



THE FEMINIST RESPONSES TO MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: A READING

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ABSTRACT

According to the well-known study on Wollstonecraft's reception in the early 20th century, some feminists embraced her unusual life experience as a personal model for their own experiments with, and literary reflections on, love, sex, and marriage. She frequently used the first-person plural to refer to herself as a part of the greater community of women who endure patriarchal oppression in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. There is evidence that many intellectuals regarded Wollstonecraft's contributions to modern women largely from a biographical and literary standpoint. Examples include Virginia Woolf, Ruth Benedict, and Emma Goldman. Numerous important biographical studies of Wollstonecraft's life and literary critiques of her writing have been produced since the 1970s. The second wave of feminist researchers, however, were undoubtedly most influenced by this symbolic interpretation of Wollstonecraft as a personal figure. In this research paper, we aim to investigate the feminist theories of Wollstonecraft as well as her experiments with gender, life, marriage, literature, and society.

KEYWORDS: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft, Feminism, Radical Feminist, Modern Feminism

INTRODUCTION

What can be said about something that we presently consider to be feminist philosophy if, properly speaking, feminism did not exist in the eighteenth century? The question can be posed because feminist thought has a long history, as Janes herself acknowledges in her analysis of Mary Astell's seventeenth-century essay, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (Part I, 1694). Astell was putting feminist theory into practise when she suggested creating a 'Retirement' where 'women' may serve God and advance their minds (the two goals having a radical interchangeability). She foreshadows Mary Wollstonecraft's parallel appeal to God in her case by stating that her religious views form the core of her wish to acknowledge women as sensible human beings in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are supported by the fact that they are human beings, just like men, and that they were put here to develop their faculties.

When Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published at the beginning of 1792, it is generally believed that it was met with shock, horror, and mockery. The forces of reaction allegedly gathered to oppose this audacious attempt to assert women's equality and spattered the Amazon with their pens. Her biographers have argued time and time again that the work's first evaluations and recorded responses were overwhelmingly positive, but this has had no effect on the widespread misperception. The causes of the academic ineffectiveness are plain to see. Later in the decade, Wollstonecraft came under fire from the media, and for most of the nineteenth century, feminists used her name as proof of the terrible effects of female liberation. The quiet approval of 1792 was completely outnumbered by the clamorous of 1798 in terms of both intensity and duration. Since the majority of authors who have written about Wollstonecraft and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are primarily focused on the slow progress of female emancipation, they anticipate a negative reaction to her and her work and show little to no interest in the oddities of late eighteenth-century social thought.



THOUGHTS ON WOLLSTONECRAFT'S FEMINISM

The emphasis on a person's potential for logical self-improvement and spiritual contemplation, however, was replaced by Wollstonecraft, ushering in a new era of feminist ideology that was founded on Enlightenment rights and called for a larger social shift in the status of women. The feminist theory did, however, enter a new phase with the work of Wollstonecraft, shifting from a focus on the ability of the individual for logical self-improvement and spiritual contemplation to an Enlightenment rights-based argument for a larger social transformation in the status of women.

The possession of the political clout to further the egalitarian change of the home, community, and state, Wollstonecraft targeted many of her assertions in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* at enfranchised males. She has been accused of misogyny and male identification by some academics due to her harsh criticisms of the degraded social status of women in her era, her general demonstration of herself as a unique exception to this rule, and her advocacy for women's equality in the pursuit of the same moral standards as men. In the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Poovey even went so far as to say that she “*rejected a female speaking voice*” (1984).

However, as we have seen, Wollstonecraft frequently addressed other women in the first person, empathising with their concerns and interests. In the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she regularly utilised the first-person plural to identify herself as a member of the larger community of women who experience patriarchal injustice: “*we might as well never have been born, unless it were necessary that we should be created to enable man to acquire the noble privilege of reason,*” she pointed out with dark humor (89). This first-person plural formulation foreshadows Wollstonecraft's final novel's ‘*radical feminist*’ shift, in which the middle-class Maria comes to understand the anguish of the working-class Jemima by hearing her personal account of experiencing patriarchal oppression all of her life: “*thinking of Jemima's peculiar fate and her own, she was led to consider the oppressed state of women, and to lament that she had given birth to a daughter*” (Wollstonecraft [1798] 1994; Lorch 1990). Taylor has stressed the psychological necessity of this sense of solidarity—more especially, the identification of the individual with group oppression—for the emergence of any social movement to address collective injustice (2003, 238–239).

The 1846 state-level legislative petition and the 1848 Seneca Falls public conference for women's rights in upstate New York marked the beginning of organised (formal, public, and collective) feminism in the nineteenth century (Ginzberg 2005). The women's political clubs of the liberal stage of the French Revolution marked the unofficial beginning of modern feminist action, but Robespierre put an end to it (Landes 1988). In early to mid-nineteenth-century American culture, abolitionist, prohibition, and benevolent societies also served as a platform for women's innovative engagement in social change and informal politics. In France, Britain, Germany, and the United States, feminist factions emerged within the socialist and anarchist movements. Women's rights movements from Britain to Russia to Chile were frequently centred around these educational causes, and there were founding of female academies, colleges, and universities as well as a push for coeducational access to men's institutions of higher learning (Stites [1978] 1991; Tagle 2005). Feminist ideas quickly spread through intricate global organisations of like-minded women and men from the 1830s through the 1860s (Anderson 2000). By the 1870s and 1880s, a number of feminist organisations were thriving, including the National Woman Suffrage Association in the United States and indigenous women's reading groups in Maharashtra (Bykov 1911; Deshpande 2008).

In France, Germany, Britain and the United States, feminist factions emerged within the socialist and anarchist movements. Initiations of female academies, colleges, and in the year 1900, some national feminist organisations had joined global networks, including the International Women's Suffrage Association (Holton 2010). Despite not being coined until 1870 in France, the word ‘*feminist*’ spread quickly around the world (Offen 2000, 19–20). It began to be used as a broad term to encompass many justifications and forms of activity against patriarchy and in favour of the welfare of women as a whole (Offen 2010, 16).

El Movimiento Feminista was the title of Elvira Lopez's doctoral dissertation on the global expansion of feminism, which she wrote in Argentina in 1901. She traced the movement's philosophical roots to ‘*Inglatera*,’ where Wollstonecraft, Mary Astell, and Saint Thomas More were prominent figures. She then described how its ideas expanded to the United States and other countries (Lopez 1901, 206). By 1914, the word ‘*feminism*’ had taken over as the preferred name for advocacy on behalf of women, including the now-universal fight for women's suffrage (Cott 1987, 3, 14).

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman appeared in five further English editions in London and New York in the first half of the nineteenth century after being completely translated into French, German, Dutch, and Danish within a decade of its publication in 1792 and excerpted in a Spanish magazine (Kitts 1994; Botting 2013a). In preparation for their campaign to add women's suffrage in the fifteenth amendment to the United States constitution, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton published the complete passage in their feminist newspaper in 1869. Constitution (Botting and Carey 2004). Due to the book's 100th anniversary, two rival editions with forewords by Englishwomen Millicent Fawcett and Elizabeth Robins Pennell were published. Between 1890 and 1892, their editions were printed numerous times in London and New York; copies of each were autographed and donated to the American Library of Congress by women's suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt. New translations into German by Bertha Pappenheim in 1899 and



the first translation into Czech by Anna Holmová in 1904 came after them. Comparative analysis of the forewords to the centennial-era editions of the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* indicates the lasting power of Wollstonecraft's first-person style of argumentation for feminists' self-understandings of their movement.

FIVE INTRODUCTIONS TO CENTENNIAL EDITIONS OF A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

A draught of the introduction to a never-finished centennial edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written by Olive Schreiner, the South African author best known for her 1883 feminist novel, *Story of an African Farm*. As Burdett has demonstrated, the colonial expatriate participated actively in Karl Pearson's '*Men's and Woman's Club*' in London in 1885 and 1886 (which was initially intended to be named after Wollstonecraft). She met publisher Walter Scott through Pearson's network. Scott urged the young feminist to present a fresh version of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* after learning about her desire to analyze the late Victorian '*sex question*' through theory (Burdett 1994). Schreiner spent three years working on the project before giving up in 1889. Although she began by reiterating the typical British Victorian criticism of Wollstonecraft's writing and contributions, her introduction swiftly shifted to a positive rehabilitation of the book's visionary grasp of the '*necessity*' of the '*woman's movement*' (Schreiner [1889] 1994, 190).

According to Schreiner, the author's own experiences as a woman served as the inspiration for the book's call for women's liberation: "*Being a woman, perhaps there was no necessity for her to see it; she knew it*" ([1889] 1994, 190). Her observations of black women in South Africa, who she said exemplified the '*primitive*' and organic foundations of the global female experience of their sex's subjugation, served as the essay's conclusion. Despite having a patronising image of these indigenous women as '*uncivilised*' due to her colonial upbringing, Schreiner opposed British feminists who denied black women the right to vote when the Union of South Africa was established in 1910.

Schreiner described her interactions with the neighbourhood black women as a form of feminist ethnography despite her preconceptions. By separating the first-person voices of herself and the indigenous women she interviewed, she aimed to maintain the cultural differences between them. She recalled, "*I have bent over a woman half flogged to death by her husband, and seen her rise, cut and bleeding, lay her child against her wounded breast, and go and kneel down silently before the grind-stone and begin to grind*" ([1889] 1994, 193).

She had a lengthy discussion with a black lady to better understand her '*deep*' resignation to patriarchal tyranny. She then translated her lengthy explanation. The interviewee's perspective on the black woman's dual burden of racial and sex-based subjugation was captured by Schreiner: "*we are dogs, we are dogs. There may perhaps be a good for the white women; I do not know; there is no good for the black*" ([1889] 1994, 193). The laments of Wollstonecraft and her imaginary alter ego Maria about the birth of women into dominance were mirrored in this African woman's voice as '*I*' and '*we*' statements. Schreiner regarded the black woman's grief as a symbol of the '*necessity*' of women's acquiescence to sexual dominance in primitive civilizations, in contrast to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*'s need for political reforms to combat such systemic injustice against women. Schreiner's introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* reflects Wollstonecraft's recognition of the rhetorical and methodological significance of employing the '*I*' and the '*we*' in recording women's experiences of denigration at the hands of males, despite its unsettling social Darwinist conclusion.

An academic biography written by Elizabeth Robins Pennell in 1884 defended Wollstonecraft from the popular Victorian British perception of her as a morally reprehensible proponent of free love. When Schreiner's introduction *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was left unfinished, she stepped in to finish it for publisher Walter Scott's 1891–1892 edition. First-person narrative was frequently utilised in Pennell's introduction to establish her authority in the expanding but still largely male-dominated field of scholarship on Wollstonecraft and the development of women's rights (1891, xxii). She also emphasised the transnational nature of the feminist movement from Wollstonecraft's time to the present by writing in the first person. Pennell inscribed the essay with her own location, Budapest, 1891, and highlighted Hungarian women's rights theorists who went back to the French Revolution.

Similar to how she did in her biography, Pennell recast Wollstonecraft as an Enlightenment Protestant in order to lessen the shock value of her views on women's human rights to a conservative audience: "*that woman, as a human being, has rights was but the inevitable conclusion of the then new philosophical theory, that 'man is born free,' which, as inevitably, had been developed from the premises of the Reformation*" (1891, viii). In her capacity as a biographer, she also saw the importance of reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as being based on the authority of Wollstonecraft's firsthand accounts of being a woman: "*had she not seen for herself the unspeakable misery caused by the intellectual and domestic degradation of women, she would not have been so quick to discern the flaw in the reasoning of Rousseau and his French and English disciples. Her book gains in force when it is realized how entirely her arguments and doctrines are based on experience*" (1891, viii). While she identified *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as the "*text book of the new generation of believers in women's rights,*" it was Pennell who distanced Mary Wollstonecraft from her contemporary feminist activists. She the others were those who, "*have failed to grasp the true meaning of the 'Vindication'*" (1891, xxii). Pennell's deft feminist language portrayed Wollstonecraft as providing women both a wider and more sensible choice,



implying that some feminists naively desired to avoid sexual difference or household roles entirely: “to live her own life, to follow her own profession, whether this was solely domestic or no” (1891, xxiii).

In her introduction, Pennell rehabilitated Wollstonecraft's biography as well as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's* arguments for Victorian readers. She utilised first-person narration sparingly to emphasise how well she understood the most contentious parts of Wollstonecraft's history, “As far as we can be certain,” she remarked that Wollstonecraft's friendship with Fanny Blood during her adolescence was her only “passionate love” much before she fell in love with Gilbert Imlay at the age of thirty-two (1891, xiv). Wollstonecraft mentioned, “I think . . . she was doing what she thought was right” residing with Imlay without having a religious ceremony like a marriage (1891, xv). After Imlay abandoned her for another woman, Pennell finally said, “I know of nothing so terrible in fiction as her second attempt at suicide” (1891, xvi). Pennell's interpretation of the psychological underpinnings of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's* arguments served as a template for contemporary research on Wollstonecraft, which frequently takes the form of intellectual or contextual biographies (Todd 2000, Taylor 2003, Gordon 2005).

The centennial edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1890 by Millicent Fawcett owes a tribute to Pennell's 1884 biography of Wollstonecraft. Similarly, she described Wollstonecraft as a result of the Reformation and rights-based Enlightenment views. She nevertheless purposefully sidestepped the Victorian debates concerning Wollstonecraft's amorous preferences by citing the authority of modern biographical studies: “the facts of Mary Wollstonecraft's life are now so well known through the biographies of Mr. Kegan Paul and Mrs. Pennell, and her memory has been so thoroughly vindicated from the contumely that was at one time heaped upon it, that I do not propose to dwell upon her personal history” (1890).

Fawcett instead examined *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's* claims and their impact on the women's rights movement: “I have here endeavored to consider the character of the initiative which she gave to the women's rights movement in England, and I find that she stamped upon it from the outset the word Duty, and has impressed it with a character that it has never since lost” (1890, 29–30). Fawcett symbolically connected her work for the ‘movement’ with the concepts of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* because she was the driving force behind the British women's suffrage movement. In addition, she skillfully highlighted Wollstonecraft's combination of ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ in her reading of the book to persuade the conservative members of her audience that it was morally necessary to support women's rights, especially the right to vote. She drew a comparison between the decency of ‘our time’ and the corrupt culture of the eighteenth century, which Wollstonecraft detested (1890). She asserted that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* should provide modern readers a ‘pleasing certainty’ of their moral integrity (1890).

While Fawcett, like Pennell, only seldom used the first person in her preface, she frequently cited *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's* first-person justifications: “I have already quoted her saying, ‘I do not want women to have power over men, but over themselves’” (1890, 29). Fawcett succeeded in identifying herself, her feminist ‘organisation,’ and her conservative culture with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's* thundering moral vindication of female self-governance through the use of such concentric circles of first-person argument. In the end, Fawcett transformed Wollstonecraft into a version of herself: she was “the basically womanly woman,” whose insightful thought foreshadowed the admirable Victorian preoccupation with making women's rights consistent with “the motherly and the wifely inclinations” (1890). Fawcett demonstrated her political savings by highlighting how *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's* imaginative devotion to women's suffrage, professions in medicine, and economic independence mesh well with marriage and family life both inside Wollstonecraft's work and in their ‘own time.’ Eberle observes that Fawcett was more direct than Pennell in linking the ‘movement’ for women's rights to Wollstonecraft's book, but she overlooks the fact that they both used a feminist rhetorical strategy to defend the importance of Wollstonecraft's life and ideals for their conservative cultures (2002).

A number of German studies of Wollstonecraft's life and work were inspired by the 100th anniversary of her passing, notably Bertha Pappenheim's piece *Das Frauenrecht* (1897) and her newly translated German version of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1899). Pappenheim was a pioneer in the fight for Jewish women's rights and is best known for establishing the Jüdischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands in 1904. Pappenheim is often referred to as ‘Anna O,’ a well-known early example of hysteria that was partially addressed by Freud and Brauer (the originator of the ‘talking cure’). She became a champion for women's rights as a result of her own struggles, particularly in the field of education. Her fascination in Wollstonecraft, whom she regarded as a sort of ‘mother’ figure for the German Jewish women's movement, was also sparked by this (Loentz 2007).

Pappenheim's version of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* contained a preface that discussed Wollstonecraft's biography and beliefs, making it just the second German translation of the book since Salzmann's translation in 1793–1744. In it, she portrayed Wollstonecraft as a wilderness prophetic voice who awoke women's collective knowledge of their rights and obligations as human beings: “the first woman who with overwhelming clarity awoke the consciousness in women— and also had the courage to voice— that women have rights, not assumed through raw force or custom, but rather human rights whose basis lies in irrefutable duties” (1899, xiii). She shared Fawcett's interpretation of Wollstonecraft, in which the author theorised both the moral and political means for emancipating women: “the means [Wollstonecraft] anticipated in achieving emancipation, freeing the soul of women, range from duty to law” (1899, xx).



She translated the treatise to make it more understandable, “*the definitions of women’s duties and rights*” with the ‘*vibrant wish*’ that Wollstonecraft would have “*encounter a better overall understanding today than they ever could one hundred years ago*” (1899, xx). Pappenheim wrote about the treatise for women’s legacies in the first person plural, saying, “*when we consider the importance of its doctrines, and the eminence of genius it displays, it seems not very improbably that it will be read as long as the English language endures*” (1899, xii). Pappenheim emphasised, as did Fawcett, that Wollstonecraft did not promote women’s rights without highlighting their related home responsibilities. She strangely described Wollstonecraft, who argued against gendered qualities and advocated for a “*revolution in female manners*” (210) that would acknowledge the equality of morality between the sexes—as a “*a woman, lovely in her person, and in the best and most engaging sense, feminine in her manners*” (1899, xiii). Pappenheim purposefully avoided talking about Wollstonecraft’s avant-garde relationships with Gilbert Imlay and William Godwin, mentioning only how her relationship with Henry Fuseli “*awake her womanly senses*” without mentioning the scandal that followed her purported infatuation with this married man (1899, xiv).

Pappenheim expressed the significance of Wollstonecraft’s life and work in allegorical terms that would particularly appeal to the typical German ladies of her time by sparingly drawing from Godwin’s *Memoirs* in her editorial commentary on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft survived a challenging upbringing to declare her female identity as a woman while maintaining her independence. In their roles as forerunners of feminist groups, Pappenheim and Fawcett frequently used the political symbolism of Wollstonecraft’s ‘*womanly*’ persona to advance their own causes. To allay public concerns and misunderstandings about their intention to change traditional gender roles along the more egalitarian lines envisioned in the *Rights of Woman*, they employed Wollstonecraft as the archetypal feminine feminist. In 1904, the Czech translator Anna Holmová brought Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to Prague. She portrayed Wollstonecraft as more of a timeless emotional touchstone than a current theoretical resource for feminist reform in Austria-Hungary, especially in light of the lively philosophical reception of John Stuart Mill’s *Subjection of Women* (1869) by Czech feminists in the 1880s and 1890s (Feinberg 2006, 22–23). She shared Schreiner’s interpretation of the *Rights of Woman*, seeing it as a manifestation of Wollstonecraft’s lived, and ‘*poignantly felt,*’ personal experiences: “*but for Wollstonecraft her ideas are a direct expression of the content of her heart; they are not borrowed but rather poignantly felt. Their significance stands out clearly, when we consider their uniqueness in the course of life back then*” (Holmová 1904, vi). Holmová astutely observed that this methodological approach to feminism, specifically Wollstonecraft’s preoccupation with include the voices and experiences of women in her justifications for human rights, was the source of her well-known critique of Rousseau. It ‘*pains*’ Wollstonecraft, claims Holmová, that Rousseau “*does not speak to women and that he does not even ask of them to realize the task of liberation, that he proclaims*” (Holmová 1904, xi). The great contribution Wollstonecraft made to feminism was her intellectual interest in women’s subjective experiences of oppression and longing for freedom from it, which Holmová here makes apparent.

In order to put her modern readers in a sympathetic but remote relationship with the romantically compelling but philosophically out-of-date Wollstonecraft, Holmová employed the first person plural. She recognised Wollstonecraft’s “*Defense of Women’s Rights . . . contains the entire program of feminism, in fact the whole ideological and emotional foundation, from which grows the emancipation effort. It brought its author fame in her homeland and soon, after being translated into other languages, also in other European countries*” (1904, v). She still confined the treatise’s applicability to ‘*our era,*’ claiming that it was ‘*not a revelation*’ in that time (1904, v). The arguments made by Wollstonecraft for women’s rights were now intellectually archaic and politically pointless because they accurately captured the “*rationalistic religion and rationalistic philosophy of her time*” (1904, vi).

Holmová came to the conclusion that Wollstonecraft’s book’s enduring significance resided less in its ‘*philosophical framework*’ and more in its emotional influence over the ‘*sensibility*’ of its modern feminist readers “*With almost an elementary force stands out the sense that a change, a renewal, is necessary,— and in this immediacy, in this desire, lies the significance of this book, which makes up for its logical and stylistic imperfections. It isolates the author from her [female] contemporaries, but connects her with the striving and longing woman of today, who disagrees with the old ways and who demands freedom to try and to look for new ways*” (1904, xvi). The reception of Wollstonecraft at the turn of the century was well-captured by Holmová. New editions of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* were upheld in cities from New York and London to Dresden and Prague as a personal and political emblem of the feminist movement’s beginnings and the ongoing battle of women to negotiate the standards of womanhood and women’s rights.

CONCLUSION

A variety of feminists used Wollstonecraft’s atypical life experience as a personal model for their own experimentation in, and literary reflections on, love, sex, and marriage, as shown by the well-known study on her reception in the early twentieth century. There is a tone of proof that many intellectuals, like Emma Goldman, Ruth Benedict, and Virginia Woolf, read Wollstonecraft’s contributions to modern women primarily from a biographical and literary perspective. Since the 1970s, various significant biographical studies of Wollstonecraft’s life and literary analyses of her work have been published. However, it was this symbolic



iteration of Wollstonecraft as a personal icon that was most certainly the most influential on feminist researchers of the second wave. But as the comparison of the forewords to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* editions from the centenary era shows, we should not ignore the political and philosophical influence of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* on first-wave feminists. The clever rhetoric and first-person argumentation of the essay served as a model for nineteenth-century feminists' own observations on how, for the most downtrodden half of the species, the personal is particularly political. Every generation of feminists has gone back to reexamine Wollstonecraft in an effort to reinterpret her significance for the present. In their serious dedication to researching Wollstonecraft's life and unique style of argumentation for their social movements, first- and second-wave feminists frequently missed her sense of humour. Her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* might provide the next generation of women's rights activists with a surprisingly amusing starting point for their new style of mimetic, sardonic, and self-referential social criticism.

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