

Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power of Social Domination

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Servitude not only debases the individual, but its effects seem to be transmitted to posterity.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.¹

I

‘In all history’ wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in 1904, more than forty years after emancipation, ‘slavery has usually been followed by a period of semi-slavery or serfdom.’² By this, he meant that the oppressed population is ‘curtailed in personal liberty, is insecure in life and property, has peculiar difficulty in earning a decent living, has almost no voice in its own government, does not enjoy adequate educational facilities, and suffers, no matter what its ability or desert, discount, impertinence and contempt.’ More than a century later, many of these barriers to freedom remain in place. Over a similar period, women, too, have emerged from a position of formal subjection – from having no political vote or independent representation before the law, for example, or by losing all their property rights upon marriage – to gain a series of hard-won freedoms and rights through which they have an equal

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft (1992), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 181. Harmondsworth: Penguin (henceforth referred to as *Vindication*).

² W. E. B. Du Bois (1996), ‘The Future of the Negro Race in America’ in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, Eric Sundquist (ed.), p. 362. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

civic status. Nevertheless, even now many women face a similar range of obstacles to those listed by Du Bois. The tendency for the aftereffects of slavery to linger on even after formal equality has been achieved, has long been a source of concern for political theorists preoccupied with the idea of securing the benefits of citizenship for all members of a political community on equal and fair terms. However, while Du Bois admitted to being unsure whether this persistence in ‘semi-servitude’ was a necessary part of the process of gaining freedom or an indication that liberation had not gone far enough, Mary Wollstonecraft shows clearly that it is the result of an incomplete emancipation.

The reality of servitude can, of course, take many forms and there are important differences between the chattel slavery of the American plantations, the historic subjection of women to male authority, and social exclusion or economic marginalization within modern democracies. Within republican political theory, however, a common principle links all these various forms of oppression and classes them as ‘slavery’ in a particular sense.³ In each case, the dominated party is understood to be ruled arbitrarily, by which is meant that they are exposed to a form of controlling power in virtue of which others are able to disregard their perspectives and override their status as persons who act for themselves, *sui iuris*. For republicans, then, the idea of slavery connotes not primarily chains or coercion, but a comparative lack of power and status in relation to others.⁴ Although everyone in society is subject to some form of external power, such as being under the law, ‘free’ individuals are not ruled arbitrarily because they are recognized as independent agents. They are full members of a political community whose laws are required to represent their interests. They

³ Philip Pettit (1997), *Republicanism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Quentin Skinner (1998), *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁴ The central image in this context is not the chained bondsman of the American South but the Roman distinction between a freeman (*liber homo*) as distinct from a slave (*servus*). See Skinner, n. 3.

also have a voice in determining those laws and are able to contest and challenge interference in their lives that does not meet the conditions of non-arbitrariness. Under these conditions, free citizens are said to act in their own right. Those who are designated as ‘slaves’, by contrast, find themselves exposed to the discretionary, or arbitrary, will of those who may have more power than they. They are not immune from unwarranted intrusion and have, at best, a limited voice in determining the terms of their social participation. To this extent, the term slave refers generically to those who are not treated as agents who act in their own right and are, thereby, dominated. Where people fear for the security of their person, property or jobs, as Du Bois suggests, they are dominated by those who have power over them in respect of these things.

Domination may be legal or political, such as where individuals are treated unequally under the law or lack important constitutional rights and representation.⁵ As we shall see, Wollstonecraft shows that domination may also be social. Insofar as individuals’ social environment represents arbitrary restrictive force – where norms and customs are not required to reflect their interests and perspectives, inhibiting and diminishing the effectiveness of their voices and reducing their ability to act as agents in their own right – they are dominated irrespective of their legal standing.

In analyzing dependence as having both political and social causes, Wollstonecraft highlights an important reason as to why patterns of domination have a tendency to persist for generations. And amongst her many significant arguments, we can identify a specific reason why social domination can be much more damaging and difficult to remove than political domination which should be of interest to contemporary republicans. Republicans rely on public reason and rational deliberation as a fundamental defence against domination which

⁵ Strictly, any form of power which meets the conditions for arbitrariness can be dominating (Pettit, n. 3, p. 59).

both allows individuals to challenge instances of arbitrary power whilst enabling the citizenry collectively to establish and maintain non-arbitrary laws which reflect their common interests.⁶ Within any political community, it is argued, certain considerations come to be generally accepted as being relevant for discussing and resolving matters of public concern. This consensus provides the context in which political deliberation inevitably takes place. Where there is social domination, Wollstonecraft shows, the appeal to public reason may be seriously undermined. Inequality and dependence corrupt the ability of citizens, both dominant and dominated alike, to reason dispassionately in their relations and public dealings. Debate and political activity, she argues, become governed by opinion, tradition and vested interests rather than by rationally grounded considerations. As a result, the considerations and ideas which are accepted as constituting public reasons come to be set by the dominant groups. This dampens, and may even negate, the effect of reasoned argument as an impartial check against domination. Instead, debate is conducted on terms which are biased towards the incumbent powers within society.

My primary interest is in how the philosophical principle of freedom as independence from arbitrary rule can address the problem of social domination. In pursuing this question, I shall confine myself to exploring this issue in the light of Wollstonecraft's work. (And in so doing, I refer only to Wollstonecraft's use of a republican framework in addressing the subject of women's subjection rather than offering a full account of her ideas about gender in society). Broadly speaking, I understand the republican ideal in terms of freedom as non-domination as articulated in contemporary terms by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner.⁷ Both

⁶ Philip Pettit (2010), 'A Republican Law of Peoples', *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, 76, 82. See also (2001), *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency*, pp. 156-7 and n. 3, p. 189. Cambridge: Polity.

⁷ Philip Pettit, n. 3 and n. 5 and Quentin Skinner (2010), 'On the Slogans of Republican Political Theory,' *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9: 95-102.

Pettit and Skinner, as well as others working within this paradigm such as Lena Halldenius, place Wollstonecraft within the eighteenth century Commonwealthman period of rational dissent, alongside figures such as Richard Price and Joseph Priestly who have been shown to use the notion of freedom as non-domination.⁸ However, although Wollstonecraft is often cited with approval by these writers and used to illustrate republican freedom, with the notable exception of Halldenius they have not explicitly examined the implications for republicanism of Wollstonecraft's understanding of freedom and slavery.⁹ Wollstonecraft's analysis of the oppressive nature of gendered relations, picking out what had been previously hidden forms of male domination, has justifiably been celebrated in its own right. However, she provides more than a sociological account of power relations. Her work also represents an innovative use of the core idea that freedom indicates the absence of arbitrary rule. Others before her had acknowledged the effect of social and cultural norms in reinforcing slavery.¹⁰

⁸ See Pettit (n. 3), p. 61, Skinner, 'How Many Concepts of Liberty?', lecture given at University of Sydney, 24 July 2006 and Halldenius (2007), 'The Primacy of Right. On the Triad of Liberty, Equality and Virtue in Wollstonecraft's political thought', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 15: 75-99.

⁹ Although all republicans place freedom in opposition to arbitrary power, there is an important difference between how Pettit and Wollstonecraft express this ideal. Where Pettit defines arbitrariness in consequentialist terms, defined according to the extent to which one's (reasoned) avowable interests have been tracked (n.3, p.52), Wollstonecraft, as we shall see, expresses her ideal in moral terms as a function of reason and individual agency. Common to both versions, however, and the focus of my argument, is the importance of social conditions and collectively-accepted notions which provide the context for, and limits of, reasoned argument. Where these conditions are biased in favour of the dominant social groups, I shall argue, there is domination.

¹⁰ Republicans had long held that those living under slavery tend to become accustomed to this state and cling to it, thus reducing the tyrant's need to exercise any direct form of control (Quentin Skinner (2008), 'Freedom as the Absence of Arbitrary Power' in *Republicanism and Political Theory*, Cécile Laborde and John Maynor (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell).

Where Wollstonecraft's diagnosis differs from her predecessors', as I shall show, is that she takes social oppression to inhibit freedom for the same reasons as the denial of legal or political rights: women are under a form of arbitrary rule, are excluded from having their interests and perspectives considered and are unable to contest their treatment in any 'court of public opinion.' While the traditional focus of republican argument had been on preventing arbitrary interference by rulers (who might, for example, dominate via taxation without representation or the royal prerogative), or on discouraging the accumulation of political and economic power in the hands of a few, Wollstonecraft demonstrates that, as far as women were concerned, these measures would never bring freedom without a simultaneous change in the cultural attitudes and patterns of behaviour (both male and female) that prevented women from becoming independent.

While I believe that an appreciation of the formal structure of freedom as independence from arbitrary power can augment existing Wollstonecraft scholarship, especially regarding her discussions of slavery,¹¹ I do not claim that this is the only way to read Wollstonecraft, nor that republican influences should be privileged amongst the many other sources upon which she drew. Barbara Taylor, for example, has highlighted the 'religious foundations of Wollstonecraft's feminism,' emphasizing the importance of her puritan and dissenting associations, whilst Daniel O'Neill situates her vigorous exchange

¹¹ For example, in her excellent study of the relationship between Wollstonecraft and the abolitionists' writing about New World slavery, Moira Ferguson does not refer to the idea of freedom as non-domination (the contemporary articulation of which emerged later in the decade). The abolitionist writing she examines, however, no less than Wollstonecraft's own work, was infused with republican sentiment underpinned by the same principle of freedom as the absence of arbitrary power ('Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery,' *Feminist Review*, 1992 (42): 82-102). I believe my interpretation would go some way towards addressing the 'internal conflicts' and contradictions that Ferguson identifies within the *Vindication*.

with Edmund Burke in the context of ideas about democracy and civilization derived from the Scottish Enlightenment.¹² It is not my intention here to demonstrate from first principles that Wollstonecraft was herself committed to a conception of what would now be called freedom as non-domination.¹³ Rather, since Wollstonecraft does clearly use the language of freedom, independence and slavery, my aim is to draw out the implications this has for republicans notwithstanding the subtleties of her overall position. In order to do this, I shall first outline some of the key features of the Commonwealthman understanding of freedom, showing how this is reflected in Wollstonecraft work, before going on to apply this to the question of social domination and the enduring pattern of servitude.

II

Classically, republican freedom was understood as an intersubjective ideal in which citizens are related to one another as independent agents.¹⁴ Freedom is connected with two other

¹² Barbara Taylor (2002), 'The Religious Foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's Feminism,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, Claudia Johnson (ed.), pp. 99-118 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and Daniel O'Neill (2007), *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press). Indeed, whilst I focus on its republican structure, many of my conclusions about Wollstonecraft's analysis of social domination are also reflected in O'Neill's assessment of her aim being to spread 'democracy into all aspects of human existence' (p. 19). Penny Weiss's discussion of 'independence' as a major theme within Wollstonecraft's work is also very useful. While I agree with much of Weiss's analysis, she positions Wollstonecraft as a 'liberal' with strong 'communitarian' leanings whereas I find the republican structure much more appropriate (2009, *Canon Fodder: Historical Women Political Thinkers*, pp. 81-100, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press).

¹³ This has been ably done by Halldenius (n.7).

¹⁴ Skinner (n.3), pp. 26-30. See also Skinner (n.6), pp. 97-8 and Cécile Laborde (2010), 'Republicanism and Global Justice', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9: 49.

ideals: equality and virtue.¹⁵ Independent agents are said to be equal where none is able to exercise arbitrary power over another, and each has the same standing under law. They are also expected to behave virtuously, by which is meant to be guided by reason rather than by opinion or passion.¹⁶ (Indeed, as Wollstonecraft understands it, virtue is the only true form of freedom: ‘it is the right use of reason alone which makes us independent of everything – excepting the unclouded reason – ‘whose service is perfect freedom.’’)¹⁷ Whilst virtue is demanded of independent agents, so independence is said to be a precondition of virtue. This is the basic framework we find in Richard Price’s writings. He describes individuals as being free to the extent that they are ‘subject to no control from the arbitrary will of any of their fellow-citizens.’¹⁸ Price links this idea of freedom with both equality and virtue, observing that the maxim ‘that all men are naturally equal’ refers to their state when grown up to maturity and become independent agents, capable of acquiring property, and of directing their own conduct’ and that freedom is ‘inseparable from knowledge and virtue.’¹⁹ Independence requires that people are not ruled arbitrarily rather than that they are not ruled at all. So long as citizens are subject to laws which are required to reflect the shared interests of the people who are governed by it and must treat all citizens as agents, such that nobody is above the law and yet no one falls below its protection, then their independence will not have been

¹⁵ Halldenus (n. 7), p. 75.

¹⁶ *Vindication*, pp. 91-5, 209. Reason, here, does not refer to abstract logic. Just as the body and mind exert an influence on each other, so reason and passion are necessary parts of thought. Through the imagination, we harness passion and reach beyond reason. Reason, nevertheless, remains a necessary grounding for virtue.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁸ Richard Price (1992), *Political Writings*, p. 85. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86 (also p. 184). For Wollstonecraft, freedom is also a natural birth right (*Vindication*, p. 44 and (1995), *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

compromised.²⁰ Such non-arbitrary rule is concerned with the common good, leaving independent individuals free to direct their personal affairs without being answerable to others.²¹

Since freedom is understood within a structure of coercive but non-arbitrary power that reflects the common good, a considerable and on-going input is required from the citizens themselves to ensure that these conditions are not breached. In order to ensure that everybody's perspectives on the common interest are taken into account, the state must be accountable to its citizens.²² Historically, two main defences of freedom have been identified. The first is the virtue of the citizens, represented by their ability and readiness to promote and maintain the conditions of freedom by being guided by reason rather than self-interest. The second is their voice. Government, says Price, 'is or is not liberty, just as the laws are just or unjust; and as the body of people do or do not participate in the power of making them.'²³ The state is nothing more than the body of people who make it up, and for it to govern in their name, it must respond to their opinions and ideas about how they want to live. Each

²⁰ Government 'makes no man master of another. It elevates no person above his fellow citizens. On the contrary, it levels all by fixing all in a state of subjection to one common authority. The authority of the laws. The will of the community.' In particular, the king 'is only the first executive officer, the creature of the law, and as much accountable and subject to the law as the meanest peasant' (n. 17, p. 88).

²¹ Ibid., p. 82. 'A citizen is free when the power of commanding his own conduct and the quiet possession of his life, person, property and good name are secured to him by being his own legislator [in the sense of having a share of government].'

²² Ibid., p. 88. The magistrates 'do not govern the state [being the body of citizens]. It is the state governs them.'

²³ Ibid., p. 17.

individual has a voice in how the affairs of the community are run which they are expected to use virtuously and with restraint.²⁴

Wollstonecraft also uses the language of independence, equality and virtue when talking about freedom and its antonym, slavery. In the opening paragraph of the dedication to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, independence is described as ‘the basis of every virtue’ with slavery cast a few pages later as dependence.²⁵ And in the first chapter she establishes that independence requires equality.²⁶ However, while women possess the prerequisite for virtue – they partake in the ‘gift of reason’ along with men – they do not have the opportunity to for independence.²⁷ Men’s power over women is, therefore, arbitrary and women are said to be slaves.²⁸ Lack of equality or opportunity for independence, however, do more than simply deprive women of freedom. Arbitrary power in whatever form, even where it is well-intentioned, is regarded as inherently corrupting, undermining the capacity of both master and slave alike to develop the capacity and character to act virtuously.²⁹ By preventing individuals from reasoning impartially and seeing their situation for what it is, patterns of domination entrench themselves and become difficult to dislodge. In the first chapter of the

²⁴ Ibid., p. 80. ‘Every independent agent in a free state ought to have a share in the government of it, either by himself personally, or by a body or representatives in choosing whom he has a free vote.’ The importance of virtue as a restraint on liberty is emphasized throughout this passage.

²⁵ *Vindication*, pp. 85, 88. She also ties reason and virtue together (p. 91).

²⁶ See also n. 18, p. 61, ‘Virtue can only flourish among equals.’

²⁷ *Vindication*, p.87, adding that women, like men, are moral beings capable of virtue and accountable for their conduct (pp. 81, 162).

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 87-8, 265.

²⁹ ‘Inequality of rank must ever impede the growth of virtue, by vitiating the mind that submits or domineers’ (n. 18, pp. 48-9).

Vindication, Wollstonecraft sets out the reasons for this in classically republican terms.³⁰ These principles form the basis of her analysis and criticism of gendered patterns of social relationships in the rest of the book (although in section IV we shall examine a separate and more innovative observation regarding the corrupting effect of arbitrary power).

The argument in chapter one is this. Although human beings are moved by their passions and emotions, through reason and virtue we are able to translate our experiences into knowledge.³¹ Through collective deliberation, individuals share their discoveries with each other so that the community grows in understanding and is able to generate ‘laws which bind society.’ Wisdom and knowledge, however, do not come easily. It takes discipline, training and intellectual courage to free oneself from the prejudices and falsehoods with which one has grown up and to overcome the impulse to be swayed by passion and self-interest.³² Individuals require an appropriate environment to develop the robust character necessary for virtuous, independent citizenship. Dependence impedes this development. If I am to be virtuous, then, I must be independent. Importantly, I must also live within a community of independent agents. While virtuous people are able to act in accordance with reason and the public good, putting aside their own self-interest when appropriate, slaves do not have this luxury because they are dependent on the goodwill of others. Slaves’ primary motivation is to manage those who have power over them. They might do this by manipulating things behind the scene or by lying low, hoping not to be noticed. Dependence, then, rewards qualities regarded as unvirtuous, such as timidity, cunning, trickery, and sycophancy. Slaves also

³⁰ See Skinner (n. 9), for a discussion of the standard republican arguments about the effects of slavery.

³¹ *Vindication*, p. 91.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2. See also n. 18, p.31, ‘the cultivation of reason is an arduous task, and men of lively fancy, finding it easier to follow the impulse of passion, endeavour to persuade themselves and others that it is most natural.’

become used to accepting the opinions of others rather than questioning what they have been told and coming to their own reasoned judgements.³³ Masters, on the other hand, grow accustomed to insincere adulation which prevents them from facing up to hard truths and building their own virtuous characters. Their opinion of themselves is inflated, their skills are often underdeveloped because they have become lazy, and they lack the self-discipline to regulate their appetites in the name of morality.³⁴

In hierarchical societies, most people are involved in relationships in which they are, in turn, dominant and subordinate. As individuals ingratiate themselves with those above them, so they become despotic to those below (a pattern into which married men of any rank are liable to slip). People become doubly corrupt, both ‘submitting and tyrannising without exercising their reason,’ becoming dead-weights on the community.³⁵ Rather than advancing society’s ends by developing useful skills, people fritter their time away pandering to extravagant fops and feathering their own nests. Only when the stranglehold of dependence is broken, she argues, will capable individuals emerge to ‘scatter seeds that grow up and have a great influence on the forming opinion,’ adding that ‘once the public opinion preponderates, through the exertion of reason, the overthrow of arbitrary power is not very distant.’³⁶ Wollstonecraft illustrates her claims with the examples of monarchy, standing armies, and the clergy as institutions which encourage flattery and luxury rather than character and virtue.³⁷ In later chapters, she includes the arbitrary rule of husbands over wives.³⁸

³³ With reference to the clergy, for example, she says that ‘blind submission imposed at college to forms of belief serves as a novitiate to the curate, who must obsequiously respect the opinion of his rector or patron, if he mean to rise in his profession’ (ibid., p. 98).

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 96-9.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 97.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

³⁷ We find the same structure of argument across Wollstonecraft’s writings. In ‘An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution,’ in (1993), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

If dependence is to be avoided, the law rather than the capricious whim of powerful individuals must be sovereign. Everybody must have the opportunity to challenge and overturn the arbitrary use of power when it arises.³⁹ Since the law as a whole must reflect the considered will and interests of the population over which it is sovereign, Wollstonecraft argues that a culture of open, vigorous and penetrating debate is required in order to broaden people's minds and equip them to pursue the knowledge necessary for identifying and upholding the common good ('to consult the public mind in a perfect state of civilization, will not only be necessary, but it will be productive of the happiest consequences, generating a government emanating from the sense of the nation.')⁴⁰ The discussion of politics, she believes, 'enlarges the heart by opening the understanding,' preventing social stagnation.⁴¹

and A Vindication of the Rights of Man (Oxford: Oxford University Press), the savagery of the Terror was attributed to the pervasive presence of arbitrary power within the French state which generated the excesses, decadence and harshness of the *ancien régime* and created the subsequent spirit of servility that characterized the nation.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 96, 128. Women themselves were not immune from exhibiting this same double standard in behaviour. In her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft describes how a dominated woman may, in turn, "tyrannise over her servants; for slavish fear and tyranny are found together" (1787, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the more Important Duties of Life*, p. 63 (London: Joseph Johnson).

³⁹ 'You must have seen,' Wollstonecraft says to Burke, 'the clogged wheels of corruption continually oiled by the sweat of the laborious poor, squeezed out of them by unceasing taxation. You must have discovered that the majority in the House of Commons was often purchased by the crown, and that the people were oppressed by the influence of their own money, extorted by the venal voice of a packed representation' (ibid., pp. 20-1).

⁴⁰ See O'Neill (n. 11), p. 255.

⁴¹ 1987, *A Short Residence in Sweden* p.103. Harmondsworth: Penguin. See also n. 18, p. 19, 'the most improving exercise of the mind... is the restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty.'

We should note, finally, that despite her emphasis on debate and public consultation, Wollstonecraft's conception of freedom under the law is not restricted to what is often termed the public, as opposed to the private, sphere. The same conditions for independence apply within the home as in the public arena. Indeed, marriage, as it was practised then, represented a paradigm case of a dominating relationship. While it is now widely accepted that independence should not be restricted to the public sphere,⁴² in Wollstonecraft's time there was a rigid cultural distinction between the (male) duties of public citizenship and the (female) responsibilities for domestic motherhood. The latter were seen as being inherently dependent.⁴³ It was part of her innovative use of the principle of freedom as non-domination that Wollstonecraft was able to apply its logic to the condition of women in the home as well as to that of citizens outside of it.

III

In a straightforward sense, Wollstonecraft describes women as slaves.⁴⁴ Being denied any civil and political rights, women were not able to act in their own right but were dependent on men. She illustrates this point vividly in her novel, *Maria*:

a wife being as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing which she can call her own... The tender mother cannot *lawfully* snatch from the gripe of the gambling spendthrift, or beastly drunkard, unmindful of his offspring, the fortune which falls to her by chance; or (so flagrant is the injustice) what she earns by her own exertions. No; he can rob her with impunity, even to waste publicly on a

⁴² See Pettit's distinction between private *dominium* and public *imperium* (n.3, p.112).

⁴³ Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, pp. 27-49, 97. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

⁴⁴ *Vindication*, pp. 87, 88, 265.

courtezan; and the laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection or redress.⁴⁵

Not all women were so unhappy but all were equally slaves since the power over them was arbitrary. Many women may, of course, had kind husbands or fathers who would not have acted in the same way as Maria's husband. And many others, by using their cunning, their charms or their talents might have been able to avoid unwanted interference and gain a degree of control over their lives. They could not, however, have done so *as a matter of right*, acting in their own names. From a republican perspective, as well as from Wollstonecraft's own, this element of entitlement marked the difference between independence and dependence, or in this sense, between freedom and slavery.⁴⁶ If women do not control their own earnings or property, for example, by right, they are not men's equals and must therefore *depend* on luck or circumstance for their continued security. This status inequality between men and women, as we have seen, is corrupting and undermines civic virtue across society. Since no woman, regardless of education, class or position, could be independent, no woman could be said to be free.⁴⁷ In her substantive analysis of social relations, it is true that

⁴⁵ *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, pp. 80-1 (original italics). New York: Dover Press, 2005.

⁴⁶ This is another hallmark of classical republican thinking. Skinner (n. 9) discusses the role that acting on one's own account as a matter of right played in the political thinking of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries. In the same volume, Skinner and Pettit defend the republican ideal on precisely this point against an alternative liberal model of freedom from interference proposed by Ian Carter and Matthew Kramer.

⁴⁷ Traditionally, republican literature has emphasised the manner in which slaves are often complicit in maintaining the institutions through which their domination is held in place, especially in respect of those over whom they themselves held a degree of power (see n.37 above). Accordingly, Wollstonecraft highlights the unsavoury and callous manner in which the white womenfolk in the New World treated their African slaves ("Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they

Wollstonecraft is sensitive to the complex ways individuals – and not just women, but including, for example, poor working men and religious Dissenters – may be dominated.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, as I shall show, the longevity of women’s subjection, the effects of which seem to be transmitted to posterity, stem from the manner in which they are as a class considered slaves.

In addition to their legal and political exclusion, women were dominated through another source of arbitrary power which prevented them from acting in their own right. The customs, traditions and opinions – including ideas about women’s natures, expectations about decent and proper conduct, preconceptions about the separate realms of public and private life, the sexual division of labour – which made up the background culture in which Wollstonecraft lived combined to keep women dependent on men no less effectively than did the law. Not only did these beliefs and values not reflect women’s interests, since they did not have sufficient authority or influence, women were left without an effective voice with which to bring about cultural change. It is sometimes said that Wollstonecraft had come to regard

invent?” (n. 18, p. 46)). Although their situation was very different in kind from their chattels, ‘free’ women such as the wives of the plantation owners were themselves ‘slaves’ since they remained under their husbands’ cover. The brutality these women displayed was no surprise from a republican perspective, given the corrupted state of an unequal society (although it did challenge Edmund Burke’s assertions about women as creatures of sensibility).

Wollstonecraft is able to distinguish between the forms of servitude that (white) women and African slaves, both men and women, suffer respectively without undermining the principle that in an important respect, they are all ‘slaves’. “Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves” she asks in respect of women, “to be subjected to prejudices that brutalise them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man?” (*Vindication*, p. 262). Ultimately, however, there is a single sense in which both white women and black Africans are dominated, albeit in different ways, namely through being ruled by the arbitrary power of (white, male) prejudice rather than by reason.

⁴⁸ See n.18, pp. 13-6 and *Vindication*, pp. 326-7.

her society's identification of the female sex with certain characteristics of delicacy, purity and weakness as a prison for women.⁴⁹ And while this is a metaphor that Wollstonecraft sometimes employs, the image of confinement does not fully capture nature of women's social oppression that she identified.⁵⁰ Women were not simply restricted in the actions they were able to perform. They were kept in a state of dependence through the effects of these beliefs and practices. Wollstonecraft frequently uses the language of slavery in respect of this social subjection. For example, Maria's friend and prison warder, Jemima, speaks of 'being born a slave' because of the prejudice she experienced for having an unwed mother. She had been, she said, 'chained by infamy to slavery.'⁵¹

Social domination represents an especially subtle, pervasive and powerful form of oppression. Wollstonecraft identifies the belief that women were 'created rather to feel than reason' as the source of the endless variety of 'meanness, cares and sorrows into which women are plunged.'⁵² She describes the resulting bondage as a specious form of 'slavery which chains the very soul of woman' and which takes a 'Herculean' effort to shake off.⁵³ Whereas poor and unpropertied men ('hard-working mechanics') lack legal rights and political representation, only women face the 'insuperable obstacles' of social domination.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Anne Mellor's introduction to *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, 1994, p. xiii. New York: Norton.

⁵⁰ In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft combines the language of prison with that of slavery. 'Was not the world was a vast prison' asks Maria 'and women were born slaves' (n. 43, p. 5). (We should note that Mellor does also discuss the idea of slavery, although without invoking the structure of independence from arbitrary power.)

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32. See also *Vindication*, pp. 154-5 where this is said not only to cause women's sorrows but to make them 'entirely dependent'.

⁵² *Vindication*, pp. 154-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 265.

In describing women as being dominated socially, it should be emphasized that domination, as a master-slave relationship, always represents a relation between agents, either individually or acting in concert.⁵⁵ To argue that women are slaves in virtue of their social background is not to imply that they are controlled in some abstract way by an impersonal system or force, as some might interpret an idea of a *Volksgeist* or collective controlling mind of a people. As Wollstonecraft makes clear, individually women were dominated even if this was in virtue of characteristics they shared with other women as a group. And individual men possessed a controlling power over women.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, power need not be directly attributable to any particular person's will or actions for it to be dominating. The crucial factor is that, ultimately, in virtue of the majority opinion or a prevailing background attitude, some agents (men) are able to exercise an arbitrary control over the actions of others (women).⁵⁷

Wollstonecraft outlines several ways in which social power is dominating. First, women's legal and political marginalization was more easily maintained where it was believed to be natural or proper. Where, for example, women were seen as being 'fragile in every sense of the word' and so 'obliged to look up to man for every comfort' who served as 'their natural protector,' the strictness of the marriage laws and the principles of coverture were seen to make sense and could be justified.⁵⁸ This gave rise to a second source of

⁵⁵ See Pettit (n. 3), p. 52.

⁵⁶ Wollstonecraft quotes a long passage from *Emile* which describes how individual women can be subject to individual men 'either by the laws of her country or by the force of opinion' (*Vindication*, p. 126 and *Emile*, p. 419 where 'opinion' is translated 'custom' (1993. London: Everyman). Although Rousseau's ideas about women and subjection differ from Wollstonecraft's, the notion of being dependent on, and in servitude to, custom and public opinion occurs throughout *Emile*.

⁵⁷ *Vindication*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-6.

dependence which was that many professions and social opportunities by which women might support themselves and establish their own independence were foreclosed to them.⁵⁹ Beyond this, Wollstonecraft also emphasizes how social attitudes compelled women to act as self-censors, guarding their every action in order to keep up appropriate appearances. For example, she says that a woman's overarching imperative was to protect her reputation for modesty at all costs. If she lost her reputation, she lost her place in society entirely and became, in effect, 'an outlaw' without protection.⁶⁰ The stakes were so high that rather than taking risks and developing their talents and abilities beyond what was socially ascribed, women would, overwhelmingly, conform to the appropriate standards rather than drawing attention to themselves.⁶¹ A fourth reason is the focus of the next section. The strength and tenacity of social pressure as a distinctive form of dominating power, I argue, lies in the way in which citizen's capacity to reason is undermined, leaving victims entirely at the mercy of their masters.

IV

In order to be independent, individuals must be in a position to defend themselves from arbitrary power. To do so, they must be able to argue their case rationally, making use of

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 260-2.

⁶⁰ This was the unfortunate Jemima's summary of her own experience (n. 43, pp. 35-6). Wollstonecraft makes a similar point in *Vindication*, quoting Catherine Macaulay's remark that 'there is but one fault which a woman of honour may not commit with impunity' (p. 252).

⁶¹ So important was the need to be seen to conform to the standards expected of a woman that Rousseau suggests that every little girl can easily be brought into line with the reproach, 'what will people think of you?' (n. 51, p. 393).

considerations accepted by all as being relevant.⁶² However, Wollstonecraft demonstrates that even where a woman could demonstrate that she had the requisite rational virtues (and she concedes that under conditions of slavery, this was not always the case), she was unlikely to be given a fair hearing irrespective of the strength of her arguments. Two reasons emerge. First, women themselves were not regarded as suitable dialogue partners with credible opinions and perspectives of their own. Secondly, where arguments are given which depart from the accepted position, they are more likely to be dismissed. The following incident taken from *Maria* illustrates both of these difficulties.

Having been imprisoned in a lunatic asylum by her abusive, neglectful and dishonest husband, Maria eventually elopes with her lover, Henry Darnford. Her husband later sues Darnford for seduction, and Maria, somewhat improbably, takes it upon herself to conduct her lover's defence. Although she is not allowed to speak in person, she presents her case in writing to the court. The judge dismisses her testimony out of hand, citing the 'fallacy of letting women plead their feelings as an excuse for the violation of the marriage-vow.' Not only were women deemed unreliable, but allowing them to speak was thought to open a 'flood-gate for immorality.'⁶³ The case was lost, for there were no witnesses other than Maria herself. Indeed her statement was considered suspect by the very fact that she was testifying against her husband. Unable to persuade anyone to listen to her, Maria found herself at the

⁶² Pettit, 2010 (n. 5), p. 82. Where citizens come together to deliberate, Pettit argues, they eventually establish 'a currency of considerations that all sides recognize as relevant' for settling public disagreements, comprising 'common reasons such that anyone who learns his or her way around in the circles of debate... will recognize... as the considerations to bring forward in support of any policy position.' See also 2001 (n. 5), pp. 156-8.

⁶³ *Maria*, p. 121.

mercy of the judicial system and the men in whose power she was.⁶⁴ Unlike a man, Maria was ‘doubly deauthorized’ as a witness, finding herself discounted on account of both who she was and the claims she made.⁶⁵ Furthermore, as Wollstonecraft makes clear, even where a woman’s testimony is accepted on its facts, the negative effect of background opinions and beliefs will remain in the form of a wider moral condemnation. In court, for example, Maria was accused of corrupting the institution of marriage and opening the door to the degradation of public decency. Such behaviour may have been permitted in France it was said, but not in England. This moral reaction both to what Maria said and that it was a woman saying it represented a further barrier to being taken seriously.

In part, the reaction to Maria’s testimony can be explained by the tendency for virtue to be corrupted in hierarchical or patriarchal societies, leading men to flatter themselves that they are superior and to defend vested interests rather than objectively to listen to unfamiliar arguments with an open mind.⁶⁶ Beyond this, however, Wollstonecraft identifies a deeper

⁶⁴ Maria’s predicament resembles that described today by writers on ‘the politics of credibility’ or ‘testimonial injustice’ concerning the variations in credence given to reports made by members of different social groups. See Karen Jones (2002), ‘The Politics of Credibility’ in *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, L. Anthony and C. Witt (eds.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

⁶⁵ Jones (n. 59), p.158. Jones illustrates her point using the example of sexual abuse, arguing that the credence one gives to reports depend on more than just the victim’s testimony. We are likely, she says, to bring to bear our ‘understanding of male sexuality and of the role and structure of the patriarchal family, and, in addition, on [our] beliefs about the ability of women and girls to understand their experiences (think of seduction-fantasy theory) and report them truthfully.’

⁶⁶ Decadence is said to have influenced Rousseau’s ‘voluptuous’ opinions on female dependence (*Vindication*, pp. 107-8). ‘When’ asks Wollstonecraft, ‘will a great man arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes which pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject?’

obstacle to women's voices being heard. Throughout her writing, she takes note of the effect people's social environment has on their behaviour, outlook and capacity for virtue.⁶⁷ These background features influence and determine the available stock of knowledge, ideas and attitudes upon which individual reasoners are able to draw. As they grow up, she argues, people tend to acquire 'prejudices' based on the ideas and attitudes to which they are exposed. In itself, a prejudice need not be a harmful attitude. It is simply 'a fond obstinate persuasion for which we can give no reason.'⁶⁸ Indeed, very often there may have been a perfectly reasonable, practical reason why things have come to be seen or done in a certain way.⁶⁹ Over time, however, the original context comes to be forgotten whereas the tradition it generated becomes entrenched. And so, 'opinions assume the disproportionate form of prejudices when they are indolently adopted only because age has given them a venerable aspect, though the reason on which they were built ceases to be a reason, or cannot be traced.' As prejudices become deeply rooted they have a tendency to 'cloud reason,' misrepresenting what is in reality a particular, culturally-specific set of possibilities as simply the way things are and allowing spurious arguments in favour of the status quo to take precedence over hard-fought intellectual endeavour.

As Wollstonecraft understands it, the public deliberation upon which the defence against dependence relies always takes place within a social setting. Background ideas, beliefs, myths and traditions come to form a system of cultural attitudes and values which

⁶⁷ In her Scandinavian travels, for example, one of Wollstonecraft's objectives was to observe the local 'state of manners and morals,' in the light of what she can ascertain about the inhabitants' religion, government, laws, freedom, economy, history and culture (n. 39, p. 172).

⁶⁸ *Vindication*, p. 220. 'The moment a reason can be given for an opinion,' Wollstonecraft adds, 'it ceases to be a prejudice, though it may be an error in judgment.'

⁶⁹ More often than not, she says, these reasons reflected a contingent local condition rather than 'a fundamental principle that would be reasonable at all times' (ibid., p. 220).

supply the common stock of standards and concepts used by citizens to frame their own arguments and evaluate the arguments of others. Ominously, however, it is often those in power who control and influence the ideas which shape this background. Wollstonecraft illustrates this point with the creation story in Genesis where Eve is formed from Adam's rib, arguing that men have played upon their superior physical strength to legitimate and perpetuate the mythical idea that the current relative gender-ordering was ordained by both God and nature.⁷⁰ She also notes the enormous influence that respected writers have in forming public opinions about the place of women.⁷¹ The outcome is that a baseline of commonly accepted ideas and values is established which is biased towards the perspectives of the dominant social. As a result, rather than deliberating in a reasoned and impartial manner, Wollstonecraft observes that 'men in general seem to employ their reason to justify prejudices, which they have imbibed, they cannot trace how, rather than to root them out.'⁷² This represents a very serious impediment to the republican ideal of public debate as a safeguard against domination. And so, while Wollstonecraft acknowledges the power of reason to expose error and injustice, she questions its effectiveness amongst a people whose customs and attitudes about what is right or fitting frequently rested upon 'on a chaotic mass of prejudices that have no inherent principle of order to keep them together.'⁷³

In identifying the influence of the social background, Wollstonecraft has done more than describe the effects of cultural attitudes and expectations on the ways we judge the arguments and opinions of others. Through her description of individuals as slaves in virtue of their social environment, a complex argument emerges which both diagnoses the structure of cultural oppression in terms of freedom as non-domination whilst highlighting a crucial

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 103.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 91-2.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 204.

difference between legal and social forms of servitude. Reasoned argument is supposed to serve as a bulwark against arbitrary power. Even the law, to which all are subject, is itself open to the external and independent scrutiny of reason since it should reflect the common interests of the people as determined through rational public deliberation. Where citizens have access to deliberative argument in their defence, then even where they are formally dominated the possibility remains that they may expose the injustice of their situation. By highlighting their situation within civil society, for example, it may be possible to lobby for a change in the law. Such a defence, however, has no realistic chance of success where prejudice has clouded the ability to reason of the judges and fellow deliberators. As a result, a fundamental check on arbitrary power is disarmed. Deliberation takes place against a background of accepted norms and de facto institutional practices, in which current structures of power and ways of life are taken as the neutral order of things. When outside voices challenge the values and received opinions of the baseline, their arguments are typically judged, not according to ‘the best reasons’ objectively conceived, but by the (arbitrary) strength of prevailing public opinion. Questions such as whose testimony is credible, which facts are relevant, and what normative considerations apply are determined from the perspective of the dominant social groups.⁷⁴ Consequently, men became the ultimate arbiters as to what was admissible in public discussion and what counted as a reasonable argument. There was no external, moderating influence to which women could appeal since the public’s capacity to reason impartially had been contaminated. Under such conditions, it is often

⁷⁴ Even terms used within political discussion, such as ‘independence’, or ‘public’ and ‘private,’ are not neutral, universal concepts but gendered ideals with particular histories that subtly reflect the sexist and patriarchal assumptions prevalent at their origins. See for example, Joan Landes (1988), *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (New York: Cornell University Press), Carole Pateman (1989), *The Disorder of Women* (Cambridge: Polity) and Gatens (n. 41).

impossible for those perceived to be outsiders to challenge the entrenched, status quo position where their own arguments are too far from the dominant ideas to be seriously entertained.

Where individuals have the legal right to contest and challenge arbitrary power, they do so using the rules of reasoned debate as these are socially understood. However, where there is social domination, people face the additional task of challenging the public understanding of what those generally accepted rules are. It is no longer a case of contesting power using reason as an independent medium but of asking for the medium itself to be redefined and agreed by all those who use it. The reliance on reasoned argument as a defence against arbitrary power requires a reasonably representative social background in order for it to operate correctly. Since it is a feature of human psychology that we unthinkingly absorb many of our ideas from our surroundings, it is, of course, unrealistic for prejudice to be eliminated altogether. It is, therefore, essential that citizens have the means of negating or countering prejudice through exercising their own cultural voice. And since societies are dynamic entities, this is an on-going requirement. As conditions change – for example, as power shifts after war, as the economy develops, as urban centres become more populous, as technology changes work patterns, or as religious beliefs alter – latent prejudices from previous generations need to be re-examined to minimize the impact on the current citizens. Rather than traditions becoming ‘moss-covered’ and entrenched, serving to further the interests of the established powers, the culture must be open enough to accommodate the possibility of social change.

V

Nobody is exempt from the influence of their environment. Even people of ‘genius,’ Wollstonecraft argues, ‘have always been blurred by the prejudices of the age.’⁷⁵ More generally, she observes that all ‘men and women,’ are inevitably shaped ‘in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it.’⁷⁶ And even enlightened, open-minded individuals, she believes, rarely ‘perceive how much they themselves are indebted to general improvement for the acquirements, and even the virtues, which they would not have had the force of mind to attain, by their individual exertions in a less advanced state of society.’⁷⁷ This is not to say, however, that we are simply products of our culture. As rational and moral beings we are responsible for our actions and our opinions. And so ‘whatever effect circumstances, have on our abilities, individuals are nevertheless, capable of becoming virtuous by the exercise of [their] own reason.’⁷⁸

Even where individuals are able to transcend their circumstances and become virtuous, however, they cannot be independent until there is social equality. Until their interests are reflected amongst the considerations that form the background against which reasoned debate is conducted and they can make their perspectives understood and be taken seriously, such virtuous individuals will not be able to contest and challenge arbitrary power. Wollstonecraft’s position is more far-reaching than calling for the extension of a set of civil and political ‘rights of man’ to include women as well. If women are to be genuinely free, she

⁷⁵ *Vindication*, p. 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷⁷ Wollstonecraft (n.39), p. 93.

⁷⁸ *Vindication*, p. 103.

argues, there must be a wholesale ‘revolution in female manners.’⁷⁹ This revolution goes beyond calling for a change in women’s behaviour (though Wollstonecraft believes the ‘exquisite sensibility and sweet docility’ that women tended to display was harmful to their prospects for independence).⁸⁰ Although change would be initiated through individual virtue, by reforming themselves, she argues, women would go on to ‘reform the world.’ As Daniel O’Neill puts it, the revolution in female manners would require a ‘radical transformation of political, economic, social, and gender relations.’⁸¹

Not only must the whole social and institutional order be restructured, it must be rebuilt by both men and women working together. So, for example, while Wollstonecraft emphasizes the importance of education in developing an individual’s potential, women must be involved in determining the content and scope of that education (she notes, for example, that the ‘false system of education’ which is said to lie at the root of women’s subjection has been bolstered through books on the subject written by men).⁸² Education, of course, is only one aspect of civil life (‘till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education.’)⁸³ Beyond this, women must play a full part in all aspects of public life – in the professions, positions of influence, and government. By interacting with others socially, Wollstonecraft argues, we ‘are obliged to examine our prejudices, and often imperceptibly lose’ them.⁸⁴ Very often, women’s very presence in a situation from which they had previously been excluded will begin to breakdown stereotypes and help redefine the way they, as women, are seen. And so, ultimately, by taking part in those social activities which

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 133, 307, 325. For a discussion of this revolution in manners requires, see O’Neill (n. 11), p. 175.

⁸⁰ *Vindication*, p. 82.

⁸¹ O’Neill (n. 11), p. 175.

⁸² *Vindication*, p. 79.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸⁴ Wollstonecraft (n. 39), p. 79.

shape public attitudes – including politics, agriculture, commerce, literature and even war – women can generate social change. In this way, women, as well as men, will be able to ‘scatter the seeds’ that will eventually reshape public opinion and, in the end, bring forward the ‘overthrow of arbitrary power.’

Creating cultural change, of course, is not easy. Nor will it be quickly brought about. Wollstonecraft is aware that ‘the changing of customs of long standing require[s] more energy’ than citizens often possess and that ‘it will require a considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices which sensualists have implanted.’⁸⁵ This is not least because of the scale of the problem to be overcome. In addition to the prejudices themselves, there are the structural obstacles which hold them in place that we have discussed, including patterns of social and political dependence, the corruption of civic virtue, and an inadequate access to education and positions of influence. Nevertheless, recognizing all of this, Wollstonecraft remains confident in the ability of women to improve themselves and, over time, to bring about a revolution in manners. It may take time, she says, to overcome ‘the *inertia* of reason; but, when it is once in motion, fables, once held sacred, may be ridiculed’ and a new social world can be constructed.⁸⁶

Concluding remarks

While the idea of initiating cultural change might sound utopian, the importance of Wollstonecraft’s arguments lies in the structure she provides for understanding social freedom. Where republicans have relied on public deliberation based on a combination of reason and commonly accepted considerations to identify and challenge arbitrary power,

⁸⁵ Wollstonecraft (n. 39), p. 115 and *Vindication*, p. 135 (see also p. 294). Wollstonecraft also suggests that Princess Matilda’s expulsion from Denmark might have been the result of her trying to introduce liberal reform too quickly, ‘wishing to do immediately what can only be done by time’ (n. 39, p. 166).

⁸⁶ Wollstonecraft (n. 39), p. 116 (original italics).

Wollstonecraft shows that this can only be effective where there already is social equality. The considerations which frame public arguments must reflect the input and interests of both men and women if they are to be non-arbitrary. In highlighting the role of social factors in domination, I have not intended to downplay the importance Wollstonecraft places on political reform and formal independence as a legal person in one's own right.⁸⁷ And clearly legal and social factors often work together in reinforcing and prolonging oppression. Nevertheless, these two kinds of domination constitute distinct evils, attributable to different sources of arbitrary power. It has been my argument that where domination is social, its harms can be particularly seditious in undermining the victims' recourse to reason to uncover and expose the extent of their dominated state.

Although I have not had the space to apply her analysis beyond its original context of women's subjection, I believe Wollstonecraft's arguments generalize to address the wider question of the social marginalization of all excluded minorities. Her examination of the interrelation between the legal-political and social-cultural spheres of communal life shows how domination within one area cannot be adequately addressed without simultaneous changes in the other. And while few contemporary republicans would deny that social factors do influence freedom and the effectiveness of legal reform, Wollstonecraft offers a framework within which this interconnectivity can be tackled, structuring both around the principle of freedom as non-domination. She also offers a model of what genuine

⁸⁷ Neither have I meant to suggest that all women in Georgian England were, as a matter of fact, totally silenced. Wollstonecraft herself had found her voice as had others, such as Catherine Macaulay, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Hester Chapone. And it was through women's efforts that changes would, eventually, come. Nevertheless, women's voices were undoubtedly severely limited. Wendy Gunther-Canada, for example, shows how women were not given the authority to speak on theoretical or political matters and, consequently, were not 'present at the level of meaning in most philosophical tracts' (2001), *Rebel Writer*, p. 157. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.

independence requires. In order to act as equal partners, jointly conducting the business of state, individuals must be taken seriously as dialogue partners and as agents. The task of enabling all citizens to share in an equal social freedom is one which faces all culturally plural societies. By applying the conception of independence in the light of social conditions Wollstonecraft has enlarged the traditional ideal and shown the magnitude of what is required if all citizens are to be able to enjoy a genuine freedom from both legal and social oppression. Independence requires more than formal equality. Citizens from all social groups and backgrounds must interact on a basis which reflects the ideas and values of all sections of society. There must be sufficient provision to empower individuals to help reshape the common understandings, traditions, beliefs and social intuitions against which their actions are understood socially. For without social parity of this sort, as Wollstonecraft shows, the effects of servitude have the potential to be transmitted to posterity.

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