

**Attending to Early Modern Women 2018**  
**Action and Agency**  
June 14-17, 2018  
Milwaukee, WI

Workshop 3.7: Early Modern Women and Discourses of Promising

Workshop Session I: Choice I

Thursday, June 14, 1:30-3:00 p.m.

Brief Summary: Addressing the theme of “Choice,” this workshop will consider how women contributed to emerging discourses of promising in theology, philosophy, and politics. Moving across time and space from seventeenth-century England to eighteenth-century France, we consider women’s meditations on the nature and value of promises as well as related questions concerning agency, intention, interpretation, and obligation.

Workshop Organizers:

Melissa Ganz, Assistant Professor of English, Marquette University; 18<sup>th</sup>-century British literature; law and literature; ethics

Email: [melissa.ganz@marquette.edu](mailto:melissa.ganz@marquette.edu)

Jennifer Vanderheyden, Assistant Professor of French, Marquette University; 18<sup>th</sup>-century French literature

Email: [jennifer.vanderheyden@marquette.edu](mailto:jennifer.vanderheyden@marquette.edu)

Amelia Zurcher, Associate Professor of English and Director, University Honors Program, Marquette University; 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century British literature

Email: [amelia.zurcher@marquette.edu](mailto:amelia.zurcher@marquette.edu)

Contact Person:

Melissa Ganz ([melissa.ganz@marquette.edu](mailto:melissa.ganz@marquette.edu); 414-288-3480)

Office: Department of English, Marquette Hall 115, P.O. Box 1881,  
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI 53201-1881

Workshop Description:

In early modern Europe, promises assumed a central role in political, economic, and religious life, as feudal societies steeped in rank and birth gave way to more democratic societies grounded in individual choice and consent, and obligations came to be imagined in contractual terms. This workshop considers how women, in particular, engaged with and contributed to the discourse of promising. The workshop will be interdisciplinary, addressing theology, politics, and philosophy as well as life-writing, fiction, and drama; it will also cross periods and cultures, moving from seventeenth-century England to eighteenth-century France. We will consider women’s meditations on the nature and value of promises, especially as they concern religious and ethical life. At the same time, we will examine questions concerning agency, intention,

interpretation, and obligation. The emphasis will be on discussion and we will invite participants to contribute other examples of promising in the early modern period.

We will begin the workshop with a consideration of promises in seventeenth-century women's spiritual and life-writing. God's "promises," moments in Scripture that seem to promise salvation for all Christians, present a problem in Reformed and non-conforming Protestant theology in seventeenth-century England because they seem to contradict the Calvinist tenet that only some will find salvation. In practical piety, unsurprisingly, they become a focal point for Reformed Christians, especially women, struggling to know whether they are saved. Women's spiritual life narratives recount their practice of compiling written lists of promises that seem particularly applicable to their lives and meditating over them in an effort to stimulate an affective apprehension of their own faith which will "prove" the promise. If women are able to experience the promises as true, at least proleptically, they can claim faith; if not, they become "hypocrites" according to Reformed theology, mouthing Scriptural words that they cannot be sure they believe. This effort to reconcile Scripture's general address with the individual assurance that each subject needs is significant not only theologically but also in the early modern history of reading, which records a complex history of ambivalence and confusion about the relation of the written word to the subject who reads it. To what extent, we will ask, does the reader become implicated in the words and ideas that she reads? What does it mean for a reader to speak written words sincerely, and where does the "truth" of the read word inhere? Women readers' pious practice with written promises in the seventeenth century seems far from developing discourses about law, ethics, and economics, but it may provide a significant pre- and co-history for those discourses.

In the eighteenth-century, philosophers and writers take up the political and ethical valences of promises. During the French Revolution, French women activists reacted fiercely to documents such as the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (*Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Male Citizen*), encouraging women to resist the patriarchal principles underlying such documents. We consider how the radical French writer Olympe de Gouges engaged with these discourses in her political and imaginative writing. In particular, we consider her dialogue with the natural rights and social contract theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot in her 1793 *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (*Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*) and her play *Le Couvent pu les vœux forcés* (*The Convent or Forced Vows*) (1790-92). The play examines the problems experienced by a young woman who is forced to take religious vows, addressing issues that Diderot (who was considered a feminist in many respects) raises in his novel *La Religieuse* (*The Nun*, 1796). We also consider de Gouges's dialogue with Rousseau, who insisted that women's and children's voices were crucial to *la volonté générale* (the general will). De Gouges shows how greed breaks the contract between God and humans, while calling attention to ethical and political questions raised by coerced vows.

Jane Austen also engages with the discourse of promising. Promises run through all of her novels but they figure especially prominently in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), which famously begins with a capacious pledge. John Dashwood promises his dying father that he will "do every thing in his power to make [his step-mother and her daughters] comfortable." The elder Dashwood "was rendered easy by such an assurance," the narrator explains, "and Mr. John

Dashwood had then leisure to consider how much there might prudently be in his power to do for them.” Not surprisingly, his wife, the vain and vapid Fanny, promptly talks him out of keeping his word. John’s breach foreshadows other instances of infidelity in the text. Willoughby soon breaks his engagement to dine with the Dashwoods and, shortly thereafter, reneges on what the women believe to be an implied promise to marry Marianne. So, too, does Lucy Steele go back on her pledge to wed Edward Ferrars. We will consider the broken pledges in the novel in the context of Enlightenment debates about the nature and value of consensual obligations, probing Austen’s dialogue with thinkers including David Hume, Adam Smith, William Paley, and William Godwin. In particular, we will consider how Austen responds to Hume’s faith in promises as the basis of social ties and Godwin’s claim that changed circumstances justify the renegeing of one’s vows. We will also examine her treatment of implied promises and the role of promisors’ intentions and promisees’ expectations in the interpretation of pledges. Through these three case studies, we will explore women’s contributions to theological, political, and ethical debates that preoccupied thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that remain of concern to this day.

#### List of Readings:

##### First Set:

1. Hannah Allen, *A Narrative of God’s Gracious Dealings with that Choice Christian Mrs. Hannah Allen* (London, 1683). Title page and pp. 8-9, 74-9 (pp. 76-7 are missing from all known copies).
2. Richard Baxter, *A Treatise of Death; the Last Enemy to be Destroyed* (London: 1660). Title page and pp. 225, 236-43.  
 (“Part of it was preached at the Funerals of Elizabeth the Late Wife of Mr. Joseph Baker...with some few passages of the life of the said Mrs. Baker, observ’d”).

##### Second Set:

1. Olympe de Gouges, *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (Sept. 1791).
2. Olympe de Gouges, “Form for a Social Contract Between Man and Woman” (1791).
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from *The Social Contract* (1762), Books II and III.
4. Denis Diderot, from *La Religieuse (The Nun)* (1796).

##### Third Set:

1. Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Vol. I, Chapters I-II.
2. William Paley, from *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), Chapter V: “Promises.”
3. William Godwin, from *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), Chapter III: “Of Promises.”

# **First Set of Readings**

A  
NARRATIVE  
OF

God's Gracious Dealings

With that Choice Christian

Mrs. *HANNAH ALLEN,*

(Afterwards Married to Mr. *Hatt,*)

RECITING

The great Advantages the Devil made of her deep Melancholy, and the Triumphant Victories, Rich and Sovereign Graces, God gave her over all his Stratagems and Devices.

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*O Lord! I am oppressed, undertake for me. Esay  
XXX. 14.*

*We are not ignorant of his Devices. 2 Cor. ii. 11.*

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*London, Printed by John Wallis. 1683.*

begin to darken my Soul, but the Devil set on with his former Temptations, which at first were with less violence and frequent intermissions, but yet with great struglings and fightings within me; as I would express it (to my Aunt) I am just as if two were fighting within me, but I trust, the Devil will never be able to overcome me; then I would repeat several promises suitable to my condition, and read over my former experiences that I had writ down, as is hereafter expressed, and obligations that I had laid upon my self, in the presence of God, and would say, Aunt, I hope I write not these things in Hypocrisie, I never intended any Eye should see them; but

but the Devil suggesteth dreadful things to me against God, and that I am an Hypocrite. At the first I began to complain that I found not that comfort and refreshment in Prayer as I was wont to do, and that God withdrew his comforting and quickening Presence from me.

When I had seen the Bible, I would say, oh that blessed Book that I so delighted in once! the Devil was strongly assaulting my Faith, and I seemed ready to be overcome, I answered the Tempter within my self in the bitterness of my Spirit; *Well, if I perish, God must deny himself.*

See the difference betwixt the voice of Faith, and the Lan-  
D 3
guage

These Promises which are here set down were great supports and refreshments to me in the time of my various Temptations and Afflictions all along, till I fell into deep despair, for from my Child-hood, God Exercised me with manifold Trials.

Isaiah, xliii. 1, 2.

**B**UT now thus saith the Lord that Created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, fear not for I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy Name, thou art mine. Vers. 2. When thou passest through the Waters, I will be with thee, and through the Rivers

James v. 11.

*Behold we count them happy  
which Endure ; ye have heard of  
the Patience of Job, and have seen  
the End of the Lord ; that the Lord  
is very pitiful and of tender mercy.*

1 John, iv. 4.

*Ye are of God, little Children ;  
and have overcome them, because  
greater is he that is in you, than  
he that is in the World.*

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THE END.

A Treatise of  
**DEATH;**  
The last ENEMY to  
be Destroyed.

Shewing wherein its Enmity con-  
sisteth, and how it is destroyed.

Part of it was preached at the Funerals  
of Elizabeth the late Wife of Mr. Jo-  
seph Baker, Pastor of the Church at  
Saint Andrews in Worcester.

By Rich. Baxter,

With some few passages of the life of the  
said Mrs. Baker, observed.

Psal. 15. 4. *In whose eyes a vile person is  
contemned: but he honoureth them that  
fear the Lord.* ]

1 Cor. 15: 55, 56, 57. *O death, where  
is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victo-  
ry? The sting of Death is sin; and the  
strength of sin is the Law. But thanks be  
to God which giveth us the victory,  
through our Lord Jesus Christ.* ]

London Printed by R. W. for New Simmons  
Book-seller in Kederminster, and are  
to be sold by him there, and by Tho.  
Johnson at the Golden Key in Pauls  
Church-yard. 1660. 211<sup>l</sup>. bound.

44-2 a 37



Some imitable passages of the life of *Elizabeth*, late Wife of Mr. *Joseph Baker*.



Though I spoke so little as was next to nothing, of our dear deceased friend, it was not because I wanted matter, or thought it unmeet: But I use it but seldom, lest I raise expectations of the like, where I cannot consciently

L 5 natly

to her self, it struck exceeding deep to my heart, how much I have sinned all my dayes, (since I undertook the person of a Minister of Christ) by the slightness and unprofitableness of my discourse; and how exceeding carefull Ministers should be of their words, and how deliberately, wisely and seriously they should speak about the things of God, and how diligently they should take all fit opportunities to that end, when we know not how silent hearers are affected with what we say: For ought we know there may be some that will write down what we say in their Books, or hearts, or both: And God and conscience write down all.

8. In her course of Reading she was still laying in for use and practice. Her course was, when she read the Scriptures, to gather out passages, and sort and refer them to their several uses, as some  
that

that were fit subjects for her Meditations: Some for encouragement to prayer, and other duties: Promises suited to various conditions and wants: as her papers shew.

And for other Books, she would meddle with none but the sound and practicall, and had no itch after the empty Books, which make ostentation of Novelty, and which Opinionists are now so taken with; nor did she like writing or preaching in envy and strife. And of good Books, she chose to read but few, and those very often over, that all might be well digested. Which is a course (for private Christians) that tends to avoid luxuriancy, and make them sincere, and solid, and established.

9 She had the great blessing of a tender conscience. She did not slightly pass over small sins without penitent observation. Her Diary records her trouble, when causelessly she  
she

she had neglected any Ordinance; or was hindered by rain or small occasions: or if she had overslept her self, and lost a morning-exercise in London, or came too late, or if she were distracted in secret duty: And if she mist of a Fast through misinformation & disappointments, and found not her heart duly sensible of the loss, that also she recorded. So did she her stirrings of anger, and her very angry looks; resolving to take more heed against them. Though all ought not to spend so much time in writing down their failings, yet all should watch, and renew repentance.

10. She was very solicitous for the souls of her friends: As for instance, her Brothers in Law; over whom she exercised a motherly care, instructing them, and watching over them, and telling them of miscarriages, and counselling them: Causing them to keep a constant  
course

course of reading the holy Scriptures, and meditating on it (as far as she could:) Causing them to learn many Chapters without Back: and to read other good Books in season: Earnestly praying for them in particular: Much desiring one or both should be Ministers: And when her Father-in-law appointed the eldest to go to France, she was much troubled for fear of his miscarriage among strangers, especially those of the Romish Way.

11. She was a serious Mourner for the sins of the time and place she lived in.

12. In sum, for strict, close, watchfull, holy walking with God, even her Husband professeth that she was a pattern to him. As I hinted before, she kept a daily account in writing, (which is now to be seen from the beginning of the year 1654.) especially of these particulars.

1. Of

1. Of the frame of her heart in every dayes duty, in Meditation, Prayer, Hearing, Reading, &c. whether lively, or dull, &c.

2. Of those sins which she had especially to repent of, and watch against.

3. Of her Resolutions and Promises, and how she kept them.

4. Of all special Providences to her self, Husband, Brothers, and others, and the improvement of them. As at the death of her Son, who died with great sighs and groans, she recorded her sense of the special necessity of holy armour, and great preparation for that encounter when her turn should come to be so removed to the everlasting habitation.

5. Of her returns of prayer, what answers, and grant of them she found.

6. Of the state of her soul upon examination: how she found it, and what

What was the issue of each examination; and in this it seems she was very exact and punctual. In which though many times fears and doubtings did arise, yet hath she frequent records of the discovery of evidences, and comfortable assurance of sincerity. Sometime when she hath heard Sermons in London, that helped her in her search: and sometime when she had been reading writings that tended that way, she recordeth what evidences she found, and in what degree the discovery was: If imperfect, resolving to take it up and follow the search further: And if she had much joy, she received it with jealousy and expectation of some humbling consequent. When any grace languished, she presently turned to some apt remedy. As for instance, it is one of her Notes, Novemb. 1658. [I found thoughts of Eternity slight and strange, and ordinary employments very desirable: at which

which I read Mr. B's Crucifixion, and was awakened to Mortification and Humiliation, &c.]

The last time that she had opportunity for this work, was two or three dayes before her delivery in Child-bearing; where she finally recorded the apprehensions she had both of her bodily and spiritual State, in these words, [ Drawing near the time of my delivery, I am fallen into such weakness, that my life is in great hazard. I find some fears of death, but not very great, hoping (through grace) I die in the Lord. ] I only mention these hints, to shew the Method she used in her daily Accounts. To those Christians that have full leisure, this course is good: But I urge it not all, upon those that have so great duties to take up that time, that they cannot spare so much to record their ordinary passages; Such must remember what others

record,

record, and daily renew repentance for their daily failings, and record only the extraordinary, observable, and more remarkable and memorable passages of their lives, lest they lose time from works of greater moment. But this excellent work of Watchfulness must be performed by all.

And I think it was a considerable expression of her true wisdom, and care of her immortal soul, that when any extraordinary necessity required it, and she found such doubts as of her self she was not able to deal with, she would go to some able experienced Minister, to open her case, and seek assistance (as she did more then once to my dear and ancient friend, Mr. Cross, who in a full age is since gone after her to Christ.) And therefore chose a Minister in Marriage, that he might be a ready assistant in such

M. 2. cases

## **Second Set of Readings**

## **Olympe de Gouges, *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (September 1791)**

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/293/>

Marie Gouze (1748–93) was a self-educated butcher's daughter from the south of France who, under the name Olympe de Gouges, wrote pamphlets and plays on a variety of issues, including slavery, which she attacked as being founded on greed and blind prejudice. In this pamphlet she provides a declaration of the rights of women to parallel the one for men, thus criticizing the deputies for having forgotten women. She addressed the pamphlet to the Queen, Marie Antoinette, though she also warned the Queen that she must work for the Revolution or risk destroying the monarchy altogether. In her postscript she denounced the customary treatment of women as objects easily abandoned. She appended to the declaration a sample form for a marriage contract that called for communal sharing of property. De Gouges went to the guillotine in 1793, condemned as a counterrevolutionary and denounced as an "unnatural" woman.

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To be decreed by the National Assembly in its last sessions or by the next legislature.

Preamble.

Mothers, daughters, sisters, female representatives of the nation ask to be constituted as a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman: so that by being constantly present to all the members of the social body this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; so that by being liable at every moment to comparison with the aim of any and all political institutions the acts of women's and men's powers may be the more fully respected; and so that by being founded henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizenesses may always tend toward maintaining the constitution, good morals, and the general welfare.

In consequence, the sex that is superior in beauty as in courage, needed in maternal sufferings, recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of woman and the citizeness.

1. Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.
2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and especially resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation, which is but the reuniting of woman and man. No body and no individual may exercise authority which does not emanate expressly from the nation.

4. Liberty and justice consist in restoring all that belongs to another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of woman has no other limits than those that the perpetual tyranny of man opposes to them; these limits must be reformed according to the laws of nature and reason.

5. The laws of nature and reason prohibit all actions which are injurious to society. No hindrance should be put in the way of anything not prohibited by these wise and divine laws, nor may anyone be forced to do what they do not require.

6. The law should be the expression of the general will. All citizenesses and citizens should take part, in person or by their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for everyone. All citizenesses and citizens, being equal in its eyes, should be equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments, according to their ability, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.

7. No woman is exempted; she is indicted, arrested, and detained in the cases determined by the law. Women like men obey this rigorous law.

8. Only strictly and obviously necessary punishments should be established by the law, and no one may be punished except by virtue of a law established and promulgated before the time of the offense, and legally applied to women.

9. Any woman being declared guilty, all rigor is exercised by the law.

10. No one should be disturbed for his fundamental opinions; woman has the right to mount the scaffold, so she should have the right equally to mount the rostrum, provided that these manifestations do not trouble public order as established by law.

11. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of woman, since this liberty assures the recognition of children by their fathers. Every citizeness may therefore say freely, I am the mother of your child; a barbarous prejudice [against unmarried women having children] should not force her to hide the truth, so long as responsibility is accepted for any abuse of this liberty in cases determined by the law [women are not allowed to lie about the paternity of their children].

12. The safeguard of the rights of woman and the citizeness requires public powers. These powers are instituted for the advantage of all and not for the private benefit of those to whom they are entrusted.

13. For maintenance of public authority and for expenses of administration, taxation of women and men is equal; she takes part in all forced labor service, in all painful tasks; she must therefore have the same proportion in the distribution of places, employments, offices, dignities, and in industry.

14. The citizenesses and citizens have the right, by themselves or through their representatives, to have demonstrated to them the necessity of public taxes. The citizenesses can only agree to them upon admission of an equal division, not only in wealth, but also in the public

administration, and to determine the means of apportionment, assessment, and collection, and the duration of the taxes.

15. The mass of women, joining with men in paying taxes, have the right to hold accountable every public agent of the administration.

16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution. The constitution is null and void if the majority of individuals composing the nation has not cooperated in its drafting.

17. Property belongs to both sexes whether united or separated; it is for each of them an inviolable and sacred right, and no one may be deprived of it as a true patrimony of nature, except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and then on condition of a just compensation in advance.

### Postscript

Women, wake up; the tocsin of reason sounds throughout the universe; recognize your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition, and lies. The torch of truth has dispersed all the clouds of folly and usurpation. Enslaved man has multiplied his force and needs yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust toward his companion. Oh women! Women, when will you cease to be blind? What advantages have you gathered in the Revolution? A scorn more marked, a disdain more conspicuous. During the centuries of corruption you only reigned over the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed; what is left to you then? Firm belief in the injustices of men. The reclaiming of your patrimony founded on the wise decrees of nature; why should you fear such a beautiful enterprise? . . . Whatever the barriers set up against you, it is in your power to overcome them; you only have to want it. Let us pass now to the appalling account of what you have been in society; and since national education is an issue at this moment, let us see if our wise legislators will think sanely about the education of women.

Women have done more harm than good. Constraint and dissimulation have been their lot. What force has taken from them, ruse returned to them; they have had recourse to all the resources of their charms, and the most irreproachable man has not resisted them. Poison, the sword, women controlled everything; they ordered up crimes as much as virtues. For centuries, the French government, especially, depended on the nocturnal administration of women; officials kept no secrets from their indiscretion; ambassadorial posts, military commands, the ministry, the presidency [of a court], the papacy, the college of cardinals, in short everything that characterizes the folly of men, profane and sacred, has been submitted to the cupidity and ambition of this sex formerly considered despicable and respected, and since the revolution, respectable and despised.

. . .

Under the former regime, everyone was vicious, everyone guilty. . . . A woman only had to be beautiful and amiable; when she possessed these two advantages, she saw a hundred fortunes at her feet. . . . The most indecent woman could make herself respectable with gold; the commerce in women [prostitution] was a kind of industry amongst the highest classes, which henceforth

will enjoy no more credit. If it still did, the Revolution would be lost, and in the new situation we would still be corrupted. Can reason hide the fact that every other road to fortune is closed to a woman bought by a man, bought like a slave from the coasts of Africa? The difference between them is great; this is known. The slave [that is, the woman] commands her master, but if the master gives her her freedom without compensation and at an age when the slave has lost all her charms, what does this unfortunate woman become? The plaything of disdain; even the doors of charity are closed to her; she is poor and old, they say; why did she not know how to make her fortune?

Other examples even more touching can be provided to reason. A young woman without experience, seduced by the man she loves, abandons her parents to follow him; the ingrate leaves her after a few years and the older she will have grown with him, the more his inconstancy will be inhuman. If she has children, he will still abandon her. If he is rich, he will believe himself excused from sharing his fortune with his noble victims. If some engagement ties him to his duties, he will violate it while counting on support from the law. If he is married, every other obligation loses its force. What laws then remain to be passed that would eradicate vice down to its roots? That of equally dividing [family] fortunes between men and women and of public administration of their goods. It is easy to imagine that a woman born of a rich family would gain much from the equal division of property [between children]. But what about the woman born in a poor family with merit and virtues; what is her lot? Poverty and opprobrium. If she does not excel in music or painting, she cannot be admitted to any public function, even if she is fully qualified. . . .

Marriage is the tomb of confidence and love. A married woman can give bastards to her husband with impunity, and even the family fortune which does not belong to them. An unmarried woman has only a feeble right: ancient and inhuman laws refuse her the right to the name and goods of her children's father; no new laws have been made in this matter. If giving my sex an honorable and just consistency is considered to be at this time paradoxical on my part and an attempt at the impossible, I leave to future men the glory of dealing with this matter; but while waiting, we can prepare the way with national education, with the restoration of morals and with conjugal agreements.

## Form for a Social Contract Between Man and Woman (Olympe de Gouges)

We, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, moved by our own will, unite ourselves for the duration of our lives, and for the duration of our mutual inclinations, under the following conditions: We intend and wish to make our wealth communal, meanwhile reserving to ourselves the right to divide it in favor of our children and of those toward whom we might have a particular inclination, mutually recognizing that our property belongs directly to our children, from whatever bed they come, and that all of them without distinction have the right to bear the name of the fathers and mothers who have acknowledged them, and we are charged to subscribe to the law which punishes the renunciation of one's own blood. We likewise obligate ourselves, in case of separation, to divide our wealth and to set aside in advance the portion the law indicates for our children, and in the event of a perfect union, the one who dies will divest himself of half his property in his children's favor, and if one dies childless, the survivor will inherit by right, unless the dying person has disposed of half the common property in favor of one whom he judged deserving.

That is approximately the formula for the marriage act I propose for execution. Upon reading this strange document, I see rising up against me the hypocrites, the pruders, the clergy, and the whole infernal sequence. But how it [my proposal] offers to the wise the moral means of achieving the perfection of a happy government! . . .

Moreover, I would like a law which would assist widows and young girls deceived by the false promises of a man to whom they were attached; I would like, I say, this law to force an inconstant man to hold to his obligations or at least [to pay] an indemnity equal to his wealth. Again, I would like this law to be rigorous against women, at least those who have the effrontery to have recourse to a law which they themselves had violated by their misconduct, if proof of that were given. At the same time, as I showed in *Le Bonheur primitif de l'homme*, in 1788, that prostitutes should be placed in designated quarters. It is not prostitutes who contribute the most to the depravity of morals, it is the women of society. In regenerating the latter, the former are changed. This link of fraternal union will first bring disorder, but in consequence it will produce at the end a perfect harmony.

I offer a foolproof way to elevate the soul of women; it is to join them to all the activities of man; if man persists in finding this way impractical, let him share his fortune with woman, not at his caprice, but by the wisdom of laws. Prejudice falls, morals are purified, and nature regains all her rights. Add to this the marriage of priests and the strengthening of the king on his throne, and the French government cannot fail.

From "Olympe de Gouges, 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen,'" in Darline Gay Levy, H. Applewhite, and M. Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1785-1795* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 9296.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1791degouge1.asp>

# Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract (1762)

## The General Will

[Book 2, Chapter 2: That Sovereignty is Indivisible

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SOVEREIGNTY, for the same reason as makes it inalienable, is indivisible; for will either is, or is not, general;<sup>6</sup> it is the will either of the body of the people, or only of a part of it. In the first case, the will, when declared, is an act of Sovereignty and constitutes law: in the second, it is merely a particular will, or act of magistracy — at the most a decree. [...]

[Chapter 3: Whether the General Will is Fallible

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IT follows from what has gone before that the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Our will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad.

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another,<sup>7</sup> and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.

If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good. But when factions arise, and partial associations are formed at the expense of the great association, the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, while it remains particular in relation to the State: it may then be said that there are no longer as many votes as there are men, but only as many as there are associations. The differences become less numerous and give a less general result. Lastly, when one of these associations is so great as to prevail over all the rest, the result is no longer a sum of small differences, but a single difference; in this case there is no longer a general will, and the opinion which prevails is purely particular.

It is therefore essential, if the general will is to be able to express itself, that there should be no partial society within the State, and that each citizen should think only his own thoughts

. [...]

[Book 3, Chapter 4: Democracy]

HE who makes the law knows better than any one else how it should be executed and interpreted. It seems then impossible to have a better constitution than of that in which the executive and legislative powers are united; but this very fact renders the government in certain respects inadequate, because things which should be distinguished are confounded, and the prince and the Sovereign, being the same person, form, so to speak, no more than a government without government.

It is not good for him who makes the laws to execute them, or for the body of the people to turn its attention away from a general standpoint and devote it to particular objects. Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests in public affairs, and the abuse of the laws by the government is a less evil than the corruption of the legislator, which is the inevitable sequel to a particular standpoint. In such a case, the State being altered in substance, all reformation becomes impossible, A people that would never misuse governmental powers would never misuse independence; a people that would always govern well would not need to be governed.

If we take the term in the strict sense, there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be. It is against the natural order for the many to govern and the few to be governed. It is unimaginable that the people should remain continually assembled to devote their time to public affairs, and it is clear that they cannot set up commissions for that purpose without the form of administration being changed. In fact, I can confidently lay down as a principle that, when the functions of government are shared by several tribunals, the less numerous sooner or later acquire the greatest authority, if only because they are in a position to expedite affairs, and power thus naturally comes into their hands.

Besides, how many conditions that are difficult to unite does such a government presuppose! First, a very small State, where the people can readily be got together and where each citizen can with ease know all the rest; secondly, great simplicity of manners, to prevent business from multiplying and raising thorny problems; next, a large measure of equality in rank and fortune, without which equality of rights and authority cannot long subsist; lastly, little or no luxury — for luxury either comes of riches or makes them necessary; it corrupts at once rich and poor, the rich by possession and the poor by covetousness; it sells the country to softness and vanity, and takes away from the State all its citizens, to make them slaves one to another, and one and all to public opinion.

[...]

Were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government is not for men

Denis Diderot. *La Religieuse (The Nun)* 1796

Here is the effect of being confined. Man is born a social being. Separate him, isolate him, his ideas will fall apart, his character will tarnish, a thousand ridiculous affections will rise in his heart, extravagant thoughts will germinate in his mind like brambles on an uncultivated land. Place man in a forest, he will become savage; in a cloister, where the concept of necessity joins that of servitude, it's even worse; one can leave the forest, one never leaves the cloister; one remains its slave. Perhaps more strength of soul is required to brave solitude than misery; misery degrades, the cloister depraves. Isn't it better to live in abjection than in madness? That's what I would dare not decide, but we must avoid both. (my translation). p. 196, Folio Classique

Jennifer Vanderheyden

Marquette University

Jennifer.vanderheyden@marquette.edu

## **Third Set of Readings**

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Sense and Sensibility, by Jane Austen  
Title: Sense and Sensibility  
Author: Jane Austen  
Release Date: May 25, 2008 [EBook #161]  
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## *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)

by Jane Austen

### CHAPTER 1

The family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex. Their estate was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of their property, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance. The late owner of this estate was a single man, who lived to a very advanced age, and who for many years of his life, had a constant companion and housekeeper in his sister. But her death, which happened ten years before his own, produced a great alteration in his home; for to supply her loss, he invited and received into his house the family of his nephew Mr. Henry Dashwood, the legal inheritor of the Norland estate, and the person to whom he intended to bequeath it. In the society of his nephew and niece, and their children, the old Gentleman's days were comfortably spent. His attachment to them all increased. The constant attention of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded not merely from interest, but from goodness of heart, gave him every degree of solid comfort which his age could receive; and the cheerfulness of the children added a relish to his existence.

By a former marriage, Mr. Henry Dashwood had one son: by his present lady, three daughters. The son, a steady respectable young man, was amply provided for by the fortune of his mother, which had been large, and half of which devolved on him on his coming of age. By his own marriage, likewise, which happened soon afterwards, he added to his wealth. To him therefore the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters; for their fortune, independent of what might arise to them from their father's inheriting that property, could be but small. Their mother had nothing, and their father only seven thousand pounds in his own disposal; for the remaining moiety of his first wife's fortune was also secured to her child, and he had only a life-interest in it.

The old gentleman died: his will was read, and like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure. He was neither so unjust, nor so ungrateful, as to leave his estate from his nephew;—but he left it to him on such terms as destroyed half the value of the bequest. Mr. Dashwood had wished for it more for the sake of his wife and daughters than for himself or his son;—but to his son, and his son's son, a child of four years old, it was secured, in such a way, as to leave to himself no power of providing for those who were most dear to him, and who most needed a provision by any charge on the estate, or by any sale of its valuable woods. The whole was tied up for the benefit of this child, who, in occasional visits with his father and mother at Norland, had so far gained on the affections of his uncle, by such attractions as are by

no means unusual in children of two or three years old; an imperfect articulation, an earnest desire of having his own way, many cunning tricks, and a great deal of noise, as to outweigh all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters. He meant not to be unkind, however, and, as a mark of his affection for the three girls, he left them a thousand pounds a-piece.

Mr. Dashwood's disappointment was, at first, severe; but his temper was cheerful and sanguine; and he might reasonably hope to live many years, and by living economically, lay by a considerable sum from the produce of an estate already large, and capable of almost immediate improvement. But the fortune, which had been so tardy in coming, was his only one twelvemonth. He survived his uncle no longer; and ten thousand pounds, including the late legacies, was all that remained for his widow and daughters.

His son was sent for as soon as his danger was known, and to him Mr. Dashwood recommended, with all the strength and urgency which illness could command, the interest of his mother-in-law and sisters.

Mr. John Dashwood had not the strong feelings of the rest of the family; but he was affected by a recommendation of such a nature at such a time, and he promised to do every thing in his power to make them comfortable. His father was rendered easy by such an assurance, and Mr. John Dashwood had then leisure to consider how much there might prudently be in his power to do for them.

He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted and rather selfish is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties. Had he married a more amiable woman, he might have been made still more respectable than he was:—he might even have been made amiable himself; for he was very young when he married, and very fond of his wife. But Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature of himself;—more narrow-minded and selfish.

When he gave his promise to his father, he meditated within himself to increase the fortunes of his sisters by the present of a thousand pounds a-piece. He then really thought himself equal to it. The prospect of four thousand a-year, in addition to his present income, besides the remaining half of his own mother's fortune, warmed his heart, and made him feel capable of generosity.—"Yes, he would give them three thousand pounds: it would be liberal and handsome! It would be enough to make them completely easy. Three thousand pounds! he could spare so considerable a sum with little inconvenience."— He thought of it all day long, and for many days successively, and he did not repent.

No sooner was his father's funeral over, than Mrs. John Dashwood, without sending any notice of her intention to her mother-in-law, arrived with her child and their attendants. No one could dispute her right to come; the house was her husband's from the moment of his father's decease; but the indelicacy of her conduct was so much the greater, and to a woman in Mrs. Dashwood's situation, with only common feelings, must have been highly displeasing;—but in HER mind there was a sense of honor so keen, a generosity so romantic, that any offence of the kind, by whomsoever given or received, was to her a source of immovable disgust. Mrs. John Dashwood

had never been a favourite with any of her husband's family; but she had had no opportunity, till the present, of shewing them with how little attention to the comfort of other people she could act when occasion required it.

So acutely did Mrs. Dashwood feel this ungracious behaviour, and so earnestly did she despise her daughter-in-law for it, that, on the arrival of the latter, she would have quitted the house for ever, had not the entreaty of her eldest girl induced her first to reflect on the propriety of going, and her own tender love for all her three children determined her afterwards to stay, and for their sakes avoid a breach with their brother.

Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn; and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.

Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great.

Elinor saw, with concern, the excess of her sister's sensibility; but by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future. Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself. She could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance.

Margaret, the other sister, was a good-humored, well-disposed girl; but as she had already imbibed a good deal of Marianne's romance, without having much of her sense, she did not, at thirteen, bid fair to equal her sisters at a more advanced period of life.

## CHAPTER 2

Mrs. John Dashwood now installed herself mistress of Norland; and her mother and sisters-in-law were degraded to the condition of visitors. As such, however, they were treated by her with quiet civility; and by her husband with as much kindness as he could feel towards anybody beyond himself, his wife, and their child. He really pressed them, with some earnestness, to consider Norland as their home; and, as no plan appeared so eligible to Mrs. Dashwood as

remaining there till she could accommodate herself with a house in the neighbourhood, his invitation was accepted.

A continuance in a place where everything reminded her of former delight, was exactly what suited her mind. In seasons of cheerfulness, no temper could be more cheerful than hers, or possess, in a greater degree, that sanguine expectation of happiness which is happiness itself. But in sorrow she must be equally carried away by her fancy, and as far beyond consolation as in pleasure she was beyond alloy.

Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree. She begged him to think again on the subject. How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum? And what possible claim could the Miss Dashwoods, who were related to him only by half blood, which she considered as no relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount. It was very well known that no affection was ever supposed to exist between the children of any man by different marriages; and why was he to ruin himself, and their poor little Harry, by giving away all his money to his half sisters?

"It was my father's last request to me," replied her husband, "that I should assist his widow and daughters."

"He did not know what he was talking of, I dare say; ten to one but he was light-headed at the time. Had he been in his right senses, he could not have thought of such a thing as begging you to give away half your fortune from your own child."

"He did not stipulate for any particular sum, my dear Fanny; he only requested me, in general terms, to assist them, and make their situation more comfortable than it was in his power to do. Perhaps it would have been as well if he had left it wholly to myself. He could hardly suppose I should neglect them. But as he required the promise, I could not do less than give it; at least I thought so at the time. The promise, therefore, was given, and must be performed. Something must be done for them whenever they leave Norland and settle in a new home."

"Well, then, LET something be done for them; but THAT something need not be three thousand pounds. Consider," she added, "that when the money is once parted with, it never can return. Your sisters will marry, and it will be gone for ever. If, indeed, it could be restored to our poor little boy—"

"Why, to be sure," said her husband, very gravely, "that would make great difference. The time may come when Harry will regret that so large a sum was parted with. If he should have a numerous family, for instance, it would be a very convenient addition."

"To be sure it would."

"Perhaps, then, it would be better for all parties, if the sum were diminished one half.—Five hundred pounds would be a prodigious increase to their fortunes!"

"Oh! beyond anything great! What brother on earth would do half so much for his sisters, even if REALLY his sisters! And as it is—only half blood!—But you have such a generous spirit!"

"I would not wish to do any thing mean," he replied. "One had rather, on such occasions, do too much than too little. No one, at least, can think I have not done enough for them: even themselves, they can hardly expect more."

"There is no knowing what THEY may expect," said the lady, "but we are not to think of their expectations: the question is, what you can afford to do."

"Certainly—and I think I may afford to give them five hundred pounds a-piece. As it is, without any addition of mine, they will each have about three thousand pounds on their mother's death—a very comfortable fortune for any young woman."

"To be sure it is; and, indeed, it strikes me that they can want no addition at all. They will have ten thousand pounds divided amongst them. If they marry, they will be sure of doing well, and if they do not, they may all live very comfortably together on the interest of ten thousand pounds."

"That is very true, and, therefore, I do not know whether, upon the whole, it would not be more advisable to do something for their mother while she lives, rather than for them—something of the annuity kind I mean.—My sisters would feel the good effects of it as well as herself. A hundred a year would make them all perfectly comfortable."

His wife hesitated a little, however, in giving her consent to this plan.

"To be sure," said she, "it is better than parting with fifteen hundred pounds at once. But, then, if Mrs. Dashwood should live fifteen years we shall be completely taken in."

"Fifteen years! my dear Fanny; her life cannot be worth half that purchase."

"Certainly not; but if you observe, people always live for ever when there is an annuity to be paid them; and she is very stout and healthy, and hardly forty. An annuity is a very serious business; it comes over and over every year, and there is no getting rid of it. You are not aware of what you are doing. I have known a great deal of the trouble of annuities; for my mother was clogged with the payment of three to old superannuated servants by my father's will, and it is amazing how disagreeable she found it. Twice every year these annuities were to be paid; and then there was the trouble of getting it to them; and then one of them was said to have died, and afterwards it turned out to be no such thing. My mother was quite sick of it. Her income was not her own, she said, with such perpetual claims on it; and it was the more unkind in my father, because, otherwise, the money would have been entirely at my mother's disposal, without any restriction whatever. It has given me such an abhorrence of annuities, that I am sure I would not pin myself down to the payment of one for all the world."

"It is certainly an unpleasant thing," replied Mr. Dashwood, "to have those kind of yearly drains on one's income. One's fortune, as your mother justly says, is NOT one's own. To be tied down

to the regular payment of such a sum, on every rent day, is by no means desirable: it takes away one's independence."

"Undoubtedly; and after all you have no thanks for it. They think themselves secure, you do no more than what is expected, and it raises no gratitude at all. If I were you, whatever I did should be done at my own discretion entirely. I would not bind myself to allow them any thing yearly. It may be very inconvenient some years to spare a hundred, or even fifty pounds from our own expenses."

"I believe you are right, my love; it will be better that there should be no annuity in the case; whatever I may give them occasionally will be of far greater assistance than a yearly allowance, because they would only enlarge their style of living if they felt sure of a larger income, and would not be sixpence the richer for it at the end of the year. It will certainly be much the best way. A present of fifty pounds, now and then, will prevent their ever being distressed for money, and will, I think, be amply discharging my promise to my father."

"To be sure it will. Indeed, to say the truth, I am convinced within myself that your father had no idea of your giving them any money at all. The assistance he thought of, I dare say, was only such as might be reasonably expected of you; for instance, such as looking out for a comfortable small house for them, helping them to move their things, and sending them presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they are in season. I'll lay my life that he meant nothing farther; indeed, it would be very strange and unreasonable if he did. Do but consider, my dear Mr. Dashwood, how excessively comfortable your mother-in-law and her daughters may live on the interest of seven thousand pounds, besides the thousand pounds belonging to each of the girls, which brings them in fifty pounds a year a-piece, and, of course, they will pay their mother for their board out of it. Altogether, they will have five hundred a-year amongst them, and what on earth can four women want for more than that?—They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be! Five hundred a year! I am sure I cannot imagine how they will spend half of it; and as to your giving them more, it is quite absurd to think of it. They will be much more able to give YOU something."

"Upon my word," said Mr. Dashwood, "I believe you are perfectly right. My father certainly could mean nothing more by his request to me than what you say. I clearly understand it now, and I will strictly fulfil my engagement by such acts of assistance and kindness to them as you have described. When my mother removes into another house my services shall be readily given to accommodate her as far as I can. Some little present of furniture too may be acceptable then."

"Certainly," returned Mrs. John Dashwood. "But, however, ONE thing must be considered. When your father and mother moved to Norland, though the furniture of Stanhill was sold, all the china, plate, and linen was saved, and is now left to your mother. Her house will therefore be almost completely fitted up as soon as she takes it."

"That is a material consideration undoubtedly. A valuable legacy indeed! And yet some of the plate would have been a very pleasant addition to our own stock here."

"Yes; and the set of breakfast china is twice as handsome as what belongs to this house. A great deal too handsome, in my opinion, for any place THEY can ever afford to live in. But, however, so it is. Your father thought only of THEM. And I must say this: that you owe no particular gratitude to him, nor attention to his wishes; for we very well know that if he could, he would have left almost everything in the world to THEM."

This argument was irresistible. It gave to his intentions whatever of decision was wanting before; and he finally resolved, that it would be absolutely unnecessary, if not highly indecorous, to do more for the widow and children of his father, than such kind of neighbourly acts as his own wife pointed out.

THE  
WORKS  
OF  
WILLIAM PALEY, D.D.

WITH  
EXTRACTS FROM HIS CORRESPONDENCE:

AND A  
LIFE OF THE AUTHOR,

BY THE  
REV. ROBERT LYNAM, A.M.  
ASSISTANT CHAPLAIN TO THE MAGDALEN HOSPITAL.

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A NEW EDITION, WITH A PORTRAIT,

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## CHAPTER V.

## PROMISES.

- I. *From whence the obligation to perform promises arises.*
- II. *In what sense promises are to be interpreted.*
- III. *In what cases promises are not binding.*

I. *From whence the obligation to perform promises arises.*

They who argue from innate moral principles, suppose a sense of the obligation of promises to be one of them; but without assuming this, or any thing else, without proof, the obligation to perform promises may be deduced from the necessity of such a conduct to the well-being, or the existence indeed, of human society.

Men act from expectation. Expectation is in most cases determined by the assurances and engagements which we receive from others. If no dependance could be placed upon these assurances, it would be impossible to know what judgment to form of many future events, or how to regulate our conduct with respect to them. Confidence therefore in promises, is essential to the intercourse of human life; because, without it, the greatest part of our conduct would proceed upon chance. But there could be no confidence in promises, if men were not obliged to perform them; the obligation therefore to perform promises, is essential to the same ends, and in the same degree.

Some may imagine, that if this obligation were suspended, a general caution and mutual distrust would ensue, which might do as well: but this is imagined, without considering how, every hour of our lives, we trust to, and depend upon, others; and how impossible it is, to stir a step, or, what is worse, to sit still a moment, without such trust and dependance. I am now writing at my ease, not doubting (or rather never dis-

trusting, and therefore never thinking about it) that the butcher will send in the joint of meat which I ordered; that his servant will bring it; that my cook will dress it; that my footman will serve it up; and that I shall find it upon table at one o'clock. Yet have I nothing for all this, but the promise of the butcher, and the implied promise of his servant and mine. And the same holds of the most important as well as the most familiar occurrences of social life. In the one, the intervention of promises is formal, and is seen and acknowledged; our instance, therefore, is intended to shew it in the other, where it is not so distinctly observed.

II. *In what sense promises are to be interpreted.*

Where the terms of promises admit of more senses than one, the promise is to be performed "in that sense in which the promiser apprehended, at the time, that the promisee received it."

It is not the sense in which the promiser actually intended it, that always governs the interpretation of an equivocal promise; because, at that rate, you might excite expectations, which you never meant, nor would be obliged to satisfy. Much less is it the sense, in which the promisee actually received the promise; for, according to that rule, you might be drawn into engagements which you never designed to undertake. It must therefore be the sense (for there is no other remaining) in which the promiser believed that the promisee accepted his promise.

This will not differ from the actual intention of the promiser, where the promise is given without collusion or reserve: but we put the rule in the above form, to exclude evasion in cases in which the popular meaning of a phrase, and the strict grammatical signification of the words, differ; or, in general, wherever the promiser attempts to make his escape through some ambiguity in the expressions which he used.

Temures promised the garrison of Sebastia, that, if they would surrender, *no blood should be shed*. The garrison surrendered: and Temures buried them all alive. Now Temures fulfilled the promise in one sense, and in the sense too in which he intended it at the time; but not in the sense in which the garrison of Sebastia actually received it, nor in the sense in which Temures himself knew that the garrison received it: which last sense, according to our rule, was the sense in which he was in conscience bound to have performed it.

From the account we have given of the obligation of promises, it is evident, that this obligation depends upon the *expectations* which we knowingly and voluntarily excite. Consequently, any action or conduct towards another, which we are sensible excites expectations in that other, is as much a promise, and creates as strict an obligation, as the most express assurances. Taking, for instance, a kinsman's child, and educating him for a liberal profession, or in a manner suitable only for the heir of a large fortune, as much obliges us to place him in that profession, or to leave him such a fortune, as if we had given him a promise to do so under our hands and seals. In like manner, a great man, who encourages an indigent retainer; or a minister of state, who distinguishes and caresses at his levee one who is in a situation to be obliged by his patronage; engages, by such behaviour, to provide for him.—This is the foundation of *tacit promises*.

You may either simply declare your present intention, or you may accompany your declaration with an engagement to abide by it, which constitutes a complete promise. In the first case, the duty is satisfied, if you were *sincere* at the time, that is, if you entertained at the time the intention you expressed, however soon, or for whatever reason, you afterward change it. In

# *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793)

By William Godwin

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## CHAPTER III: OF PROMISES

The validity of promises examined. -- Shewn to be inconsistent with justice. -- To be foreign to the general good. -- Of the expectation excited. -- The fulfilling expectation does not imply the validity of a promise. -- Conclusion.

{150} The whole principle of an original contract proceeds upon the obligation under which we are placed to observe our promises. The reasoning upon which it is founded is, 'that we have promised obedience to government, and therefore are bound to obey.' It may consequently be proper to enquire into the nature of this obligation to observe our promises.

We have already established justice as the sum of moral and political duty. Is justice then in its own nature precarious or immutable? Surely immutable. As long as men are men, the conduct I am bound to observe respecting them must remain the same. A good man must always be the proper object of my support and cooperation; vice of my censure; and the vicious man of instruction and reform.

{151} What is it then to which the obligation of a promise applies? What I have promised is either right, or wrong, or indifferent. There are few articles of human conduct that fall under the latter class; and the greater shall be our improvements in moral science the fewer still will they appear. Omitting these, let us then consider only the two preceding classes. 'I have promised to do something just and right.' This certainly I ought to perform. Why? Not because I promised, but because justice prescribes it. 'I have promised to bestow a sum of money upon some good and respectable purpose. In the interval between the promise and my fulfilling it, a greater and nobler purpose offers itself, and calls with an imperious voice for my cooperation.' Which ought I to prefer? That which best deserves my preference. A promise can make no alteration in the case. I ought to be guided by the intrinsic merit of the objects, and not by any external and foreign consideration. No engagements of mine can change their intrinsic claims.

All this must be exceedingly plain to the reader who has followed me in my early reasonings upon the nature of justice. If every shilling of our property, every hour of our time and every faculty of our mind, have already received their destination from the principles of immutable justice, promises have no department left upon which for them to decide. Justice it appears therefore ought to be done, whether we have promised it or not. If we discover any thing to be unjust, we ought to abstain from it, with whatever {152} solemnity we have engaged for its perpetration. We were erroneous and vicious when the promise was made; but this affords no sufficient reason for its performance.

But it will be said, 'if promises be not made, or when made be not fulfilled, how can the affairs of the world be carried on?' By rational and intelligent beings acting as if they were rational and intelligent. A promise would perhaps be sufficiently innocent, if it were understood merely as

declaratory of intention, and not as precluding farther information. Even in this restrained sense how ever it is far from being generally necessary. Why should it be supposed that the affairs of the world would not go on sufficiently well, though my neighbour could no farther depend upon my assistance than it appeared rational to grant it? This would be a sufficient dependence if I were honest, nor would he if he were honest desire any thing more. If I were dishonest, if I could not be bound by the reason and justice of the case, it would afford him slender additional dependence to call in the aid of a principle founded in prejudice and mistake: not to say, that, let it afford ever so great advantage in any particular case, the evil of the immoral precedent would outweigh the individual advantage.

It may be farther objected, 'that this principle might be sufficiently suited to a better and more perfect state of society, but that at present there are dishonest members of the community, {153} who will not perform their duty, if they be not bound to it by some grosser motive, than the mere moral consideration.' Be it so. This is a question altogether different from that we have been examining. We are not now enquiring whether the community ought to animadvert upon the errors of its members. This animadversion the upright man is not backward to encounter, and willingly risks the penalty, which the society (for the society is more competent to ascertain the just amount of the penalty than the preceding caprice of the parties) has awarded in cases apparently similar, if he conceive that his duty requires from him that risk.

But to return to the case of promises. If I shall be told, that, 'in choosing between two purposes about which to employ my money, my time or my talents, my promise may make an essential difference, and therefore having once been given ought to be fulfilled. The party to whom it was made has had expectations excited in him, which I ought not to disappoint; the party to whom I am under no engagement has no such disappointment to encounter.' What is this tenderness to which I am bound, this expectation I must not dare to disappoint? An expectation that I should do wrong, that I should prefer a less good to a greater, that I should commit absolute evil; for such must be the result when the balance has been struck. 'But his expectation has altered the nature of his situation, has engaged him in {154} undertakings from which he would otherwise have abstained.' Be it so. He and all other men will be taught to depend more upon their own exertions, and less upon the assistance of others, which caprice may refuse, or justice oblige me to withhold. He and all others will be taught to acquire such merit, and to engage in such pursuits, as shall oblige every honest man to come to their succour, if they should stand in need of assistance. The resolute execution of justice, without listening to that false pity, which, to do imaginary kindness to one, would lead us to injure the whole, would in a thousand ways increase the independence, the energies and the virtues of mankind.

....

It is undoubtedly upon this hypothesis a part of our duty to make as few promises or declarations exciting appropriate expectations as possible. He who lightly gives another the idea that he will govern himself in his future conduct, not by the view that shall be present in his mind when the conduct shall become determined on, but by the view he shall be able to take of it at some preceding period, is vicious in so doing. But the obligation he is under respecting his future conduct is, to act justly, and not, because he has committed one error, for that reason to become guilty of a second.