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Women in Britain Since 1750

Professor Kale

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Takeaway 1

Vocabulary:

1. Wollstonecraft:
 - a. Mahometanism: Archaic word for Islam
 - b. Sanford and Merton: history book commonly used in the late 18th and 19th centuries
2. Montgomery:
 - a. Inter alia: Latin meaning “among other things”
 - b. Peculator: embezzler
3. Phillips:
 - a. Coverture: the concept of a married woman’s rights and identity being the same as her husband’s

Takeaway:

Readings for this week illustrated the amount of women’s rights that were both upheld by the law and not covered by it. Beginning with Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, the idea of a woman as a human being and not a separate species (or extension of her husband) was argued for. This approach to women’s rights especially as they related to coverture was explored in both the Montgomery and Phillips readings, as to how the law was changed and challenged regarding marriage and discrimination or cruelty towards women. In many cases, single women had more rights and certainly more freedom than their married counterparts.

I found it interesting and discouraging how little it seemed the law had to do with actually inspiring social change. For example, one of the articles presented in the Montgomery reading told of a wife who was abused by her husband but came to an agreement to be “knock[ed] about” only on Saturdays (Montgomery 28). This was not grounds for divorce, as the law claimed it

could be granted if the divorcing party “cannot reasonably be expected to live with the respondent” (Montgomery 28). This agreement was come to as a result of conferencing with the husband, not the wife. Explaining these views on the laws and their difference to actual cases being carried out, Phillips says “Atiyah points out, however, while a number of eighteenth-century lawyers were 'willing to modify the law to bring it up to date with social and economic changes from time to time . . . they certainly never contemplated the idea of using the law so as to create social and economic change’” (Phillips 30). The way that the laws existed as more of a reaction to societal beliefs changing than being the catalyst for it was very present in these readings, and how they ultimately resulted in women not being able to take advantage of laws that were supposed to help them.