Politics and Friendship II

Mary Wollstonecraft and Political Friendship

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1. Introduction

We know that Mary Wollstonecraft, as a girl, took the ideal of friendship, and its conduct, very seriously. More often than not she was disappointed in and by her friends. Aged fourteen, and aggrieved in her relationship with Jane Arden, Mary wrote:

"I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship; I must have the first place or none..." [Todd 2000:16]

Janet Todd has made this the epigraph for the first chapter of her recent life of Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). With her next letter to Jane, Mary returned an Essay upon friendship which your Papa lent me the other day... Friendship founded upon virtue Truth and love; - it sweetens the cares, lessens the sorrows, and adds to the joys of life. - ... Happy beyond expression is that pair who are thus united...’ [Todd 2000:17]

Todd does not speculate what essay this could have been. But I guess that it is safe to assume that it would have made reference to the classics, or to friendship in Christ, or both. The idea that friendship is a virtuous relationship pervaded all of Mary Wollstonecraft’s strivings to live virtuously in her own life, and all her scornful criticism of what passed for ‘virtuous conduct’ in some of the social worlds in which she found herself. She needed both familial love and domestic security, and independence and freedom. Friendship seemed to her to be the relationship in which these two conflicting desires could both be satisfied. Her desire to be united in friendship with someone with whom she could be ‘happy beyond expression’ inspired in her risky and reckless actions. She tried to live in virtuous friendship with women; then she tried with men. When she grew older she tried, really tried although hopelessly, not to demand that she be ‘first or none’. Frequently and for extended periods she lived in an agony of loneliness. In the end, aged 38, she died with friends around her, and loved. She left two daughters, only one of whom had she mothered – only for three years; not long enough to be the true friend the mother and citizen should be.
In this paper I propose to critically analyse Wollstonecraft’s theory of friendship, mainly as that is articulated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Friendship is central to her theory of politics, justice and citizenship. For her, friendship is ‘the most holy band of society’ [VRW: 96]. Ideally, that is a rights based, republican, society. But friendship is a crucial cement for any society worth the name.

In large part, Wollstonecraft’s theory of friendship resembles classical theories. The person who is a good friend, who understands the ideals of friendship and lives by them, is a person who will make a responsible and effective citizen. Other relationships – kinship, commerce, and erotic relations – are bad models for citizenship, if they don’t corrupt politics and the patria altogether. That is, Wollstonecraft’s theory is that friendship is instrumental for citizenship and hence for the good governance of states.

But there are theoretical and normative tensions in Wollstonecraft’s writing about friendship. First, friendship is corrupted by commerce, by inequality of status, and by erotic love. How could people be friends, genuinely, in a corrupt society? and how can we achieve a society in which friendship can flourish? The argument that good friends make good citizens is matched by an equally powerful argument that friendship is only possible in a just state. According to Wollstonecraft’s theory friendship must be a political goal, a policy. Second, there is a troubling tension in the ideal of reciprocity in friendship. Specifically, the problem is how to maintain a clear distinction between reciprocity and mutuality on the one hand, and the kind of exchange which is susceptible to commercial or egoistic motivations on the other. Friendship must be an ethical rather than an economic matter, and it involves substantial equality between the parties.
2. Wollstonecraft’s theory of friendship

2.1. In *Mary, a Fiction* (1788), a number of the key themes that are worked out in Wollstonecraft’s subsequent political writing are present to a striking degree. Indeed, they form the foundation of the story, the framework within which the moral action unfolds and is articulated by the narrator. Systems of social rank and the accompanying manners, and of sexually segregated upper class marriage are the evils out of which the eponymous heroine emerges and against which she continually struggles. By contrast, the virtue of charity, the commitment to duty, and the belief in the value of care in the family, are the oppositional values that are articulated by Mary even if she is not able to fully realise the latter in her life. The family to which she is committed goes beyond the genetically related group, extending to servants, other dependents and friends. Tortured by nightmares caused by the fact that her mother had sent a sick little girl from a poor family away from the nursery with tragic consequences, Mary

‘.... at last made a vow that if she was ever mistress of a family she would herself watch over every part of it’. [14-15]

In *Mary* though the eponymous heroine is a person of sensibility – sensitivity, fineness, feeling. This sensibility is drawn in contrast to her father’s coarseness, violence and vice on the one hand, and her mother’s neglect of duty, and withdrawal into ill health and a fantasy world of trashy fiction, on the other. In her subsequent political writings this ideal of sensibility was another target of Wollstonecraft’s critical and social constructivist analysis. Mary is first and foremost repulsed and revolted by cruelty, indifference, the neglect of duty, hypocrisy and all the rest.

‘She was miserable when beggars were driven from the gate without being relieved’. [16]

The novel is centred on two friendships, both of which are unsatisfactory. Mary submits to a marriage arranged by her father for commercial reasons. Her first refuge from this marriage is with Ann, older than Mary, who Mary at first admires and learns from. But Ann is suffering from unrequited love for a man, and she develops into a person

‘truly feminine... timid, irresolute.... In everything it was not the great, but the beautiful, or the pretty, that caught her attention’. [34-35]
Nevertheless, Mary continues to love Ann and to wish to live with her and care for her:

To have this friend constantly with her; to make her mind easy with respect to her family, would it not be superlative bliss? [38]

After Mary’s mother’s death this plan is realised, but living with Ann does not

banish all her cares, or carry off all her constitutional black bile. Before she enjoyed Ann’s society she imagined it would have made her completely happy: she was disappointed, and yet knew not what to complain of. ... Ann and she were not congenial minds. [44]

When Ann becomes ill Mary gets permission from her husband to accompany her to the warmer climate of Lisbon. The letter from him giving his permission

contained some commonplace remarks on her romantic friendship, as he termed it. [53]

In Lisbon Ann and Mary make acquaintances who exemplify the evils of rank, hypocritical manners and the neglect of duty are once against borne in on Mary. But among this group is Henry, who admires Mary’s devotion to Ann, and supports her through Ann’s death. Knowing she is married, he nevertheless wishes to pursue a relationship with Mary:

‘Would you allow me to call you “friend” ’ said he in a hesitating voice. [90]

So ‘friends’ they become, although from the outset it is not right as the moral authorial voice makes clear:

She did not reason on the subject; but she felt he was attached to her: lost in this delirium, she never asked herself what kind of affection she had for him, or what it tended to; nor did she know that love and friendship are very distinct; she thought with rapture that there was one person in the world who had an affection for her, and that person she admired – had a friendship for. [96]

In Lisbon and then back in England Mary and Henry try to live this impossible friendship, going out and about together, but he is ill, and the outings are impossible anyway. When Henry dies, Mary returns to her marriage, faces her repulsion at her husband’s sexuality, and devotes herself to charitable work.

I have set out the two friendships in Mary at some length because here Wollstonecraft focusses on the impossibilities of friendship. In a conversation with Henry before she leaves Lisbon Mary says:
Shall I never be happy? My feelings do not accord with the notions of solitary happiness. In a state of bliss, it will be the society of beings we can love, without the alloy that earthly infirmities mix with our best affections, that will constitute the great part of our happiness. [109]

In Mary the ‘earthly infirmities’ that make friendship impossible include depression and poverty, hypocritical manners and social norms, and repressed or unrequited erotic passion. Mary idealises friendship as such; her husband insults her by referring to her friendship with Ann as ‘romantic’, but as the setting of the novel, the heroine’s sensibility, and the authorial voice all make clear, he speaks true. So, which does Mary idealise, really? Mary’s criticism of her mother and father’s marriage focusses on their separate lives

While they resided in London they lived in the usual fashionable style and seldom saw each other... [2]

Her mother

was chaste, according to the vulgar acceptance of the word; that is, she did not make any actual faux pas [7]

She idealises, that is, companionate domestic marriage. But what if your friend disappoints you as Ann does Mary, and you do not turn out to be ‘congenial minds’? Mary does not want to be solitary; but in her life she does not find her companion. There are deep ambiguities in the nature of friendship as that is analysed in Mary, then.

Janet Todd interprets Mary as an ‘extraordinary betrayal’ of Fanny Blood. Fanny Blood had been Mary Wollstonecraft’s friend – the object of her desire and passion, the object of her devotion, the person with whom Wollstonecraft had dreamed of a life together, simple, virtuous, women living without men. They did, together with Mary’s sisters Eliza and Everina, live together and run a school. But Fanny was ill; they were poor; the plan for a self-sufficient life together could not be realised; eventually Fanny had moved to Portugal and married a man who had been engaged to her for many years; she died in Lisbon of a combination of consumption and childbirth – Mary nursing her. The depiction of Ann as weak and unworthy of the virtuous friendship of Mary; the representation of the strong Mary pitying and nursing her weak and dying ‘friend’, in Todd’s interpretation, could have sprung
from the hurt at Fanny’s defection in marrying and dying; perhaps it responded to a need in herself to move on and see her absorption in her friend as an encumbrance in her life, a state she had to outgrow... in some ways its disloyalty formed a farewell to the dream of female community and surrogate families. [Todd 2000: 113]

2.2. Friendship is a key theme in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). In her first major political work, then, Wollstonecraft persists with her initial conviction, problematised in *Mary*, that friendship is the social relationship foundational for a just society. In the opening paragraphs of the *Vindication* friendship is put together with liberty, right, reason, equality and justice as the values key to her vision. These values are contrasted with those she understands as basic for Burke: pomp, feeling and emotion, rank, the manners associated with rank, custom, and condescension. [VRM: 7-9] By ‘charity’ Burke means ‘the condescending distribution of alms’; Wollstonecraft means ‘an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity’ [VRM: 9]

Friendship is drawn as a relationship between equals, in contrast to the inequalities of rank, the despotic governmental and parental style, and the injustice of property distribution which Wollstonecraft finds at the centre of Burke’s attack on the revolution in France. Friendship is equal, it is rational, and it is the natural condition of rational men. The order of rank, privilege, ‘tradition’ and ‘ancient rights’ which Burke extols is artificial:

The man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born, and the consequent homage that benumbed his faculties like the torpedo’s touch; - or a being, with a capacity of reasoning, would not have failed to discover, as his faculties unfolded, that true happiness arose from the friendship and intimacy that can only be enjoyed by equals...’ [VRM: 9]

The natural/artificial distinction structures a good deal of Wollstonecraft’s argument in both *Vindications*. Rights are not ancient, as in Burkean conservative thought, but they are natural – there are rights which men inherit at birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; [VRM: 12]

Wollstonecraft’s concept of ‘naturalness’, as we have seen, is linked with reason. She is concerned to repudiate Burke’s own theory of ‘instinct’ as natural. Burke’s respect for rank has driven out what should be his natural ‘common feelings of humanity’. [VRM: 16] Her charge against Burke is that in
elaborating his theory of tradition, ancient privilege, human instincts and so on he is allowing emotion sway, unfettered by reason. [VRM 8ff, 29-30, 39, 54]

if virtue is to be acquired by experience, or taught by example, reason, perfected by reflection, must be the director of the whole host of passions. [VRM 31]

If virtue be an instinct, I renounce all hope of immortality; and with it all the sublime reveries and dignified sentiments that have smoothed the rugged path of life: it is all a cheat, a lying vision; I have disquieted myself in vain; for in my eye all feelings are false and spurious, that do not rest on justice as their foundation, and are not concentrated by universal love. [VRM: 33]

Burke makes two errors. First, he mistakes aspects of ‘brute life’ for what is natural. Second, he mistakes aspects of artificial, ‘civilised’ life for what is natural.

Burke also frequently uses parental and patriarchal metaphors for kingship and government.

This is answered by Wollstonecraft from her own theory of parenting:

A government that acts in this manner cannot be called a good parent, nor inspire natural (habitual is the proper word) affection, in the breasts of children who are thus disregarded. [VRM:16]

Proper parenting would make no distinction between one child and another. [VRM:21] But just as unjust governments favour the rich and punish the poor, so in Burke’s favoured world younger children are disfavoured by primogeniture, which robs the younger of opportunities, of advancement and development, of love or favour from their parents. The effect of existing family and property structures is even more deleterious for women, who in order to be marriageable have to be weak and coquettish [VRM: 22] Were property distributed justly – that is to say, according to the law that

nature authorises and reason sanctions... [according to]... the right a man has to enjoy the acquisitions which his talent and industry have acquired; [VRM: 23]

then luxury and effeminacy, gaming and gallantry might be replaced by

virtuous ambition, and love... Women would probably then act like mothers, and the fine lady, become a rational woman, might think it necessary to superintend her family and suckle her children, in order to fulfil her part of the social compact. [VRM:23]

Can a man relish the simple food of friendship, who has been habitually pampered by flattery? [VRM: 42]

Among unequals there can be no society; ... from such intimacies friendship can never grow; if the basis of friendship is mutual respect and not a commercial treaty. [VRM: 38]
In the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, then, friendship is that which can never be attained in Burke’s world of rank, ancient privilege, unequal and unjust property distributions. In Burke’s world many are dispossessed, and hence degraded. They are made dependent on the favour of others – of prospective husbands, if they are women, or employers if they are servants. Parents leave the ‘care’ of their children to servants; servants are respected neither by parents or children. In this text Wollstonecraft links friendship with justice in property and with proper parenting of children. Friendship is associated with equality, freedom, and virtue. Friendship is corrupted, destroyed, by effeminacy and luxury, the artificial inequalities of rank, the deprivations of propertylessness and poverty, and by commerce and commercial relations.

2.3. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) the major, and problematic, opposition is between passionate love and friendship:

Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle and cemented by time. The very reverse may be said of love. In a great degree, love and friendship cannot subsist in the same bosom; even when inspired by different objects they weaken or destroy each other, and for the same object can only be felt in succession. The vain fears and fond jealousies, the winds which fan the flame of love, when judiciously or artfully tempered, are both incompatible with the tender confidence and sincere respect of friendship. [VRW: 145]

Love is, in a great degree, an arbitrary passion, and will reign, like some other stalking mischiefs, by its own authority, without deigning to reason; and it may also be easily distinguished from esteem, the foundation of friendship, because it is often excited by evanescent beauties and graces.... [VRW: 194]

Friendship is associated with virtue and self-sufficiency, and women, above all, will have to transform if they are to experience and enjoy its calm:

the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband; and if she, by possessing such substantial qualities, merit his regard, she will not find it necessary to conceal her affection, nor to pretend to an unnatural coldness of constitution to continue to excite her husband’s passions. [VRW: 95]
Such a woman would be able to take her proper place as citizen in the public world:

Why then do philosophers look for public spirit? Public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue, or it will resemble the factitious sentiment which makes women careful to preserve their reputation and men their honour... [VRW: 219-220]

The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother. [VRW: 226]

But to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws; she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death – for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? or virtuous, who is not free? [VRW: 227]

Here, then, friendship stands in opposition to the sexual passion which is susceptible to corruption and artificiality – to excitement by superficial appearances, to degeneration into jealousy and other vicious emotions and motivations. The conventional commercial marriage market sets great store by women's vapid coquettishness and empty headedness. Conventional marriage and family forms encourage women to neglect and reject their children. Friendship within marriage would go hand in hand with a proper regard to work and duty. Doing one's duty – properly doing it – presupposes independence and freedom. Such a person is the good citizen.

A number of significant points can here be drawn from this account of Wollstonecraft's theory of friendship.

2.4. First, friendship for her extends into the heart of kinship, and, indeed, has its roots there. It is common in late twentieth century social and political theory to distinguish kinship and friendship: Our kin relations are unchosen whereas our friendships are fully voluntary; kinship is a setting for obligation whereas friendship is a setting for freedom. [Friedman 1989: 284, 286] However, Wollstonecraft's understanding is in line with the Aristotelian concept philia, which encompasses a wide range of relationships. It includes the relations between citizens, and those between parents and children, and other sets of kin, as well as that between groups and individuals who socialise together, seek out each
other’s company, and engage in shared interests and activities; and it also extends to the relationship between erotic lovers. [Schwarzenbach 1996:99]

The point here is that kin, erotic lovers, and fellow citizens can be also friends. In Aristotle’s words ‘to choose to live together is friendship’ [Pols 1280b38]. In this passage Aristotle distinguishes between relationships based just on exchange, or where parties just happen to dwell in the same place, and friendship, where parties want to live together, and are committed to common purposes, including the maintenance of the relationship of friendship. [Pols 1280b1–1281a2] On this analysis, friendship, based on wanting and willing, includes a certain reflexive quality about the relationship itself. Hence business partners, and kin or members of a household, can be friends. On Aristotle’s theory of politics, citizens in the ideal state must be friends.

Wollstonecraft’s view is that kin, and she focusses especially on parents and children, although sibling relationships are also important to her, could, under certain social conditions, be friends, although the social conditions then prevailing in many classes of society fatally undermined any such aspiration to friendship. If there were friendship in the family then both husband and wife would be able appropriately to perform their private and public duties as citizens – duties which include proper parenting of children, but also participating in the public life of the patria and upholding just laws. This is because the relationship of friendship leaves both parties free, and independent from each other. It is premised on the equality of the parties. In friendship proper one party does not have to pretend to be inferior to the other in order to please, nor, indeed, to cultivate inferiority. (Heterosexual moeurs are, actually, doubly dishonest – women’s inferiority is paraded as superiority, as the power they have to ‘enslave’ men!) There is no need to dissimulate about feelings – for instance, to pretend not to want the other, in order to inflame the other’s desire to conquer. [VRW 121-126]

So, the level of openness of speech and manner, of reason, of independence that we need and value in citizens would be rehearsed and modelled in domestic life. And in such a parenting regime
children would be raised to be independent and virtuous too. The woman who lies to please her husband cannot model truth for her children; the woman who is deprived of amicable love in her marriage is likely either to neglect her children, spoil them by improper indulgence, or tyrannise over them. [VRW: 233] The proper parent will have command over her own temper, so that she can manage her children’s tempers; her affection for her children will earn reciprocal affection from them. [VRW:234]

All of this is directly related to government of the state:

... unconditional obedience is the catchword of tyrants of every description ... one kind of despotism supports another. Tyrants would have cause to tremble if reason were to become the rule of duty in any of the relations of life, for the light might spread till perfect day appeared. [VRW: 232]

Friendship, that is, is a cement which sets people free, within society and the state, and within the spheres of personal relations.

2.5. Second, we should note that Wollstonecraft develops a congruence theory of character, personal relations, and public institutions and citizenship. [Rosenblum 1994] By this is meant that according to her, as according to many political theorists and philosophers, the character of the sibling, child or parent, the character of the member of the society, and the character of the citizen of the state should all have the same shape, the same workings and the same characteristics. According to Wollstonecraft and others, there should be no incongruity between expectations upon me or upon my conduct, as I move from one realm of life to another.

Wollstonecraft’s theory of social constructivism and agency, indeed, means that there can be no such incongruity. Women are thoroughly degraded by the marriage market and the institution of bourgeois marriage itself. [VRW 121ff] The degradation is done by educating them to lie, by depriving them of education for any occupation other than marriage (or the kind of degrading employment as companion, or governess, that had so humiliated Wollstonecraft – another domestic set up in which lying is an absolute daily necessity), of developing their ‘sensibility’ at the expense of their reason, and so on.[VRW:131] All of this means that even were women admitted to full citizenship, or expected to participate in the political governance of a society, society and education being unchanged, they would absolutely lack the character or characteristics that would allow or enable them to discharge this function. That is to say our training in the family, the development of our characters and conduct through education (and by education Wollstonecraft means the entirety of socialisation as well as formal instruction) is absolutely fateful for the our public lives.
By the same logic the man who dissimulates and tyrannises in his relationship with his wife, or acts the rake in his relationships with women generally, will dissimulate, tyrannise and behave viciously in his profession or in public office.

What has hitherto been the political perfection of the world? In the two most celebrated nations [ie France and Britain –ejf] it has only been a polish of manners, an extension of that family love, which is rather the effect of sympathy and selfish passions, than reasonable humanity. And in what has ended their so much extolled patriotism? In vain glory and barbarity....

...... because the so-called virtue on which this ‘patriotism’ is based is the ‘factitious virtue’ of domestic life and ‘society’. [Fr Rev: 293]

That is, according to Wollstonecraft, we will behave similarly in one social setting as in another. – family, society, state. This is so because our character and our conduct are continuous, with each other, and over time. We are, in this sense, unified subjects – vicious or virtuous. Hence, standards and models of conduct must be found which apply, prescriptively and descriptively, to all settings. If we are servile, or tyrannical, in private, so we will be in public.

There is an apparent contrast here with a compensation theory, which appears in Marx’s work and was developed by Marxist feminists. According to this theory a man who is dominated and enslaved at work will become tyrant at home. [refs: Delphy...] The power he wields in the household compensates for the degradation of his working life. That is, there is a sharp disjunction or incongruity between public and private conduct, between society and economy, and household. Wollstonecraft’s response to this challenge to her theory would be to say that both enslavement in the factory and violence in the home are vicious ways of life. The poverty of the working man who bullies his family at home is the equivalent of the degradation of the enslaved wife who tyrannises over her children. It is quite true that the woman who is a slave in the bedroom might be a tyrant in the nursery. The person who is vicious in their private life will be vicious in their public life. It is true that there is an apparent bodily and affective change between the servile and the tyrannical. By contrast to the inconstancy, incongruity, of vice, virtuous conduct is steadfast and stable; essentially unchanging from one setting to another. This is because vicious conduct is typically motivated by emotions and responses such as fear [VRW 115], or lust which are episodic. Virtue, and duty, and right, by contrast, are motivated by reason [VRM: 31, 33; VRW: ] which is constant.

Similarly, Wollstonecraft considers the argument that the military camp is the school for citizenship. In her view, current military culture and modes of war are anything but virtuous. [VRW 81, 88-9] Wars themselves are mostly morally indefensible, although they ostensibly make ‘heroes’. The modern soldier is horribly like the ‘civilised woman’, or like the rake. [VRW:224, 226] That is to say, the apparent virtue of militarism is only apparent; the conduct is not steadfast, not stably transferable to
other settings. Soldiers who are well enough disciplined in camp are liable to run amok in the city. So ‘military heroes’ don’t make good citizens any more than civilised women do.

Friendship is the standard and the model for all relations between people everywhere. Friendship applies in our personal lives, our social lives and our public political lives.

3 Female friendship

The first problem arising from Wollstonecraft’s theory of friendship I wish to consider is the problem, or rather the project, of women’s friendship. Some men, thanks to education and culture, and their opportunities in public life, have developed reason, a high sense of justice, and a capacity for friendship. Wollstonecraft has to concede, things being as they are, ‘more friendship is to be found in the male than the female world’. [VRW: 277] Clearly, she is speaking here of a normative ideal of friendship, for Wollstonecraft does not deny the sentimental, and the passionate, friendships that were common among women. But she complains that women are overly familiar and intimate with one another; in women’s relationships ‘That decent personal reserve which is the foundation of dignity of character’ is corrupted. [VRW 205-6] Such sentimental and passionate ‘friendship’ does not meet the conditions of genuine friendship, and certainly cannot model citizenship. But how are women to find true friendship, with each other, or with men?

Philosophers are to be censured for vainly ‘looking for’ public spirit. Public spirit cannot be conjured up alone by any philosophy, and it won’t be hiding somewhere undetected in the existing polity. ‘Public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue’. [VRW 219] But by Wollstonecraft’s own theory, this private virtue is impossible in an unequal, unjust state of unfree individuals. Wollstonecraft refers to the herculean powers necessary to change women’s characters. Although there are some loopholes out of which a man may creep, and dare to think and act for himself.... for a woman it is a herculean task, because she has difficulties peculiar to her sex to overcome, which require almost superhuman powers.[VRW 225]

Still, legislation is the answer. The Vindication is addressed to Talleyrand. It argues that women must be included in the new constitution of France, they must not be confined to domestic concerns, and they cannot.

‘if women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious, to obtain illicit privileges.’[VRW 68]
Women, then, *must* have rights. But in this work Wollstonecraft does not set out a programme of the detailed political and legal rights they should have. The *Vindication* is devoted to an extended justification of the basic proposal that women should have rights, and should be admitted to citizenship. It is a prolegomena to the book of political philosophy that Wollstonecraft didn’t write.

We can only speculate what rights based and legislative measures she might have proposed to tackle the problem of awful parenting, but she declares that children must be freed from parental tyranny. [VRW 237] We can certainly guess that she would have proposed inheritance and property laws that did not favour boys over girls, or the eldest over all others. Women must be enabled to earn their own living by being allowed to enter the professions – medicine, ‘business of various kinds’.

[VRW:229] She dares to suggest that women should be included in the political system of government:

> I may excite laughter, by dropping an hint, which I mean to pursue, at some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government. [VRW: 228]

But the greater part of the *Vindication* contains proposals for national, liberal, schooling. Schooling must be liberal – it must pay attention to the morals of children, as well as to scholarship and literacy. [VRW 246] And it must be national – which is to say, organised publicly. [VRW 263] And girls should be taught the sciences, the arts, history, and morality. [264]

The project of female friendship, then, is a political and a legal project, in which, it is envisaged, social and cultural change will be brought about by political will and legislation. The *Vindication* and other interventions like it are attempts to generate the political will, which can bring about the legislation, that will shape the characters and culture of future citizens.

4. **Affection and reciprocity**

For Wollstonecraft, friendship’s virtue lies with its equality, with the independence of friends from each other. It lies in equal freedom, in other words. Friendship is threatened, or corrupted, by
sexual passion and violence, by dependence and resentment, by servitude and tyranny, and by commercial exchanges, especially the commercial exchange of marriage. Wollstonecraft certainly makes a distinction between ‘business’ – which she thinks women should be able to enter, just as they should be able to enter medicine and politics – and the menial subsistence occupations that are next door to prostitution on the social and economic scale. Occupations like millinery in a hierarchical and snobbish society bring not only the poverty, but also lack of dignity and respect – indeed, positive contempt. This contempt necessitates dishonesty – the acceptance of humiliation without protest, false respect for so-called superiors. [VRW 229]

Wollstonecraft is vague about the kind of ‘businesses’ that she thinks are fit occupations for the woman citizen. But she became extremely critical of the kind of speculative, commercial, capitalist activity that she observed opportunist adventurers engage in in France. At the time she was writing her book on the French revolution, the father of her baby was engaged in such ‘commercial’ activity. His commerce and concentration on doing deals, his desire for more profit, his selfish attitude towards relationships, and indeed his abuse of the hopes of the new French republic, came to stand as the absolute antithesis of the friendship she hoped for with him. [Todd: 281, 309, 340, 348] His commercial activity as she saw it, of course, mirrored, was congruent with, his neglect and betrayal of her, her dependence on his favour, his infidelity.

Exchange and reciprocity is central to Wollstonecraft’s friendship – especially an imagined, a possible, friendship between men and women, between male and female citizens. The ‘rational fellowship’ she hopes for between men and women [VRW 231] will enable women to mother properly. That is, there must be a division of labour between men and women. But women must not be absolutely dependent on their husbands – if they are they (the women) will be ‘cunning, mean and selfish’. The exchange must be mutual, and genuinely equal and egalitarian, then.
Formally, any exchange ‘equalises’ – that is, it is as if the educational labour the governess gives to her employer is exactly quantitatively equivalent to the wage and subsistence she receives in return. Both parties are left, after the transaction, as well off as they were before. But the formal equalisation of the transaction is consistent with dramatic inequality between the position of the parties. The apparent maintenance of the parties’ respective positions is consistent with dramatic differences in position before and after the transaction. For instance, a woman who exchanges domestic labour or management for subsistence in marriage by that fact diminishes her future option set.

The aspect of inequality in formally equal exchange that exercises Wollstonecraft most, though, is the unequal effect that exchanges have on character. The advantaged, ‘superior’ party in an exchange has his sense of worth enhanced by the unequal transaction which confirms his superiority; the disadvantaged party suffers a corresponding diminution of worth. The only exchanges that are ethically defensible, on this view, are exchanges between individuals who have equal standing, and who exchange goods of quantitatively equal worth. We can imagine a society in which those conditions apply, and a political and legal system dedicated to the defence and maintenance of just those conditions.

It is clear enough that Wollstonecraft envisages a continuation of the complex economic life, with its division of occupations and functions, its shops and farms, its market in goods and services including literature and arts. Indeed, in many respects her vision of friendship is a vision of the city. A city in which men and women go out, from the home, to work; while women when they are mothering babies and small children will stay at home while their male partner goes out to do his citizen duty. [VRW 223] There is perhaps some tension between this vision and her prediction in the French Revolution that Paris, once the court and its associated aristocratic and haute-bourgeois life is gone, if the Republic is consolidated, will also ‘crumble into decay’. [FR 365]

In proportion as the charms of solitary reflection and agricultural recreations are felt, the people, by leaving the villages and cities, will give a new complexion to the face of the country – and we may then look for a turn of mind more solid, principles more fixed, and a conduct more consistent and virtuous. [FR 365]
Here, domestic friendship is associated with rural self-sufficiency. (Why cannot large estates be divided into small farms? she had asked Burke [VRM 58], and there she remarks too on the pestilential misery of London [VRM 59].) Whereas in Parisian urban and court life wit, repartee, fencing, dancing, and other skills were a necessary art, these are only a poor substitute for the real interest only to be nourished in the affectionate intercourse of domestic intimacy, where confidence enlarges the heart it opens. [FR 366]

The point, though, is that Wollstonecraft envisages a definite domestic division of labour, whether the household is the household of London city life, or post-revolutionary rural self-sufficiency. In order that individuals can be free and equal the life they live must be modest and plain. [VRW 223] Women must mother and men must father – so both must spend time at home with children. [VRW:68] Thus friendship, domestic friendship at any rate, is based on equality of dignity, regard, and affection, and reciprocity in work.

I want here to draw attention to a troubling tension between the idea of exchange and the idea of friendship. The uses of friendship for personal gain are uses which threaten friendship itself. Although Aristotle admits ‘instrumental friendship’ as a species of friendship proper, it is a deviation from the perfect form of friendship based on goodness (as friendship based on pleasure is also a deviation). Instrumental friendship will not be stable, because material interests change.[NE:1156a16 to 1156b23]. Cicero, by contrast, argues that friendship proper cannot be based on utility or mutual advantage. Aristotle and Cicero do not deny that utility, and pleasure, derive from friendship. Of course Wollstonecraft takes the same position – utility for each party derives from friendship’s peculiar pleasures and rewards. But individual utility cannot ethically be the motivation for friendship. The motivation for friendship must be mutual regard, and shared purpose.

Nevertheless, together friends can do what they cannot as individuals. The domestic household is a joint cooperative production, and from the domestic household each party draws a benefit they could not otherwise enjoy. Furthermore, the friendship relation generates externalities – like well brought up children – which benefit all. It generates public goods. That is to say, friendship is
undoubtedly instrumental for society and polity – on a certain, broadly republican, theory of what society and polity should be. It is also instrumental, which is to say, utility enhancing, for individuals. But the individual instrumentality and utility cannot be what motivates individuals into friendship. Were this to be the motivation, the resulting relationship would not count as friendship proper.

5. **The generalisability of a dyadic relation**

The main problem that concerns us here lies with the logic of citizen friendship. Friendship, in Wollstonecraft’s accounts, is analysed in the form of a dyadic relation. Her problematic, consistently, is the nature of that tie between two people, and the effects that tie has on other social institutions, such as education, parenting, political representation, citizenship, and the like; and the effects that tie has on other social relationships, such as those with children, employees, spouses, etc. As we have seen the overall form of Wollstonecraft’s argument is that

- friendship is a rational virtuous relationship that inheres between free equal and independent persons;
- it is premissed on mutual regard and reciprocity, and shared purposes;
- friendship between individuals generates positive externalities, such as family stability, and well brought up children, some or all of which are public goods;
- individuals accustomed to friendship relations will have the propensity to discharge their duties – that is, their duties in personal relations such as marriage or parenthood, their duties in society, such as neighbouring and work, and their duties at the level of the state – such as engagement in political activity and government.

How, exactly, is the inference to the final conclusion supported? The individuals who are free, equal and independent, and hence have the capacity and motivation for friendship as their primary relation with others, have received an appropriate moral and formal education, and enjoy legal rights which protect their independence, freedom and equality, and are subject to legal and political duties which they are
expected, and enabled, to discharge. Equal citizens will be appropriately, and authentically, patriotic and dutiful. [VRM: 14; VRW 227, 272]

That is, it is necessary to institutionalise a just state, and a just society, before the conditions for friendship between persons can be met. Wollstonecraft’s vision of friendship between persons proceeds from her vision of just laws and a just society. To that extent, friendship is a political relationship.

6. Conclusion

Wollstonecraft’s theory is that friendship is the only relationship that is congruent both with domestic familial life, and with citizenship in a rights based polity. Friendship, therefore, and the social conditions that will enable friendship to be lived, must be the first policy. It will take political will and legal reform to bring about the social reconstruction that will realise the conditions for friendship.

The friendship that she models, though – calm, sincere, rational, freely chosen, leaving both parties independent – is denigrated and denied by the romantic who believes in sexual passion and by the cynic who will see sex and commerce everywhere.

And, further, throughout Wollstonecraft’s work her conviction that friendship is the only virtuous and political relationship, the one that can hold together a just society is in an uneasy balance with the impossibility and corruption (not just corruptibility) of friendship. Friendship is instrumental, further it is necessary, for citizenship and good government. Yet it is next to impossible to realise in the world she lived in – a world of strong emotions and passions, of depression, of poverty, of commercial exchange.
References


