Dear Anne

By Marie A. Hlavin

This paper was written for Dr. Mary Rooks’ Literature in English II. It is a letter to a character in Jane Austen’s “Persuasion”. In the letter, the author introduces the character to the theories of Mary Wollstonecraft.

My Dear Friend Anne,

It has come to my attention your discouraged attempts at loving a man who, at your families’ request, you were not permitted to marry many years ago. In writing this plea for your understanding of two paramount considerations on this front, I am sorry to offend or incite you to harbor emotions of distrust or resentment toward me. For, Anne, I do so admire you as one admires a sweet daughter who lives in the likeness of her mother, as I have seen in you bits of my own longing for acknowledgment and true love, and I send these words to you with the utmost respect and sincere adoration.

That being said, I wish to introduce you to the influence of the most noble and forward thinking of women, who, without flattering the fascinating graces of women in general (Wollstonecraft 1461), persuades me to employ the great mind that rattles in my skull rather than the great force of my bosom that rattles in the skulls of men upon their viewing it. The name of this purveyor of the female intellect is Mary Wollstonecraft, and she has written a grand detail of the talents of women beyond beauty of face or grace of posture, namely that of the potential rationality of our sex, were it not trampled by the influence of men and the impudence that dictates the virtues of women of high social class and wealth. For you, my dear Anne, have been victim to the assumptions of both traits of weakness listed here, and I sense that in your realizing this through this letter, you are more capable than either of your feeble minded sisters to appreciate your strengths and qualities that make you a respectable and desirable specimen of our sex.

The first in your folly to previously secure love is the forced notion that Captain Wentworth, before he was Captain Wentworth and merely a man of no title or admired nobility, was of little worth due to his situation and status as a gentleman according to your insufferable father, Sir Walter Elliott (Austen 33). Again, I ask that you please excuse any insult directed at your father and formerly your sisters. It is my understanding that the three are rather inclined to view wealth as the highest of accomplishments in life, giving way to a lack of reason themselves. Nobility and intellect do oft reside together in this, a most trying of times for those who have neither, but what has nobility gained your father as of late when considering his need to retrench because he has simply lived beyond his means, especially taking into account the fact that this was not necessary when your dear and most shrewd mother was still with us (Austen 16)?

With this fact, I ask of you to separate in your mind the idea that only nobility ought denote intelligence and keenness of wit. Consider your friend, Mrs. Smith. You do seem to enjoy her company, enough so that you would risk the approval of your family in denying tea with Lady Dalrymple for the delights of a conference with Mrs. Smith

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and her nurse (Austen 181). Even in this, the most contemptuous of letters, I applaud your decency in visiting one so poorly off as opposed to visiting one so well off that your presence would have been of little consequence to her.

In your rebellion, I find cause to not only applaud you, but to implore you to expand your thoughts and heart to this issue of birthright and natural law. For isn’t it the Aristotelian ideal to actualize our potentials regardless of our means? Is it not God’s will that we lead fulfilled and bountiful lives with or without the baubles of the rich? I dare say that it is His wish and desire that all of His followers burgeon the mind, if not only to have lived a life of completeness; yet you are consistently and relentlessly reminded of your connectedness to high society (Austen 179) by those who don’t dare let their eyes wander to the corner of the streets where the less fortunate reside, if only as a means to dissuade you from seeing these unfortunate fellows yourself. What have they to fear of the poor, Anne, if they are so high in stature as to be seemingly untouchable? I do believe that Sir Walter is so fully adored by himself that he never sees anyone, let alone the urchins that bring him his tea or, like ghosts, prepare his bed for sleeping.

Being of good conscience and sound mind, I trust that you will take what I am about to say in good light, and nary think me too anxious or feeble myself. The fear of the wretched that lies in the minds of the rich can only be blamed on a theory of power. For, if the philosophy of John Locke is true, a mind is a clean slate until polluted by the thoughts of men (Dean, Metha, and Forbis 111). No natural law truly exists when considering the wealth of man. All men are born with the ability to navigate knowledge, yet, and this is where the fear is present, if we allow the underlings of our society too much education, they may have access to hearty discernment and realize their status as what it truly is: a reason for revolt against that which has determined their fate. As it is, a lack in rationality will almost definitely lead to a lack in morality, leading to the further perpetuation of one’s meager station in life. In this same light I feel that the tyranny of the poor by the nobility is a means to maintain an air of superiority. For if the streets’ corner dwellers were as well informed as those who keep them there, there would be no nobility.

Even as it is, I am left to wonder whether or not there is reason in the vain and greedy souls of those privy to such wealth, given that their appearance and belongings hold more importance than their affections for or relations with another. An even distribution of wealth would mean less for one like Sir Walter and enough for one such as Mrs. Smith. It is you who I charge with the task of making this known to those who would be willing to listen, Anne. It is you who has the heart and the notion to care for one without concern for their connections or nobility. For, if you don’t use the wit that you possess, I fear that the state of matters will become much worse before they are made better. Had there been less nobility in the minds and hearts of your family and friends seven years ago, you may not have been forced to wait for love to find you again.

These points as stated lead me then to the second paradox Ms. Wollstonecraft has inspired me to relay to you, which is the conclusion that women are not given by society the benefits that make men appear to be the stronger sex of our species. This last point has come to me as I witnessed you wavering to approach Captain Wentworth with your true emotions of an everlasting love for him. For seven years you have been forlorn with love, "clouding every
enjoyment of youth” (Austen 37) given you by nature, yet you sat for so long, deceiving not only Frederich but your own heart, as well. And for what? Were you not confident enough in your worth to express these harbored emotions? Have you been so ravaged by the expectancies of men merely to dearily blush (Gregory 9) at the sight of him rather than to speak in earnest of your love for him? I believe that you have, Anne, but I pray that I may convince you with these words that this behavior is fitting only for a simp of lowly intellect, and not at all a behavior I would expect from one so thoughtful as you.

Ms. Wollstonecraft is correct to point out the physical inferiority of women in comparison with men; however, the question remains as to whether it is God’s will or the will of man that makes our sex weaker in mind and, often, in spirit. Expected to inspire love as opposed to rational and conscientious thought, women are, as this philosopher of truth says, “like the flowers planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty…” (Wollstonecraft 1459). Men are determined to make us the “alluring objects” (Wollstonecraft 1460) that we have become rather than befriend us as equals sharing the ability to converse as intelligible creatures, and we have allowed them to do so. We even promote this amongst our sex as the proper way of things because we are convinced that a lack of doing so will indicate a flaw in our character.

We have become the puppets in the play directed by the opposing sex, and the men who admit to loving us insist on our acting out scenes that further weaken our senses and rational minds. It’s as if the civilized world has taken on Mahometan rationale, insisting that our sex is free from the souls that are said to be in us all and lead us to heaven or hell (Wollstonecraft 1460). But what choice are we given when our education consists of mostly domestic arts meant to make us more desirable to prospective husbands, and our own mothers contend that cunning, obedience, and strict propriety are the virtues that we must possess to be deemed an acceptable specimen of our sex (Wollstonecraft 1463)? How are we to exercise the faculties we have acquired merely through existence when we are busy with the needlework forced upon us and the sketching of the countryside that we shall likely never have the opportunity to master (Wollstonecraft 1461)?

Now, I ask you, which is truly the weaker sex? The one who is not given the chance to bloom, or the one who is so frightened by the blossoming of the female mind, eventually leading to intellectual equality, that he enslaves us in a world of childlike wonderment and perpetual ignorance (Wollstonecraft 1463)?

If only you could have repeated your discussion about what makes someone good company with Captain Wentworth, rather than wasting it on Mr. Elliott. Perhaps then he would not have thought you so fickle of mind and easily persuaded as he assumed you were given the breaking of your engagement those seven years ago. Perhaps the torture you felt leading up to his recent proposal of marriage would have been eased or avoided completely had you been encouraged to speak your mind rather than to shy away from it. Your opinions were certainly wasted on Mr. Elliott, who is of the belief that birth and the nobleman’s notion of manners are what make for a suitable partner in conversation (Austen 179). What of women who are born into poverty? What of Mrs. Smith? Certainly you have found good company in her, regardless of her lack of formal cultivation. Can it be said that she possesses an even more rational mind than,
say, your sister, Elizabeth, who doesn’t seem to have any kind of rationale between her perfectly baubled ears? Is a woman of leisure owning also a mind at rest, whereas a woman of toil possesses a mind consistently in a state of employ? I believe this is so, Anne, and Ms. Wollstonecraft has said it too, “...the rich of both sexes have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit.” She goes on to say, “Civilized women are, therefore, so weakened by false refinement, that...their condition is much below what it would be were they left in a state nearer to nature” (1478). So, you see, Anne, your formal education has rendered you nearly helpless in a world outside of privilege and birthright. Those women who are born into what Sir Walter and Mr. Elliott would consider to be nothing, leave life with something more than your education would lead you to acknowledge: pure reason.

And what of women of distinction who have led nations and created a path for us? What of Nefertiti and Cleopatra and even Queen Elizabeth, despite her presumed illegitimacy? Do you suppose that the fathers of these great women deemed them inadequate because of their sex? Had they done so, would we know who they are, or would they have passed through life never making historical mountains out of the mound of dirt given them by nature? I predict that if the drivel offered to fathers by John Gregory in *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*, who feigns to understand the idiosyncrasies of women and chooses to pass this ill-informed theory onto his impressionable daughters, was in existence at the times in history when these women were in power, we might never have known their names or been graced with their influence.

I can say with the utmost confidence that Mr. Gregory’s advice has passed through the hands of your father, especially after overhearing his opinion of the women of Bath. He gives them no credit of intellectual integrity when insulting their plain appearance and touting their (most unlikely) admiration of him (Austen 168). It is from this ascertainment of his which forms my opinion that he agrees with Mr. Gregory’s overall theme that a woman owning wit is a dangerous member of her sex (Gregory 10). Do you think Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth was devoid of wit? I think not, Anne.

I must conclude, Anne, and congratulate you on your engagement to Captain Wentworth. I wish to leave you with some final thoughts of the nature, or rather forced opinion of our sex and station in life. It is not wealth or connectedness that make us whole in our existence. It is not our birth into this world as women which makes us inferior or unimportant. It is the assumption by most that both of these things are what determine the successes of a lifetime. This assumption is reached in folly and proves only to harm the less fortunate and degrade the women in society, who, if seen as equals, would be more apt to live up to Aristotelian and even Elizabethan standards of self-actualization and enlightenment. Living under the thumb of noblemen has the poor becoming poorer and women of means becoming more like lapdogs every day.

It is fortunate that you have secured love in a future husband rather than to marry for convenience; though it is a wonder to me that you were able to accomplish this given your current state as a woman of nobility who was so easily persuaded. Do not lose sense of yourself through the chores of marriage and the illusion of worth because of your nobility. Be strong in mind and spirit, Anne, and you will find happiness and fulfillment in all your days to come.
My Sincerest Best Wishes,
Marie A. Hlavin

Works Cited


