

Mary Wollstonecraft

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

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Objectives

1. Describe the international political context around Wollstonecraft's authorship of the first book-length philosophical treatise on "the rights of woman" after the French Revolution.
2. Contrast her arguments on "the rights of woman" with her eighteenth-century philosophical rivals, Burke and Rousseau.
3. Relate Wollstonecraft's conception of the "rights of woman" to later ideas of women's rights.
4. Distinguish Wollstonecraft's style of proto-feminist argumentation from modern strands of feminism, while showing its enduring resonances in feminist art and culture.

Reading Assignment

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Nairne, Eleanor. "A Naked Statue for a Feminist Hero?" *The New York Times*, 12 November 2020.

Commentary

Born in London in 1759, [Mary Wollstonecraft](#) began to write her philosophical magnum opus, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in the autumn of 1791. The Haitian Revolution had erupted in the French sugar colony of Saint-Domingue in August of that year. 100,000 African slaves and free mulattos rebelled against the white settlers and plantation owners in response to revolutionary France's failure to enact anti-slavery and black citizenship laws for its colonies, even after its legal adoption of the universalistic language of natural rights in its *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* in 1789.

The startling news of the massive, violent, and wildly successful uprisings of the enslaved and oppressed in Saint-Domingue soon reached the London papers. In early October 1791, Wollstonecraft was "sitting for the picture," an oil painting commissioned by her friend and patron William Roscoe, in order to mark her own revolutionary success. In late November 1790, she had published her first political treatise and internationally-received work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Written in about three weeks, the 150-page tract was the first book-length reply to Irishman and British Member of Parliament [Edmund Burke's](#) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which had been issued on November 1 to great public

debate. Burke took a pugnacious stand against the French revolutionaries' rights-oriented and "democratic" politics, claiming that it threatened the very peace and stability of European societies, which were, in his staid view, predicated upon the preservation of social and political hierarchies of gender, race, class, and church across their cultures and governments.

Unlike Burke, both Wollstonecraft and Roscoe joined many British and Irish intellectuals of the period in warmly advocating the early phase of the [French Revolution](#). The storming of the Bastille in Paris in July 1789 not only liberated the political enemies of the absolute monarchy and the state's Catholic clergy, but also led to the establishment of a limited constitutional monarchy and a republican declaration of the "rights of man" for French government. The most radical political revolution of the modern era empowered the third estate, or the French common people, to rise to political prominence over the clergy and the nobility that summer. An assembly of representatives of the third estate had promulgated the Tennis Court Oath in late June. It propelled the implementation of a new constitution of mixed government—meaning, limited, secular, and representative. This republican constitution, with a limited monarch (Louis XVI) as its figurehead, put the people of France and its representative legislative assembly at its base.

The French *Declaration* of 1789 enshrined in its political language the Francophone Enlightenment idea of the "natural rights" of mankind, most famously disseminated by [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#) in the 1760s. According to this political theory, all men—including the enslaved—held equal rights by nature of being human, regardless of their social or political status under law and government. The new French constitution aspired, like Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), to some form of popular sovereignty that would institutionalize and protect these equal rights of mankind. On this utopian view, the collectively-made laws of a legitimate, or republican, government would ideally guarantee the enjoyment of the rights of man under the law. But in the post-1789 political reality, variants of the words "man" and "rights" remained heavily accented by gender, race, and class. However radical, the idea of equal rights—from Rousseau to the French *Declaration*—did not *yet* apply to women, the enslaved, blacks, and mulattos in the French empire and beyond.

Unlike Burke, but like Roscoe and other members of her progressive social circle in London such as the Dissenting Christian minister [Richard Price](#), Wollstonecraft was a vocal and principled abolitionist. Her *Rights of Men* likely attracted Roscoe's support due to its anti-slavery stance. Against Burke, she explicitly argued for the cultural and legal extension of the "rights of men" enshrined in the French *Declaration* of 1789 to adult people in all societies, including poor men, women, and chattel slaves.

Five months before the Haitian Revolution erupted, Jamaica's *Kingston Daily Advertiser* positively reviewed and excerpted the *Rights of Men*. Founded in 1790, this major daily newspaper reported on post-revolutionary international politics as it bore upon the West Indies. It contributed to what the historian Julius S. Scott has called the "common wind" of news and rumors about slave unrest that spread swiftly through seaports of the Caribbean, the United States, Britain, and Europe after 1789. Jamaica was Britain's most profitable sugar colony, due west of Saint-Domingue, and so Wollstonecraft's

pro-revolutionary and abolitionist arguments probably first gained international traction in the communication networks of slave-driven, settler-colonial societies in the Americas.

As the reviews of her *Rights of Men* hit the London papers in the winter of 1790-91, Wollstonecraft could not have missed the public debates over the woman who dared to challenge Burke on the scope and definition of rights. After all, she wrote one of the first, anonymous reviews of her own book for her publisher Joseph Johnson's progressive journal, *The Analytical Review*. And even before the second edition of her *Rights of Men* appeared in mid-December 1790 with her name on the title page, rumors had been swirling in the city's gossip columns that a woman associated with Johnson's publishing house had written the first major retort to Burke on "the rights of men."

By the 27th of December 1790, the cover page of London's *Public Advertiser* would feature no less than two satirical letters to the editor that championed Wollstonecraft by way of mocking Burke's anti-rights discourse. The anonymous writers suggested that Wollstonecraft ought to turn her attention to the "subject" of "the rights of women." It was to this "same subject" that she in fact devoted her thinking in 1791. She produced the bulk of the 268-page *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in about a six-week span during the following autumn and early winter before putting the final touches on the last of the thirteen chapters as the book went to press with Johnson in January 1792.

While the *Rights of Men* targeted Burke's defense of gender, class, and racial hierarchies, the *Rights of Woman* turned its critical attention to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's defense of patriarchy, or men-dominant societies and governments. In his influential philosophical novel *Emile, or On Education* (1762), Rousseau espoused a gender-segregated system of education, whereby girls and boys would be raised to fulfill separate and distinct roles in marriage, family, and society, by virtue of what he argued were the natural differences in their sexual and reproductive functioning. In his *Social Contract*, published the same year, Rousseau declined to mention women. This telling silence, the feminist political philosopher Carol Pateman argued, implied that women were by nature excluded from the terms of the social contract that granted the rights of republican citizenship to men only. Women, according to Rousseau's patriarchal view of politics, could not be part of the popular sovereign that had the power to legitimate the modern republican state.

In the first five chapters of the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft launched an extended attack on Rousseau's treatment of sexual difference as definitive of the social roles of men and women. In her opposing, egalitarian philosophical view—inspired by the rational Dissenting Christian moral theology of her mentor the Reverend Richard Price—Wollstonecraft pictured the sexes with the same mental and moral capacities because they were made in the same rational image of their divine Creator. On this egalitarian metaphysical view of the human being, expressed across her *Vindications*, there was "no sex to virtue," the mind, or the soul, even as she granted that the bodies of the sexes were obviously different. Contra Rousseau, Wollstonecraft thought that men and women's roles in society should be defined not by their bodily differences, but rather by their equal mental and moral capacities to freely choose happiness and justice over wrongdoing and injustice in their relations with others and the world at large.

Moving beyond the radicalism of even her *Rights of Men*, the key philosophical innovation of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* was twofold. First, she expanded the post-revolutionary concept of the rights of man so that it was truly universal in scope. Rights applied to men and women, and girls and boys, of all racial, ethnic, class, and national backgrounds. Under the banner of the "rights of humanity," she specifically included African slaves and free people of colour and other peoples who had been oppressed by the twin Enlightenment powers of privileged white men and European imperialism. She also insisted that the "rights of woman" and children were identical to the "rights of humanity." These rights included free, state-provided primary education; children's freedom from religious indoctrination and other forms of parental tyranny; girls' and women's rights to the same educational and work opportunities as boys and men; a fundamental and universal freedom from all forms of physical, sexual, economic, and political exploitation, domination, and abuse; and the adult citizen's right to vote for one's own representatives, including those who reflect one's own gender and social status. Wollstonecraft's conceptual revolution was to overturn the prevailing view of rights as the domain of powerful men, by universalizing them as the fundamental "birthright" of women and other humans regardless of prior social or legal status.

The second major innovation of the *Rights of Woman* was to put these arguments for "the rights of woman" as integral to the universal and equal "rights of humanity" in the form of a book-length philosophical treatise. Before Wollstonecraft, no one had published a book, focused on the issue of the rights of women, which attempted to treat this novel subject in long form across a series of chapters on discrete topics essential to its defense. Although important book-length, proto-feminist works by [Christine de Pisan](#), [Gabrielle Suchon](#), [Mary Astell](#), Poulain de la Barre, Sophia, Louise Dupin, and Catharine Macaulay had preceded the *Rights of Woman* in the modern era, these focused on defending the broader idea of the "equality" of the sexes—especially in terms of their intellectual, moral, social, and political potential to contribute to society—not specifically the definition and scope of the equal "civil and political rights" that the sexes held by virtue of being human, and ought to hold under the laws of any legitimate government. But it does not seem that Wollstonecraft was aware of these women writers other than her contemporary and correspondent Macaulay, with the possible exception of Sophia, whose *Woman not Inferior to Man: or, a Short and Modest Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity and Esteem with the Men* (London, 1739) shares some intriguing similarities in its subtitle to the title of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Even the landmark works on the rights of women published in 1790-91 by the leading French republican and proto-feminist political philosophers, the [Marquis de Condorcet](#) and Olympe de Gouges, were shorter pamphlets or speeches, not book-length treatises, which primarily influenced their local and national debates on rights. To cement its cultural and political significance, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* enjoyed an immediate international reception, which made her the most famous (and infamous) advocate of "the rights of woman" on both sides of the Atlantic for over a century. It was translated into French in early 1792, reviewed in Parisian journals, translated into Spanish and published in excerpts in Madrid, and translated into German by 1793. In the United States, the book was an instant success, with multiple editions appearing in Boston and Philadelphia in 1792 alone.

Not until the rise of the many branches of the modern international feminist movement in the late nineteenth century, beginning with the French invention and dissemination of the political term “féminisme” to describe the cause of women’s rights, were Wollstonecraft and her magnum opus eventually overshadowed by her diverse readers and followers. These feminist luminaries included everyone from anarchists like Voltairine de Cleyre and Emma Goldman to suffragists like Millicent Fawcett and Carrie Chapman Catt. Even then, Wollstonecraft and the *Rights of Woman* remained globally recognized icons for modern [feminism](#), a pattern that persists to the present day. Many of these writers were as inspired by the *Rights of Woman*’s revolutionary idea that marriage should be a moral and intellectual friendship between equals, as much as by the book’s radical defense of equality in education, citizenship rights, and career opportunities for the sexes across their lifespans.

During the pandemic year of 2020-21, the world has returned its attention to Wollstonecraft and the arguments of her *Rights of Woman*. In London in November 2020, the first “[statue for Wollstonecraft](#)” was installed on Newington Green, near where she once heard the progressive sermons by Richard Price that inspired her ground-breaking and systematic moral and political arguments for the equal rights of the sexes across cultures and nations. British artist Maggi Hambling’s work of contemporary feminist public art is intentionally provocative, much like Wollstonecraft’s twin *Vindications* of the rights of humanity were designed to be. The abstract statue does not represent the figure of Wollstonecraft, but instead presents a confluence of feminine forms that culminate in a small, silvery, futuristic, naked statuette of an unnamed “everywoman.”

Hambling’s everywoman gestures toward the unknown future of women and ideas of womanhood, which Wollstonecraft imagined would be transformed over the centuries by the extension of “the rights of humanity” to people of all races, genders, nations, classes, and conditions of servitude. While many critics suggested that the naked icon of the “tiny, shiny woman” on top of the statue posed a slight to Wollstonecraft’s dignity as a founder of modern feminism, it remains to be seen what the lasting impression of this work of art will be in the public eye. Whether it continues to be controversial or not, Hambling’s statue has already captured in material form Wollstonecraft’s uncanny knack for instigating visionary international debates on gender equality, human rights, and the social and political standing of girls and women.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Does the representation of Wollstonecraft in contemporary art change how you think of her work?
2. If you lived your life according to Wollstonecraft's egalitarian ideals, how would your experience of family, education, love, and work change?
3. What were the differences between the prevailing conception of "the rights of man" after the French Revolution and Wollstonecraft's conception of "the rights of woman"?
4. How can theories and practices of women's rights and human rights presently benefit

from further philosophical engagement with Wollstonecraft?

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