

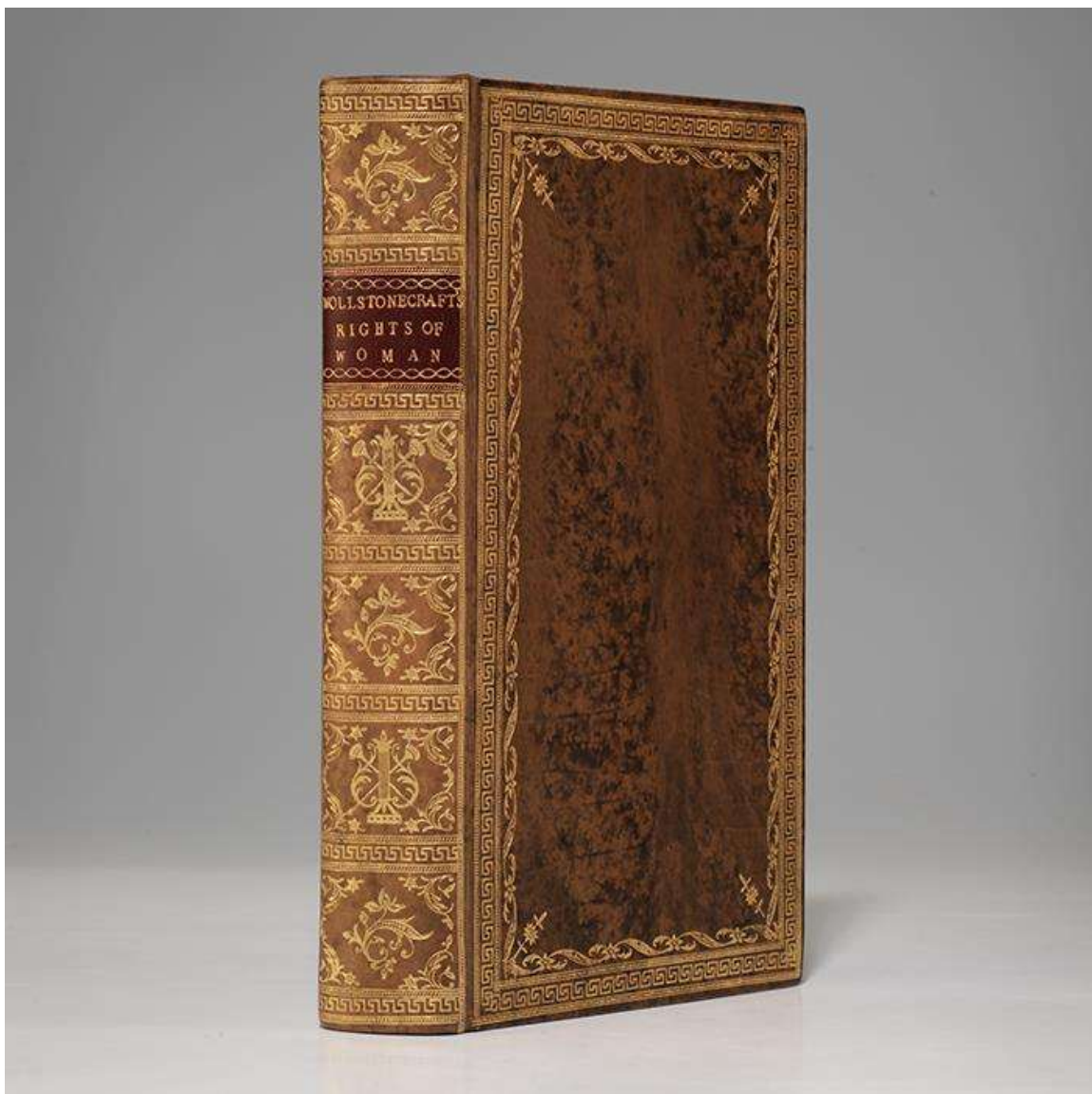
"Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft: A Canonical Book

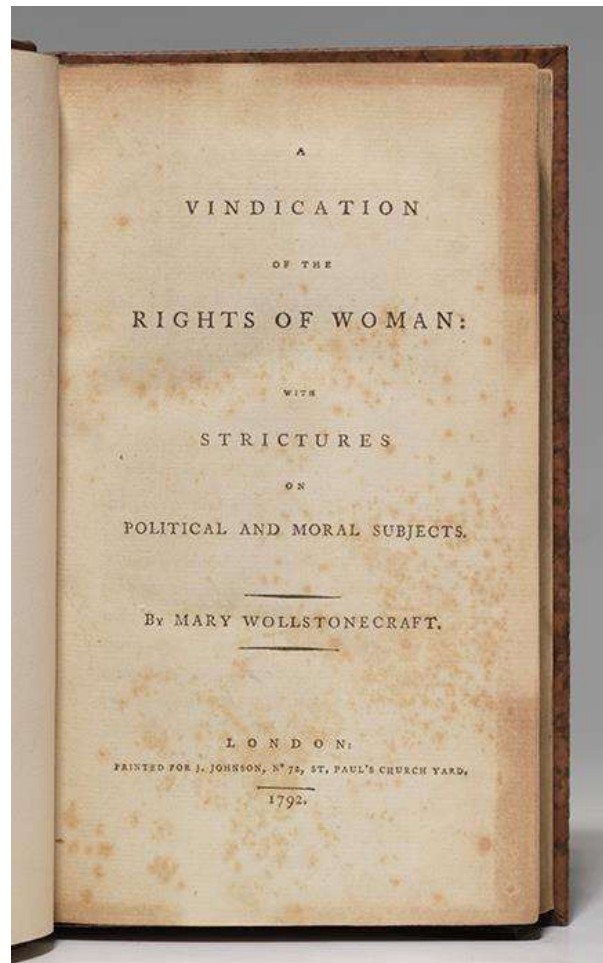
Curated by Stephen A Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Mary Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792





"LIBERTY AND EQUALITY FOR ALL HUMANITY": 1792 FIRST EDITION OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S LANDMARK VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

First edition of Wollstonecraft's classic work on freedom, equality, and education, with Volume I the only volume published, handsomely bound. "Wollstonecraft's major work caused an outcry when it was published and is hailed as a cornerstone of feminism.... The central theme of the work on women's rights was that they should be educated to carry a responsibility in society equal to that of men. In disagreement with Rousseau... Wollstonecraft urged 'rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience'" (Legacies of Genius 64).

Vindication of the Rights of Woman was written in a "plain and direct style, and it was this as well as the idea of writing a book on the subject at all, which caused the outcry that ensued... she argued for equality of education for both sexes... and co-education. It was a rational plea for a rational basis to the relation between the sexes... Its chief object was to show that women were not the playthings of men but ought to be their equal partners, which they could be only if they were educated in the same way" (PMM 242).

"While the American statesman Aaron Burr declared 'your sex has in her an able advocate... a work of genius' (and John Adams teased his wife, Abigail, for being a 'Disciple of Wollstonecraft!') Horace Walpole's reaction was more typical. He called her a 'hyena in petticoats'" (New York Times). "She was the first woman to articulate publicly a request for women's suffrage and coequal education... Although Wollstonecraft is best known as a feminist thinker, her philosophies are not limited to women's issues... Wollstonecraft advocates liberty and equality for all humanity. Advancing arguments for political rights, she argues for the removal of traditional injustices of rank, property, class, and gender... The key to freedom lies in the reasoning individual conscience, not in laws or dogma... Wollstonecraft adamantly asserts that education inculcating reason will eventually emancipate all humankind from all forms of servitude (political, sexual, religious, or economic)" (Great Thinkers of the Western World, 322-327).

Volume One was the only volume published. Windle A5a. ESTC T50903. Goldsmiths 15366. CBEL II:656.

WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects. London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1792. Octavo, period-style full brown tree calf, elaborately gilt-decorated spine and covers, marbled endpapers. Housed in a custom clamshell box.

Light foxing to text, mainly to preliminaries, binding fine. A beautifully bound copy, scarce and desirable.

Introduction

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects was published in January 1792 by British philosopher and women's rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft. It stands as one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy, emerging during a period of revolutionary political thought across Europe. Wollstonecraft was specifically prompted to write this groundbreaking text after reading Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's 1791 report to the French National Assembly, which stated that women should only receive domestic education rather than public education reserved for men¹². She even dedicated her work to Talleyrand-Périgord, stating in her dedication that "my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue"².

The book was written against the tumultuous backdrop of the French Revolution and the debates it sparked in Britain. This period, known as the Revolution controversy, saw British political commentators addressing topics ranging from representative government to human rights and the separation of church and state¹. Wollstonecraft had already entered this political discourse in 1790 with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, a response to Edmund Burke's conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France*¹. While Burke argued against citizens' right to revolt against their government, Wollstonecraft countered that rights should be conferred because they are reasonable and just, regardless of their basis in tradition¹.

In this intellectual climate, Wollstonecraft hurried to complete *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a direct response to ongoing events, intending to write a more thoughtful second volume but dying before completing it¹. Her work fundamentally challenged the prevailing notion that women should be treated as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, arguing instead that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men¹.

The Author

Mary Wollstonecraft was born on April 27, 1759, in Spitalfields, London, the second of seven children in a family that experienced financial and social decline throughout her childhood³. Unlike her brother Edward, who received a formal education and became a lawyer, Wollstonecraft's education was somewhat haphazard, though not entirely unusual for someone of her sex and position at that time³. Despite these limitations, she developed a true command of the Bible, gained knowledge of ancient philosophers (partly through her acquaintance with Thomas Taylor, a famed translator of Plato), and was familiar with early modern sources such as Shakespeare and Milton³.

Given her circumstances as a woman from an impecunious family, Wollstonecraft's prospects were limited. She worked successively as a lady's companion, a schoolteacher, and a governess³. In 1778, she was engaged as a companion to a Mrs. Dawson in Bath, returning home in 1781 to nurse her ailing mother until her death in 1782³. Following this, Wollstonecraft experienced several emotionally difficult episodes, including dramatically intervening in her sister Eliza's

marriage by taking her away from her husband and leaving her infant daughter behind (who later died)³.

In 1784, Wollstonecraft established a school with her sisters and friend Fanny Blood in Newington Green, where she met the moral and political thinker Reverend Richard Price, head of Newington's thriving Dissenting community³. This was a crucial encounter for Wollstonecraft, as she later rose to Price's defense in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), and through connections to this community, she gained an introduction to her future publisher, friend, and patron, Joseph Johnson³.

Wollstonecraft's personal life was marked by unconventional choices that later became fodder for critics. After her death in 1797 following childbirth complications, her husband William Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, an intimate account of Wollstonecraft's life that revealed details of an illegitimate pregnancy and multiple suicide attempts¹⁰. Though Godwin's intentions were to provide an honest portrayal of his late wife, the memoir was poorly received and contributed to a decline in Wollstonecraft's reputation in the fifty years following her death¹⁰.

Why this is a Canonical Book

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman deserves its place in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First, it represents one of the earliest articulations of women's equality and their need for civil and political rights, ideas that would eventually become central to American democratic values⁴. Wollstonecraft's argument that women are entitled to an equal education aligns with America's eventual embrace of universal education and equal opportunity⁸.

The work is fundamentally built on principles that would become cornerstones of American governance: equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness through rational self-improvement. Wollstonecraft's insistence that women be considered "rational creatures" whose "first object of ambition ought to be to obtain a character as a human Being" resonates with America's founding principles of natural rights and human dignity¹⁰. Her assertion that "it is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world" reflects America's commitment to justice as a foundational value⁵.

Moreover, Wollstonecraft's work had significant impact on advocates for women's rights in the nineteenth century, particularly influencing the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, which produced the Declaration of Sentiments laying out the aims of the women's suffrage movement in the United States¹. This direct line of influence demonstrates how her ideas helped shape one of America's most important social and political movements.

The book also embodies the spirit of reasoned dissent that characterizes American political discourse. Wollstonecraft's willingness to challenge established authority and advocate for change based on rational argument rather than tradition exemplifies the American tradition of critical engagement with social and political norms¹. Her work represents the kind of intellectual courage that has driven American progress throughout its history.

Finally, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* addresses themes of universal human rights that transcend national boundaries but have found particular resonance in American culture and governance. Wollstonecraft's vision of a society where individuals are judged by their character and abilities rather than their sex aligns with America's aspirational commitment to meritocracy and equal opportunity⁹.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves."⁵

This quote encapsulates Wollstonecraft's core argument about women's autonomy and self-determination. Rather than seeking dominance over men, she advocates for women's control over their own lives and destinies. This remains profoundly relevant today as societies continue to grapple with issues of bodily autonomy, economic independence, and personal agency for women. The quote reminds us that feminism at its heart is about self-determination rather than power over others, a distinction that remains important in contemporary discourse about gender equality.

2. "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience."⁵

This statement powerfully connects education to liberation, suggesting that intellectual development is the key to women's emancipation from unquestioning submission. In our current era, where access to education for girls and women remains uneven globally, this quote underscores the transformative power of knowledge. It also speaks to the broader value of critical thinking in a democratic society, where informed citizenship rather than "blind obedience" is essential for functional governance.

3. "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners - time to restore to them their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world."⁵

This call to action remains relevant as societies continue to work toward gender equality. The quote emphasizes women's agency in their own liberation and their capacity to transform not just their own lives but society as a whole. It speaks to the ongoing work of challenging gender norms and expectations while affirming women's full humanity and potential contribution to social progress.

4. "My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone."⁵

This quote challenges the infantilization of women that persists in various forms today. Wollstonecraft's insistence on treating women as rational beings capable of serious thought and action remains relevant in a world where women's intellectual contributions are still sometimes

undervalued or dismissed. It reminds us that genuine respect means engaging with women's ideas and capabilities rather than focusing on superficial attributes.

5. "It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men."[5](#)

This statement recognizes the connection between economic independence and moral agency. Wollstonecraft understood that financial dependence creates power imbalances that compromise autonomy and ethical choice. Today, as women continue to face economic disparities and financial vulnerability, this insight remains crucial to understanding the structural dimensions of gender inequality and the importance of economic empowerment for full participation in society.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Necessity of Equal Education

Wollstonecraft's central argument is that women are entitled to an education equal to that of men, one that develops their rational faculties rather than merely ornamental accomplishments[8](#). She contends that the apparent intellectual differences between men and women are the result of differential education, not inherent capacity[9](#). This education should align with women's position in society as mothers, housewives, and laborers, enabling them to fulfill these roles more effectively while also developing as complete human beings[8](#). Wollstonecraft argues that with proper education, women could become true "companions" to their husbands rather than mere subordinates, benefiting all of society[8](#). This revolutionary idea challenged the prevailing notion that women's education should be limited to domestic skills and superficial accomplishments.

2. Reason as the Path to Virtue and Equality

Wollstonecraft emphasizes the development of reason as essential for both sexes to achieve virtue and fulfill their duties as citizens and human beings[6](#). She argues that God created men and women and endowed them both with immortal souls; thus, both sexes are capable of reason[6](#). Women must develop reason to be effective parents and to develop virtue, which will suppress tyrannical impulses and free them from their shackles[6](#). This focus on rationality as the basis for moral development and social equality represents a direct challenge to prevailing views that women were primarily emotional beings whose value lay in their sensibility rather than their rational capacity.

3. The Critique of Artificial Femininity

Throughout the work, Wollstonecraft criticizes the artificial construction of femininity that emphasizes beauty, delicacy, and emotional sensitivity at the expense of intellectual and moral development[5](#). She famously writes, "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison"[5](#). This critique extends to the education system that cultivates these qualities in women, arguing that such an approach renders women "weak, artificial beings" who are unable to fulfill

their potential as human beings⁵. This analysis of how gender is socially constructed anticipated much later feminist thought.

4. Marriage as Friendship

Wollstonecraft reconceptualizes marriage not as a relationship of dominance and submission but as a friendship between equals⁶. She argues that women educated in reason would make better companions to their husbands and better mothers to their children⁹. This vision of marriage based on mutual respect and intellectual compatibility challenged the prevailing view of marriage as primarily an economic arrangement or a relationship of male authority and female obedience. Her statement that "The most holy band of society is friendship" reflects this elevation of companionate marriage over relationships based on transitory passion or economic necessity⁵.

5. Class Analysis and Critique of Privilege

While primarily focused on gender, Wollstonecraft also offers a class analysis, criticizing the wealthy for their "false-refinement, immorality, and vanity" and describing them as "weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner [who] undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society"¹. She argues from a middle-class perspective, frequently praising modesty and industry as virtues associated with the middle class¹. This intersectional approach, considering how class and gender interact, was ahead of its time and anticipated later feminist analyses of how different forms of privilege and oppression interact.

Three Major Controversies

1. Radical Challenge to Gender Norms

Wollstonecraft's work provoked significant controversy by challenging fundamental assumptions about gender roles in 18th-century society. Critics were alarmed by her call for a "revolution in female manners" and her assertion that women should have equal access to education and potentially even participation in civil government¹⁰. The Monthly Review, while relatively fair in its assessment, explicitly stated: "We do not, however, so zealously adopt Miss W.'s plan for a REVOLUTION in female education" and "We do not see, that the condition or the character of women would be improved, by assuming an active part in civil government"¹⁰. Even before the publication of Godwin's controversial memoir, critics were labeling her ideas as "dangerous" and "absurd"¹⁰. The Gentleman's Magazine published a harsh review in 1791 exclaiming, "The rights of men asserted by a fair lady!" as if the very idea was shocking, and claimed they could not "find a shadow of reason in her declamation"¹⁰. This reaction reveals how threatening Wollstonecraft's ideas were to the established gender order of her time.

2. Reception After Godwin's Memoir

The publication of William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798, the year after Wollstonecraft's death, sparked intense controversy by revealing

intimate details of her life, including an illegitimate pregnancy and multiple suicide attempts¹⁰. Though Godwin intended to provide an honest portrayal of his late wife, the memoir was poorly received and led to widespread criticism of Wollstonecraft's personal choices¹⁰. This controversy significantly damaged her reputation, and "in the fifty years following her death, most of the literary world deemed her work unsuitable"¹⁰. This reaction illustrates how women's ideas were often judged in relation to their personal conduct rather than on their own merits, a double standard that has persisted in various forms. However, recent scholarship suggests that the decline in Wollstonecraft's reputation was more complex than previously thought, with the process of labeling her ideas as "dangerously radical" beginning well before the memoir's publication¹⁰.

3. Ambiguity on Complete Gender Equality

A more nuanced controversy surrounds Wollstonecraft's position on complete gender equality. While she called for equality in education and morality, "she does not explicitly state that men and women are equal"¹. This ambiguity has made it difficult for some scholars to classify Wollstonecraft as a modern feminist, as the word itself did not emerge until decades after her death¹. Her national plan for education retained class distinctions, suggesting different educational paths for different social classes, with only "young people of superior abilities, or fortune" receiving advanced education in languages, science, history, and politics¹. This complexity in her thought has led to ongoing debates about how to interpret her work in relation to contemporary feminism. Some scholars have characterized her as the "original 'bad feminist'" because her ideas don't always align neatly with later feminist thought⁴. This controversy reflects broader tensions within feminist theory about how to interpret historical texts that were progressive for their time but may contain elements that seem contradictory or limited from a contemporary perspective.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* because it provides crucial historical context for understanding the ongoing struggle for gender equality in our society. As one of the earliest and most eloquent articulations of women's rights as human rights, this work helps us trace the intellectual lineage of ideas that have shaped American democracy and social progress. Wollstonecraft's arguments for women's education, rational development, and full participation in society remain relevant as we continue to work toward realizing the promise of equality for all citizens.

The book challenges readers to examine the foundations of their own beliefs about gender, education, and social organization. By engaging with Wollstonecraft's radical (for her time) ideas, Americans can gain perspective on how far we have come in advancing gender equality and how much work remains to be done. Her insistence that social progress depends on recognizing the full humanity and potential of all people resonates with America's highest aspirations as a nation committed to liberty and justice for all.

Moreover, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* demonstrates the power of reasoned argument to challenge entrenched social hierarchies and promote positive change. In an era of polarized

political discourse, Wollstonecraft's example of engaging directly with the ideas of her opponents and making a case based on principles of human dignity and rational thought provides a model for civic engagement that transcends partisan divisions.

Finally, this book reminds us that the struggle for equality has never been easy or straightforward. Wollstonecraft faced significant criticism during her lifetime, and her reputation suffered further after her death. Yet her ideas endured and eventually helped inspire movements that transformed society. For Americans committed to continuing the work of building a more perfect union, Wollstonecraft's courage, intellectual rigor, and unwavering commitment to human dignity offer both inspiration and practical guidance. Her vision of a society where all individuals can develop their rational capacities and contribute meaningfully to the common good remains as compelling today as it was in 1792.

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