government may be said to derive its strength from the nursery."[31] The noble mission of educating the future governors of the country had a great deal in common with the radical notion of republican motherhood. While this concept provided radicals with a foundation upon which to base their claims for equality, it was employed by conservatives to defend the exclusion of women from public life by emphasizing their duties in the home as moral educators. Indeed, the moral education to be had in the society of a virtuous woman was a primary factor in conservatives' recommendation of the institution of marriage as the firmest support of civil society. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* noted that marriage "educates men in such a way as to afford them the best preparation for being good members of civil and political society."[32]

The centrality of marriage and the family to social stability was more explicit in conservative than in radical thought. It was for this reason that the conservatives in the debate on women were more sensitive to the political implications of radical claims for women's rights. Unlike the sympathetic reviewers of the radicals, who often regarded their works as nothing more than sensible treatises on female education, the conservatives immediately grasped the potential for political radicalism lurking beneath demands for intellectual rights.

In their response to the radical arguments, the conservatives focussed on political terms such as rights, equality, liberty, and reform. Commenting on the debate on women, More observed that "the revived contention has taken a more serious turn, and brings forward political as well as intellectual pretensions; and among the innovations of this innovating period, the imposing term of *rights* has been produced to sanctify the claims of our female pretenders."[33]

Having recognized the political arguments underlying the radicals' demands, the conservatives then responded in kind, adopting conservative political concepts to make

30. Jane West, *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806; rep. New York, 1974), 1: 58.
31. John Burton, *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (1793, rep. New York, 1970), 1: 92.
32. *AJR* 1 (1798): 101.
33. More, 2: 33.

their own points. Fearing a domestic revolution if the radicals' claims gained too wide an acceptance, William Duff, in his *Letters on the Intellectual and Moral Character of Women* (1807), cautioned women against exercising an "illegal and usurped . . . *governing* power." Further on, he reminded the ladies

> that there are many of our sex, who though sound Whigs in their political principles, retain a tincture of Jacobitism in their principles of domestic government; and how much soever they detest those exploded doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance in the government of the state, they are not for excluding them altogether in the government of the household.[34]

The *Lady's Monthly Museum* drew a similar parallel between domestic and civil government in a review of Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* in which it defended "the monarchical constitution of matrimony."[35]

The association, in the minds of contemporaries, between social and political relationships was strengthened by the events of the late 1790s. Since 1793 England had been at war with France. By the late 1790s French armies controlled mainland Europe and fears of a French invasion were widespread. The smouldering embers of hysteria were fanned by rumours that the French Revolution was the first stage of an international plot aimed at the destruction of all established government and religion. Fears that revolutionary principles would undermine the sanctity of the family were reinforced when the French government declared marriage to be a civil contract and granted the right of divorce.

As a wave of moral panic washed over England, the cry "Reform or Ruin!" was heard across the country.[36] The reform referred to was, of course, moral reform. "The danger of the times requires our utmost exertions," wrote a correspondent to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and the contribution of women was seen as crucial.[37] More called on women "in this moment of alarm and peril" to come forward and contribute to the saving of their country by raising "the depressed tone of public morals." She urged them to "exert themselves with a patriotism at once firm and feminine, for the general good!"[38]

The conservatives were fighting a moral battle on two fronts. In the political field they were waging war against "levelling republicans," and at home they were barricading their doors lest "the revolutionary mania" invade their families. These two subversive elements, political radicalism on the one hand and what could be called sexual radicalism on the other, were closely identified in the minds of conservatives.

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34. William Duff, *Letters on the Intellectual and Moral Character of Women* (1800, rep. New York, 1974), 134, 274.
35. *LMM* 1 (1798): 146.
36. For a discussion of the moral crisis experienced by England during the French Revolution, see Richard A. Soloway, "Reform or Ruin: English Moral Thought During the First French Republic," *Review of Politics* 24: 1 (1963): 110-28.
37. *Gentleman's Magazine* (henceforth *GM*) 65 (1795): 105.
38. More, 1: 3, 5, 6.

In novels, education manuals, and the press, conservatives warned of the domestic repercussions of radical political principles. A correspondent (most likely fictitious) to the *Anti-Jacobin* described how his father had been misled by "those new-fangled French Doctrines." Coming home drunk one night after attending a meeting of the local Corresponding Society, he addressed his wife as "Female Citizen" and explained to her that they would be divorced as soon as the French invaded, "and when thou art divorced from me, thou mayest marry as many husbands as thou canst get."[39]

The publication, in 1798, of William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a "Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* further cemented the connection between political and sexual radicalism. Here, Godwin revealed that Wollstonecraft had given birth to an illegitimate child, had twice attempted suicide, and had lived with Godwin out of wedlock before discovering she was pregnant.[40] The story of Wollstonecraft's life revealed a particularly vulnerable area for the radicals, and provided a focus for conservative reaction. The *Memoirs*, combined with the passage from Godwin's *Political Justice* in which he described marriage as "a monopoly, and the worst of monopolies,"[41] proved what the conservatives had suspected all along — that political radicalism inevitably led to sexual licentiousness.

Within this framework, radical ideas on women became especially threatening. Not only would the political notions of liberty and equality result in sexual radicalism, but sexual radicalism, which could include anything from suggestions for a more egalitarian family structure to a full-blown critique of the institution of marriage, was viewed as ultimately leading to the destruction of the social and political order.

Wollstonecraft's ideas, and those of the other radicals in the debate on women, were believed to be "destructive of domestic, civil and political society." Their "jacobinical morals" would "loosen and finally dissolve the tie of marriage, destroy one of the chief foundations of political society, and thus promote jacobinical politics."[42] This moral revolution was viewed as the "precursor of some violent political convulsion that will shake the fair fabric of the British monarchy to its very basis."[43]

To the disastrous results, both political and domestic, of a radical philosophy stressing equality, liberty, and independence, the conservatives contrasted the quiet domestic pleasures to be found in "the right path of regulated desires, social affections, active benevolence, humility, sincerity, and a lively dependence on the Divine favour and protection."[44] This ideal conformed to a broader vision of political order which rested

39. *Anti-Jacobin* (henceforth *AJ*) (9 April 1798): 173.
40. William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of a "Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* (1798, rep. Farnborough, 1970).
41. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), ed. K. Codell Carter (Oxford, 1971), Book 8, 303.
42. *AJR* 1 (1798): 99, 100.
43. *AJR* 15 (1803): 48.
44. Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800, rep. New York, 1974), 3: 365.

upon the central principles of duty, obedience, and dependence. It is within this vision that the conservative notion of virtuous womanhood must be located.

The ideals and principles of conservatives such as Hannah More were regarded by contemporaries as "diametrically opposite to [those of] Miss Wollstonecraft."[45] Many historians have reproduced this dichotomy in their own studies of the woman question in late eighteenth-century England. This analysis (with which I basically agree) does, however, have a tendency to overlook certain shared assumptions between radicals and conservatives and neglect those areas in which the two "sides" were in agreement. It must not be forgotten that many of the conservative participants in the debate were themselves combatting orthodox views of women as trifling, decorative objects and arguing for new relationships between men and women, firmly grounded in an Evangelical moral ethos. Indeed the need to reconcile the notion of the spiritual equality of men and women with a belief in an hierarchical family structure could at times be problematic for Evangelicals.

This tension is particularly evident in arguments concerning women's role as moral agents. Wollstonecraft and More sound much alike in their discussions of the influence of women in society. Their arguments for improved female education originated from the same source — a belief in the central importance of women as the moral educators of future citizens. However, they take their arguments to divergent ends with regard to the civic emancipation of women and their vision of society as a whole.

The concept of the virtuous citizen was at the core of both radical and conservative arguments. The point at issue was the definition of virtue. According to the radicals, society must cultivate the equality, freedom, and independence of its members, both male and female, in order for virtue to flourish. The conservative conception of virtue, on the other hand, consisted primarily in obedience and submission to the word of God.

Both radicals and conservatives in the debate on women argued for a particular conception of women's rightful place in society within the context of a wider vision of social and political order. The characteristics of this social order determined, to a large extent, the qualities deemed desirable in a woman. While a recognition of the shared assumptions underlying their views on women and society is important, these similarities should not overshadow the key points where the two sides clashed. The competing interpretations of liberty, equality, and independence advanced by radicals and conservatives in the debate on women are indicative of the basically opposing nature of their views. Steeped in the language and arguments of contemporary politics, the debate on women was an integral part of a larger contest over the structure of power and authority within late eighteenth-century English society.

45. Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females* (1798, rep. New York, 1974), 35.