

## Nancy Kingsbury Wollstonecraft and the Logic of Freedom as Independence

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Although known to historians and biographers of the Wollstonecraft family, Nancy Kingsbury Wollstonecraft's writings have been little read outside of a select group of specialists for almost two hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Her work gained some wider recognition in 2019 when her illustrated manuscript on

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<sup>1</sup> The foremost authority on the historical figure of Nancy Kingsbury Wollstonecraft is Wayne Bodle whose research into her life stretches back to 2010 and forms part of his wider project on the extended Wollstonecraft family in the Americas. He has presented several papers on this subject, including most recently, "Wollstonecraft(s) in the Americas, 1792-1904" at Wollapalooza III, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2020. He has also written a series of posts on the Wollstonecraft family on the *Feminist History of Philosophy* blog (<https://feministhistoryofphilosophy.wordpress.com/2019/07/18/the-wollstonecrafts-in-america-links-and-summary/>).

Historically, the only references to Kingsbury Wollstonecraft that I am aware of are from the editor of the journal in which she published "The Natural Rights of Woman", Samuel Knapp in his *Female Biography Containing Notices of Distinguished Women in Different Nations and Ages* (1834) and a cursory mention by W. Clark Durant in his introduction to William Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1927). More recently, Carol Bensick has written on Kingsbury Wollstonecraft, comparing these respective treatments ("As much Force, and More Justice" vs. Pathetic Caricature: Samuel L. Knapp and Clark Durant on Nancy Kingsbury Wollstonecraft's 'Natural Rights of Woman', 2020).

Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft's life sometimes make mention of Kingsbury Wollstonecraft in the context of her marriage to Charles Wollstonecraft and her subsequent time in Cuba (see e.g. Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 2012, 317). Eileen Hunt Botting and Charlotte Matthews also discuss Kingsbury Wollstonecraft in Cuba ("Overthrowing the Floresta–Wollstonecraft Myth for Latin American

*Specimens of the Plants and Fruits of the Island of Cuba* resurfaced.<sup>2</sup> This led to the sharing on social media of Kingsbury's article on "The Natural Rights of Woman", bringing this work to a much wider audience for the first time in recent history.<sup>3</sup> Part of the attraction for many of those who encountered this essay was surely the curiosity factor of reading a treatment of the rights of woman by 'another Wollstonecraft'. Certainly, that was the case for me. It does not take one more than a few paragraphs, however, to realise that Kingsbury speaks with her own assured and forthright voice, presenting a distinctive and penetrating analysis that is fully deserving of sustained scholarly attention in its own right.

Though Kingsbury's interests were broad – encompassing biology and natural history as well as literature and philosophy – my focus here is on her political philosophy. I examine only one aspect that we can discern from "The Natural Rights of Woman". Although I have said that Kingsbury's work stands on its own, irrespective of comparison with her more famous sister-in-law, I nevertheless place her in dialogue with Mary Wollstonecraft, identifying in Kingsbury a bridge connecting Wollstonecraft's innovations of the late eighteenth century with later emancipatory thought towards the end of the nineteenth century. In doing this, my interest in her work is purely analytical. I treat Kingsbury as a philosopher in her own right and make no biographical claims about the possible

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Feminism", 2014, 79.) Finally, the resurfacing of Kingsbury Wollstonecraft's Cuban manuscripts was covered in a few online articles, including by Jose Beduya ("Botanical illustration pioneer goes from obscurity to online", 2019), Jonathan Carey ("A Forgotten Botanist's Stunning 19th-Century Manuscript Is Now Online", 2019) and Czerne Reid ("'Lost' book of exquisite scientific drawings rediscovered after 190 years", 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Beduya, "Botanical illustration pioneer goes from obscurity to online".

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Kingsbury Wollstonecraft 1825, "The Natural Rights of Woman".

influence Wollstonecraft may have had on her thinking.<sup>4</sup> This much said, whether or not there is a causal connection, there is a clear resonance between themes invoked by both writers that I believe is worth examining. To avoid confusion, I shall refer to Nancy Wollstonecraft by her premarital name, Kingsbury, reserving 'Wollstonecraft' for Mary Wollstonecraft.

Kingsbury's article is framed to address what appears to be a puzzling question. Why, she asks, in the early nineteenth century in America, when there are historically unparalleled opportunities for women to improve their minds – both formally through education and informally by reading or engaging in cultural activities – do so few take advantage of this? Indeed, she further observes, as society grows more affluent and they have more leisure time, women seem all the more to seek the shallow and fleeting pleasures that are aimed at pleasing men, polishing their manners and remaining ignorant. This perception fed into the popular prevailing prejudice that women were not in fact men's intellectual and moral equals but that they were, rather, created to rely on the support of men. Kingsbury does not deny that there were greater opportunities for self-improvement which women seem to have squandered. Instead, she locates the issue to be addressed at a structural level. Whatever opportunities there are for women's education are negated by deeper and more pervasive social practices, norms and institutions. The result is that the choices women end up making, even though they may appear paradoxical or suboptimal, are rational responses to the complex but often unperceived realities of their subjection.

In framing her argument, Kingsbury both picks up on themes developed by Wollstonecraft and makes use of several of the same conceptual tools. In what follows, I place Wollstonecraft within the republican political tradition, although it is not necessary to endorse that label to follow my

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<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that Kingsbury sometimes used the name 'Mary Wollstonecraft' to refer to herself. Bodle indicates that Kingsbury may have travelled under her predecessor's name and that is how the editor of the *Boston Monthly*, in which she published, seems to have known her (as I discuss below). How far this interest in Wollstonecraft influenced Kingsbury's philosophy directly is not a question I can pursue in this article.

analysis.<sup>5</sup> All that is required here is to accept that Wollstonecraft employs a cluster of connected ideas that centre around the notions of independence, equality, virtue and the common good which relate to each other in a particular way. Kingsbury's work, similarly, makes use of this framework. Accordingly, I will make use of a republican logic of freedom as independence in analysing Kingsbury's texts.

I should emphasise that my use of the philosophical logic does not of itself imply that Kingsbury's personal political views were themselves 'republican' in the broader sense (Bodle, for example, characterises Kingsbury as having monarchist sympathies). It is not, therefore, my intention to classify Kingsbury as a 'republican philosopher', nor indeed to give her any particular label such as feminist or education theorist although her work engages with these areas. Rather, my purpose is to identify and follow her use of the particular logic of independence as a function of equality, virtue and the common good, and to place this in the context of both Wollstonecraft's earlier and Frederick Douglass's later applications. I am not aware of any other philosophical treatments given to Kingsbury's work and so I leave it for others to provide fuller accounts of her intellectual repertoire. In focusing on the logic of independence, I set aside any investigation of Kingsbury's personal attitudes. In so doing, I draw parallels between her conclusions about the socially structural nature of women's subjection with those developed by Douglass in the context of race. This does not mean that Kingsbury herself was consistent in her personal beliefs on the issues of both sex and race. I am not in a position to make any claims of my own in this regard and will concentrate only on the logic of the principles that Wollstonecraft, Kingsbury and Douglass use and develop. However, I shall provide some background into the complexities of the Wollstonecraft family on the question of slavery and

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<sup>5</sup> Several recent writers have argued that Wollstonecraft made extensive use of republican concepts across her writing. See especially Bergès 2019, "Women, Revolutions and Republicanism"; Coffee 2014, "Freedom as Independence: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Grand Blessing of Life"; Halldenius 2015, *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism*. See also Botting 2016, *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights*.

race, and which may implicate Kingsbury herself, drawing in particular on the scholarship of Eileen Hunt.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first section, I give a short biographical account of Kingsbury and her writing by way of orientation for unfamiliar readers. In the second section, I continue with this biographical focus, discussing the application of Kingsbury's and Wollstonecraft's arguments for gender equality to the issue of racial-equality. In section three, I turn to the foundations of Wollstonecraft's philosophy, briefly outlining the Wollstonecraftian themes and concepts upon which I shall draw in my analysis of Kingsbury. I focus particularly on the relationship between the four key values outlined above in her work: freedom as independence, equality, virtue, and the common good. In section four, I establish the foundations of the position I ascribe to Kingsbury, drawing on two of her articles, "Patriotism: A Sketch" and "Books and Literature". I discuss the role played by three of the values I identified in Wollstonecraft: independence, virtue and the common good. In the fifth section, I turn to the "Natural Rights of Woman" itself, examining the ideal of equality, especially in the sense of women's mental equality with men, and focusing particularly on the systematic and wholesale denial of opportunities for developing their intellectual capacities that women experience. In section six, I examine the corrupting effect that inequality has on virtue, which in turn undermines the collective commitment to the common good and thereby of the conditions necessary for social freedom. In section seven, I bring together Kingsbury's arguments, showing how restoring women's natural intellectual equality is not simply a matter of educational reform, and nor is it a function of individual choice. Instead it requires a holistic approach that entails the regeneration of social, political and economic relations between the sexes. Finally, in the concluding section, I very briefly place Kingsbury's arguments within a trend within the nineteenth century that develops Wollstonecraft's

arguments and builds toward the later emancipatory thought of Frederick Douglass, who it has been argued employs a Wollstonecraftian philosophical scheme.<sup>6</sup>

### **Nancy Kingsbury Wollstonecraft**

Nancy Kingsbury was born in 1791 in New Hampshire in the small town of Rindge, not far from the border with Massachusetts.<sup>7</sup> In 1813 she married Wollstonecraft's youngest brother, Charles (1770-1817), who had left England for America in 1792 in order to improve his prospects.<sup>8</sup> Following Charles's death in 1817, Kingsbury moved to Matanzas, Cuba where she wrote her three-volume manuscript on the island's plants and fruits. It was intricately and beautifully illustrated by herself, something which has attracted considerable praise by her twenty-first century admirers. Sadly, Kingsbury died of fever shortly after sending her book to publishers aged only 36 (incidentally, a similar age to Wollstonecraft herself, who died at 38). It is, however, said to be one of the earliest and most comprehensive pictorial accounts of Cuban plant life in existence.<sup>9</sup> Self-taught, as we would expect of a woman of the time, Kingsbury was nevertheless an astute botanist and natural historian. She had earlier published a series of wide ranging observations and reflections of Cuba's culture and geography, written as two "Letters from Cuba" in the *Boston Monthly Magazine*, which was the same journal in which she had earlier

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Coffey 2020, "A Radical Revolution in Thought: Frederick Douglass on the Slave's Perspective on Republican Freedom".

<sup>7</sup> Kingsbury is usually given as having been born in Rindge. Bodle, however, locates her place of birth as Walpole, Massachusetts based on his examination of her birth records (private correspondence).

<sup>8</sup> Wollstonecraft had confided her friend of her profligate brother, that "it is not easy to procure a situation for a young man who has nothing to recommend him". She later added that Thomas Paine had replied that, once Charles had started to apply himself, it would "do him no harm in America" (*The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 2003, 192, 203).

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Carey 2019, "A Forgotten Botanist's Stunning 19th-Century Manuscript is Now Online".

published the “Natural Rights of Woman”.<sup>10</sup> Amongst her fascinating discussions, Kingsbury concludes from an examination of the local geology that, contrary to the prevailing opinion, that Cuba “has been formed from the ocean and not disjoined from the continent”.<sup>11</sup> She adds that “I am more inclined to believe that the West India Isles will join the continent at some future period than I am to think they have made part of it in times past. But this I suppose would be laughed at” as vague and speculative. As it turns out, the Caribbean and South American plates are, indeed, converging (though, of course, the modern theory of plate tectonics was not available to her).

That Kingsbury’s work was lost to public view for so long is not entirely surprising or unusual. The combination of the difficult spelling of her married surname and the standard of nineteenth century record keeping is problem enough. Her Cuban manuscript was, for example, originally listed under the name ‘Wollstonecroft’.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Kingsbury is more commonly referred to today as Anne rather than Nancy. Bodle believes this to be a mistake, perhaps based on the assumption that Nancy was historically often a diminutive of Anne even though by the nineteenth century it was also a name in its own right. He believes that a mistake was made in the clerical records in Cornell sometime after the receipt of her manuscript. The volumes remain attributed to Anne Kingsbury Wollstonecraft today. A more general, and often more serious, problem of identity that she shares with many historic women writers, was that Kingsbury often wrote under a pseudonym. The three articles for the *Boston Monthly* that I discuss were written under the name D’Anville whereas her two Cuban letters are simply attributed to “a person of great observation and accomplishments”.<sup>13</sup> A further complication, particular to Kingsbury, was the tendency for her to be confused or conflated

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<sup>10</sup> Kingsbury 1826, “Letters from Cuba.... No. 1” and “Letters from Cuba.... No. 2”.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters No. 2*, 642.

<sup>12</sup> Czerne Reid 2019, “‘Lost’ book of exquisite scientific drawings rediscovered after 190 years”.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters No. 1*, 561.

(possibly deliberately on her part) with her more famous namesake. When the editor of the *Boston Monthly*, Samuel Knapp, later revealed the identity of D’Anville in an entry to an anthology of distinguished women that he was compiling, he gave it as Mary Wollstonecraft (misspelled as Wollstoncraft).<sup>14</sup> A century later, Kingsbury was the subject of a brief and dismissive discussion in W. Clark Durant’s introduction to a reprinting of Godwin’s *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft*, although he referred to her simply as Mrs Wollstonecraft.<sup>15</sup> Beyond these obscure and oblique references, however, there is scant mention of Kingsbury or her work in the historical and scholarly record.<sup>16</sup>

Durant’s unfavourable comparison of Kingsbury with Wollstonecraft is born of ignorance – he had apparently not read Kingsbury’s papers – as well as some sexist presumptions about Kingsbury’s likely motives for having written a similarly titled treatment of women’s rights. He assumed that she had simply produced an inferior copy of the original.<sup>17</sup> As I hope to show, Knapp’s assessment is more accurate. She was, he maintained, a powerful and penetrating thinker who wrote with “pith and point”.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, far from copying Wollstonecraft, Kingsbury engaged deeply with the same themes and drew upon a similar range of concepts to produce her own innovative and distinctive position.

### **Gender, Race and the Universal Scope of Freedom as Independence**

In arguing that Kingsbury employed, and then extended, concepts that Wollstonecraft used, my focus is on the particular ideal of freedom as independence, as I set this out in the next section. The principal

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Knapp 1834, *A Female Biography Containing Notices of Distinguished Women in Different Nations and Ages*, 477-79. For a detailed and insightful discussion, see Carol Bensick, “Knapp and Durant”.

<sup>15</sup> William Godwin (1927), *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

<sup>16</sup> See Bensick Knapp and Durant”.

<sup>17</sup> Bensick, “Knapp and Durant”.

<sup>18</sup> Bensick, “Knapp and Durant”.

application of this notion in both Wollstonecraft and Kingsbury is that of women's natural and civil rights. The republican logic that dependence undermines the civic virtue necessary for a free and stable society is not confined to any specific social groups, and as we shall see, Wollstonecraft and Kingsbury both couch their claims in general terms at times. In the final sections, however, I shall show how Frederick Douglass picks up on the same logic implied by the principle of freedom as independence applying it to the issue of racial equality. Kingsbury herself did not, to my knowledge, write in any detail on the matter of race and so I cannot speculate on what her personal views on this issue were. Accordingly, my concern here is solely with the logic that emerges from the philosophical principles Kingsbury develops.<sup>19</sup>

In Wollstonecraft's case, the extension of her arguments for women's independence to the issue of race can be justified more readily not only theoretically but also both textually and contextually. It is important to remember, Eileen Hunt reminds us, that (as so often with women in the history of philosophy) "we have an incomplete corpus of writings for Wollstonecraft" since many of her writings were either anonymously written or destroyed by relatives after her death.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, there is ample evidence of her condemnation of racial slavery on republican grounds in

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<sup>19</sup> On a biographical note, there has been some speculation that Kingsbury was the beneficiary of slave labour. Bodle, for example, notes that the estate of Kingsbury's husband Charles Wollstonecraft, "included several enslaved people in late 1810s urban New Orleans", adding that this is "surely one of the more demoralizing findings of Wollstonecraft scholarship" (2019, "Charles Wollstonecraft"). Bensick goes on to argue, plausibly if inconclusively, that Kingsbury may have had connections to slaveholders in Cuba ("Knapp and Durant").

<sup>20</sup> Writing as Eileen Hunt Botting (2021, "Wollstonecraft in Jamaica: the international reception of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in the *Kingston Daily Advertiser* in 1791", 8). She adds that "most of [Wollstonecraft's] unpublished papers seem to have been destroyed after her death in 1797 by her relatives, beginning with her husband William Godwin and extending to her grandson Percy Florence Shelley and his wife Jane who bequeathed a portion of the family papers to Oxford's Bodleian Library".

the writings that we do have. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, for example, Wollstonecraft likens the condition of women to that of racially-based chattel slaves, using the conceptual language of freedom as independence as we will discuss it in the next section (“is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard”).<sup>21</sup> Although Wollstonecraft never develops a sustained application for a racially equal society in the terms that she does for gender, this passage is evidence that she recognised that the same basic principles were at work regarding the logic of dependence. Hunt identifies a “universalistic, theologically-informed” principle of human beings as free and rational agents made in God’s image in Wollstonecraft’s writing.<sup>22</sup> I agree but add that this is worked out through the framework of independence. Hunt nuances her conclusion by observing that Wollstonecraft often employ an ‘Orientalist’ language, especially in identifying Muslim societies as exemplars of those that have suffered the corruption that follows authoritarian regimes.<sup>23</sup> The extent to which this is an issue in Wollstonecraft’s thought deserves greater treatment than I can give it here. However, it is an indication of the pervasive nature of background cultural assumptions that Wollstonecraft herself is sensitive to when she notes that “men and women must be educated, 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, and given a family character, as it were, to the century”.<sup>24</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup> Wollstonecraft 2014, 174. A few lines above, Wollstonecraft describes the slave trade as an “abominable traffick”.

<sup>22</sup> Botting, “Wollstonecraft in Jamaica”, 3. See also Botting 2020, “From revolutionary Paris to Nootka Sound to Saint-Domingue: The international politics and prejudice behind Wollstonecraft’s theory of the rights of humanity, 1789–91”, 2 (“Across Wollstonecraft’s writings from 1788 to 1792, the “rights of humanity” became—at least in theory—the moral and political entitlement of people of any “nation,” “color,” “sex,” or “rank””).

<sup>23</sup> Botting, “From Nootka Sound to Saint-Domingue” (3-4, and especially 15-17).

<sup>24</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (47).

thought also underpins the call for a radical revolution in thought that I go on to attribute to Douglass in the final section.

Hunt also highlights how several of the anonymous book reviews that Wollstonecraft wrote as a staff writer for the *Analytical Review* were on “topics related to the social and political conditions of “Indian” and “slave” peoples of the Americas” including, most prominently, her review of the freedman and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano’s slave narrative.<sup>25</sup> One of the most interesting, and perhaps telling, indications of Wollstonecraft’s consistency in applying the same principles of freedom and independence to the question of race-based slavery as she does to women’s social subordination can be seen in the reception of her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) in the sugar-producing colony of Jamaica.<sup>26</sup> Hunt has recently shown that the prominent Jamaican newspaper, the *Kingston Daily Advertiser*, published several articles on Wollstonecraft’s book, including a lengthy extract that runs to 1,660 words. In this extract, Wollstonecraft not only explicitly condemns slavery (“Hell stalks abroad;—the lash resounds on the slave’s naked sides”) – something notable in a newspaper that served the interests of the plantation owners – but in building her case, she draws on the elements of the conception of freedom as independence that I will outline in the next section.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789, see Botting 2020, “From Nootka Sound to Saint-Domingue”, 9). Botting identifies eight of Wollstonecraft’s reviews as concerning native and slave peoples in the Americas, following the work of Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (*The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, volume 7, pp. 50, 100, 168, 185, 332, 355, 375, 390).

<sup>26</sup> Botting 2021, “Wollstonecraft in Jamaica”.

<sup>27</sup> For example, the extract begins with a condemnation of Burke’s praise of the concept of ‘natural subordination’, which to a republican represents arbitrary power and the antithesis of freedom. Such a blind submission does not serve the common interest but rather leads to tyranny which undermines civic virtue. Wollstonecraft calls for the break-up of large estates which would enable independence amongst the poor.

## The Foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's Thought

There are many ways to approach Wollstonecraft's philosophy. One way that I believe is helpful, is through the central role that a small cluster of concepts play in shaping her arguments. These include freedom, understood as independence from arbitrary forms of controlling power; equality, notionally of political and social status but also entailing a high degree of material equality; and virtue, a key component of which implies a willingness and a capacity to guide one's conduct according to the dictates of reason.<sup>28</sup> Taken together, these three values give rise to an ideal of the common good, understood inclusively to represent the genuine shared interests of all members of society, including those of both women and men but also cutting across racial, religious and class divisions.<sup>29</sup>

In emphasising these particular values, which are all connected in Wollstonecraft's thought, a number of scholars have identified her as writing within the republican tradition of political philosophy.<sup>30</sup> In my view this has many advantages. Certainly, Wollstonecraft makes explicit and prominent use of republican themes in *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and in the *History of*

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"Virtue", which is necessary for freedom, "can only flourish amongst equals", whereas those who live in submission and dependence, "are radically degraded by the habits of their life". The extract can be found on Botting 2021, 5 and in Wollstonecraft 1995, 58-62.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Coffee 2013, "Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power of Social Domination" and 2014 "Freedom as Independence"; Halldenius, *Feminist Republicanism*; Bergès, "Women, Revolutions and Republicanism".

<sup>29</sup> Coffee 2016, "Freedom, Diversity and the Virtuous Republic"; Halldenius (2016), "Representation in Mary Wollstonecraft's Political Philosophy".

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the references in the two preceding notes, see also Bergès 2016, "Wet Nursing and Political Participation" and Susan James 2016, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Conception of Rights". Also Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights*.

*the French Revolution* (1794). Placing her within this tradition allows us to connect Wollstonecraft's thought with the wider arc of revolutionary and emancipatory thinking that spans the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This helps us place Wollstonecraft in dialogue with women writing in different contexts and times but drawing on a shared overarching set of political concepts, including Catharine Macaulay, Olympe de Gouges in revolutionary France, and writers such as Frances Wright in early nineteenth century USA, the intellectual context in which Kingsbury herself was located.<sup>31</sup> It also provides one point of contact through which to discuss the common aims that linked Wollstonecraft and other feminist philosophers with emancipatory groups such as abolitionists and campaigners for racial equality throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> An additional benefit of reading Wollstonecraft as writing within this broader context is that it gives lie to the claim that republicanism is solely a patriarchal approach constructed wholly by male philosophers without any female input.<sup>33</sup> Neither should contemporary feminist republicanism be seen simply an ahistorical attempt to rescue a masculine philosophy. On the contrary, women such as Wollstonecraft have theorised within the basic framework of freedom understood as independence, equality and virtue in considerable numbers over a sustained historical period, challenging its received masculine assumptions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bergès "Women, Revolutions and Republicanism"; On Wollstonecraft's influence on American feminism in the nineteenth century, including from a republican perspective, see Botting 2013, "Making an American Feminist Icon: Mary Wollstonecraft's Reception in US Newspapers, 1800-1869"; Botting and Matthews 2014, "Overthrowing the Floresta–Wollstonecraft Myth for Latin American Feminism"; Falchi, Federica 2016, "Frances Wright: Liberty as Founding Principle of Republican America".

<sup>32</sup> Coffee "Radical Revolution in Thought".

<sup>33</sup> Green 2019, "On the Philosophical Significance of Eighteenth-Century Female 'Republicans'".

<sup>34</sup> Bergès, "Women, Revolutions and Republicanism", Coffee "Women and the History of Republicanism".

One of Wollstonecraft's most important philosophical innovations, it has been argued, is the way she rearticulates the standard notion of republicanism as political ideal as a social one.<sup>35</sup> If the classic republican slogan was, historically, that 'freedom is only possible in a free state', Wollstonecraft amends it to read that 'freedom is only possible in a free (inclusive and representative) culture'. Our political freedoms, she argues, are dependent on, and derivative from, our social freedoms – from the way that we are perceived, valued, judged socially. Wollstonecraft's innovation, albeit one built on the ground laid by Catharine Macaulay before her, was to apply the same structure of freedom that republicans ascribe to political institutions to the general culture as well. Wollstonecraft's arguments were developed in the context of women's rights, and rightly this is where they have had most influence. Nevertheless, as an analysis of the social and cultural threats to freedom, they clearly also have great purchase on the question of racial inclusion within the political community on equal terms. In this context, it has been shown that Wollstonecraft's early insights and arguments find an echo in the later developments of social reformers a century later, such as Frederick Douglass.<sup>36</sup>

Though reading Wollstonecraft through a republican lens is well attested in the literature, I recognise that it can come with perceptions of conceptual and historical baggage that some scholars – particularly some feminists – find unhelpful.<sup>37</sup> Amongst other things, these include its long association with patriarchy, assumptions of rugged individualism, and an alleged rigid distinction between the public and private spheres. Although I believe these objections can readily be addressed, this is not the place to enter into this debate. I make no reference to the wider republican tradition in my discussion and neither does my argument rest upon it. All that is necessary for my analysis is to

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<sup>35</sup> Coffee, "Enduring Power".

<sup>36</sup> Coffee, "Radical Revolution".

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Green, "Eighteenth-Century Female 'Republicans'", Anne Phillips (2000), "Feminism and Republicanism: is this a Plausible Alliance?", Pateman (2007), "Why republicanism?".

appreciate how the small cluster of ideas – freedom as independence, equality, virtue arranged in a particular way – used by Wollstonecraft to advance her analysis of women’s subjection resonate with Kingsbury’s subsequent account.

Each of these three components of independence, equality, and virtue is necessary for a free society that upholds the common good of all citizens. If any one of them is missing, this is said to have a corrosive, or corrupting, effect on the others such that it will further undermine the conditions necessary for freedom. Substantial inequality, for example, leads to dependence, and dependence is said to undermine the conditions necessary for virtue. If a wife, for instance, does not have the same legal standing or protection as her husband, she will be dependent on him. Since she does not have the legal empowerment to act in her own name, she relies on the protection and power of her husband.<sup>38</sup> Rather than always acting on principle and conscience, as one must if one is to act with virtue, she will be required to defer to her husband’s judgement, and to placate him where necessary.<sup>39</sup> If wives want to take control of their lives they cannot rely on the power of reasoned

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<sup>38</sup> The condition of being dependent on others for one’s security and wellbeing was something that Wollstonecraft abhorred throughout her life. Some of the earliest, and strongest, advice that she gave her childhood friend Jane Arden was to “struggle with any obstacles rather than go into a state of dependence”, referring to the dangers of becoming a lady’s companion, a position that left the employee completely at the mercy of her employer (*Collected Letters*, 29). She later tells her friend George Blood that she only desires “to subsist, without being dependant on the caprice of an [sic] fellow-creature” (70, original spellings). The dangers of dependence were most acute for married women whose entire legal standing and financial security were under the control of their husbands. This is a theme which Wollstonecraft develops at length in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and in both her short novels, *Mary: A Fiction* and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*.

<sup>39</sup> A wife 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?” (Wollstonecraft 2014, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 176).

argument, as equal partners would, but must resort to more underhand means, such as to “govern their tyrants by sinister tricks”.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly, the corruption of virtue in dependent relations happens in both directions, affecting both dominated and dominator alike. While the oppressed have historically received most attention for their abject, ignoble behaviour – including not only coquettish wives but also obsequious servants and fawning courtiers – there is, nevertheless, a long tradition of condemning the tyrannical, overbearing, arrogant behaviour of those in positions of unaccountable power, such as aristocrats, senior clergy and, of course, slaveholders (and Wollstonecraft makes clear that husbands are as liable to succumb to this form of degradation as wives are to the effects of subjection).<sup>41</sup> A second implication of inequality and dependence is that the process of corruption is said to spread from particular bilateral relationships (e.g. a husband and a dependent wife), to infect other people within their orbit. A man dominated in the poisonous world of intrigue at court, for example, may come home in the evening and take out his feelings of disempowerment on his wife. Wollstonecraft herself notes how such a dominated wife may, in turn, come to “tyrannise over her servants; for slavish fear and tyranny are found together”.<sup>42</sup> Dependence is not only an individual harm, therefore, but a social concern since ultimately the freedom of the whole of society is at risk as the corruption of virtue spreads imperceptibly, yet inexorably and irreversibly, throughout society. In this context, Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland likens its effect to that of rust. “The rust of barbarity”, she observes, “covers

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<sup>40</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 174.

<sup>41</sup> This is one of the primary themes in the first chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

<sup>42</sup> Wollstonecraft (1787), *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the more Important Duties of Life*, 63.

their proud masters and ruins them together. The poisoned breath of despotism destroys virtue in the bud".<sup>43</sup>

### **Kingsbury: Independence, Virtue and the Common Good**

In the second of her three political articles for the *Boston Monthly*, "Patriotism: A Sketch", Kingsbury draws upon several of the concepts discussed above.<sup>44</sup> In particular, I want to highlight the role played by two of the three core Wollstonecraftian ideals, independence and virtue, as well as by the common good. In the following sections I will add the third, equality, and discuss the principle of the mutual corruption of virtue where equality is absent. In "Patriotism", as she does in her other two contributions to the journal, Kingsbury starts from very broad foundational principles before narrowing down her focus at the end with a very specific and targeted argument, in this case with an appeal for a national botanical garden funded by the federal government. Kingsbury starts with the importance of the principle of patriotism, or love of country. This is chief amongst the civic or political virtues, the glue that ties citizens together and unites them as one country. Patriotism, as Kingsbury outlines it, is closely connected to the idea of the common good discussed above, representing the alignment of public and private virtue. If anyone "values the happiness of his own fireside", she reminds us, it is the law and the government "which can alone secure to him these private blessings" ("Patriotism", 304-5).

Patriotism, in this principled sense of valuing the common good, contrasts with a mere blind loyalty to, or preference for, one's country. It is not the superiority of our nation, or its competitive advantage, that should motivate us, but a love for the values themselves upon which our country is built. Patriotic citizens do not aspire for their nation to dominate others but, instead, strive to improve their own society in order to protect and preserve its independence and the free way of life that this

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<sup>43</sup> Bergès, "A Republican Housewife", 111.

<sup>44</sup> Kingsbury (1826), "Patriotism: A Sketch".

independence gives them. Rather than a chauvinistic or jingoistic belief that our country's values and institutions are already perfect, a sober reflection is called for, one based on a principle of continual reform and progress. It is also important to be realistic about one's nation's place in the world. Americans can, by all means, be very proud of the strength of their country but at the same time, they should realise that it was by no means inevitable that they would win their struggle for independence against a formidable power. It was in the interests of France – even though they “hated our glorious cause” of independence – Spain, Germany and Russia to allow the Americans to prevail in order to weaken their rival and enemy, Great Britain (305). Independence, then, was achieved with the tacit or explicit assistance of other nations, or at least with their lack of opposition. This reliance on others for the means and conditions of our freedom is an integral feature of what it means to be independent, whether individually, within the nation as citizens who rely on the virtue of other citizens and of the law, or collectively as a nation amongst the community of nations. Other countries emerging from colonial subjection, such as Haiti, were not so fortunate and had their freedom actively stymied by the regional and colonial powers including, we might add, by the United States itself.<sup>45</sup>

The virtue of patriotism entails the continual improvement and cultivation of the minds of the citizenry. This enables them to make better – both more just and more effective – laws to protect and extend the freedom that they have. We cannot rest on our laurels, believing that it is because of our inherent virtues that we have achieved our current levels of technological, cultural and ethical superiority. Once again, the Americans were fortunate to have had British colonial masters. Living in Cuba, Kingsbury observes that “it is impossible for the man whose life has been spent in North

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<sup>45</sup> Although its independence was declared in 1804, the USA did not recognise the independence of Haiti until 1862, in part reflecting the considerable influence in the southern slaveholders and plantation owners in the US antebellum period. For a brief account of US relations with Haiti post-independence, see Crawford-Roberts, “A History of United States Policy Towards Haiti”. See also, Reinhardt 2005, “200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution”.

America, protected, guided and enlightened by our wholesome laws and customs, to *imagine* the obstacles, the barriers, the hindrances and discouragements, which obstruct the progress of *mind*, and consequently of liberty, in the Spanish Americas” (307, her italics). The only access to education for both the young and the old, Kingsbury adds by way of example, is through priests who regard the study of all literature and languages as sinful, requiring confession and penance. In spite of these hindrances, the Spanish, as well as the Greeks, to name but two, are beginning to break their bonds and it is inevitable that these nations will take their place amongst the free and culturally enlightened states alongside the North Americans.

It is not just in scientific, technological or economic progress that the mental strength of a nation should be measured. Kingsbury accepts that American achievements in these respects are impressive. It is also necessary to expand and inspire people’s minds through cultural and artistic progress. This will not only help stimulate moral improvements but will also contribute to future scientific endeavours by enlarging people’s horizons and sparking their imaginations. Here, she regards America as being “in her early infancy”, a subject she develops at length in her article, “Books and Literature” (310). While Kingsbury is making a general point, she concludes her article with targeted argument against the writing of Walter Scott. An interesting aspect of her argument is the way that this objective can be achieved by integrating it into some of America’s existing activities, in particular with the activities of its missionaries. Missionaries represent a ready-made task force spread out across the world and going into remote and unstudied areas. They could collect samples, species, artefacts and knowledge at comparatively little additional cost. Not only would this benefit the nation immeasurably but it would enhance the propagation of the gospel by replacing mere proselytising with a more considered engagement with the local minds. The future domestic freedom and international standing of any nation depends on its virtue which is in large part a reflection of the minds of its people. By integrating a commitment to continually enriching and renewing the cultural and scientific riches of the nation, Kingsbury believes that we will both boost our virtue while also

improve the efficiency of our other activities, in this case the propagation of the Gospel. This is a win-win situation that, she reasons, should not be a difficult or controversial decision.

In "Books and Literature", Kingsbury develops her thoughts on the matter of cultivating the collective mind, and therefore virtue, of the republic. The state not only has the right, but also a duty, to sponsor the arts, she argues, since this is squarely in the common interest. The production of the cultural works that stimulate and enlarge the public's mind and imagination cannot be left to the free market because the market's operation does not produce the right kind of art; it does not produce works of substance or depth. The United States in the 1820s, Kingsbury observes, has a population that is far more educated, and inclined to read far more books, than England had in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. America also has far more writers than the English had. But this quantity of readers and writers does not translate itself into the quality of the books that are produced. Whereas John Milton and William Cowper, for example, were not read by a mass audience and they could not live off their writings, publishing novels had become a very lucrative profession for those who were successful in Kingsbury's time, sustained by the buoyant public demand for books. The problem is that by responding to popular tastes and succumbing to popular acclaim, authors were pandering to their audiences, drawing on familiar but shallow everyday experiences that allowed readers to recognise themselves in what they read without being confronted with challenging themes that require them to wrestle with their principles or take a fresh perspective. Critics, too, are seduced adding more credence to this market-driven approach. Kingsbury likens the explosion of literary interest to a religious 'awakening' which, she says, seems for a while to burn very brightly but which fails to take root and subsequently tends to fade quickly. Religious awakenings similarly stimulate the easy passions but do not engage people's deeper spiritual or intellectual needs.

Kingsbury's broader argument concerns the general importance of patronising and developing high quality cultural work at public expense as an essential part of maintaining a virtuous population that can maintain and promote its free way of life. More narrowly, however, her target is Walter Scott,

whose style and popularity, she believes, have propelled the devastating trend in the quality contemporary literature that she describes. In passing, though, Kingsbury gives Scott a partial reprieve for, as she puts it, administering a death blow to the army of inconsequential and frivolous women writers of the period (“that host of female scribblers who did much more than waste the paper – the time of the printers – and the money of boarding school misses, by their voluminous tomes of sentimental nonsense, and deluding details of deceiving error”).<sup>46</sup> These writers were symptoms of a much deeper social problem concerning the relations of the sexes which Kingsbury addresses in the “Natural Rights of Woman”, to which we now turn.

### **Equality of Mind**

The motivating premise of Kingsbury’s argument in the “Natural Rights of Woman” is that men and women are fundamentally equal but that men have, universally, taken it upon themselves to subject women to their authority. She does not explicitly stipulate in what sense she considers the sexes to be equal, though her focus is firmly on women’s equality as rational agents. Neither does she state precisely what follows from their equality in terms of social or political rights. Nevertheless, unlike Wollstonecraft for example, who identifies certain gender-specific duties such as a natural duty of motherhood, Kingsbury does not gesture towards any particular natural differences that might influence and distinguish men and women’s eventual roles as citizens.<sup>47</sup>

There is, Kingsbury maintains, no credible basis – rationally, theologically, scientifically or empirically – for ascribing different mental or intellectual capacities to the sexes, and yet we find ourselves in a society whose norms and institutions monolithically reinforce a belief in the mental

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<sup>46</sup> Kingsbury 1826, “Books and Literature”, 79.

<sup>47</sup> A great deal has been written on Wollstonecraft’s conception of the gendered differences of male and female citizenship. See, amongst many others, Ruth Abbey 2014, “Are Women Human?” in *Vindication*, 229-245; Bergès “Wet Nurses”; Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill and Human Rights*; Coffee “Grand Blessing”.

superiority of males. This psychological control is highly significant since she goes on to argue in “Patriotism” – as we have noted above – that it is principally through the mind that social systems of oppression and tyranny are maintained. The resulting restrictions on women’s intellectual opportunities systematically prevent women from developing whatever rational capacities they might have, thereby making the initial baseless claim about inferiority a social, if contingent, reality. Alongside the denial of opportunities for women to develop their minds, Kingsbury argues, social myths emerge to strengthen and entrench the belief that this is both natural and as it should be. She cites the prevailing interpretation of the Biblical story of Eve having been the one to have been deceived into eating the apple as an example of a belief that reinforces the widespread acceptance of male intellectual superiority (just as Wollstonecraft makes a similar point drawing on the belief that Eve’s having been created from Adam’s rib as evidence of male superiority).<sup>48</sup>

Kingsbury does not present an explicit argument for women’s equality. Instead, she challenges its opponents to provide either evidence or a rationale to the contrary, while at the same time unpicking several specious arguments that are often put forward for men’s superiority. Though she couches her early remarks in biblical terms – God created male and female as “one bone – one flesh – one *mind*. To *them* he directed his divine commands and gave them rule over all that he had made. Their wisdom – their intelligence – their sovereignty was equal. God blessed them *both*, and gave them united dominion” – she, is nevertheless, making a rational and a scientific argument.<sup>49</sup> As with Wollstonecraft before her, Kingsbury’s is the God of reason and natural philosophy, or science. Writing with characteristic pointed, yet penetrating, humour that runs through all her articles, she notes that “*man* soon became wiser than his Maker and discovered that the Almighty was mistaken” (“Natural

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<sup>48</sup> *Vindication*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> “Natural Rights”, 126-7 (her italics).

Rights”, 127).<sup>50</sup> Men have, in other words, usurped power, there being no rational or scientific justification for their position of domination. Kingsbury goes on to challenge her opponents to identify precisely when, and how, the discovery of superior male intelligence came to be made, urging them to employ the same scientific urgency and conceptual curiosity that scholars show in their other studies. So fundamental is the intellectual dichotomy between sexes said to be for the social organisation of our lives, and so rigidly and meticulously is it enforced, that we are owed a serious intellectual analysis of, and scientific investigation into, how this came to be. “Surely it is as desirable to learn wherein the brain of Adam was different from that of his wife”, she insists, “as it is to know that the jaw bone of a mammoth was different from that of an elephant” (127). And, building on what resembles Rousseau’s influential claim in *Emile*, she wonders why more research has not been done into “what first led to the discovery whether the more exquisite personal beauty of woman put him upon thinking whether his own innate desire of absolute rule” was a corollary of this, for “it is universally admitted on all sides, that nothing but the acknowledgment of her superior *beauty*, could, in any age whatever have induced woman even *seemingly*, to acquiesce in the mental superiority arrogated by man” (127, her italics).<sup>51</sup>

There being no rational basis for it, the hierarchy between the sexes is neither a principled distinction nor a prudent division of labour. It is, rather, the outcome of a raw power struggle. Kingsbury’s reference here to women ‘seeming to acquiesce’ is significant. While the matter of women’s subordinate status appears superficially to have been settled, covertly it remains the subject

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<sup>50</sup>Original italics.

<sup>51</sup>Rousseau identifies women’s charms as providing them with a controlling power over men that offsets men’s superior physical and intellectual abilities at the start of Book V of *Emile*, writing that “nature has endowed woman with a power of stimulating man's passions in excess of man's power of satisfying those passions, and has thus made him dependent on her goodwill, and compelled him in his turn to endeavour to please her, so that she may be willing to yield to his superior strength” (*Emile*, 220).

of an ongoing conflict. Women's seeming acceptance of their lot belies their continued desire to free themselves and to stand on their own merits on equal terms. The stakes in this contest are both ethical and pragmatic. It is, clearly, a moral battle since men have defied reason and religion by arbitrarily denying women their natural rights as moral agents to liberty and equality with men. Nevertheless, in spite of the essay's title, Kingsbury says very little about the normative importance of women's rights, concentrating instead on the practical implications of these having been arrogated and, in particular, focussing on the wholesale denial of education and of the opportunities to develop their mental faculties. A woman, she says, was "not permitted to enjoy a single ray of the light of science, nor to feel the genial influence of its invigorating beams; but was immersed within the prison gates of ignorance and superstition" (128).

Constraining the mind is, as we have seen, the principal means by which systematic forms of oppression are maintained. However, while authoritarian governments were liable to fear a violent uprising from a resentful population, they were more complacent with regard to women. The rationale used was, typically, that women simply were not suited to learning. Kingsbury gives this line short shrift, pointing out several of its logical flaws and implausibility. For one thing, it seems overkill to impose a blanket ban on women's intellectual improvement (can we really believe that a woman "should spoil a pudding merely from knowing how to read" a recipe? [129]).<sup>52</sup> More seriously (though

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<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note that Hannah Mather Crocker also jokes about puddings in the context of women's rights. Hannah Mather Crocker wrote in her *Observations on the Real Rights of Women* (1818) that, "there may be a few groveling minds who think that woman should not aspire to any further knowledge than to obtain enough of the cymical art to enable them to compound a good pudding, pie, or cake, for her lord and master to compound" (Crocker 2011, 85). Eileen Hunt Botting and Sarah Houser discuss Crocker's use of this reference to cooking in their excellent article on Crocker's feminism and political theory in "Drawing the line of Equality: Hannah Mather Crocker on Women's Rights (2006, 273). Crocker's joke was reprinted in a major African

wittily argued), the denial of women's education holds back the progress of the whole of society. This, again, has a Wollstonecraftian tone. "Contending for the rights of woman", Wollstonecraft writes, "my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education... she will stop the process of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice".<sup>53</sup> To this, Kingsbury adds that, even an erudite man whose time would have been better spent on higher intellectual callings, must lay "aside the pen of inspiration to take up the frying pan or his palate must have suffered the martyrdom of swallowing a dinner" prepared by his ignorant wife (129). The extension of this argument is plain. Let women learn and improve themselves, Kingsbury argues, whether in matters trivial or profound, and let them find their natural level of achievement. To the extent that women succeed or even excel, this is to the benefit of everyone, whereas if they fail, nothing is lost save some unnecessary effort. It makes little sense on these grounds to limit women's education, and so Kingsbury suspects that the motive is darker. It must, she concludes, "be monstrous cowardice indeed, which fears an inferior being, even against its own interest" (129).

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American newspaper in Boston in the 1820s (I thank the anonymous referee for pointing out this connection to me).

Whether or not Kingsbury had read Crocker herself or seen the pudding reference reprinted, I am not myself in a position to say. But this episode reminds us, perhaps, that this is an understudied period in women's intellectual history in which the protagonists were reading and drawing on each other's works. Furthermore, Crocker's *Observations* represented an engagement with the themes and substance of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* in the American context, albeit with some critical distance (2011, 104-5). Set alongside Kingsbury's work, we can see a diverse set of reactions, responses and extensions of Wollstonecraft's work by women at this time. The best discussion I know of on the reception of Wollstonecraft in America is Botting "Making an American Feminist Icon" (2013). See also Bergès, Botting and Coffee (eds), *The Wollstonecraftian Mind* (2019).

<sup>53</sup> *Vindication*, 22.

Kingsbury's conclusion here mirrors that made by abolitionists in the context of racial domination. If men are acting against their ostensible best interests in keeping women ignorant and subordinate, then they must have some more nefarious interest at stake, such as the maintenance of their position of dominance. Douglass later arrives at the same position in respect of white Americans' support for the racist laws and policies that prevent black Americans from gaining a secure foothold in society.

### **Inequality of Power and the Corruption of Virtue**

Kingsbury's reference to the disingenuous cowardice implied in rigorously keeping down a supposedly inferior group of people is instructive as it forms part of a theme that runs through her analysis, one that draws heavily on a master-slave dynamic. This was not uncommon in feminist discourse at the time and linked feminist arguments, in certain aspects at least, to those made by abolitionists. Douglass, for example, would later echo Kingsbury's charge of hypocrisy and cowardice by drawing attention to the cognitive dissonance involved where white Americans both believe that black people are inferior to white and that, somehow, by allowing black citizens to become educated these inferior individuals would come to overrun and rule over them, despite white people's superior intellect and virtue.<sup>54</sup> Kingsbury's particular use of the master-slave dynamic, however, is suggestive of a distinctive argument developed in detail by Catharine Macaulay in her *Letters on Education* (1790) which would, in turn, greatly influence Wollstonecraft for whom the notion that women were slaves played a central role in the construction of her own feminist arguments.<sup>55</sup> What interests me in particular, for the matter under consideration in this article, however, is how Kingsbury identifies certain cultural

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, *Life and Writings*, 351.

<sup>55</sup> On Macaulay's use of the framework of slavery, see Coffee 2017 "Macaulay's Republican Conception of Social and Political Liberty". On Wollstonecraft's central use of the image of slavery, see also Bergès "Wet Nurses"; Coffee "Enduring Power"; Halldenius "Representation".

conditions – which are the joint responsibility of men and women to create together – as being requirements for the development of female virtue (including the exercise of their reason) and, by extension, the full enjoyment of their natural rights.

The subjection of women by men not only impedes the social accumulation of knowledge, it undermines the unity and cohesion necessary for a commitment to the common good. While the status quo might appear to represent a smooth hierarchical arrangement that everyone accepts, this belies the extent of the resentment women feel. “The love of power is a passion no less ardent in the weak than in the strong”, Kingsbury argues, “and when [woman] saw herself defrauded... while she appeared to acquiesce... and submitted to be thought beautiful and silly, she only studied how she should, with these, outwit wisdom and knowledge” as practiced by men (“Natural Rights”, 129). With these weapons, she adds, woman “has managed to support no very unequal warfare, from the time of her early degradation, up to the present period of returning equality”. Beneath the placid surface in which both men and women – masters and slaves – are playing their part dutifully, each is busy covertly working against the other, thereby undermining respect for the common good which is essential for freedom.<sup>56</sup> This serves to erode civic virtue, since neither side is being honest or straightforward but instead resorts to lies and trickery to secure what they want or need. Consequently, the covert war between men and women becomes “a degradation and disgrace to both”. It is important to reiterate that the process of corruption in virtue is mutual and that both men and women are affected. Though Kingsbury focuses on the effect that subjection has on women for her argument, there is no suggestion of victim blaming or that women are more greatly affected than men. The problem is one – just as Macaulay and Wollstonecraft had argued before her – that affected both sexes alike. The impact on women, however, in terms of their knowledge, confidence and skills, was comparatively greater.

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<sup>56</sup> For a detailed analysis of Macaulay’s arguments on this, see Coffee “Macaulay’s Republican Conception”.

The continual need by subordinate and subjected people – in classical republican analyses these are slaves but the claims generalise to encompass anyone in a dependent relationship, including courtiers, soldiers, the poor, and women – to resort to trickery and cunning was standardly considered to have a lasting, even permanent, effect on their virtue and character. The natural capacity for human beings to reason was, nevertheless, held to be something which had to be nurtured and developed in a person. Since women were not given the necessary education or opportunities, they would irrevocably diminish their critical faculties and capacity for virtue. Wollstonecraft, in a similar context, makes plain that men, too, lose their capacity for reason by becoming complacent and intellectually dishonest in seeking to justify false arguments that bolster their own dominance.<sup>57</sup> Kingsbury's focus here, however, is not so much on women's capacity for impartial debate but on their lack of access to the arts and sciences that would have improved their minds.

Having established this, Kingsbury develops what I regard as the most interesting part of her argument. Up to this point, she has given a historical account of gender relations. However, having been resolutely and determinedly denied the opportunities for intellectual improvement for almost all of history, Kingsbury observes, in the America of the early nineteenth century women had an unparalleled access to education, from early years primary education through to newly established colleges and academies in almost every branch of science or the arts. Women, she argues, had both the opportunities and the leisure time in which to become educated. Furthermore, America was at an early stage in its economic and cultural development, affluent without yet becoming decadent. The relative simplicity of its manners at the time – this is, again, a republican and Wollstonecraftian argument – that had not yet become degenerate like in older, richer nations such as England and France, meant that there were fewer fashionable pursuits available to distract young women from their studies. Nevertheless, with all these advantages, Kingsbury laments, women seem not to have availed themselves of their opportunities and remain as uninformed and frivolous as ever. “Whence

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<sup>57</sup> *Vindication*, 71-2.

comes it”, she asks, “that with equal advantages, the women are so uninformed that only a few of them can support conversation upon any other than the most trifling subjects?” (132). This, she fears, lends apparent support to those who argue that women are indeed less intellectually curious or capable by nature, and that efforts to provide them with an education are misguided. In any case, they add further, if women were capable of being educated, then they only have themselves to blame for not taking up the opportunities available. On both counts, Kingsbury responds, we must not be so hasty.

### **Structure of Social Relations**

There is no doubt that women’s access to education expanded rapidly in the early nineteenth century, even if it was not, perhaps, as rosy as Kingsbury portrays it.<sup>58</sup> Her argument is, however, conceptual rather than empirical, addressing the question of what it would really take for women to stand on an equal footing with men with respect to the equal exercise of their mental and intellectual faculties. Kingsbury’s answer concerns the restructuring of social relations between the sexes more than the mere provision of female academies. This is a necessarily collective responsibility. Although, individually, no doubt, any given woman could have taken greater steps to develop her mind, as a sex women must accept some censure for the state of their learning. But, Kingsbury goes on, neither are men exempt from blame. “Men”, she argues, “have not generally encouraged the improvement of female intellect, either by their conduct towards the illiterate, or their approbation of the more intelligent” (133).

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<sup>58</sup> On the state of women’s education in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see for example, Monaghan 1988, “Literary Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England” and 2005, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. See also, Greer (ed.) 2003, *Girls and Literacy in America: Historical Perspectives to the Present*.

Individually, men might personally discourage women by not valuing their learning and preferring their superficial achievements. The most significant impact, however, is collective and stems from the structural asymmetries in social power between the sexes. The accumulated outcome of men's actions, "either by their conduct towards the illiterate, or their approbation of the more intelligent", is that "literature has not been made *fashionable* in society – it has not become necessary, for it has not been made the subject of conversation, nor furnished the materials for it in fashionable and polite circles" (133, her italics). This need not have been the intended outcome of any individual male, but it was the result. Charming and frivolous behaviour is rewarded, learning and studious application are not. This pattern of male approval and disapproval is itself made against, and shaped by, an existing background of assumptions about female virtue, feminine norms and the proper place of women in society in which learning and scholarship do not have any place. A well-developed intellect, Kingsbury says, will not secure for women social acceptance or a lucrative and stable career. If women want the security that those things bring, then the reality of the situation for any woman at that time was that she would require the protection of a man. It is, therefore, a straightforwardly rational choice for women to continue to play up to the delightful and playful stereotype that men collectively favour, since that is where their best chance of social and economic survival and prosperity lies. Under these circumstances it is natural and inevitable that "the first wish of women is to please the men and whatever they imagine will best please them that they are most desirous to possess" (134). "If knowledge, wit, and wisdom, were essential to this", Kingsbury adds, "every woman would endeavor to be knowing, witty and wise". Sadly, of course, they were not essential.

This situation in which prudence and rational calculation steer women away from intellectual self-development is not of their making. Nevertheless, the conduct of many women does reinforce it. As is so often the case within a class of dominated or subject people, many women very often resented those amongst them who attempted to rise above the rest of them, and would often seek to undermine the potential success of their ambitious contemporaries. Once again, Kingsbury draws on the classical republican analysis of the behaviour of slaves, applying in the context of jealousy of

others' intellectual learning a point that Macaulay makes in the *Letters on Education* about the tendency of women to betray other women's illicit affairs, thereby coming to ruin their reputations.<sup>59</sup> While such behaviour is unpleasant, and often tawdry, it is precisely what is to be expected and is quite rational given the logic of what it is to be a member of a dominated sub-group, replicating the pattern of behaviour said to be found amongst slaves. This is just one part of the overall process of the degradation and the corruption of virtue that both sexes suffer as a result of women's systematic subjection, something that Wollstonecraft also makes a great deal about in the *Vindication* (itself an analysis which also owes a lot to Macaulay's earlier work). The pernicious effect of slave systems is that they to divide slaves from each other, making it more rational on a short-term individual survival basis for subject people to be mutually suspicious rather than to come together to work for equality.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to understand that Kingsbury is not blaming women here. The lack of value placed on scholarly endeavour and achievement is individually rational for most women given what is at stake in the situation in which they find themselves. Admittedly, Kingsbury – like Wollstonecraft and Macaulay before her – is unable personally to comprehend how it is women have come actually to prefer their degradation to intellectual enlightenment (“that women should prefer the evanescent pleasure of empty, false, and often gross flattery, to the dignity of the female character, and her importance and usefulness in society, and in her own family is what I can neither defend, nor account for”, 134). Her supposition is that it must be explained by ignorance, passed down from mother to daughter. In this context, Wollstonecraft gives a more nuanced answer that gives more substance to the same core idea. Commenting on Rousseau's claim in *Emilius and Sophia*, the unfinished sequel to *Emile*, that “the common attachment and regard of a mother, nay, mere habit, will make her beloved by her children... Even the constraint she lays them under, if well directed, will increase their affection,

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<sup>59</sup> *Letters on Education*, 133-4.

<sup>60</sup> These points were also made later by Douglass. See Coffee, “Radical Revolution in Thought”.

instead of lessening it; because a state of dependence being natural to the sex, they perceive themselves formed for obedience”,<sup>61</sup> Wollstonecraft argues that, “this is begging the question; for servitude not only debases the individual, but its effects seem to be transmitted to posterity. Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel? ‘These dogs,’ observes a naturalist, ‘at first kept their ears erect; but custom has superseded nature, and a token of fear is become a beauty’”.<sup>62</sup>

In the end, Kingsbury is relatively upbeat, believing that things are changing within American culture. Accomplished women have emerged and shown themselves to be the equal of any accomplished man, she argues and she believes that the stigma attached to female learning was on the decline. “Ladies”, she says, “are no longer afraid nor ashamed to be acquainted with history with geography with natural history or with whatever has a tendency to enlarge their views strengthen their understanding improve their taste or amend their heart” (“Natural Rights”, 135). These steps are real and positive, but they are very small when viewed against the scale of the task that she has articulated, which is to change entrenched cultural forms that have emerged over millennia, that pervade almost every area of social life in complex and subtle ways, and which overtly and tacitly favour one half of the population over the other. In this context, Wollstonecraft, who also believed that change was possible counselled us to recognise that change would only come slowly, over the course of many generations. “The changing of customs of long standing” she warns, “will require a

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<sup>61</sup> Rousseau 1763, *Emilius and Sophia*, vol. 3, 193; Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 110.

<sup>62</sup> *Vindication*, 110.

considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices which sensualists have implanted".<sup>63</sup>

### **A Wholesale Conceptual Revolution**

In the "Natural Rights of Woman", Kingsbury continues a line of argument that was begun – in the republican feminist tradition, at least – by Macaulay and Wollstonecraft. Women's political rights entail the right and opportunity to be educated. Access to education, however, while necessary is not sufficient. The enjoyment of equal rights requires, first, a suitable socio-economic context in which that education is materially incentivised and rewarded. A crucial factor that follows is that women must be independent of men financially so that they are in a position to follow their own interests, develop their characters and forge their own paths rather than having to conform to social expectations and the forms of behaviour that men – whose support and protection they would otherwise be compelled to secure – find most appealing. A second necessary factor for educational reform to be effective the presence of a supportive culture in which women's education and learning is valued. Women must, for example, live in a society that does not sneer at, or shun, those with learning or with idiosyncratic or controversial opinions.

In confining her attention only to the particular issue of the preconditions necessary for successful educational reform, Kingsbury's focus in the "Natural Rights of Woman" is much narrower than Wollstonecraft's in the *Vindication*. Kingsbury, in contrast to her predecessor, does not discuss the importance of legal and political rights. Nevertheless, the structure of her argument and the implications of the position she establishes are far-reaching and can be extended into all the important areas of social, political and civic life. If women are to ensure that the cultural and economic conditions

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<sup>63</sup>Wollstonecraft 1987, *Short Residence in Sweden*, 115 and *Vindication*, 135. Wollstonecraft also suggested 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" (*Short Residence*, 166).

necessary for their education are in place, then they will require a reliable and effective public voice in order to shape popular opinion and public policy, and the legal representation in order to implement this. This also entails that women have the social standing that only legal rights and the ability to rise to position of influence can secure. Furthermore, the logic of Kingsbury's arguments is that access to an equal and adequate education is not only a natural right in itself, but an enabling good that will equip and empower women to act on equal terms with men as individual agents and as citizens. In this, her position resembles closely the conclusion Wollstonecraft reaches at the end of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that to bring about the conditions necessary for women's equal freedom, citizenship and the exercise of their natural rights will require nothing less than a "REVOLUTION in female manners".<sup>64</sup>

Wollstonecraft's phrase 'female manners' is significant. Far from representing trivial forms of contingent etiquette and behaviour, it encompasses the whole system of gendered social, economic, and political relations.<sup>65</sup> The way that men and women interact, and the concepts, norms and beliefs which govern women's participation in domestic and civil society must be reconceived and remade to reflect what Wollstonecraft refers to as "unchangeable morals" (principled, rational precepts) rather than "local manners" (contingent etiquette).<sup>66</sup> By doing this, she continues, women regain their "lost dignity", which will enable them to, "as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world". The thrust of the *Vindication*, then, was to develop a foundational account and broad framework within which women's equal natural rights can be realised. Wollstonecraft did not work through the detailed implications of this framework, setting aside much of that task for her sadly

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<sup>64</sup> *Vindication*, 224 (Wollstonecraft's emphasis).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, O'Neill 2007, *Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy*, 175.

<sup>66</sup> *Vindication*, 71.

never-to-be-written sequel.<sup>67</sup> Kingsbury's article, therefore, adds a layer of detailed analysis to just one aspect of Wollstonecraft's work by probing the question of educational reform and showing how merely providing more opportunities for learning and for intellectual self-development – while clearly important – is insufficient without extensive social reforms.

The theoretical and political implications of Kingsbury's position are radical and consequential. Certainly, within the republican philosophical context that I have placed her within, Kingsbury's analysis forms part of a wider trend in the nineteenth century, one that takes in not only feminism but also other emancipatory groups including advocates for racial equality, in which the enjoyment and exercise of legal and political rights are increasingly understood to be intricately tied social reform and cultural change. Whereas republicans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries understood political freedom as independence in terms of the institutional arrangements that secured a non-arbitrary law, the members of persistently excluded and oppressed social groups came to realise that this was insufficient.<sup>68</sup> Legal and political change would require a corresponding shift in beliefs and attitudes. Theoretically, accommodating this within the republican framework required some conceptual innovation, particularly on the roles played by reason and virtue, which it has been argued, begin with the earlier work of Macaulay and Wollstonecraft. The discussion of their influence on republican thinking in the nineteenth century has, sadly, been beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, by extending aspects of Wollstonecraft's thinking in the way she has, Kingsbury's work

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<sup>67</sup> Wollstonecraft wrote to the poet and activist, William Roscoe, that she was dissatisfied with what she had produced in the *Vindication*, written as it was in great haste ("it is not pleasant", she wrote, "to have the Devil coming for the conclusion of a sheet before it is written", *Collected Letters*, 194). She wrote that, for this reason, she would finish the whole of her planned next volume before committing it to print, a project which was never undertaken save for some notes or 'hints'.

<sup>68</sup> Coffee, "Enduring Effects", "Macaulay's Republican Conception".

prefigures some later republican positions that are much more extensively developed. Perhaps the most fully worked-out of these is Frederick Douglass.<sup>69</sup>

Douglass goes much further than Kingsbury, questioning the very possibility of social and political freedom in a prejudiced society.<sup>70</sup> For political rights – which he identifies amongst the natural rights of black people – to be effective there must be a comprehensive and wholesale conceptual revolution that accompanies the requisite institutional, political and economic changes. Without this, there can be no effective freedom. Indeed, on the eve of the end of the Civil War, and so before the backlash of the counter-reconstruction, Douglass went so far as to predict that the Emancipation Proclamation would not bring freedom. All that would happen, he argued, would be that the black population would, in his words, “exchange the relation of slavery to individuals, only to become the slaves of the community at large”, becoming oppressed not just by their old masters but by the entire structure of white society.<sup>71</sup> Douglass continues the line of thought articulated by Kingsbury in the “Natural Rights of Women” that prejudicial attitudes concerning the nature and abilities of women, and the associated forms of social behaviour and accepted norms that result, work together to restrict women’s freedom by conditioning the range of options that it is rational or prudent to pursue. So

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<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Coffee “Radical Revolution in Thought”.

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<sup>70</sup> Although Douglass’s focus is on the question of race, he applies the same logic explicitly to the question of gender emancipation and equality (Coffee 2020, Douglass 1888, “The Woman’s Suffrage Movement”, in *Life and Writings*, vol. 5, 448-54). By the mid eighteenth century, the women’s and abolitionist movements had become closely aligned. Although this alliance would be severely strained following the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1870), at which point activists were split on whether to focus on achieving suffrage for black men or white women. For a sustained analysis of Douglass and the Women’s Movement, see Lemons 2009, *Womanist Forefathers: Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois*.

<sup>71</sup> *Life and Writings* vol. 1, 292

restrictive was the social structure, whose entire normative and conceptual foundations had been built on the premise that black Americans were inferior, dangerous and incapable of responsible citizenship, Douglass argued, that to overcome it would require “nothing less than a radical revolution in all the modes of thought which have flourished under the blighting slave system”. Douglass, like Kingsbury, is echoing Wollstonecraft’s call for a revolution in female manners, having in mind a reconceptualization of the norms, beliefs, practices and social relations within which African Americans would participate as agents and citizens.

Taken on their own, Kingsbury’s writings are worthy of serious study and a small place in the history of women in philosophy. Placed in the wider context of the development of emancipatory thought during the nineteenth century, and particularly the expansion of Wollstonecraft’s thought within the emerging women’s republican tradition, they take on an even greater significance. Either way, historians of political thought are fortunate that the writings of Kingsbury have been rediscovered. While, sadly, they are only few, they are immensely rich and provocative.

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