

Ann Loades

Feminist Theology

Voices from the Past

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ANN LOADES

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Preface

I have explored some of the material contained in this book in a variety of contexts, and I am grateful to my audiences and to the readers for Polity Press who made constructive suggestions for its improvement. I am also deeply grateful to the Very Revd Dr John Arnold, Dean of Durham, for allowing me to have a bolt-hole in the Meissen Library, housed in Durham Cathedral's precincts, where I could work undisturbed.

The fact that I have been able to put it all together in a book, however, owes everything to the encouragement, determination and help of David Brown, Van Mildert Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham and Canon of Durham Cathedral. In dedicating it to him, I wish it were better, but, such as it is, I hope it makes a small contribution to the life of the tradition about which he himself writes so eloquently.

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Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth century the position of women in western society advanced enormously, though feminist theory and feminist theology have only really been prominent since the Second World War. While, undoubtedly, such writing includes much of great value, to my mind there is a real danger of too much introspection or 'navel-gazing'. So what I am attempting to do in this work, while in no way discounting the valuable insights already gained, is to enlarge feminist perspectives in a way that prevents them from being narrowly self-referential. As equality becomes increasingly a reality, there is a real danger that it will involve leaving some still on the margins of our attention – in some contexts, women themselves, in some others, those for whom they should have legitimate concern.

To further my end of widening perspectives, I have selected three distinguished women, all now long dead, but from whom I believe we have still much to learn. While all three worked hard to advance the cause of women, each did so in a way that was not blind to the setting of women in a wide social context. The first of these, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), lived at a time when the language of human rights was coming to full fruition. She used that language to argue for similar rights for women as her contemporary Tom Paine was arguing for men. Intriguingly, however, in contrast to perhaps the majority of modern feminists who would use that language, her practice indicated clearly that she did not allow such argument automatically to override women's responsibility to the unborn. My second example, Josephine Butler (1828–1906), is of a woman now less known than Mary Wollstonecraft, but unjustly neglected, since her impact on the lives of

women in late nineteenth-century England was vast. It is largely thanks to the work of Josephine Butler that legislation which unfairly discriminated against working-class women was successfully repealed, not only in England but also elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. In many ways she must be seen as a surprising candidate for such a role, inasmuch as she came from the upper echelons of English society (the Grey family) and could easily have lived her whole life in untroubled comfort. Nonetheless, she campaigned vigorously on behalf of those with whom she had no natural social affinity and in particular on behalf of prostitutes. Despite her own happy home, she saw that many of women's problems lay within the home itself. Modern feminism expends considerable energies in securing rights for women, but there is surprisingly little attention given to that issue of the malfunctioning home. It is an uncomfortable issue to face, but it is becoming increasingly obvious that many social ills stem from childhood abuse, some of which is committed either by women apparently unable to do other than collude with their male partners, or by women acting of themselves.

With my third example, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957), I come to one of the most contentious areas in contemporary feminist writing. Much of this insists upon a distinctively feminist voice and contribution. While often this seems to be exactly right, there is a huge danger of repeating the mistakes of the past, where it needs to be remembered that women were marginalized not always by being made inferior to men but sometimes by being declared superior, and of almost untouchable irrelevance. What makes the writings of Dorothy L. Sayers of contemporary interest is the way in which she more often than not argued for the importance of the contribution of women by insisting on the irrelevance of such sexual difference to the particular issue in question. Not only that, she found pre-eminently in the writings of a man (Dante) the best historical expression of the significance of the feminine, and a willingness even unashamedly to make the feminine central to God's mediation of the renewal of life to us. She had no truck with those who thought that women could not be as rational as men. Instead, she insisted that the horizons of the workplace should be enlarged so that women no less than men, and men no less than women, should fully share the allegedly distinctive contribution of both to full human flourishing, and each enjoy the advantages allegedly unique to the other.

It seems to me no accident that what all these three women had in common was a religious faith. Feminist theology has been largely marginalized by secular feminist writing, but one great advantage

that religious belief gives is its requirement to think beyond one's immediate concerns, not least in its central focusing concept of a transcendent reality. Of course, this provides no guarantee of wider dimensions being given due weight, and some of the history of Christianity is a sorry tale of the exploitation and manipulation of women. Nonetheless, these three women all seem to have come to their particular perspective in large part through the practices of their Anglican belief, and in the case of Josephine Butler and Dorothy L. Sayers, through life-long membership of the Church of England. Mary Wollstonecraft continued to appeal to the Christian Scriptures even when she was no longer a practising Christian. She, indeed, is a particularly interesting case, because the modern tendency is only to show interest in her where she is anticipating modern concerns, whereas what I find especially challenging and attractive about her is that, while undoubtedly anticipating those concerns, she provides a legitimate critique of aspects of them by setting them in what is ultimately a different frame of reference. In her case, she suffered the added disadvantage that her first defender (William Godwin) employed a distorting lens through which to view her, helpful though he intended it to be. There is a similar issue about my second author, Josephine Butler. A modern superficial reading only discovers the typical Victorian 'do-gooder', whereas in fact she pursued what she saw as the good in the face of a general consensus to the contrary, including not only the Parliament of her day but also many of her own sex. Likewise with Dorothy L. Sayers: we find conferences organized to discuss her significance that totally marginalize the relevance of her religious faith. As we shall see, this constituted the well-spring of her being and even helped shape her apparently purely secular writing. Not only have the religious convictions of my three writers been ignored by those feminists who have read them, they have been largely ignored by those interested in the contribution women have made to theological thinking, and I think they deserve better. Each of them made a significant contribution to their Church and its life in the social world in which we all share, and the issues with which they concerned themselves are still important. In fact, it is only because these women, with others, pushed through barriers placed in their way that certain matters were put on to the public agenda in the first place, and remain there. It may well be thought distressing that their concerns are still so difficult to discuss and to negotiate, but, then, anyone who wants change needs a mixture of long-term patience and the energy to make changes as best they can, depending on what is politically and socially feasible in their time.

Introduction

The book falls into three parts. In Part I, arising out of my reflections on the life and some of the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, I have chosen to discuss the importance of abortion and its significance in the lives of women who want to take their place as citizens along with men. Mary Wollstonecraft herself had the courage briefly to voice her distress about the practice of abortion, though clearly understood why it seemed to be the only recourse to poorer women who had to deal with the dilemma they faced if they found themselves pregnant. My discussion of my chosen writer is shorter in length than that of abortion itself and its significance in the lives of women since her time. Mary Wollstonecraft raised some of the issues about abortion, but it has received far more attention in the last two centuries than anyone in her day could have anticipated. The very fact that she, like all too many other women, died in childbirth illustrates the point that women might well risk abortion in preference to death at the end of pregnancy. Next comes Josephine Butler, and in her case, my writing on her life and concerns occupies the bulk of Part II. She herself was a prolific writer, and through the course of a life so much longer than that of Mary Wollstonecraft confronted and fought against many social ills, most notably those central to women's lives. I have interwoven my account of her attention to these ills with my narrative of her life, but have selected the sexual abuse of children on which to focus. My discussion of this is necessarily shorter than my discussion of abortion, as it has been as difficult to discuss in our own time as abortion was in Mary Wollstonecraft's day. In Part III I discuss some aspects of the work of Dorothy L. Sayers. She not only engaged critically and constructively with the Christian tradition, but also raised some important questions about the impact that tradition had on the possibilities of education and work open to women – issues central to the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Although living in a different century, Dorothy Sayers faced some of Mary's problems. She too bore an illegitimate child, but unlike Mary's good fortune in marrying a man whose household could make room for her daughter, Dorothy Sayers's son could not come to live with her when she married a man not the child's father. Both, however, had excellent reasons for their conviction that women should be able to earn their own living and support their children. All three of my chosen writers were concerned with issues of justice, sometimes in its more public aspect, sometimes in its more private, and sometimes explicitly in connection with the Church.

It is of course anachronistic to describe any or all of the three as feminist theologians, or even as feminists. Depending on what one makes of theology, a woman might wish never to claim so problematic

a description as 'theologian' for herself. That said, to the extent that each of the three women described here wrote and taught theology, it is not wholly inappropriate to describe them as theologians, given that each of them supposed themselves to be talking of God in their own particular ways. 'Feminist' is perhaps equally difficult to apply, depending on what we suppose that word to mean. If it means someone who dislikes and distrusts men and loathes children, none of the three was a feminist. They all seem to have supposed that the establishment of justice in society was a task to be shared by women and men together, and, indeed, each of them achieved what they did with the support of men. If, however, we may suppose that 'feminist' minimally means someone who seeks greater justice for women and children both without and within the churches, then all three can be described as feminist. Despite the anachronisms, then, they can be claimed for feminist theology to the same extent as any other woman writing in similar vein before about 1965. It is obvious that such feminist theology as they represent is of a specifically Christian kind, and context-dependent at that. All three struggled hard with the devaluation of women for which the Christian tradition is in its own way responsible, but all three assume that the tradition also contains resources for transformation and change, despite the considerable weight of criticism that may be levelled against it. Finding it to be life-giving is a task to be achieved, they suggest, rather than a resource to be taken for granted. These three mustered all the available insight they could, as they took upon themselves certain burdens in the days when it was far harder for women to use their voices in public even than it is now. Since in any age being female is as much the characteristic human experience as being male, the insights and experiences of these three, as of other women, are as important and valuable as are those of men. Yet only in the second half of the twentieth century has this point been heard in such a way that the Christian tradition is now forced to come to terms with it. Until the twentieth century feminist theologians simply have not been on the scene in a sufficiently distinctive and powerful way. Those who are both feminist and theologians owe much to those who, like the three women discussed in this book, raised issues for their own time and for us. To them and their work and their continuing importance I now turn.

Part I

Women and Self-Governance

1

Mary Wollstonecraft

In this chapter I shall look initially at Mary Wollstonecraft in her own right, and at the kind of contribution she was able to make to feminist issues in her time, and then in the next chapter, drawing on one issue of concern to her, I will explore how the breadth of her vision might be applied to one problematic issue for our own time: that of abortion.

In the late summer of 1797 Mary awaited the birth of her second child (born on 30 August). In less than two weeks her children were motherless, and found themselves the heirs of a very problematic legacy. For the complications of their mother's personal life-story, once made public, made it very difficult for more conventional women in the next century to appropriate for themselves the many powerful arguments she had advanced in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792. It was to her husband William Godwin that Mary was to owe the legacy of her reputation in the first instance, the man responsible after her death for Fanny, the illegitimate child of her first love, and for his own daughter, Mary, that second child. (Fanny was to commit suicide in 1816 by swallowing laudanum. Mary married Shelley after his first wife, Harriet, drowned herself. Their stories, where known, also complicated opinion about Mary Wollstonecraft.) Godwin had finally by 1791 shaken off his earlier ambitions for a life as a Dissenting minister and turned to politics. With others, he argued for the repeal of the seventeenth-century Acts of Parliament which prevented 'dissenters' from the Church of England from holding public offices, and he also fought for the reform of Parliament itself, and for the abolition of slavery. His own political reputation was in a sense already secured by 1793, through the production of *An Enquiry*

Concerning Political Justice and its influence on General Virtue and Happiness. Its radical stance was reflected by the way in which in the following year he stood by his friends who had been charged with high treason. It was the period of the French Revolution and the execution of Marie-Antoinette and Louis XVI, and England and France had just declared war on one another. If not found guilty of treason, Dissenters and political critics might well be found guilty of sedition. Given the establishment of various locations in Australia as penal settlements, transportation was sometimes as final as a death sentence, and that was indeed the end of some Dissenters put on trial in Edinburgh. In the year after Mary's death, the bookseller Joseph Johnson, a longstanding friend of Mary and William Godwin, was imprisoned for six months at the age of 60 for selling a seditious pamphlet (Tomalin 1994: 15). It was thus a difficult time to publicize Mary's own views. Nonetheless, after Mary's death Godwin wanted to commend her to the reading public by publishing his *Memoirs* of her, but in order to dissociate her from the charge of political radicalism he revealed all too much of the details of her life, whilst obscuring much else (Ravetz 1983). This inevitably affected the reading of her published texts, and the effect of Godwin's *Memoirs* (published by Johnson) was to ensure that her arguments could not be appreciated until later generations of women, educated in 'Dissenting' circles, found inspiration in her work in very different political and social circumstances. It is instructive, therefore, to record here some of the salient features of her life, as we might now see them.

Mary Wollstonecraft's early life

Born in 1759 into a family 'headed' by a man who for various reasons could not make a success of farming, Mary had found herself in the intolerable position of protecting her mother and her siblings from her father's increasingly abusive behaviour within his family circle, though he was perhaps by no means exceptional for his time (Fletcher 1995: 192–203). It seems to have been not her older brother, the focus of his parents' hopes, but Mary who took upon herself the responsibility of sheltering her mother from her father's violence. For one achievement she held her mother particularly in high regard, and that is for having reared her handful of children successfully in an age of high infant mortality, as Godwin fully appreciated. He noted that Mary herself had a publication in view precisely on the rearing of children,

partly inspired by her own success in getting her daughter Fanny, in difficult circumstances, as far as the age of $3\frac{1}{2}$. When Mary was growing up no one would have supposed that she needed more than a minimal education – certainly not of the kind that she later acquired by her own efforts. Even in a family much better situated, the most that was expected of girls would have been some elementary schooling and whatever else they might choose to learn (if capable of doing so) from what their brothers were taught. Those women in adult life who found themselves dependent on their literary skills to feed themselves sometimes managed to remedy such deficiencies, if sufficiently desperate. In Mary's case it was acquaintances among the clergy who gave her help. Interestingly, although in the next century John Stuart Mill thought the clergy of his day like women in being shown deference whilst 'shut out from the free and equal discussion of great practical questions', he generously acknowledged that, if the clergy had the kind of influence on middle-class women that was dreaded by their male relatives, then they had fairly earned it:

The clergy are the only persons who, as a class, have taken any pains with women's minds; the only persons who have appealed directly to their own principles and convictions; who have addressed them as if they had themselves a moral responsibility – as if their souls and consciences were their own. The clergy are the only men who have seemed to think it of any consequence what women think or feel, on any subject outside the domestic sphere. Those who show this respect to women, deserve to have influence with them. (Robson and Robson 1994: 277)

To one clergyman and his wife, the Clares, Mary owed her friendship with Fanny Blood, better educated than herself and whom she tried to emulate. Nursing her own mother through her dying, at the age of 23 Mary had helped one of her sisters leave her husband after the birth of a first child – perhaps suffering from what would now be called post-natal depression. To find her own independence, and with virtually no resources other than their own wits, and rather than return to any position of 'companion', she and Fanny Blood and two other sisters endeavoured to support themselves by opening and running a small school. It was there in Newington Green that Mary met Dr Richard Price, minister of the Dissenting Chapel, himself a distinguished scientist and Fellow of the Royal Society, and a man with international contacts. Her admiration and gratitude to Dr Price was to be expressed in her riposte to Edmund Burke's criticism of him in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* of 1790.