

Irony and Bildung in Feminist Educational Writings (Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, Edgeworth)¹

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Abstract: The context of the present paper is my research on philosophies of female education and the questions of female Bildung in the 18th and 19th centuries in England. I have been studying works on educationalist and philosophical concerns and literary works, such as the Bildungsromane and utopian novels written in the period. Female writings – either literary-utopian or educational-philosophical – seem to rely on the framework and theoretical background of well-known male works in order to present a critical and ironical reading while also raising questions of social solidarity and (e)quality in individual Bildung. In my paper, I highlight the strategies of feminist rhetoric, taking my textual examples from Mary Wollstonecraft’s anti-Rousseauian *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), while I also refer to educational writings by two of her contemporaries, Catharine Macaulay and Maria Edgeworth.

In 18th-century England, along with the reforms aimed at changing the school-system, educationalist and philosophical-educational works were published in which the questions of female education were also asked, for instance, writings by Mary Astell and Hannah More. However, at the time, the British were likely to display their general fear of “mass” or public education, and this remained true in the 19th century. One might think, for example, of Matthew Arnold’s cultural criticism and his proposition of the basic education provided to the lower layers of society, to the “mob”. The responsible moralists of the two centuries – both men and women – realised the urgent issues of Bildung and systematic education, which were mainly discussed by thinkers and critics from the middle-class; in addition Arnold’s works on the subject, John Stuart Mill’s writings also exemplify these efforts. Meanwhile, the female members of the well-to-do middle-class were given a private education by tutors of good reputation. In her *Letters on Education* (1792), Catharine Macaulay focuses on private, not public education, but she bravely stands up for the coeducation of children of the elite. Macaulay quotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke,

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the two most influential thinkers of the time on the philosophy of education, and she also engages in a polemic with the ex-radical Edmund Burke concerning women's place in society. Her discourses obviously had a great impact on Mary Wollstonecraft. Florence S. Boos, a feminist literary and cultural critic, highlights Macaulay's strong voice in her sharp rhetoric and "militant" opposition to the male neglect of female education, though she admits that Macaulay's educational principles are rather elitist, since Macaulay herself belonged to high society (Boos, 1976, pp. 74–5). Boos claims that the argumentation of the letters XXI-XXIV was built mostly on Wollstonecraft's egalitarian treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which she started to write in the year of the publication of the Letters. Let me quote a famous passage to present Macaulay's clever style and attacking tone:

[...] knowledge is equally necessary to both sexes in the pursuit of happiness [...] all those vices and imperfections which have been generally regarded as inseparable from the female character, do not in any manner proceed from sexual causes, but are entirely the effects of situation and education. (Macaulay, 2014, pp. 201–202)

Although Macaulay's intellect made her "an isolated figure" and her feminist views on educational theory were not really known (and not at all shared by others, Boos, 1976, pp. 65–66), works by Mary Wollstonecraft, her contemporary, were met with indignation countrywide. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) – the "hyena in petticoats", to quote Horace Walpole's mock-metaphor (Taylor, 2007, p. 2) – had become a famous proto-feminist, moralist, and educationalist of her own time, who founded a private school for girls, worked as a teacher and a governess, then later earned her living as an editor and translator at a London-based publishing house. Her life story is quite scandalous, beginning with a love affair with an American captain (from him, she had her first daughter, Fanny Imlay) to her membership in a revolutionary group, the Radicals, with politicians Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine, painters Henry Fuseli and William Blake, and her future husband, the anarchist William Godwin, from whom her second daughter, Mary, was born. Soon after Mary's birth, she died, and her husband looked after her literary legacy and brought up their daughters.

In her writings, Mary Wollstonecraft was concerned about the questions of female education, and it is tempting to juxtapose her political-pedagogical works with her literary pieces aimed at educating her reader (see, for instance, her two novels, *Mary and Maria*; Richardson, 2002, p. 24). As a writer, she had enjoyed great success with a collection of stories intended for children entitled *Original Stories* (1788), in which a fictitious governess teaches two young girls

in the Rousseauian spirit, telling them parables. Emphasising the acceptance of parental and instructive control, she shows how the children are becoming able to learn self-control and “monitor themselves”, while the “white paper” sheet of the youthful mind is filled through practical training, an idea in accordance with Locke’s conception of the “tabula rasa” (Richardson, 2002, p. 31.). In 1787, Wollstonecraft published a similarly Lockean booklet, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (even the title recalls the Locke’s influence; see his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*), which was written in the style of the so-called conduct-books being printed to help parents educate their children at home. In her early work, one notices her critical tone, especially when she describes how narrow the path for women who wanted to pursue a profession was, since the only options available were to become a private tutor, a school-teacher, or a governess.

Returning to the main work of the present paper, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), its author regarded it as a moral, philosophical “essay”. Its thirteen chapters can be divided into three great sections: in the first, Wollstonecraft shows us the forms of sexual inequality in her own time; then the female character is presented; and, finally, the importance of family and education is discussed. In the introduction, she describes the miserable conditions of the age, in which female minds are unhealthily neglected and the whole school-system is “false”. “Women are, in fact, [...] degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence”, while “the word masculine is only a bugbear” when it is used as a reference to strong women’s behaviour (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 15). But through sensible training, women can be reared to drop their habitual frivolous and childlike gestures, with which, in their flattering technique of problem-solving, they rely on men in a manner defined as charming but functioning to foreground their implied weakness. Dropping these acquired mannerisms would help them begin to live like autonomous human beings.

Throughout the work, Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric is rich with both an ironic tone a utopian pitch. She knows full well that one group of her contemporaries (for instance, the philosophers Rousseau and Burke) gladly claims that everything was fine in the past, that is “all was right originally”, another group trusts in the present, saying “all is now right”, while she thinks that only the future can bring the state of harmony and peace: “all will be right” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 23). She puts the past, present, and future tenses of the copulative verb in italics, but I would emphasise the indefinite pronoun “all” in the phrases, since if more than half of society live in a state of subjugation, only the promise to provide wellbeing for everyone makes sense. Describing the present situation of women, she shows that they are treated like “gentle, domestic brutes” and

are kept in a regressively innocent, childlike state (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 29). Already here, related to the child-simile, Wollstonecraft points out – in accordance with Rousseau’s ideas on the “natural” education of men in *Emile* – that the education of children is crucial to the improvement of society, and women should also receive proper instruction (Wollstonecraft, 2004, pp. 30–31). Co-equal education will result in independent individuals who are able to think and act on their own: this constitutes Wollstonecraft’s interpretation of the Kantian self-liberated humans, who “dare to know” (in the spirit of Horace’s “*sapere aude*”), relying on their own reason in Kant’s essay, “Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (1784). She finds striking parallels between the limited training provided for soldiers and women, since the state needs them simply as machines which fulfil specific tasks; the soldiers have to fight and die, women are to marry and have babies (to fight and die for the country). The two groups do not show great interest in self-education or thorough learning. Moreover, she remarks maliciously, women are likely to be attracted to army officers (contemporary romance books are full of such episodes), and both women and soldiers are fond of fashion, balls and levity – “they were taught to please, and they only live to please” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 34).

Wollstonecraft values the Rousseauian principle of natural education, but she thinks that the fifth book on female education, “Sophy, or Woman”, is “grossly unnatural”, highlighting the famous passage according to which men’s and women’s education cannot be the same naturally, and women are to be brought up to accompany the naturally educated man (cf. to be a “helpmeet for him”, Rousseau, 1921). She adds that the main aim of female education is “to render them pleasing”; women have to be charming and graceful (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 38.). Wollstonecraft’s work, right from the introduction, is full of critical remarks about gender roles: for instance, she criticises the notion of masculine sublimity being opposed to feminine beauty, then, the differentiation of male thinking oriented towards the future while the female is labelled as rather present-bound, and she questions the masculine quality of melancholy, claiming that there are male souls “confined” in female bodies (Wollstonecraft, 2004, pp. 45–47).

In Rousseau’s *Emile*, we read that “he is a man and she is a woman; this is all they have to boast of [;] [i]n the present confusion between the sexes it is almost a miracle to belong to one’s own sex” (Rousseau, 1921), while Wollstonecraft displays a different attitude, saying that women “were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine”

(Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 46). In her utopian vision, she foresees the times when “sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including woman, will become more wise and virtuous” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 50, italics are mine).

Similarly to Rousseau, she stresses the importance of physical education not only for women but also for men, because in her age gentlemen looked down on physical exercises and “bodily labour”; the weak and delicate constitution was a sign of refinement. In the presentation of women’s situation, she quotes a lot from Rousseau’s *Emile*, and she makes comments on the passages she cites and occasionally cites them again. She thinks that in his frequent highlighting of female coquetry and “short-sighted desire”, Rousseau shows that his own sensuality and passionate temperament had blinded him; consequently, she refers to the fifth book on *Sophy* as “the philosophy of lasciviousness” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 64). Opposed to the image of girls being trained to play with dolls and sit and do idle things at home (i.e. the image of the charming coquet), Wollstonecraft presents the girl who behaves differently, the active and clever “boyish girl” who is “a romp” – the word refers to a vivid, energetic child, “sporting in the open air”, freely running and laughing, and the 18th-century “romp” can also be associated with the meanings of the words she uses later, the rebellious “rampage” and the ardent “rampancy” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 57). In fact, the romp could naturally be the real partner to the naturally educated and free-spirited boy if Wollstonecraft had written the part on woman’s education in *Emile*. Yet only through her irony and critical tone can she express her scepticism concerning Rousseau’s philosophy of female education. As she writes, if “taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, pp. 58–9).

How can a slave be expected to be guided by reason and to aim to achieve virtue in life? Wollstonecraft, actually, addresses this question to both sexes. She finds that her age is decadent, and she urges a new definition of the notion of the “(hu)man”. Meanwhile, she thinks that education should not only provide preparation and training for life, but should also strive for perfection. Let me quote one of the most famous passages, which is again a comment on Rousseau:

‘Educate women like men,’ says Rousseau, ‘and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us’. This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves. (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 81)

Wollstonecraft neglects the irony of the original and omits the end of Rousseau's statement, namely, that "and then men will be masters indeed" (Rousseau, 1921). For my part, I sincerely hope that Rousseau himself is using irony here, referring to the master-servant dichotomy of the sexes, which is one of the most important themes of feminist discourses.

Wollstonecraft surveys the courses of female life, including the fashionably imprisoned wife, the single spinster who is begrudgingly supported by her brother, the widow, the governess, and the prostitute. In each of these life situations, it would be greatly beneficial for "Sophy" to know more of the world than fashion, drawing, and sewing; Wollstonecraft adds gardening, experimental philosophy, and literature, though not terribly convincingly. Interpreting her contemporaries' works on education, she first turns again to Rousseau, and she repeats some already cited passages and makes ironical remarks. As she explains, she distorts Rousseau's statements: "I warped the author's reasoning to support my own arguments" (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 100). The verb "to warp" is usually applied to indicate the bending of a wooden frame due to changes in the weather (raining and freezing), i.e. the way in which the wood becomes twisted and undulatory while still under pressure. So far in critical writings, I have mainly come across the term as a reference to the modern functioning of irony, as it describes the deforming effects of contexts. According to Rousseau, here in the context, in the framework of female education, girls "should early be accustomed to restraint. This [...] is inherent in their sex [...]. All their life long, they will have to submit to the strictest and most enduring restraints, those of propriety" (Rousseau, 1921). However, Wollstonecraft claims that not only women but also men of the lower classes (the vast majority of the population) live under control and constraint. In the case of women, specifically education – or more precisely, the lack of proper education – leads to the early acquisition of "self-denial", the narrowing of walks of life, and the servile acceptance of the assigned limits (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 104). Combined with the idea that Rousseau himself admits, namely that man is "imperfect" and is trying all his life to become a better human being but generally is not able to master himself, and the woman or women subjected to him should even "submit to injustice" (Rousseau, 1921), Wollstonecraft's programme about the liberating of the female mind is more compelling. Truly, the pleasant "helpmeet" and the future nurturer of children can be expected to be able to think. Even Sophy is capable of intelligent conversations; I wonder how convincing Rousseau's words sound here:

By nature man thinks but seldom. He learns to think as he acquires the other arts, but with even greater difficulty. In both sexes alike I am only aware of two

really distinct classes, those who think and those who do not; and this difference is almost entirely one of education. A man who thinks should not ally himself with a woman who does not think, for he loses the chief delight of social life if he has a wife who cannot share his thoughts. (Rousseau, 1921, italics are mine)

If Rousseau belongs the class of people who are able think – and as he is a man, he has good chances of belonging to this class – can he not see the contradiction here with what he has previously written about the limited education of women? Would it not be easier to bring up a non-thinking man to match a non-thinking woman? He even remarks that well-educated and “talented women only get a hold over fools”: a clever man should be a master, not a student of his wife (Rousseau, 1921). Wollstonecraft takes this argument as nonsense, but she dedicates a separate chapter to the topic of female modesty.

In the longest chapter of the book, Wollstonecraft reviews the works discussing educational questions of her age and she comments on the ideas of the female writers. She criticises Madame Genlis’s ideas (and her narrow-mindedness), she values the soundness of Mrs Chapone’s letters, and she praises the aforementioned Mrs Macaulay’s outstanding intellect. According to Wollstonecraft, Macaulay’s writing is almost asexual, since she is not concerned about the sexes (“no sex appears”); to such a great extent does she rely on common sense in her “strong and clear” argumentation that one could even attribute the arrogance of “masculine understanding” to her (Wollstonecraft, 2004, pp. 130–2).

Regarding Wollstonecraft’s practical ideas on education, she emphasises the importance of coeducation, since, if they are educated together, the members of the two sexes behave differently in each other’s presence. Their co-training and teaching moderate the selfish wildness of boys and help the girls drop their peevish cunning. She also distinguishes weak and faint beauty, which is called feminine by masculine expectations, from the desired dignified beauty that is beautiful physically and morally – and that is closer to the Kantian or Burkean concept of the (masculine) sublime. In the concluding passage on education, Wollstonecraft prophetically writes about the moral sublimity of the future:

The conclusion which I wish to draw, is obvious; make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers; that is – if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers. Discussing the advantages which public and private education combined, [... being] particularly relative to the female world, because I think the female world oppressed; yet the gangrene, which the vices engendered by oppression have produced, is not confined to the morbid part, but pervades society at large: so that when I wish to see my sex become more like moral agents, my heart bounds with the

anticipation of the general diffusion of that sublime contentment which only morality can diffuse. (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p. 222, italics are mine)

This is a wonderful conclusion, which highlights the moral and practical utility of education in a utopian, social framework. Unfortunately, Mary Wollstonecraft could not put her theory into personal practice, as she was not able to bring up and guide the education of her daughters. The ardent egalitarian writer and thinker died a couple of days after the birth of her second child. Later, her daughter Mary read her works. Wollstonecraft was the only female writer whose works Mary could read when she was widely reading the classics in her teens (for instance, she knew the works of Milton, Morus, Shakespeare, and Rousseau). The future Mary Shelley (1797–1851), or Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, born Mary Godwin, wrote not only *Frankenstein* (1817) but also an anti-utopian work entitled *The Last Man* (1826), which is favoured in feminist ecocriticism today.

And now, to balance the rebellion of the Godwin-family, I present another family endeavour from the end of the 18th century, that is, *Practical Education* (1798), by Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his daughter, Maria Edgeworth. The 800-page book is written in the style of the popular conduct books, but the authors criticise the contemporary fashionable notions of female education. The philosophical framework of the book is given by Locke's empirical-sensualist approach, and even the title and the structure recall Locke's educational booklet for the practical gentleman (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1693). Several chapters of the Edgeworth-manual present the features of the female character (see "Temper"; "Prudence and Economy"; "Sympathy and Sensibility"; "Vanity, Pride and Ambition"), and all of the related passages speak of the balanced restraint of temperament and emotions and the acquisition of self-control. In the chapter on female temperament, Rousseau's famous passage about the framework of female education is quoted, namely, about the claim that Sophy is to be brought up so that she gladly accept her place in life (Edgeworth, 1798, p. 168). The most important female virtue is "to have command of temper" (Edgeworth, 1798, p. 700). Accordingly, female education should aim to foster this "command" not only through the restraint of female sensibility and fantasy but also with the right training (Edgeworth, 1798, p. 312). We can see that the father and his daughter are mainly concerned with the elite instruction provided for members of the upper middle class; consequently, they find that while economy and arithmetic are useful, in the development of the future gentlewomen's behaviour, the study of music and painting is beneficial (Edgeworth, 1798, p. 528). However, the Edgeworth-handbook warns against reading too many romances, since one rarely comes across the noble and generous

heroines of such fancies in real life. Indeed, one should not expect outstanding deeds from the women of the age, whose real task is to fulfil their “quite domestic virtues”. Moreover, in the passage against “impulsive” love marriages, the authors – the father and/or the daughter – encourage women, in rather a futile attempt, to think rationally, and they also emphasise the sensible experience of sober, mature feelings instead of fictitious daydreaming:

Women, who cultivate their reasoning powers, and who acquire tastes for science and literature, find sufficient variety in life, and do not require the stimulus or dissipation, or of a romance. Their sympathy and sensibility are engrossed by proper objects, and connected with habits of useful exertion: they usually feel the affection which others profess, and actually enjoy the happiness which others describe. (Edgeworth, 1798, p. 298)

Unfortunately, the handbook of practical education does not provide concrete suggestions concerning how to begin the outlined self-education of women. The above quotation seems to confirm the limits of Sophy’s training, reinforcing its morally motivated borders for the sake of domestic peace. On the whole, in spite of its remarks and critical ideas, the Edgeworth-work does not attack the female education of the century and does not argue with Locke or Rousseau. The sensitive problems of female education are smoothly situated in the massive frames of *Bildung* previously drawn and strictly prescribed by the cited male thinkers: there is no place for rebellious or rampant irony in the book by the caring father and the good daughter.

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