

*A Vindication of the
Rights of Woman*

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*A Vindication of the
Rights of Men*

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

with an introduction by

BEE ROWLATT



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INTRODUCTION

Vindication vɪndɪ'keɪʃ(ə)n noun

The action of clearing someone of blame or suspicion.
Proof that someone or something is right, reasonable
or justified.

Why Wollstonecraft, and why now?

Why Wollstonecraft? That's easy. The past is teeming with books that deserve to be read, but how many of them were written at a hundred miles an hour by a messy-haired woman on a mission to change the world and everyone in it? Wollstonecraft wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790 and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* two years later. Together they are an unparalleled equal-rights double bill. Do you like your writers pounding out their blistering-hot ideas around a sensationalist life, eating taboos for breakfast while changing the shape of the horizon on the daily? You have found that writer. As Lizzo says, 'It's bad bitch o'clock.'

And why now? Where to begin... In summer 2022 the writer Rebecca Solnit visited the graveyard of St Pancras Old Church, a quiet space behind two of London's busiest train stations. She took a selfie by Wollstonecraft's gravestone, posting it with the words: 'Feminism has a long history.' It was in the immediate aftermath of that volcanic eruption of misogyny: the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Was this visit some form of homing device, the magnetic pull of a reassuring voice from the past that won't change, won't let us down?

Feminism is a global movement that is in flux, everywhere, all the time. It turns out that even the most basic equalities can go backwards as well as forwards, with Afghan girls out of school, FGM persisting and online incel cultures on the rise. The very idea of human rights is being swept into a self-defeating confection known as ‘culture wars’. That infamous Supreme Court ruling is far from being the only barometer of the anti-rights backlash. But I was struck by Solnit’s visit, and why it felt important. It’s because this is where we go in times of crisis – we go to the source.

Who is she?

Wollstonecraft is our ancestor: she is the foremother of feminism, a key Enlightenment philosopher, abolitionist and very early architect of what we now call human rights. But the first thing you need to know about Wollstonecraft is that she is an optimist, despite having so little cause to be so. She was born in 1759, into a background of violence and alcoholism. Although her family didn’t believe in educating girls, they didn’t seem to mind living off her earnings once she educated herself.

Somehow Wollstonecraft’s ‘ardent affection for the human race’ persists, despite the early years of neglect and domestic abuse. In later life she experiences hunger, depression and the perils of attempting to lead an experimental life. At every turn she discovers what it means to be the less-valued kind of human being; it is the source of the high-voltage rage that fuels her writing.

After an itinerant childhood, a spell as a lady’s companion and time spent caring for her mother and sister, Wollstonecraft finally ends up in Newington Green, among a community of Radical Dissenters drawn there by the benevolent minister Richard Price. The fact that these people are ‘excluded as a

class from education and civil rights by a lazy-minded majority was something for an embryonic feminist to brood upon.¹

By virtue of her intellectual curiosity (also of being the most argumentative person at the party) Wollstonecraft becomes part of a luminous circle including William Blake, Tom Paine and members of the founding generation of the United States of America. Her lifelong dream of financial independence results in the founding of a school and the start of her writing career. Her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, is a strong indicator of the future direction of travel.

Although Wollstonecraft is rarely out of trouble and nearly always skint, she is self-aware and at times very funny. She jokes at her own expense in a letter to a lover – ‘still harping on the same subject, you will exclaim!’² – and even in the *Vindications* there are laughs – her eye-rolls and sarcastic asides still burn to this day.

She is an enemy of traditions and the ‘rust of antiquity’, and as she bursts off the page you can almost feel that rush in lines like: ‘I pause to recollect myself, and smother the contempt I feel rising for your rhetorical flourishes.’ Wollstonecraft is not content just to be an observer. She doesn’t sit around celebrating the ideals of the French Revolution, she gallops off solo to live there, right in the bloody midst of it, becoming along the way a destitute single mum and de facto war correspondent.

Another love affair gone wrong, a treasure hunt around the wild shores of the Skagerrak with her toddler in tow and two attempts on her own life, followed by a return to authorial prowess and an innovative form of domestic harmony all look like the blissful ending to her Hollywood blockbuster story. But then, in the most bitter twist of all, Wollstonecraft dies in

1 Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974), p. 61.

2 Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘Letter XIX’ from *Letters written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1796). Further references are given in the text as ‘Letters’.

childbirth, giving birth to the future Mary Shelley. It is fair to say ‘Wollstonecraft’s was an interrupted life.’¹ She was only 38.

Following her death Wollstonecraft’s newly minted husband William Godwin writes a heartfelt account of her life, including her love lives and her mental health battles. His *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an unusually fresh work of biography, but its revelations spark a scandal and years of vicious trolling. Back then, her personal life appalled people; now it teaches us how far we have come and what is still at stake. Her story is more than just extraordinary, it is crucial to the understanding of her work.

The most famous of the two vindications, *The Rights of Woman*, rippled all around the world during the era of revolutions. The scholar Eileen Hunt traces its reception in Kingstown, Jamaica, just before the Haitian revolution; in a Madras newspaper in India in 1794; and almost a century later in the Bombay Circulating Library, as the Indian independence movement gathered strength.

It ripples down through time as well. In the 1960s the African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, worked on a three-part play about Wollstonecraft, incomplete because of Hansberry’s untimely death. Hunt credits ‘Hansberry’s interest in Wollstonecraft as the origin of her feminist ideas. [The play] features the fifteen-year-old Wollstonecraft sticking out her tongue at her patronising older brother.’²

The image of a teenager sticking out her tongue embodies the spirit of defiance that Wollstonecraft never lost. It wasn’t enough to hold her employers, other writers, the church, political powers and the monarchy to account – she also challenged everyone she met. Her sisters regularly fell out with her, and various boyfriends

¹ Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), p. 390.

² Eileen Hunt, *Portraits of Wollstonecraft*, Volume 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. xix.

and girlfriends took fright at her intensity. 'I must have first place or none!' she demanded of one of her first loves, Jane Arden.

Wollstonecraft transgressed the social norms of the day with the women she loved, her hostility to marriage, her extra-marital pregnancies. The same fluidity is present in her genre-defying writing. The novelist Kamila Shamsie describes Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* as 'a revolutionary work – most striking for the friendship she creates between two women from vastly different class backgrounds who discover common ground in the injustices they face as women... It is terrifying, funny, finely judged in its execution.'¹

The *Vindications* are key milestones, not only in the formation of a language that describes what makes us human, but also in Wollstonecraft's own development as a writer. They predate her time in revolutionary Paris, her doomed Scandinavian treasure hunt, her attempts on her life and her journey into motherhood. These episodes will change and deepen her work, while her lived experience continues to influence her writing.

The *Vindications* therefore represent only part of the breadth of Wollstonecraft's writing, but they are her launchpad. Together they are an escalating call to arms, revealing her dynamic intention: her 'favourite subject of contemplation, the future improvement of the world,' (Letter XXII, *Letters*). Wollstonecraft hoped to be useful, and she longed for a future in which her work would not be needed.

We're not there yet. So far that future has brought with it an ongoing stream of new interpretations of her work, 'constantly remoulded in feminism's changing image,' and yet, 'Wollstonecraft remains as vital and necessary a presence today as she was in the 1790s.'²

1 Kamila Shamsie in the theatre programme for *An Amazon Stept Out* by Bee Rowlett, directed by Honor Borwick, Lyric Theatre, London, 30th September 2019 (London: Wollstonecraft Society, 2019).

2 Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 253.

A VINDICATION OF THE
RIGHTS OF MEN

Advertisement

MR BURKE'S REFLECTIONS on the French Revolution* first engaged my attention as the transient topic of the day, and reading it more for amusement than information, my indignation was roused by the sophistical arguments that every moment crossed me in the questionable shape of natural feelings and common sense.

Many pages of the following letter were the effusions of the moment, but, swelling imperceptibly to a considerable size, the idea was suggested of publishing a short vindication of *the Rights of Men*.

Not having leisure* or patience to follow this desultory writer through all the devious tracks in which his fancy has started fresh game, I have confined my strictures, in a great measure, to the grand principles at which he has levelled many ingenious arguments in a very specious garb.

A Letter to the Right Honourable

Edmund Burke

SIR,
It is not necessary, with courtly insincerity, to apologise to you for thus intruding on your precious time, not to profess that I think it an honour to discuss an important subject with a man whose literary abilities have raised him to notice in the state. * I have not yet learned to twist my periods, nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments and imply what I should be afraid to utter. If, therefore, in the course of this epistle I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy, for truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime, and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful. But I war not with an individual when I contend for the *rights of men** and the liberty of reason. You see I do not condescend to cull my words to avoid the invidious phrase, nor shall I be prevented from giving a manly definition of it, by the flimsy ridicule which a lively fancy has interwoven with the present acceptation of the term. Reverencing the rights of humanity, I shall dare to assert them, not intimidated by the horse laugh* that you have raised, or waiting till time has wiped away the compassionate tears which you have elaborately laboured to excite.

From the many just sentiments interspersed through the letter before me, and from the whole tendency of it, I should believe

you to be a good – though a vain – man, if some circumstances in your conduct did not render the inflexibility of your integrity doubtful; and for this vanity a knowledge of human nature enables me to discover such extenuating circumstances, in the very texture of your mind, that I am ready to call it amiable, and separate the public from the private character.

I know that a lively imagination renders a man particularly calculated to shine in conversation and in those desultory productions where method is disregarded, and the instantaneous applause which his eloquence* extorts is at once a reward and a spur. Once a wit and always a wit is an aphorism that has received the sanction of experience; yet I am apt to conclude that the man who with scrupulous anxiety endeavours to support that shining character can never nourish by reflection any profound or, if you please, metaphysical passion. Ambition becomes only the tool of vanity, and his reason, the weathercock of unrestrained feelings, is only employed to varnish over the faults which it ought to have corrected.

Sacred, however, would the infirmities and errors of a good man be, in my eyes, if they were only displayed in a private circle; if the venial fault only rendered the wit anxious, like a celebrated beauty, to raise admiration on every occasion, and excite emotion, instead of the calm reciprocation of mutual esteem and unimpassioned respect. Such vanity enlivens social intercourse, and forces the little great man to be always on his guard to secure his throne; and an ingenious man, who is ever on the watch for conquest, will, in his eagerness to exhibit his whole store of knowledge, furnish an attentive observer with some useful information, calcined* by fancy and formed by taste.

And though some dry reasoner might whisper that the arguments were superficial, and should even add that the feelings which are thus ostentatiously displayed are often the cold declamation of the head, and not the effusions of the heart – what will these shrewd remarks avail when the witty arguments and ornamental feelings are on a level with the comprehension

of the fashionable world, and a book is found very amusing? Even the ladies, sir, may repeat your sprightly sallies, and retail in theatrical attitudes many of your sentimental exclamations. Sensibility is the *manie** of the day, and compassion the virtue which is to cover a multitude of vices, whilst justice is left to mourn in sullen silence, and balance truth in vain.

In life, an honest man with a confined understanding is frequently the slave of his habits and the dupe of his feelings, whilst the man with a clearer head and colder heart makes the passions of others bend to his interest; but truly sublime is the character that acts from principle and governs the inferior springs of activity without slackening their vigour; whose feelings give vital heat to his resolves, but never hurry him into feverish eccentricities.

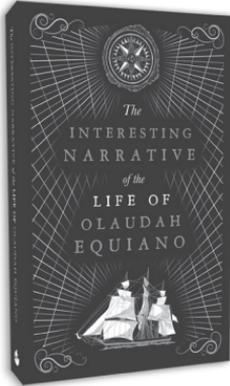
However, as you have informed us that respect chills love, it is natural to conclude that all your pretty flights arise from your pampered sensibility, and that, vain of this fancied pre-eminence of organs, you foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to your brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason. It is not in this view surprising that when you should argue you become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, instead of enlightening your understanding.

Quitting now the flowers of rhetoric, let us, sir, reason together; and, believe me, I should not have meddled with these troubled waters in order to point out your inconsistencies if your wit had not burnished up some rusty, baneful opinions, and swelled the shallow current of ridicule till it resembled the flow of reason, and presumed to be the test of truth.

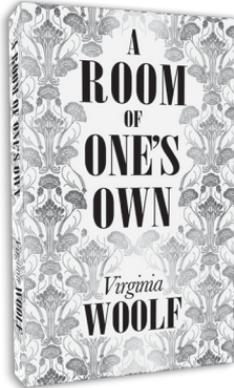
I shall not attempt to follow you through 'horse-way and footpath';* but, attacking the foundation of your opinions, I shall leave the superstructure to find a centre of gravity on which it may lean till some strong blast puffs it into the air; or your teeming fancy, which the ripening judgement of sixty years* has not tamed, produces another Chinese erection* to stare, at every turn, the plain country people in the face, who bluntly call such an airy edifice a folly.



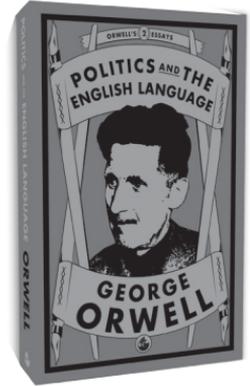
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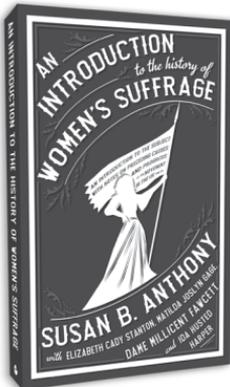
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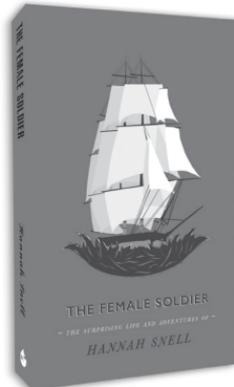
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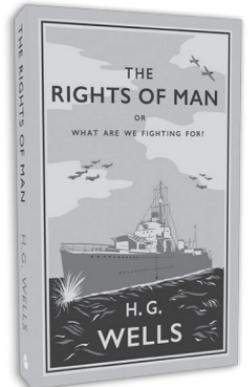
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