If…[women] be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God. …

I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man. In fact, the conduct of an accountable being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason; or on what foundation rests the throne of God?

It appears to me necessary to dwell on these obvious truths, because females have been insulated, as it were; and, while they have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked with artificial graces that enable them to exercise a short-lived tyranny. Love, in their bosoms, taking place of every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be fair, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character. Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.

STEP 1: Read the text out loud with a partner.

STEP 2: Discuss the following questions with a partner.

- How many times in this excerpt does Wollstonecraft appeal to reason / rationality? Why does she put such an emphasis on reason?
- “Salutary, sublime curb of principle” means (more or less) “beneficial, divine guidance of one’s moral code.” What, she claims, are women (unjustly) guided by now?
- Why do you think she feels the need to say “I love man as my fellow”? Why does man have the sceptre (symbol of power / kingship)?
- On what foundation does the throne of God rest?
- What is the difference between virtue and artificial grace? How can artificial graces make one a tyrant?
- Why is “rais[ing] emotion” an “ignoble desire”? What might be a “nobler passion”?
- How is liberty the mother of virtue? What then must happen for women to be truly virtuous?
- A flaw is a mistake. How can something be both beautiful and a mistake? Are women mistakes?
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