

EARLY FEMINISM IN ENGLAND

In the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe there occurred on the stage of history several women who became noted for their more direct espousal of fairer treatment of women as it related to their education and worth as a human being. Feminists' scholars regarded the 18th century author Mary Wollstonecraft as the original harbinger of feminism, a term not coined until the 19th century. We now know that there were women before Mary Wollstonecraft who strongly stated their disgust for men's denial of women's equality and need for a proper education. Why were a few women now taking up their pens to write monographs about the importance of women's intrinsic value? In the late Middle Ages, Christine de Pizan (1364-1430?) had ably responded to male writers' attack on the inadequacies of women in her The Book of the City of Ladies. About four hundred years transpired between Christine and the first notable writer of these years, Aphra Behn, who attempted to raise women's position in society.

Aphra Behn was born in England, and then taken as a child to Surinam, the West Indies. While she was there she met an enslaved African American prince named Oroonoko, who would later become the chief protagonist for her novel, Oroonoko. As an early abolitionist, Behn's novel was the first popular portrayal of the horrors of slavery. Behn later returned to England and married, but she became a widow three years later. After the death of her husband she was employed as a spy in Antwerp for England's King Charles II, when the English were fighting the Dutch. Providing the king with political and naval information, she soon learned the errant payment policy of monarchs, and she ended up in debtor's prison for debts acquired while spying for her king. Ironically, she argued the royalist point of view on issues in London at coffee houses and theaters. Needing to support herself, she turned to writing plays and other genre.

Aphra wrote many successful plays, novels, and poetry that allowed women readers to view issues from an outspoken woman's perspective. Behn managed to create strong, independent female characters that made their own choices. Her first play The Forced Marriage was incredibly successful, but it is her play The Rover that was her best. She went on to write seventeen plays. These 17 plays were produced within 17 years, and at times the only two London theaters had both her plays running simultaneously. At times she was suspected of plagiarism or she was taking credit for what her lovers were writing because English society still believed women were not capable of

intelligent ideas and formation of their own independent opinions. For Behn, differences between men and women were only creations of society. Because of her writing style and denial of women's subservience to men, she is described as the George Sand of the Restoration Era. When Aphra Behn died she was buried right outside the door that led from Poet's Corner to the Cloisters in Westminster Abbey. Nearly all of the notable literary giants of England either are buried there or have a memorial in their honor.

Why have most people not heard of Aphra Behn? Because Behn's plays were considered "bawdy"; she was chastised by the Victorians. In 1863, the Saturday Review wrote: "Mrs. Behn's works had a scandalous reputation...it is true that this did not prevent her from attaining honorable burial in Westminster Abbey, but it is a pity her books did not rot with her bones." Here is an example of the obscurity that befell women in the past. Aphra Behn was catalogued and caged into the common trap historically reserved for women writers. This translates into: women may have too little sense of modesty, and thereby be labeled as bawdy; or too little sense of emotion and sensitivity, and then labeled as having a masculine mind; or too little understanding of any subject in depth or substance, and therefore their writing is labeled as trivial; and lastly, too little concern for men and thereby labeled as embittered. If it is not women themselves that are deficient, then it is their writing or other contributions that are. Then if all those ploys fail, their ideas must have originated with a man.

To label the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft as the first major feminist treatise is to do Mary Astell serious injustice. For nearly 100 years before Wollstonecraft's work was published, Mary Astell in 1694 put forward a similar thesis in her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Astell was an erudite gifted writer who wrote satirical works commenting on the idea that men appeared superior to women, and too often women appeared silly to men. To Astell it was the male patriarchic system and its inbred socialization down through history that was responsible for the obvious outward differences between men and women. Mary emphatically stated that education was the signature factor accounting for gender differences. Many men had ready access to educational opportunities, whereas women had traditionally been denied education; but then men blamed women because they were not educated. Astell further elaborated on this thesis stating that men liked uneducated women and foolish women because it made men appear more masterful and superior.

The most unique aspect of Astell's philosophy on the genders was on marriage. Her *Some Reflections upon Marriage Occasioned by the Duke and duchess of Mazarin's Case* published in 1700 clearly shows that her arguments are the very ones people use today. She said that women are happy to submit to men because they had been maneuvered into this submissive position, and then were obliged to support it. Directly quoting Astell: "Women are for the most part wise enough to love their chains, and to discern how becomingly they fit for without autonomy or power what else can they do?" "Changes will come," said Mary "when women will no longer accept men's definitions of marriage, etc."

Dale Spender makes an interesting point in his book on women. Satire by male authors was acceptable, but if satire was done by female authors then they were nasty or bitchy. The 18th century famous author, Jonathan Swift, in his *Gulliver's Travels* suggested that babies be boiled to death to solve the famine problems in Ireland. When Mary Astell suggested that women should submit totally to the tyranny of men, even some important female scholars criticize her today for her conservative statements, not allowing for her mocking or satirizing ability. Knowledgeable people were aware of Swift's satire, but there is no tradition of women satirists. Why the discrepancies then between men and women? It cannot be explained because women have not written powerful and persuasive satire since the time of Aphra Behn and Mary Astell. Satirists have qualities that men have: intelligence, wit, and a sense of humor. Right – and there is the irony.

Mary Astell wanted to establish a college just for women, and even received 10,000 pounds from the future Queen Anne. This was a considerable sum of money then, but since one of the major Protestant Bishops of England was against it on religious grounds as it would appear to be too much like a Catholic Convent for nuns, it did not come to pass.

Lady Mary Wortley Montague (1689-1762) is another remarkable woman writer and health advocate, who has been relegated to the fringes. She educated herself from her father's huge library, including teaching herself Latin. Later when Mary was older, she eloped with Edward Wortley Montague; they ended up several years later in the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey) when he became an ambassador for the English. Intrigued by the Turkish customs and people, Mary started sending back to England a series of fascinating letters, many of which were published and are still in print today. The book, *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, was published in 1734, and shared many of Mary

Astell's ideas about the nature of society, and the fallacy of male superiority. We are not sure if she was the author of this work for it was unsigned as were most of Lady Mary's writings. They were published anonymously. Later on in history women writers will be forced to use a male pseudonym in order to get published.

Mary Montague is also considered one of the first women political journalists as she wrote articles in political periodicals of the time in support of Robert Walpole's government. He was England's first prime minister, and Mary was supportive of his movement into this political arena. Her major article was "The Nonsense of Common Sense," an attack on an opposition journal *Common Sense*. Definite feminist ideas were reflected in this and other political articles.

Perhaps Lady Mary Montague's most famous aspect of her life was her attempt to arouse the medical doctors of London to utilize the Turkish method of engrafting to inoculate against smallpox. Smallpox was a major pandemic during the early modern years, and millions died from it. Others were scared horribly on their faces and other parts of their bodies. Mary used it successfully on her own son while in the Ottoman Empire. Engrafting involved making slits in people's veins and putting pox scabs into them. This is an excerpt from her letter to a friend, Sarah Chiswell, in 1717: "I am patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England...and I should not fail to write to some of our doctors about it if I knew any one of them that I thought had virtue enough to destroy such a considerable branch of their revenues for the good of mankind, but that distemper is too beneficial to them not to expose all their resentment the hardy weight that should undertake to put an end to it." Undaunted by the London physicians' silence, Lady Mary wrote to Newgate Prison officials in London, requesting volunteers for both the Turkish system of engrafting and the Chinese style of sniffing the pox scabs up one's nostrils. Rewarding them with release from prison if they volunteered, seven men were given pox scabs in their veins, and one man tried the Chinese method. All survived, although the prisoner given the Chinese method got a more serious reaction.

During this same time Edward Jenner had heard about these trials, and thought that he would experiment himself using cow pox in the veins to protect against smallpox. He noticed that dairy maids, who regularly help milk the cows, did not get smallpox. Jenner, though, has received all the credit throughout history for coming up with the inoculation process that Mary Montague instigated.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), was a remarkable woman, who was famous from the time she wrote her views on the French Revolution entitled *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, 1790. This work and her later ones during the time of the French Revolution will be discussed in “Women in the French Revolution” chapter. Her earlier works, though, established her as a feminist writer in the same category as the previous mentioned women. She was the daughter of an English tradesman, who squandered his inheritance and abused his wife, Mary’s mother. Apparently, from an early age she showed signs of rebellion against acceptable dress and behavior patterns of respectable girls and young ladies. She fought against the ill treatment of servants, widows, and the poor. Then she left home to become a lady’s companion and a school mistress. While in London she became acquainted with a group of people involved in areas outside accepted practices, like political radicals and Unitarian ministers. At this point in her life she started to write about the ills of society, beginning with the plight of women. In her first essay, “Thoughts on Education of Daughters: she complained bitterly about the lack of acceptable occupations open to women. This was almost like an autobiography of her life. Then she did write her autobiography entitled Mary, where she advocated social reform and sexual liberation for women. In her next work, the novel Maria, she further elucidated points she made in Mary. “When novelists and moralists praise as virtue woman’s coldness of constitution and want of passion, I am disgusted.”

Jane Austen, 1775-1817, is without a doubt, the most famous woman writer from this time frame. Who has not watched a Hollywood production of one of her books Pride and Prejudice, or Sense and Sensibility, or better yet, a British production of one of these? Jane was born to older middling class parents, who had eight other children besides Jane. We have extant letters she and her sister Cassandra wrote to each other. Two of her brothers were Navy officers. Jane became a financial burden on her family as she did not marry. Many restrictions were placed on women in their class. She had to maintain a lady's status thus disallowing any employment outside her home. Part of her duties was to make medicines, wine, beer, and mead for the household. She played the piano. Writing was her reprieve, but she hid this knowledge from non-family members. Jane wrote on small pieces of 3" x 5" paper, and when she heard a creaking door, she put them away under a book. Success came to her during her lifetime, for five of her books were published. She called her novels, "her children." Many reviews were published during her lifetime praising her. Sir Walter Scott,

another famous writer, wrote: "Maybe she is the number one writer of her day...she has a genius to capture the true flavor of life." Indeed, she read her novels out loud to her family, before submitting them for publication. This is why there is so much humor and authenticity in her novels. Female behavior was stereotypical, and Jane definitely excelled at portraying society's expectations and requirements for women. Here is a partial list of these characteristics: looks are vastly important, women are not to show their feelings, women are to wait for men to make the first move, respectable women are to be accompanied at all times, proper introductions are necessary, women were viewed as excessive talkers, marriage or spinsterhood were the proper life cycle roles for women, inheritance was reserved for males, and women's time is not as valuable as the opposite sex. Women's only superiority was their moral behavior. Much more can be written about Jane Austen, but I will leave that for another day.