

A Brave Woman There Was...

An encounter with Mary Wollstonecraft

This performance celebrates the pioneering work of the Eighteenth Century feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft. In preparing it all the members were struck again and again by the enduring insight and relevance of the author's ideas.

Abstract truths, the principles and axioms of sciences, and in short everything which tends to generalise our ideas, is not the proper province of women. As to works of genius, they are beyond their capacity Jean-Jacques Rousseau quoted by Mary Wollstonecraft **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)**

But what if men by philosophy or temperament are more adapted to exercise authority or to issue commands ? Tony Abbott, currently Leader of the Opposition, Australian House of Representatives (2012)

Prelude: *The Woman Warrior* In about 1710 broadside ballad sellers took a theme by Henry Purcell to tell the story of a young woman who pretended to be a man and enlisted as a soldier. But unlike the heroines of the many songs of the type, this woman did not do so in order to follow a lover.

Original Stories for Children: Mary Wollstonecraft wrote this work in 1787-8 as a commission for a work to take advantage of a growing market for children's books. As you will hear, the work was very different from the type of work loved by parents and children today. It shows sides of Mary different from those we know from her radical feminist works, and from her description of motherhood found in her *Lessons [for Fanny]*. You will also meet one of the great, though lesser known characters of English literature, Mrs Mason.

The dialogue is offset by children's songs and rhymes of the period. These are, in order of presentation: *Jacky; The Master; The cock crows in the morn; Elsie Marley; A little cock sparrow; Three children; Come when you're called.*

An Afternoon in Paris: Mary Wollstonecraft moved to France in 1792, inspired to do so by the creation there of a new revolutionary society. In this scene she meets and exchanges ideas with Olympe de Gouges, another outstanding feminist writer, who is perhaps less well known in England than she should be. The extracts from her play *Black Slavery*, and her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* are still frequently startling in their modernity. But as you will hear, great minds do not always think alike. Songs: *Ça ira; La Guillotine*

Mary's Birthday: This piece was originally created to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mary's birth and was performed close to the writer's tombstone in St Pancras Old Churchyard. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* during the last four months of 1791, at a speed which has amazed many commentators. So we imagined that at her birthday tea in 1791, Mary could have been formulating the ideas which came so quickly later in the year. There are some contrasting comments from a visiting male authority on the subject. Songs: *Sorry the Day; Man, Man, Man*

Nearly all the script of *A Brave Woman there was...* consists of the words actually written by the two women, but presented in dramatic form. With one exception, all the music dates from the period or before.

Reason calls for the respect of the Rights of Women and loudly demands justice for one half of the human race. Mary Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Acknowledgements and sources:

The Woman Warrior is discussed in detail in *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry* (Dianne Dagaw, University of Chicago Press 1996)

The brief title of Mary Wollstonecraft's work for children is *Original Stories from Real Life*. A scanned version of the original book can be obtained by going to the Google/books site. The songs and rhymes in this section were: *Jacky* (lyric trad, music Edward Lee); *The Master* (lyrics anon. tune is a variant of *Over the Hills and Far Away*); *The cock crows in the morn* (trad children's rhyme); *Elsie Marley* (variant of Nancy Dawson, trad.; the theme was used in *The Beggar's Opera*); *A little cock sparrow* (trad children's rhyme); *Three children* (lyric trad, music Edward Lee); *Come when you're called* (trad children's rhyme. The descriptive passage from *Original Stories* was set to music by Edward Lee.

Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration* can be downloaded in English at

<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/decwom2.html> and in French at

<http://www.philo5.com/Mes%20lectures/GougesOlympeDe-DeclarationDroitsFemme.htm>

Her play can be downloaded in English at http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/other_works.htm

and in French at http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/literary_works/esclavage.pdf

One of the many variants of the lyrics of : *Ça ira* can be found at

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ah!_ça_ira. The song can be heard in an original version at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMI5gDI34NE&feature=related> There is also a well-known version by Edith Piaf at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rauZMrXqRu0&feature=related>

The song *La guillotine* can be heard at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZW0kAQ_F38.

Interestingly, this anonymous song (originally a minuet theme) appeared first in the Royalist newspaper *Les Actes des Apôtres* in 1789 to satirise the new invention of Doctor Guillotin. At that point they did not foresee the use to which it would soon be put.

The text of *Mary's Birthday* is taken entirely from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The text is readily available either for download from Google/books or in printed form in Penguin Classics or Oxford World Classics. The lyrics and music of *Sorry the Day* are unknown but are believed to have originated in Ireland. The lyrics of *Man, Man, Man* were written by Peter Motteaux to a tune by Henry Purcell, for use in the play *The United Lovers* by Thomas Scott in his play *The Mock Marriage* (1696)

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SOUNDS LIKE

Performers: *Jan North, singer/reader Frances Lee reader/singer Edward Lee guitar/reader*

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