The Rights of Woman
Gender in Robert Burns’s Enlightenment
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WHAT IS A GALLERY GATEWAY?

Welcome to the Gallery Gateway for The Rosenbach’s exhibition *The Rights of Woman: Gender in Robert Burns’s Enlightenment*. This Gallery Gateway provides all of the content presented on-site in The Rosenbach’s exhibition galleries in an easily-accessible, easy-to-print online format.

The Gallery Gateway is a hybrid of a traditional museum exhibition catalogue and digital exhibitions that have become popular in recent years. The Gateway presents a large amount of visual and text-based content in a PDF format that makes exhibition content as accessible as possible. The document can be viewed online or downloaded to a personal device for viewing or printing.

*The purpose of the Gallery Gateway is to make exhibition content available to those who cannot visit The Rosenbach in person and to create a permanent record of the information shared in the exhibition.*

The Rosenbach will make Gallery Gateways for its exhibitions available in its Online Exhibition Portal at rosenbach.org/gallery-gateway. You will also find other special features there, including sound effects for web listening, digital interactives, graphics from the gallery, interviews, and other video content. Check the portal for other features as more Gallery Gateways go live.

HOW TO USE THE GALLERY GATEWAY

**View the Artifacts**
- Explore photos of objects included in the exhibition.

**Read the Text**
- Engage with the interpretive text that accompanies artifacts on display in the exhibition.

**Consider a Visit!**
- Discover The Rosenbach through research, tours, and programs.
Robert Burns had a complex relationship with the women in his life. He wrote legendary love poetry, engaged in spirited intellectual dialogue with female thinkers, and damaged the opportunity and social mobility of some women by his privileged approach to intimate relationships. This pop-up exhibition, designed to accompany The Rosenbach's Burns Night 2020 celebrations, places Burns’s satirical poem “The Rights of Woman” of 1792 in conversation with two other literary and philosophical works published the same year: Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man, Part the Second and Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. By examining these touchstone literary and scholarly achievements of the Enlightenment, and by analyzing Burns’s correspondence with noted poet and social activist Helen Maria Williams, The Rights of Woman examines the transformational power of the Enlightenment’s promise of human dignity and universal rights.
Robert Burns
in 2020

The Rosenbach holds one of the world’s great collections of rare books and manuscripts connected to the life, work, and legacy of Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland. Every year, the institution commemorates Burns’s artistic achievements by holding a Burns Night celebration, as do many other organizations around the world. As part of The Rosenbach’s January 25, 2020, Burns Night festivities, the institution prepared a small, pop-up exhibition to consider Burns’s attitudes toward women’s rights at the end of the eighteenth century—during the Age of Enlightenment and Revolutions, when new discourses about liberty and equality reshaped society, politics, and culture in both Europe and North America.

Drawing from The Rosenbach’s rich collection of Burns materials as well as special items on loan from partner institutions in Philadelphia, The Rights of Woman engages artifacts from the life and times of Robert Burns to place the poet’s political and social attitudes in the context of Enlightenment thought. The exhibition centers on The Rosenbach’s manuscript of Burns’s poem “The Rights of Woman,” which he composed as a satirical response to the growing calls for female liberty in the late 1700s. The purpose of the exhibition is not to diminish Burns’s achievements as an artist but rather to unlock the intellectual history of his age, offering perspectives on his life and work especially applicable to our own era of civic engagement and political self-actualization.

Please enjoy engaging with the artifacts and interpretive texts that you will find in the coming pages. Then, if you would like to continue your exploration of The Rosenbach’s collection, please make use of our online resources and contact our research library for more information.
THE

RIGHTS

of WOMAN

Gender in Robert Burns’s Enlightenment
In 1792, Robert Burns wrote a poem making light of the idea of women’s rights.

That year, France was in the throes of revolution, the United States’ Constitution and Bill of Rights had recently been ratified, and ideals of liberty and equality challenged the old social order. In “The Rights of Woman,” Burns diminished the potential of women as political actors. But in the Age of Revolution, he and other men had good reason to take notice of women’s increasing power in civic life.

In 1792—the very year that Burns authored his casual dismissal of women’s rights—English writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The working women of Paris had not long before taken up arms and marched to the Palace of Versailles in revolutionary fervor. The idea of equal rights held potential to transform gender relationships. Could it be that all people regardless of gender were created equal?

Robert Burns had complex relationships with the women in his life. He wrote legendary love poetry, engaged in spirited intellectual dialogue with women, and damaged the opportunity and social mobility of some women by his privileged approach to intimate relationships.

When honoring Burns’s cultural legacy, it is vital to consider his views on civil liberties, women’s rights, and gender relationships. Explore this gallery to learn more about gender in the Age of Enlightenment.

Why were women claiming new political influence in the late 1700s? How should we assess Burns’s legacy in light of his view of women’s political agency? What lessons does Burns’s 1792 poem offer about gender and politics in 2020? What obstacles do women face in achieving true civic equality in our time?

Share your thoughts with us on social media! @TheRosenbach #RightsOfWoman #BurnsNight2020
1. Thomas Paine (1737–1809), Rights of man; part the second. Combining principle and practice
London: H.D. Symonds, 1792
A 792r

The Mosaic account of the creation, whether taken as divine authority, or merely historical, is fully up to this point, the unity or equality of man. The expressions admit of no controversy. “And God said, Let us make man in our image. In the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” The distinction of the sexes is pointed out, but no other distinction is even implied.

No author played a more important role in fomenting revolutionary spirit on both sides of the Atlantic than did Thomas Paine, most famous for his pamphlet Common Sense, which stoked support for the independence movement in what became the United States in 1776. Paine’s international reputation increased in the years following the American Revolution, and in 1791/1792 he published a two-part treatise called Rights of Man, which challenged the legitimacy of monarchies and encouraged revolution when governments fail to take care of their people.

Yet women’s rights did not figure prominently in Paine’s calls for liberty. A famous deist whose views on Christianity were generally derogatory, in the first part of Rights of Man Paine used scriptural evidence (as quoted in italics above) to point out that gender distinctions were mentioned in the Bible whereas socioeconomic and political hierarchies were not. While he succeeded in articulating the power of political equality and argued for revolutionary change in the social order, Thomas Paine fell short in explicitly and passionately calling for women’s civil rights, drawing on the very religious stories he degraded to highlight gender distinction.

Great Britain, 1792
EL2. B967 MS1

While Europe’s eye is fix’d on mighty things,
The fate of Empires and the fall of Kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his Plan,
And even children lisp The Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
*The Rights of Woman claim some small attention.*

By 1792, Europe was experiencing revolution as the French people demanded their universal rights, and arguments for political rights for women, while controversial, were entering the mainstream of civic discourse across Europe and America. Burns’s poem “The Rights of Woman” offered his satirical opinion on women’s rights.

Burns wrote this poem to be read by Louise Fontenelle, an acclaimed London actress, at a theatrical benefit. In a letter accompanying the poem (a transcription of which is available in this gallery), Burns hailed Fontenelle for both her appearance and her talent: “Your charms as a woman would insure applause to the most indifferent Actress, and your theatrical talents would secure admiration to the plainest figure.”

Burns presented his poem as a lighthearted piece of evening entertainment, but the text also offers commentary on women’s civic status. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, also published 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the idea that women should concern themselves primarily with private family affairs: “Females, in fact, [are] denied all political privileges, and ... a civil existence.” Burns, an emerging political radical who probably corresponded with Wollstonecraft and was familiar with her work, nevertheless espoused attitudes toward gender that reinforced the status quo.
The Rights of Man. A Prologue.

While Virtue's eye is turn'd on mighty things,
The fate of Virtue, the fall of Man;
While guarded still the Patriot's path,
And even children talk of the Rights of Man,
And the mighty Duke just let me mention,
The Rights of Man claim some small attention.

First, in the hope inwardly connected,
One grand Right of Woman's Protection—
The tender flower that lulls its head, elate,
Half-life must fall before the blasts of Fate,
Lank in the earth, defeat its lovely form,
Until your shelter ward the unfolding storm.

Our second Right, but still, how is caution,
To keep that Right inviolate the fashion.
Each man of virtue has it in full right for him
And die before he wrongs A La Lozanne—
There was indeed in fact life hidden Spain
A time when rough rude Men had naughty ways.
Yet ev'n thus inviolate a Lady's heart.
Now, thank our stars, these Grecian times are o'er.
Now, will kind men—If you are all well too,
Most truly think and we are much the gainer,
Each constant mutual spirit, and our manners.

Fast night the third, and last, our last, and fastest,
That night to shifting torches to the market.
Which even the Rights of Ransom in our Freedom
Must fall before—his dear, dear admiration
In that alternate alone we love & more
And them that life of life, immortal Love!

Lips, tears, smiles, glances, arts, illustations, airs,
Against such a heart, what lasting change does?
When Beautiful Beauty joins with all her charms
Who is so weak at ease in rebel arms?

Then grace with kings, grace with cistati,
With bloody solemnity, I redemption
Let Majesty your first attention summon
Ah, says, "The Majesty of Women".
Madam,

in such a bad age as ours, those who add to the society of our preserves, are absolutely not permitted. Do you Madam, in our humble family, trust that I have been more enticed to entertainment than well I was in friendship? Indeed, your kindness as a woman would incite a pleasure to the most indifferent. But your theatrical talents would deserve admiration and the highest applause. This compliment, Madam, is not the unmeaning or invidious compliment of a Thunderous 3. Enticer; I say it from the same honest impulse that the sublimity of Nature excited my admiration of her beauties give me delight.

I wish to be the following letter to be of your service, in any other thought upon this. I shall be more than happy—the more I am with you. They are nearly sometimes. I know they have no great merit, but though they shall do but little to entertainment, in the evening, they gave me the pleasure of an opportunity, to declare how much I have the honor to,

Madam,

your very humble servt.
Contending for the rights of woman, 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, for truth must be common to all.

A prominent philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote many works, including a history of the French Revolution and one of the most important statements of 18th-century feminism: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Deeply influenced by the rationalism of the period, Wollstonecraft’s Vindication asserted that gender inequality was not natural, but rather the result of a lack of rigorous education for women.

In the book, she envisioned a society in which reason, rather than power and privilege, reigned supreme. It appeared the same year that Robert Burns penned “The Rights of Woman,” a poem that presented precisely the argument for female roles that Wollstonecraft found so detestable: the notion that women should occupy primarily a private sphere and leave political and civic affairs to men.
I want to show you that I have honesty enough to tell you what I take to be truths, even when they are not quite on the side of approbation; and I do it in the firm faith, that you have equal greatness of mind to hear them with pleasure.

At the time Burns wrote his “The Rights of Woman,” Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine were attending salons held in Paris by Helen Maria Williams, with whom Burns had corresponded as a fellow poet. His exchanges with her demonstrate that he was capable of engaging with women on an equal footing when considering them as individuals and intellectual collaborators.

Williams was already a well-regarded poet when she wrote to Burns in 1787 expressing admiration for his work. Like many of her contemporaries, including Burns himself, she wrote about both the natural world and social topics such as war, colonialism, and slavery. Two years later Burns sent her a long, thoughtful, and overall positive criticism of her abolitionist text “Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade.” He explained that making such notes was his habit “whenever I read a book ... in our own trade,” and that as he welcomed comments on his own work, in sending these to her he was “doing as I would be done by.” He approved her handling of the political topic as much as her skillful aesthetic expression.

Williams replied that she found his “objections perfectly just, except in one instance,” in which she stood by her original choice of words. Within a year she had moved to France, where she was active in moderate revolutionary circles, and lived there the rest of her life, publishing important accounts of French life and thought for English audiences.
I do not love a moment in returning you my sincere acknowledgments for your letter, and your criticism on my poem, which is a very welcome one. I hope you have read it with attention. I think your observations are correct, and very useful. If I do not perceive that there is more propriety in verse than prose —

and have indeed been very prone of panegyric on my little performance — much less in return of a compliment from you, would have been gratifying.
5. Robert Burns (1759–1796), Bruce’s address to his army. A favorite Scotch song as sung by Mr. Keene

Philadelphia: G. Willig’s Musical Magazine, [1819?]
Loan, Music Department, Free Library of Philadelphia, Sheet Music Collection 11961B

6. Of a’ the airs, a favorite Scotch ballad, written by R. Burns

Philadelphia: G.E. Blake, [1810-1814]
Loan, Music Department, Free Library of Philadelphia, Sheet Music Collection 11115

Distinctions between the supposedly “male” political sphere and the “female” domestic sphere shape the rhetoric of Burns’s song lyrics. Compare, for example, the lyrics of these two songs.

Both of these pieces of sheet music were published in Philadelphia in the early 1800s, underscoring Burns’s widespread influence on both sides of the Atlantic. In “Bruce’s Address to His Army,” a song about male warriors fighting for Scotland’s freedom, Burns wields the language of liberty to challenge the tyranny of foreign monarchy and support the rights of common men. In “Of A’ the Airs,” Burns wields a much softer rhetoric to link the beauties of fair Jean to Scotland’s natural landscape: “Gay nature’s charm would soon depart if’t were not for my Jean.” In these and other texts, Burns assumes a stark division between a male world of statecraft, warfare, and liberty and a female world in which, as Burns suggests in “The Rights of Woman,” women are entitled to protection, decorum, and admiration, but not an equal share in the Enlightenment’s promise of civic self-determination.

OY "A THE AIRS,"
written by R. Burns

[Sheet music and text not legible]
How to Make a Research Appointment and Access Other Rosenbach and Free Library of Philadelphia Resources

The Rosenbach’s world-renowned collection of rare books, manuscripts, and fine and decorative-art objects is accessible free of charge for your study and use.

To learn more about the kinds of materials we hold, visit rosenbach.org/collections. Also, explore the various Collections Guides and databases accessible at rosenbach.org/research/catalogs-databases.

To communicate with a member of The Rosenbach’s staff about our holdings, visit rosenbach.org/research/make-an-inquiry. Research appointments may be made at rosenbach.org/research/make-an-appointment.

The Rosenbach offers an array of tours and programs designed to showcase our collections and inspire learning. To learn more, visit rosenbach.org/visit and rosenbach.org/events.

Call The Rosenbach at 1.215.732.1600 to speak with a representative.

The Rosenbach also encourages you to explore the resources of our affiliated institution, the Free Library of Philadelphia. Visit the Free Library’s catalog at catalog.freelibrary.org to discover resources including audiobooks available to Free Library of Philadelphia cardholders. Also, visit freelibrary.org/collections to learn about Special Collections accessible at the Parkway Central Library (1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia).
We foster inquiry, learning, and creative thought by engaging audiences in programs, exhibitions, and research inspired by our collections.