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Parallels and Divergences Between Proto-Feminist Ideas and Modern-Day Feminism

The term “feminism” was not used to describe those advocating for the rights of women until 1892 (McAfee). However, pioneering activists promoted feminist ideologies long before scholars coined the term. One such proto-feminist was Mary Wollstonecraft, a writer, philosopher, and fierce advocate for the rights of women. One of Wollstonecraft’s most famous texts is her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she identifies and criticizes the social systems which deprive women of equal rights. In the 20th century, the book gained traction among feminist scholars, and is now recognized as a foundational feminist text. Her main focuses in this text include why men deprive women of proper rights and education, how this harms women, and why it should be stopped. This text perfectly encapsulates the similarities and differences between proto-feminism and modern-day feminism. Although Wollstonecraft’s arguments and ideologies are at times outdated, the oppression she describes has not disappeared; rather, it has taken on new forms. While the position of women in society has advanced greatly since the time of Wollstonecraft and other proto-feminists, the societal ailments that she criticizes in this book bear startling similarities to modern-day patriarchal systems.

Wollstonecraft opens her book with a dedication and direct address to Bishop Talleyrand. Talleyrand was a member of France’s National Assembly, which legally denied all French women the rights of citizens in 1791 (Johnson 219). As shown by this background, one of the main rifts between Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminism and the modern-day is the context in which she was arguing. Whereas presently, women have achieved equal rights under law in many countries, women in Wollstonecraft’s time were treated as a legally inferior class. Wollstonecraft explains to Talleyrand that her society forces “all women, by denying them their civil and

political rights, to remain immured” (Wollstonecraft 221). As shown by this address to Talleyrand, Wollstonecraft and other proto-feminists were fighting simply to escape their confinement and be treated as humans. Because of this distinction, many of the ideas Wollstonecraft promotes in this text were radical for her time, despite how mild they seem now. This context can help readers to better understand the arguments that Wollstonecraft and other proto-feminists promoted and the subsequent backlash they received.

Because Wollstonecraft wants a chance of appealing to her 18th century audience, she starts her dedication by laying out “a simple principle, that if [woman] be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue” (Wollstonecraft 221). This point shows that Wollstonecraft knows her audience well; she lived and wrote during the Enlightenment, which was a time of great societal progress and civil unrest. Therefore, her argument that society can’t properly progress without educated women is very compelling for her audience. As she puts it, “truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice” (Wollstonecraft 221). More simply put, a whole population must have access to knowledge in order for that knowledge to cause any lasting change. Wollstonecraft’s argument here is very dated compared to the ideas of many modern feminists, as it focuses on social and economic progression rather than the intrinsic rights of women. Because Wollstonecraft and other proto-feminists were fighting an uphill battle, they were forced to make their arguments more palatable to a rigid male audience. Conversely, modern feminists are now able to focus on securing rights for women rather than convincing male chauvinists that women deserve these rights. However, there are some ties between Wollstonecraft’s argument and present-day feminism, as her argument here closely parallels the tactics used by those advocating for the education of women in developing

countries. Many activist groups working in these places stress the societal benefits of an educated female population. UNICEF, for example, explains on their website that “girls’ education strengthens economies and reduces inequality by contributing to more stable, resilient societies” (UNICEF). The similarities between Wollstonecraft’s arguments and those of modern-day activists reveal her intelligence and persuasion skills. Unfortunately, the continued prevalence of these arguments also highlights the failure of many nations to ensure equal rights and protections for women. However, the progression past these tactics in more developed countries shows that society has come a long way since the time of proto-feminism.

Because Wollstonecraft was living in a proto-feminist society, all of her arguments and ideas are based upon her own opinions and observations, rather than building off of the theories and viewpoints of other feminists who came before her. Despite this limitation, many of the ideas in this text have gone on to be supported and expanded upon by modern feminists. For example, one of Wollstonecraft’s foundational arguments is that most of the women around her have been subdued and sedated into a state of dependence on men. In her introduction, she writes that “women, intoxicated by the adoration which men [...] pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow creatures who find amusement in their society” (Wollstonecraft 224). This sentiment closely mirrors the idea of “compulsory heterosexuality,” a term coined by 20th century feminist poet Adrienne Rich. Rich created the term to describe the patriarchal systems men have created. In these systems, all women are subdued into craving male attention and validation, regardless of whether or not they’re attracted to the men they’re soliciting this affection from. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich writes that institutions such as marriage, which physically and metaphorically confine women, are part of a “cluster of forces within which

women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives” (Rich 20). The system that Wollstonecraft describes, in which women become dependent upon male affection, is a direct reflection of this concept.

In Chapter Four of her text, Wollstonecraft examines the idea of intoxicating male validation even more closely, criticizing the same exact constructs that Rich does. She writes that, while men can spend their adolescent years developing their personalities and interests, women are taught only about marriage and how to be good wives. As she puts it, “from the education women receive from society, the love of pleasure may be said to govern them all” (Wollstonecraft 242). The main difference between Rich and Wollstonecraft’s argument is the rigidity of the patriarchal structure men have created. Wollstonecraft’s text shows that in her time, virtually all women were physically dependent on men for food, shelter, and safety, since they were not allowed to make their own living. By contrast, the patriarchal constrictions described by Rich, such as societal pressure to appeal to men, are more psychological than physical. Despite these differences, the parallels between Wollstonecraft and Rich’s ideas are striking, given the fact that these women lived two centuries apart from each other. While the solidarity between these women is inspiring, there is also a sadness to it, because it shows that the problems highlighted by proto-feminists are still present today. However, it also reveals the validity and power of Wollstonecraft’s words, as her ideas are still being promoted and built upon by modern-day feminists.

Expanding upon her idea that men have subdued women into a state of patriarchal compliance, Wollstonecraft argues that men trap women in a state of constant adolescence. According to Wollstonecraft, this is entirely intentional on the part of men; men of this pre-

feminism time knew that if women gained enough knowledge and self-awareness, they would rebel against their state of oppression. Therefore, men prevented women from becoming independent or educated. Wollstonecraft argues that men train women to “remain, it may be said, innocent; they mean in a state of childhood” (Wollstonecraft 244). While this structure of female subjugation and infantilization has been mostly dismantled in western society, remnants still remain. One of the main residues of this system is the normalization of men being older than their female partners. While there is nothing inherently wrong with men being in relationships with women who are younger than them, the frequency and intensity of this dynamic makes it worth noting. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Purdue University found that “in Western societies, adult men generally prefer female partners who are somewhat younger than themselves” (Agnew 6). The tendency of men to pursue relationships with younger women is widespread, but has become increasingly scrutinized in recent years. Much of this scrutiny comes from the power imbalance that is fostered by large age gaps in relationships. Many modern feminists argue that men tend to pursue younger women so that they can more easily control manipulate them, an argument that is directly in line with Wollstonecraft’s. It is impossible to say whether all age-gap relationships stem from men’s intent to control women and uphold the patriarchy. However, there are significant parallels between Wollstonecraft’s argument and that of modern feminists regarding the infantilization of women. These similarities suggest that men’s attempted subordination of women may not have disappeared completely.

As shown previously, there are many notable similarities between Wollstonecraft’s arguments and those of modern feminists, revealing the parallels between proto-feminism and modern-day feminist theory. These parallels reveal that, unfortunately, many gender disparities have not disappeared since Wollstonecraft’s time. However, there are also many differences

between Wollstonecraft and modern feminists, show that society has progressed immensely since the proto-feminist era. The issue that inspired Wollstonecraft to write this book has been partially resolved, as women have received equal rights under the law in France and many other countries. The evolving response to this text also indicates a significant cultural shift; whereas the text was seen as radical and outlandish at the time of publication, Wollstonecraft's ideas are now readily accepted and supported by many. The dissimilarities between this text's arguments and the 21st century feminism show how far we have come, mainly thanks to foundational proto-feminists such as Wollstonecraft herself. Wollstonecraft's text serves as a powerful reminder of the strength of words and the importance of speaking up against injustice.

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