

coarseness and vulgarity in all the proceedings of the assembly and of all their instructors. Their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal.

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### MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

The first of the many published replies to Burke's *Reflections* was by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), who appears elsewhere in this anthology as author of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the landmark work in the history of feminism, and *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). Toward the end of 1790, when Burke's *Reflections* came out, she was working in London as a writer and translator for the radical publisher Joseph Johnson. Reading Burke, she was outraged at the weakness of his arguments and the exaggerated rhetoric with which he depicted the revolutionists as violators of royalty and womanhood. Always a rapid writer, she composed her reply, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in a matter of days, and Johnson's printer set it in type as fast as the sheets of manuscript were turned in. It was published anonymously in November less than a month after Burke's *Reflections* first appeared, and a second edition (the time with her name on the title page) was called for almost immediately.

#### From 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 Honorable Edmund Burke

Sir,

is 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,<sup>1</sup> nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments, and imply that 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 acceptance 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 showered 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 not a very 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 nature of your mind, that I am ready to call it amiable, and separate the public from the private character.

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 foot-path;"<sup>2</sup> but, attacking the foundation of your opinions, I shall leave the superstructure to find a center of gravity on which it may lean till some strong blast puffs it into the air; or your teeming fancy, which the ripening judgment of sixty years has not tamed, produces another Chinese erection,<sup>3</sup> to stare, at every turn, the plain country people in the face, who bluntly call such an airy edifice—a folly.

The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact.

Liberty, in this simple, unsophisticated sense, I acknowledge, is a fair idea that has never yet received a form in the various governments that have been established on our beautiful globe; the demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men, and to fence round with legal pomp laws that war with justice. But that it results from the eternal foundation of right—from immutable truth—who will presume to deny, that