

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01884-5 - A Vindication of the Rights of Men

Mary Wollstonecraft

Excerpt

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A
L E T T E R
T O T H E
Right Honourable EDMUND BURKE.

S I R,

IT is not necessary, with courtly insincerity, to apologise to you for thus intruding on your precious time, nor to profess that I think it an honour to discuss an important subject with a man whose literary abilities have raised him to notice in the state. I have not yet learned to twist my periods, nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments, and imply what I should be afraid to utter:

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if, therefore, in the course of this epistle, I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy; for truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity, the only criterion of the beautiful. But I war not with an individual when I contend for the *rights of men* and the liberty of reason.

You see I do not condescend to cull my words to avoid the invidious phrase, nor shall I be prevented from giving a manly definition of it, by the flimsy ridicule which a lively fancy has interwoven with the present acceptance of the term. Reverencing the rights of humanity, I shall dare to assert them, not intimidated by the laugh which you have raised, or waiting till time has wiped away the tears of compassion that you have elaborately laboured to excite.

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From the many just sentiments intersperfed through the letter before me, and from the whole tendency of it, I believe you to be, though a vain, yet a good man ; and for this weaknefs a knowledge of human nature enables me to difcover fuch extenuating circumftances, in the very texture of your mind, that I am ready to call it amiable, and feparate the public from the private character.

I know that a lively imagination renders a man particularly calculated to fhine in conversation and thefe kind of defultory productions ; and the instantaneous applaufe which his eloquence extorts is at once a reward and a fpur. Once a wit and always a wit, is an aphorifm that has received the fancion of experience ; but the man who with fcrupulous anxiety endeavours to fupport that character, can never nourifh by reflection any profound, or, if you please, metaphyfical paffion. Ambition becomes only the tool of vanity, and

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Reason,

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Reason, the weather-cock of unrestrained feelings, is employed to varnish over the faults which she ought to have corrected.

Sacred, however, would the infirmities and errors of a good man be, in my eyes, if they were only displayed in a private circle ; if the venial fault only rendered the wit anxious, like a celebrated beauty, to raise admiration on every occasion, and excite emotion, instead of the calm reciprocation of mutual esteem and unimpassioned respect. Such vanity enlivens social intercourse, and forces the little great man to be always on his guard to secure his throne ; and an ingenious man, who is ever on the watch for conquest, will, in his eagerness to exhibit his whole store of knowledge, furnish an attentive observer with some useful information, calcined by fancy and formed by taste.

And though some dry reasoner might whisper that the arguments were superficial, and
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should even add, that the feelings which are thus ostentatiously displayed are often the cold declamation of the head, and not the effusions of the heart—what will these shrewd remarks avail, when the witty arguments and ornamental feelings are on a level with the comprehension of the fashionable world, and a book is found very amusing? Even the Ladies, Sir, may repeat your sprightly sallies, and retail in theatrical attitudes many of your pathetic exclamations. Sensibility is the *manie* of the day, and compassion the virtue which is to cover a multitude of vices, whilst justice is left to mourn in fullen silence, and balance truth in vain.

In life, an honest man with a confined understanding, is frequently the slave of his habits and the dupe of his feelings, whilst the man with a clearer head and colder heart makes the passions of others bend to his interest; but truly sublime is that character who acts from

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principle, and governs the inferior springs of activity without slackening their vigour, whose feelings give vital heat to his resolves, but never hurry him into feverish eccentricities.

However, as you have informed us that respect chills love, it is natural to conclude, that all your pretty flights arise from your pampered sensibility; and that, vain of this fancied pre-eminence of organs, you foster every emotion till the flames, mounting to your brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason. It is not in this view surprising, that when you should argue you become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, instead of enlightening your understanding.

Quitting now the flowers of rhetoric, let us, Sir, reason together; and, believe me, I should not have meddled with these troubled waters, in order to point out your inconsistencies, if your wit had not burnished up some rusty

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baneful opinions, and swelled the shallow current of ridicule till it resembled the flow of reason, and presumed to be the test of truth.

I shall not attempt to follow you through “horse-way and foot-path;” but, attacking the foundation of your opinions, I shall leave the superstructure to find a centre of gravity on which it may lean till some strong blast puffs it into air; or your teeming fancy, which the ripening judgment of sixty years has not tamed, produces another Chinese erection, to stare, at every turn, the plain country people in the face, who bluntly call such an airy edifice—a folly.

The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of the other individuals whom he is united with in a social compact.

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Liberty, in this simple, unsophisticated sense, I acknowledge, is a fair idea that has never yet received a form in the various governments that have been established on our beautiful globe; the demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men; but that it results from the eternal foundation of right—from immutable truth—who will presume to deny, that pretends to rationality—if reason has led them to build their morality^a and religion on an everlasting foundation—the attributes of God?

I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your flimsy paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed first principle to refute; I shall not, therefore, conde-

^a As religion is included in my idea of morality, I should not have mentioned the term without specifying all the simple ideas which that comprehensive word generalizes; but as the charge of atheism has been very freely bandied about in the letter I am considering, I condescend to guard against misrepresentation.

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scend to shew where you affirm in one page what you deny in another ; and how frequently you draw conclusions without any previous premises : — it would be something like cowardice to fight with a man who had never exercised the weapons which his opponent chose to combat with.

I know that you have a mortal antipathy to reason ; but, if there is any thing like argument, or first principles, in your wild declamation, behold the result : — that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience : and that, if we do discover some errors, our *feelings* should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. These are gothic notions of beauty — the ivy is beautiful though it insidiously

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diously destroys the trunk from which it receives support.

Further, that we ought cautiously to remain for ever in frozen inactivity, because a thaw that nourishes the soil spreads a temporary inundation; and that the fear of risking any thing should prevent a struggle for the most estimable advantages. This is sound reasoning, I grant, in the mouth of the rich and short-sighted.

Yes, Sir, the strong gained riches, the few have sacrificed the many to their vices ; and, to be able to pamper their appetites, and supinely exist without exercising mind or body, they have ceased to be men.—They, indeed, would deserve compassion, if injustice was not softened by the tyrant's plea—necessity ; if prescription was not raised as an immortal boundary against innovation. Their minds, in fact, instead of being cultivated, have been
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