

[Mary Wollstonecraft](#)'s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, is often referred to as the founding text or manifesto of Western feminism.

Nineteenth-century American feminists revered its author as their founding mother and read and spoke about her works ubiquitously.

Wollstonecraft's first major work, *The Vindication of the [Rights of Man](#)* (1790), was a response to *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) by [Edmund Burke](#). Burke was one of many British writers and polemicists who entered the impassioned dialogue on the French Revolution, but his work was particularly galvanizing to people like Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine for its espousal of the view that citizens should not rebel against their government in order to revolutionize its traditions. Wollstonecraft averred that rights cannot be based on tradition, only reason and rationality.

Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* continued these themes and applied them to women. She dedicated the volume to Charles Maurice Talleyrand-Périgord, whose recently delivered speech on education to the National Assembly in France had suggested that women must only concern themselves with domestic affairs and stay out of the political arena.

As she rushed while writing the text, she worried that she did not do the subject justice when she presented the work to her publisher, and indeed, planned on writing a second volume but never did so; she wrote to her friend William Roscoe, "I am dissatisfied with myself for not having done justice to the subject. – Do not suspect me of false modesty – I mean to say that had I allowed myself more time I could have written a better book, in every sense of the word ... I intend to finish the next volume before I begin to print, for it is not pleasant to have the Devil coming for the conclusion of a sheet fore it is written."

In terms of the reception of the work, most students and scholars commonly assume—derroneously—that it received mostly hostile reviews. That perspective has recently been debunked by multiple scholarly articles and biographies. R.M. Janes's insightful article on the subject tells a more complex story: "The progressive intellectual circles represented by the leading reviews reacted positively to demands for intellectual equality, improved education, and reformed manners. Demands for political participation by women or for changes in women's social behavior were regarded as unessential and absurd. Those elements of the works in question that corresponded to changes that had been in train for half a century were approved; those that marked out the direction of more drastic social transformations were rightly though disapprovingly remarked

as revolutionary and visionary, if they were seen at all." Except for one review by a conservative publication, all early views were largely positive. Many reviewers focused on *Vindication* as an educational tract and remarked upon it approvingly. Political concerns were ignored by liberals and conservatives alike. Conservative publication *The Critical Review* showed the most awareness of the political implications of Wollstonecraft's writing.

The later hostility that the work garnered was related to the demise of Wollstonecraft's reputation in the unflattering light of her husband's memoirs published about her life and her frequent disregard for traditional 18th-century morality. Her reputation was still problematic throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries but has since been demonstrably less necessary to the analysis of her theories and ideas. Indeed, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* stands on its own as a mainstay in university courses on women's history and feminism, political science, and the history of the 18th century and the Age of Reason. This text has become one of the most influential points of departure in the Western canon.

[Mary Wollstonecraft's \*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman\*](#) is a treatise on overcoming the ways in which women in her time are oppressed and denied their potential in society, with concomitant problems for their households and society as a whole. The dedication is to Charles M. Talleyrand-Périgord, the late bishop of Autun whose views on female education were distasteful to Wollstonecraft. The introduction sets out her view that neglect of girls' education is largely to blame for the condition of adult women. They are treated as subordinate beings who care only about being attractive, elegant, and meek, they buy into this oppression, and they do not have the tools to vindicate their fundamental rights or the awareness that they are in such a condition.

In the first chapter Wollstonecraft promotes reason and rationality and discusses the deleterious effects of absolute, arbitrary political power and the vices associated with riches and hereditary honors. Chapters two and three detail the various ways in which women are rendered subordinate. They are taught that their looks are of paramount concern, and they tend to cultivate weakness and artificiality to appear pleasing to others. They are seldom independent and tend not to exercise reason. Writers like Rousseau and [Dr. Gregory](#) desire that women remain virtual slaves, enshrined in the home and concerned only with their "natural" proclivities of being modest, chaste, and beautiful. Women are taught to indulge their emotions and thus have unhappy marriages because passion cannot be sustained. Virtue should not be relative to gender; as both men and women were created by God and have souls, they have the same kind of

propensity to exercise reason and develop virtue. Female dependence as seen in her day is not *natural*. Women's confinement in the home and inability to participate in the public sphere results in their insipidness and pettiness. Wollstonecraft wants to inspire a "revolution in female manners."