

BOOK REVIEW

Modern Virtue: Mary Wollstonecraft and a Tradition of Dissent.
By Emily Dumler-Winckler. New York: Oxford University
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Within mainstream political theory, there have been relatively few attempts to think in a sustained fashion about Mary Wollstonecraft's religious beliefs and writings (for exceptions, see Botting 2006, 2016; Taylor 2003; for a summary of scholarly approaches, see Dumler-Winckler 2019). For most, as author Emily Dumler-Winckler has written elsewhere, Wollstonecraft's religious views appear as "eighteenth-century wallpaper used to adorn the edifice of her feminist arguments" (Dumler-Winckler 2019, 297). Yet this, by Dumler-Winckler's lights, is incorrect: instead, we ought to be attuned to how Wollstonecraft's "theology and feminism mutually inform and reform one another" (Dumler-Winckler 2019, 307). With *Modern Virtue: Mary Wollstonecraft and a Tradition of Dissent*, Dumler-Winckler successfully—and thoroughly—demonstrates just that. *Modern Virtue* is essential reading for Wollstonecraft scholars, perhaps all the more so for those of us who do not share the author's background in theology.

For Dumler-Winckler, Wollstonecraft is a hinge figure in the history of political and religious thought, who is largely unrecognized as such—not on account of her feminism, but on account of her analysis of the virtues. Dumler-Winckler credits Wollstonecraft with pairing her interest in individual, personal virtue with a concern for the role of virtue in shaping positions on the socio-political issues of her time, not only gender issues but also economic inequality, the Atlantic slave trade, and political revolution, among others. While more secular thinkers have tended to ignore the religious dynamics at work in her text, Dumler-Winckler seeks to reclaim the theological Wollstonecraft for addressing her own as well as our more modern political concerns. In Dumler-Winckler's view, it is Wollstonecraft's contention that "an account of refined and virtuous tastes that is at once dissenting, feminist, and democratic should help to move the conversation about virtues in modernity beyond the impasse of virtues' defenders and detractors" (40).

Defenders and detractors (also called despisers) are the two main groups of "virtue thinkers" that Dumler-Winckler identifies in today's landscape who

would theoretically take issue with Wollstonecraft's inclusion in the great list of virtue thinkers. The defenders, of whom Alasdair MacIntyre is a prime example, believe that modernity's plurality of moral frameworks has led to the obscuring, if not obliteration, of the virtues. Some, such as Martha Nussbaum, have attempted to retrieve those virtues, albeit in a secular vein. The despisers, on the other hand, are, as the term suggests, highly critical of anything like a virtue tradition and either doubt or refuse its possible relevance to contemporary political and moral life. Dumler-Winckler attributes this view to "many feminist, womanist, postcolonial and decolonial philosophers, theologians, and ethicists" (8).

Wollstonecraft, in Dumler-Winckler's telling, offers something like a third way. Virtue, for Wollstonecraft, is acquired rather than inherited, and "she adopts, adapts, and in some cases radically redesigns the inherited wardrobe of the moral imagination" (6). Dumler-Winckler takes the notion of the "wardrobe of the moral imagination" from religious scripture but especially from its extended use as a metaphor in the work of Edmund Burke, Wollstonecraft's canniest intellectual rival. While Dumler-Winckler emphasizes the wardrobe dimension of the metaphor, what also shines through is the role of imagination in Wollstonecraft's thought, allowing her to reconceive of such varied topics as taste, sexed virtues, justice and rights, and political friendship.

If there is fault to be found, it is that the book's explosive ambitions necessarily fall short. For instance, Dumler-Winckler writes that her "hope is to chart a path that opens new ways of understanding relations amongst theology, ethics, politics, aesthetics, and critical theory" (13). This is a grand scope. (My marginal note reads, "is that all?!") More specifically, some connections that Dumler-Winckler draws are either unnecessary or unpersuasive, such as her comparison of Wollstonecraft on virtue and Judith Butler on performativity in the first half of Chapter 3, which feels forced and unrevealing, particularly about Butler. In comparison, her discussion of Saba Mahmood and Wollstonecraft on modesty allows us new ways of looking at both thinkers, surely the ideal outcome of such comparisons. Dumler-Winckler is impressively well-read and seemingly all of their readings have made their way into *Modern Virtue*—one paragraph alone volleys between Angela Davis, Shakespeare, and Wollstonecraft (213), inducing a bit of whiplash. The breadth also occasionally leaves the reader with the feeling of being kept from the book's central argument.

Yet for those who have not been especially attentive to Wollstonecraft's theological work, Dumler-Winckler's text constantly invokes surprising and intriguing comparisons—reading the courtroom scene in *Maria* as a Christian martyr act, for example (36). One of Dumler-Winckler's more intriguing propositions is that Wollstonecraft's infamous "revolution in female manners" is indebted to virtues, themselves cultivated by imitating the life of Christ (124). Perhaps most powerfully, Dumler-Winckler argues that "Wollstonecraft understands that true virtue is revolutionary because it enables one to justly oppose injustice, to not only dissent but to do so by embodying an alternative to those injustices" (119). That proposition alone should entice Wollstonecraft's many readers to take up Dumler-Winckler as a companion text.

References

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