

Mary Wollstonecraft
and Feminist
Republicanism

Lena Halldenius

Number 30

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND FEMINIST
REPUBLICANISM: INDEPENDENCE, RIGHTS
AND THE EXPERIENCE OF UNFREEDOM

BY

Lena Halldenius



PICKERING & CHATTO
2015

*Published by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited
21 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2TH
2252 Ridge Road, Brookfield, Vermont 05036-9704, USA
www.pickeringchatto.com*

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Halldenius, Lena, 1967–, author. Mary Wollstonecraft and feminist republican-
ism. – (The Enlightenment world)

1. Wollstonecraft, Mary, 1759–1797 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Woll-
stonecraft, Mary, 1759–1797 – Political and social views. 3. Republicanism in
literature. 4. Liberty in literature. 5. Feminist literature – 18th century – History
and criticism.

I. Title II. Series
828.6'09-dc23

ISBN-13: 9781848935365
Web-PDF: 9781781447246
ePUB ISBN: 9781781447253



This publication is printed on acid-free paper that conforms to the American
National Standard for the Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

*Content Management Platform by Librios™
Typeset by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by CPI Books*

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For Hedvig,
'always appear what you are'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book has been an enjoyable process, not least because of all the great people whose comments, critique and support I have benefited from along the way. The academic 'home' of this book has been the research programme *Understanding Agency. Conceptions of Action, Human Nature and Value in the Western Philosophical Tradition*, initiated by Lilli Alanen and funded by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond). I am grateful to the foundation, to Lilli and to the other members of the group, particularly Tomas Ekenberg, Peter Myrdal, Pauliina Remes and Frans Svensson. A special thank you to Ulrika Björk and to Anna Cabak Rédei for fine academic companionship. My fellow Wollstonecraftians – Sandrine Bergès, Alan Coffee and Martina Reuter – have provided support, careful critique and camaraderie throughout, as has Hannah Dawson and Susan James. I am grateful to Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, who initiated the project *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, a collaboration from which I benefited enormously in the early and formative stages of my work on Wollstonecraft; my gratitude extends to the whole project group. For their comments, suggestions and discussions on various drafts of my efforts, some of which have survived and made it into the book, and for giving me the opportunity to speak about Wollstonecraft at various events across Europe, I am also grateful to Jacqueline Broad, Karen Detlefsen, Annelien de Dijn, Geneviève Fraisse, Karen Green, James Harris, Carla Hesse, Jane Hodson, Avi Lifschitz, Elisabeth Mansén, Kari Palonen, Tuija Pulkkinen, Cecilia Rosengren, Antoinette Saxer, Eric Schliesser and many others. I thank the Crafoord Foundation for their financial support of Human Rights Studies at Lund University, where I am fortunate enough to work. My colleagues and students remind me daily of how joyful academic life can be. My husband and friend, Kjell Eriksson, and our daughter, Hedvig, who has grown up with this book, remind me daily of how joyful other aspects of life can be.

November 2014

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
1 A Feminist Republican	1
2 Liberty as Independence	19
3 Rights	33
4 Experiencing Unfreedom: The Stories of Three Women	51
5 Acting Morally	75
6 Revolution: The Political Circumstances of Action and Change	91
7 Liberation: Economic Independence and Civil Existence	109
Epilogue: A Feminist without a Movement	129
Works Cited	133
Notes	141
Index	171

1 A FEMINIST REPUBLICAN

Sometime in the winter of 1789 Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) wrote in a letter to her publisher and friend Joseph Johnson that ‘While I live, I am persuaded, I must exert my understanding to procure an independence, and render myself useful.’¹ This brief remark, squeezed in between an expression of gratitude to Johnson for his assistance and a request for a German grammar, tells us a good deal about Wollstonecraft’s attitude to life, to society and to morality. It is a duty of the human person to make herself useful to others and it is a goal in the life of an enlightened being to make oneself independent. Neither of these things can be achieved or even attempted without a struggle, without consistent exertion of the faculties of body and mind. The ‘independence’ to which Wollstonecraft refers in this letter is the hard-won capacity to support oneself without having to rely on friends or creditors – which is slightly ironic considering that she was more or less constantly in debt to Johnson.

By the time this letter was sent, Wollstonecraft had not published the books and essays for which she is now generally remembered, but she was already a professional writer, having started out with the kinds of subjects that lay closest to hand for a woman: education and fiction. Her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) was closely followed by a book of educational stories, *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), and a collection of texts ‘Selected from the best writers’, in *The Female Reader* (1789). She had also written a short novel – *Mary, a Fiction* (1788).²

Wollstonecraft wrote in order to support herself, aiming to make her living in a way that would free her from the constrictions and tediousness of the occupations that were available to a middle-class woman, such as the lady’s companion, the governess, or the schoolmistress. She had tried them all and particularly detested the awkward position of being a hired help in someone else’s house. By writing she hoped to ‘procure an independence’ in two ways: financially and personally. It remained a struggle throughout her life. In a later letter to Johnson she told him defiantly and partially against the facts that ‘I am POOR – yet can live without your benevolent exertions’.³

A writer needs a publisher. Joseph Johnson was an important figure in those circles of political radicals and religious dissenters in London that become an intellectual and formative home for Wollstonecraft. Without him we might never have heard of her. Among Johnson's authors were the natural philosopher and Unitarian Joseph Priestley, the poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld, the political economist Thomas Malthus, the political anarchist William Godwin (who was to become Wollstonecraft's partner), and the novelist Mary Hays, a close friend of Wollstonecraft's and deeply influenced by her. There were also less radical writers on Johnson's list, like the politically cautious Quaker Priscilla Wakefield. Johnson reportedly would not publish Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–92),⁴ but Paine was part of his circle. Wollstonecraft found herself in the midst of an intellectual community of authors and thinkers where a female discussion partner around the dinner table was nothing out of the ordinary and politics was ever present.

Johnson was known to encourage women writers and employed Wollstonecraft as a regular book reviewer and editorial assistant for the *Analytical Review*, a periodical that he co-founded in 1788. He also commissioned her to do translations – not many – of religious and moral works. It was for that purpose that she needed a German grammar.

Feminism and Republicanism

In this book I hope to make the case for regarding Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist republican.⁵ There is a general observation to make first. Slotting Wollstonecraft into a broadly republican camp is not a terribly radical choice. Characterizing an eighteenth-century progressive thinker who defended the French Revolution on the basis of the principles on which it was fought as a republican makes good sense.⁶ Eighteenth-century republicanism is characterized by its emphasis on the capacity and necessity of representative forms of government for the liberty of persons within the state. A necessary criterion for a free form of government is, for these republicans, that political power is constitutionally circumscribed and under popular control. The people, as the highest source of civic authority, exercises this authority through voting and representation in assemblies. Whoever is in political office or holds executive powers answers and is accountable to this popular authority. Any other form of state is despotic.

How a republic should be organized more specifically was a subject of much debate, but it is inherent to the republican position as I conceive of it here to hold that subjects can be free as persons only if they live in a free state or a republic. Under despotism, everyone is a slave to the whim and arbitrary power of the absolute ruler and this holds also for those subjects within the state who happen to enjoy a good deal of status and opportunity.

'Freedom' in republican thought of this period does not stand for freedom from interference or the freedom to do whatever you like. It stands for freedom from subordination to the arbitrary power of another.⁷ Being free is to not have a master. As Wollstonecraft's friend, the non-conformist minister Richard Price put it: 'Individuals in private life, while held under the power of masters, cannot be denominated free however equitably and kindly they may be treated'.⁸ The commitment to a republican constitution follows logically from this conception of freedom, since an absolute ruler who is beyond popular control and above the laws represents just such an arbitrary power that violates the personal freedom of the subjects. As Wollstonecraft notes in her report from the early stages of the revolution, the usual preamble to decrees from the French king was 'for such is his pleasure'.⁹ There can be no clearer expression of the people's unfreedom than to be subjected in that way to personal whim. If there is one point that I wish to make more than any other, it is that this republican approach to personal freedom in political society is at the very centre of Wollstonecraft's philosophy and that the job of interpreting her thoughts amounts to interpreting the implications of this conception of freedom for her morality, her politics and her feminism.

Living unfreely in this republican sense is to be deprived of status, not necessarily opportunity or choice (even though it might well entail that too). As a feminist one stands conflicted before this approach to freedom in political society. A conception of freedom that focuses on the social and legal position of subordination, on the denial of status and of means of contestation, speaks strongly to feminist concerns. Yet, in the longer republican tradition, from Rome via the Renaissance to Wollstonecraft's own times, the citizen whose freedom was at stake was practically per definition a man, embodied in the male figure of the virtuous person, whose excellence in statesmanship, public oratory and the liberal arts are matched only by his bravery in battle.¹⁰ Female virtue was something else entirely: domestic, non-civic and consisting in chastity, piety and submission to male authority. A female citizen was a contradiction in terms; independence was not for such fragile vessels.

By the eighteenth century the martial aspects of patriotism and the glorification of war and conquest had faded and were not really a significant philosophical element in the English republicanism within which Wollstonecraft moved. The identification of public status with maleness proved stubborn, however. The question of political participation had become a very concrete one given the practical concerns in the new republics of America and France. Who is the citizen? Who can vote? Who can be elected? Who has the qualities that merit a person being trusted with affairs of the state? That being male had to be a necessary criterion was so much taken for granted that it hardly needed saying, but the material conditions of citizenship – notably economic self-sufficiency – also contributed to excluding women from public life. The facts that women

could not own or inherit property and were barred from civil service disqualified them indirectly but just as efficiently from membership of the republic. Both the American declaration of independence and the new French constitution claimed legitimacy on the basis of a doctrine of natural rights and the civic rights of citizens, but in neither case did these overtly republican revolts result in equal citizenship rights or any political rights for women, who remained under the cover of their male citizen guardians. The rights of man gave no rights to women. For republican women like Wollstonecraft this was a humiliating betrayal.

Wollstonecraft's feminism sits within this nest of issues and we need the republican background to understand the quality of her feminism. The term 'feminist republicanism' does not refer to a school of thought or a hidden tradition that I claim to have uncovered. It is simply the name I give to Wollstonecraft's philosophy as I read it. I call her a feminist republican in order to say that her feminism modifies her republican commitments. Her vindication of women's rights challenges republicanism from within, without discounting the main tenets of republican political thought.

Her focus on women's exclusion from public life serves to make it understandable why Wollstonecraft so rarely addresses women in her writings.¹¹ Given women's condition, she fears that 'they will not listen'.¹² Her interlocutors are instead those men of public status who take it upon themselves to decide to shut women out, from politics as well as from equal companionship, while claiming paradoxically to have the rights of all at heart.

The feminist promise of republican citizenship is one upon which Wollstonecraft insists. In order to be free as a person one has to enjoy the status of citizen in the sense of being a subject in one's own right, capable of acting independently in public and, as it were, of representing oneself to others. If you are denied that status you *cannot* be free – in fact, you are a slave – no matter what other allowances are made and even if no one coerces you. The relegation of the female to the domestic, and the domestic to the fringes of society, out of public sight, are functions of exactly those hierarchies and relations of power that the republican conception of freedom should serve to expose.

We need to get a few important things right at the outset and one such thing is Wollstonecraft's view of what equality between the sexes is about. In an often quoted passage in *The Rights of Woman* she expresses a 'wild wish', which is to see 'the distinction of sex confounded in society'.¹³ The emphasis should be on 'in society', which in the context refers to social intercourse generally. As long as weakness continues to be ascribed to the female character, as long as the easiest way for women to get the love and respect that every person wants is to play along in a game where they are always 'to *seem* to be this and that' they will remain what they are made to be: creatures whose understandings are cramped, with frivolities as their only pursuits, and a combination of cunning, meekness,

and good looks their only assets in a game where the end is to 'please fools'.¹⁴ Being a woman is a created condition and living a woman's life is akin to stage acting, a false show. The bitter pill is that women are trained to be inoffensive playthings without a serious thought in their minds, only to be held in contempt for being exactly what they are told that they have to be.

Socially confounding the distinction of sex is the only proper response, Wollstonecraft claims, for anyone who believes, like she and many of her readers did, that morality is founded on reason and reason 'gives no sex to virtue'.¹⁵ To train one's virtuous character is to check one's appetites and passions as reason directs; this is a duty for every person, and in this moral regard 'nature has not made any difference'.¹⁶ The only way to make a moral distinction between the sexes would be to deny that women possess reason, and anyone who denies that would be landed with the uncomfortable conclusion that women in that case cannot have any duties either. This, then, is the core of the matter as far as equality between the sexes is concerned.

Some commentators today seem disappointed by the fact that Wollstonecraft was untroubled by women and men having different social functions. She speaks freely of 'the peculiar duties of women',¹⁷ which has been taken, wrongly, as testimony to the incompleteness of her feminism. It has been argued that despite her insistence on women's intellectual and moral capacities, she still believed that they ought to be content with their private station as wives and mothers.¹⁸ These readings miss the point. True to her republicanism, Wollstonecraft regarded family duties as part of the civic duties of the female citizen. But one thing that we need to attend to here is that the republican idea of civic motherhood usually came with the asymmetrical assumption that women's functions – such as motherhood – were specifically female, while men's functions were universal human ones for which women – because of their female attributes of weakness and sentimentality – were unfit. Wollstonecraft rejects this asymmetry. Being a mother is a specific function but so is being a father. She was unperturbed by specific female functions since she regarded them as counterparts to equivalent male ones. 'I treat of the peculiar duties of women, as I should treat of the peculiar duties of a citizen or father'.¹⁹ The main object in life is one that men and women have in common: their moral development as creatures of reason. This overarching human function informs all the specific ones, making sexual differences in those inferred functions and social tasks morally irrelevant.

Even more significant are Wollstonecraft's complaints about the demeaning professions open to women. She regarded the lack of respectable employment and the obstacles in the way of earning one's own living as a blow to women's freedom: 'Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses ... Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue ... Women would not then marry for a support'.²⁰ After all, how could women be

independent of men if they did not have their own money? We will have reason to return to the material conditions of independence, but let me stress already that Wollstonecraft's insistence on women's economic independence and on the dignity and respectability that she attaches to the fulfilling of one's duties towards oneself and others through paid work, puts a spanner in the works of the common misapprehension that Wollstonecraft only cared about women of the middle classes.²¹

There is an easily-anticipated objection to my use of the term 'feminist', which did not come into use until well into, perhaps even towards the end of, the nineteenth century. The use of this term grew out of the emerging women's liberation movement, so is it not simply a confusing anachronism to let it refer to anything that happened prior to that? Even though I am in general eager to avoid imposing new terminologies on to an unsuspecting past that would not have recognized them, I think that I can justify the exception in this case, on practical grounds.

We do well to set Wollstonecraft apart in a rather decisive way from more politically cautious writers, like Hannah More and Patricia Wakefield, who also addressed the subject of the inequality between women and men and who were also troubled by the state of women and wished to see reforms in place, but who confined their suggestions to manners and education. For Wollstonecraft, we cannot hope to get at the wrongfulness of women's situation unless we are prepared to question the hierarchical organization of political society and of commercial life. The inequality of women raises political issues about rights, property, power and institutions, not merely moral ones about conduct, attitudes and good principles. Using 'feminist' as a term of convenience in this context is meant to indicate that Wollstonecraft appreciated and analysed the *political* implications of norms about good manners and proper education.

Another reason why I take the liberty of using 'feminist' is to do with Wollstonecraft's method. A crucial feature of her internal critique of republicanism is the way in which she explores the lived experience of being dependent. She explores, if you will, the phenomenological content of living unfreely by asking not only what unfreedom *is*, but also what it is *like*. What is it like to live at the mercy of another? What does that do to you? Wollstonecraft defends republican principles but believes that a true understanding of what it is to be free, why hierarchy is bad and how inequality works can only come through experience. Janet Todd, in her introduction to a collection of Wollstonecraft's correspondence, claims that Wollstonecraft 'believed in getting to truth through investigating her own experience'.²² I would qualify that in the following way: she believed in getting to truth through investigating the experience of the unprivileged, the unfree, the women and the labouring masses who paid for the *status quo*.

We get a sense of this feminist core of Wollstonecraft's republican philosophy in her focus on the dynamics between the organization and workings of unequal institutions like education, the family and the labour market, and the effects on the mind and self-perception of people who live and act within these institutions without any means of controlling or changing them. The kind of education to which women were typically subjected is a good case in point. Women, she maintains, are not only kept dependent – on men and the institutions that men control – but also, and even more invidiously, they are taught to act and think dependently: 'that is, to act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong, to power'.²³ With a biting reference to Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), she adds the practical observation that a woman 'trained up to obedience', who have only 'learned to please', is left helpless and in poverty if her husband – her keeper and master – dies before her.²⁴

To live unfreely is to be dependent on the will of another, to be under their power, subject to their whim. This holds even if you submit willingly; in fact, it holds particularly if you submit willingly, since doing so indicates that not only your rational deliberations but also your desires and emotions have been shaped to fit or make sense of the slavery you are in. The cruel joke is that women are trained not only to *live* a life without freedom, but to *love* it. The oppression and consequent mental corruption of women and, indeed, all people who live under the thumb of arbitrary power is complete when they do not even regard themselves as unfree anymore or when they cling to their slavery as a desperate badge of honour or comfort, or simply as a way of making life feel predictable and safe. Here is an overwhelming challenge for anyone seeking progressive change. The task is not merely to improve education or to reform laws on inheritance, property and other such things. It is the deeper and more unsettling one of addressing the experience of unfreedom, trying to understand how it can be that women and other slaves 'hug' their chains of dependence, but also what life is like for those women who seek to 'spurn' or 'snap' their chains while being destined by law and custom to remain firmly shackled to them.²⁵

Writing a Revolution

The effect of the revolutionary upheavals in France on Wollstonecraft's thought and writings will always be a matter of interpretation, but there is no denying that after 1789 she is a different kind of writer, a political writer. She was always intent on the moral project of exposing the infantile stupidity to which women and girls were convicted by established customs that identified a woman's virtue with inoffensive nothingness, but the structure of society and the laws that oppress and exclude women now emerge from the shadows to be the main players. By the same stroke, gaining personal independence comes across as a more