



THE ROSENBACH 

# GALLERY GATEWAY

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*The Rights of Woman*

*Gender in Robert Burns's Enlightenment*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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# WELCOME TO THE GALLERY GATEWAY

## 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](http://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.

The graphic features a central magenta rectangular area with the title text. This is flanked by two vertical strips of handwritten text in cursive script, appearing to be from historical documents. The overall design is elegant and scholarly.

# THE RIGHTS *of* WOMAN

*Gender in Robert Burns's Enlightenment*

## KEY EXHIBITION DETAILS

ON VIEW AT THE ROSENBACH  
FRIDAY, JANUARY 24–SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2020

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.

*Then truce with kings, & truce with constitutions  
With bloody armaments & revolutions!  
Let Majesty your first attention summon,  
Ah! ça ira! The Majesty of Woman!!*

Robert Burns, "The Rights of Woman," 1792

## INTRODUCTION

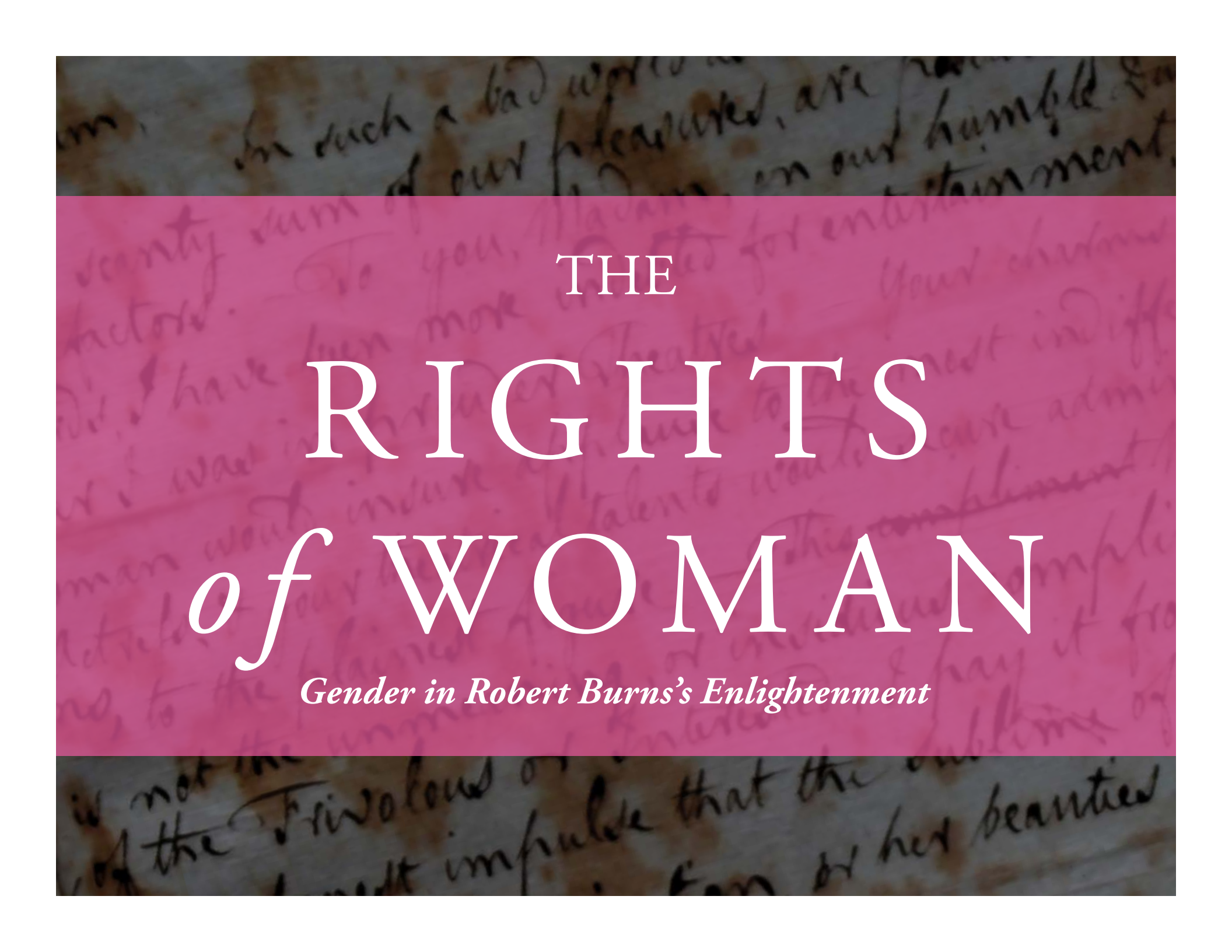
Robert Burns  
in 2020

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.

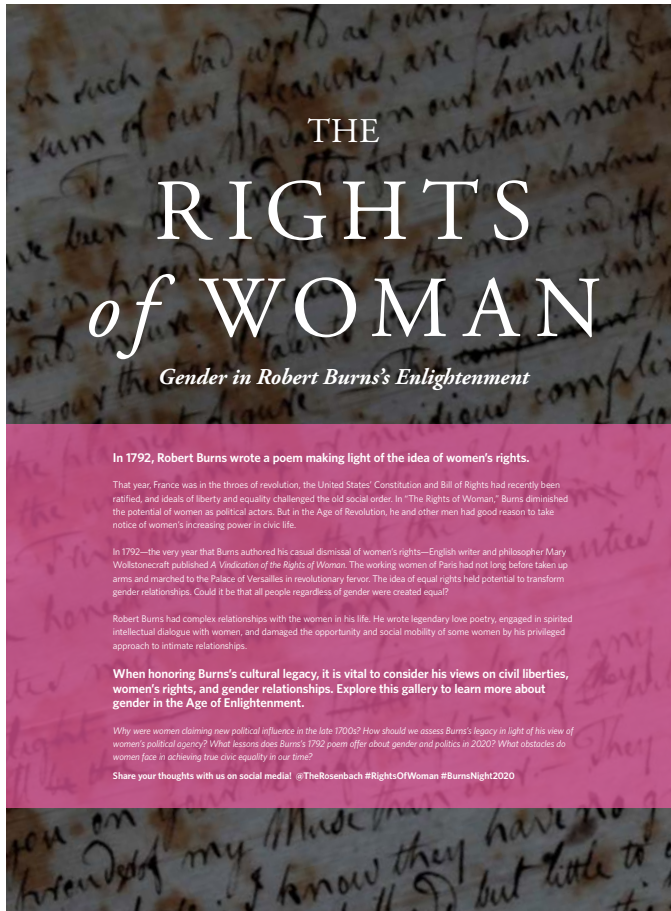
Please enjoy engaging with the artifacts and interpretive texts that you will find in the coming pages. Then, if you would like to continue your exploration of The Rosenbach's collection, please make use of our online resources and contact our research library for more information.





# 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?

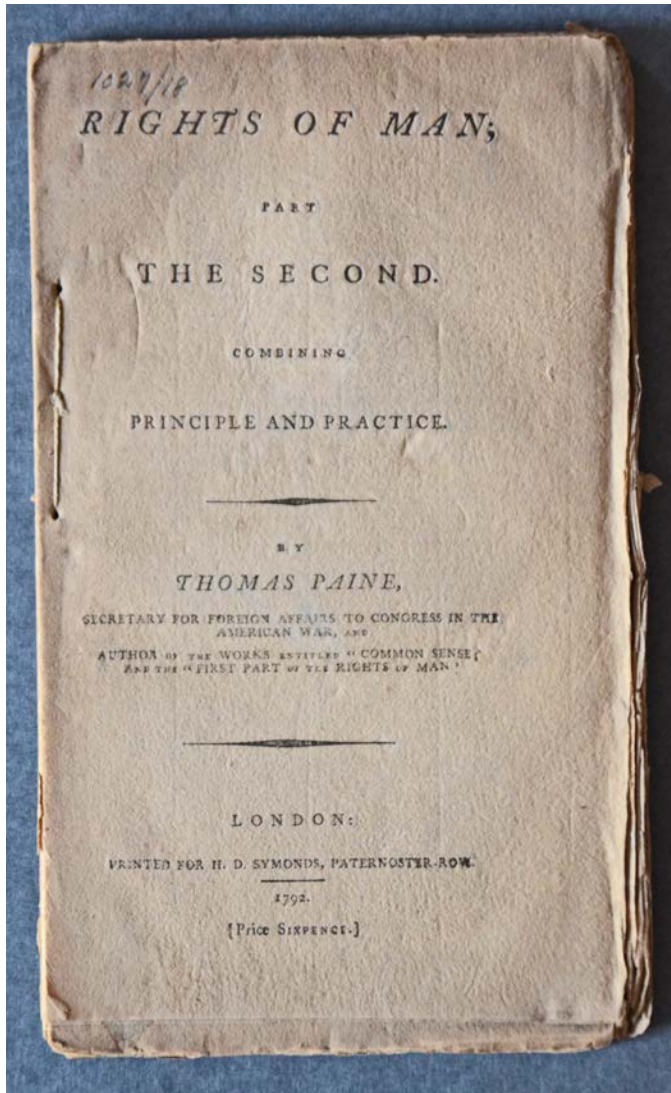
Robert Burns had complex relationships with the women in his life. He wrote legendary love poetry, engaged in spirited intellectual dialogue with women, and damaged the opportunity and social mobility of some women by his privileged approach to intimate relationships.

**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**





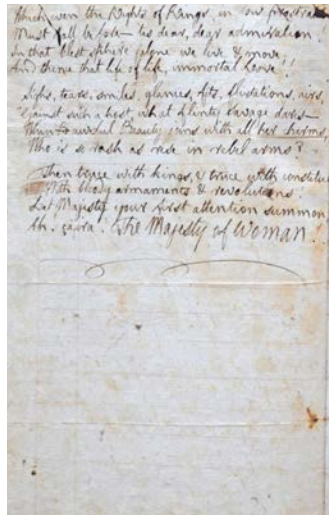
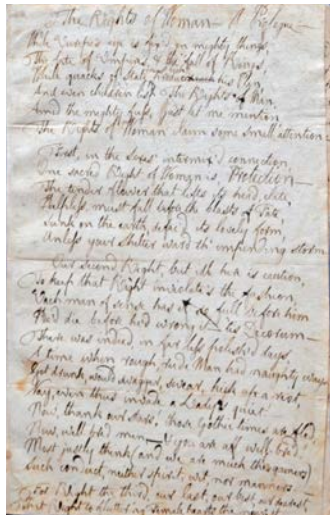
## 1. Thomas Paine (1737–1809), *Rights of man; part the second. Combining principle and practice*

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.



## 2. Robert Burns (1759–1796), “The Rights of woman: an occasional address. Spoken by Miss Fontenelle on her benefit night, November 26, 1792”

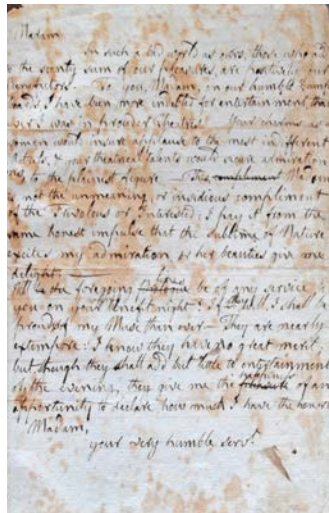
Great Britain, 1792  
EL2 .B967 MS1

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 Woman - A Prologue -  
While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,  
The fate of Empires, & the fall of Kings,  
While quacks of State produce <sup>new</sup> his Plan,  
And even children list The Rights of Man,  
Amid the mighty huff, just let me mention  
The Rights of Woman claim some small attention -  
First, in the sexes' intermix'd connection,  
One sacred Right of Woman is, Protection -  
The tender flower that lifts its head, late,  
Perhaps, must fall before the blasts of Fate,  
Sink on the earth, defac'd its lovely form,  
Unless your shelter ward th' impending storm.  
Our second Right, but idle here is caution,  
To keep that Right inviolate is the fashion,  
Each man of sense had it as full before him  
He'd die before he'd wrong it - his Decorum -  
There was indeed, in far less polished days,  
A time when rough, rude Man had naughty ways,  
Got drunk, would swagger, swear, kick up a riot,  
Say, even thus invade a Lady's quiet -  
Now, thank our stars, those Gothic times are fled,  
Now, well-bred men - & you are all well-bred,  
Most justly think (and we are much the gainers)  
Such conduct, neither spirit, wit, nor manners -  
Not Right the third, our last, our best, our dearest,  
That Right is flattering female boasts the nearest.

2a



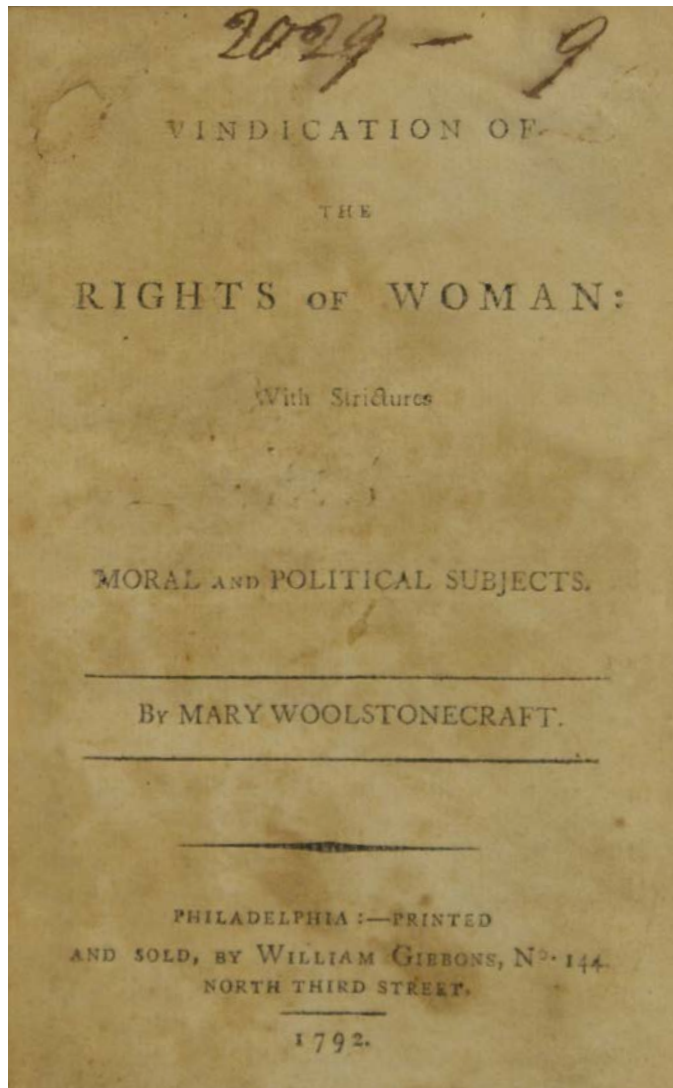
Which even the Rights of Kings in low prostration  
Must fall before—his dear, dear admiration!  
In that blest sphere alone we live & move;  
And thence that life of life, immortal love!

Lights, tears, smiles, glances, fits, flirtations, airs,  
Against such a host, what flinty savage dares—  
When to awful Beauty joined with all her charms,  
Who is so rash as ride in rebel arms?

Then truce with kings, & truce with constitutions  
With bloody armaments & revolutions!  
Let Majesty your first attention summon  
Th' *causa*! The Majesty of Woman!

2b

Madam,  
In such a bad world as ours, those who add  
to the scanty sum of our pleasures, are positively our  
Benefactors. To you, Madam, in our humble Sam-  
boards, I have been more indebted for entertain-ment, than  
ever I was in grander Theatres. Your charms as a  
woman would insure applause to the most indifferent  
Actors, & your theatrical talents would secure admiration  
to the plainest figure. This compliment, Madam,  
is not the unmeaning, or insidious compliment  
of the Trivious or Interested; I pay it from the  
same honest impulse that the sublimity of Nature  
excites my admiration, or her beauties give me  
delight. —  
Will the foregoing <sup>lines</sup> ~~prologue~~ be of any service to  
you on your <sup>benefit</sup> night? If ~~they~~ <sup>they</sup> will, I shall be  
proud of my Muse than ever. — They are nearly  
extempore: I know they have no great merit;  
but though they shall add but little to entertainment  
of the evening, they give me the <sup>happinefs</sup> ~~pleasure~~ of an  
opportunity to declare how much I have the honour to  
Madam,  
your very humble servt.



### 3. Mary Woolstonecraft [Wollstonecraft] (1759-1797), *A vindication of the rights of woman: with strictures on moral and political subjects*

Philadelphia: Printed and sold by William Gibbons, 1792  
Loan, Library Company of Philadelphia (Zinman collection 25053)

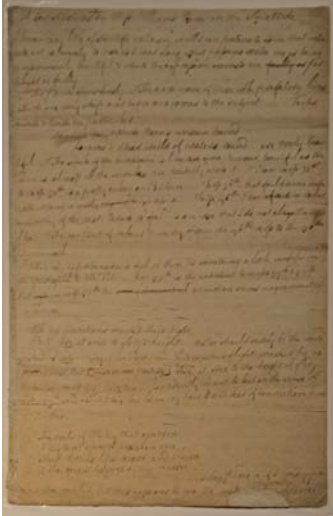
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*Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge, for **truth must be common to all**.*

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.

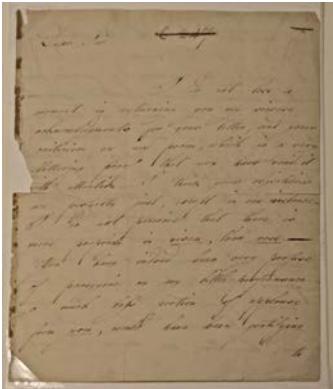
In the book, she envisioned a society in which reason, rather than power and privilege, reigned supreme. It appeared the same year that Robert Burns penned "The Rights of Woman," a poem that presented precisely the argument for female roles that Wollstonecraft found so detestable: the notion that women should occupy primarily a private sphere and leave political and civic affairs to men.





**4a. Robert Burns  
(1759-1796),  
“A few strictures  
on Miss Williams  
poem on the  
slave trade”**

[Ellisland, Scotland, July 1789]  
EMs 1320/25a



**4b. Helen Maria  
Williams  
(1761-1827),  
autograph letter  
signed to  
Robert Burns**

London, 7 August 1789  
EMs 1320/25b

**4c. Unknown artist,  
Helen Maria  
Williams**

Stipple engraving on wove paper  
London, 1 February 1816  
1954.0565



*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.

4a

Dear Sir ~~C-47~~ 1

I do not lose a moment in returning you my sincere acknowledgments for your letter, and your criticism on my poem, which is a very flattering proof that you have read it with attention. I think your objections are perfectly just, except in one instance. I do not perceive that there is more propriety in risen, than rose —

You have indeed been very profuse of panegyric in my little performance a much less portion of approbation from you, would have been gratifying to

4b



4c





## 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

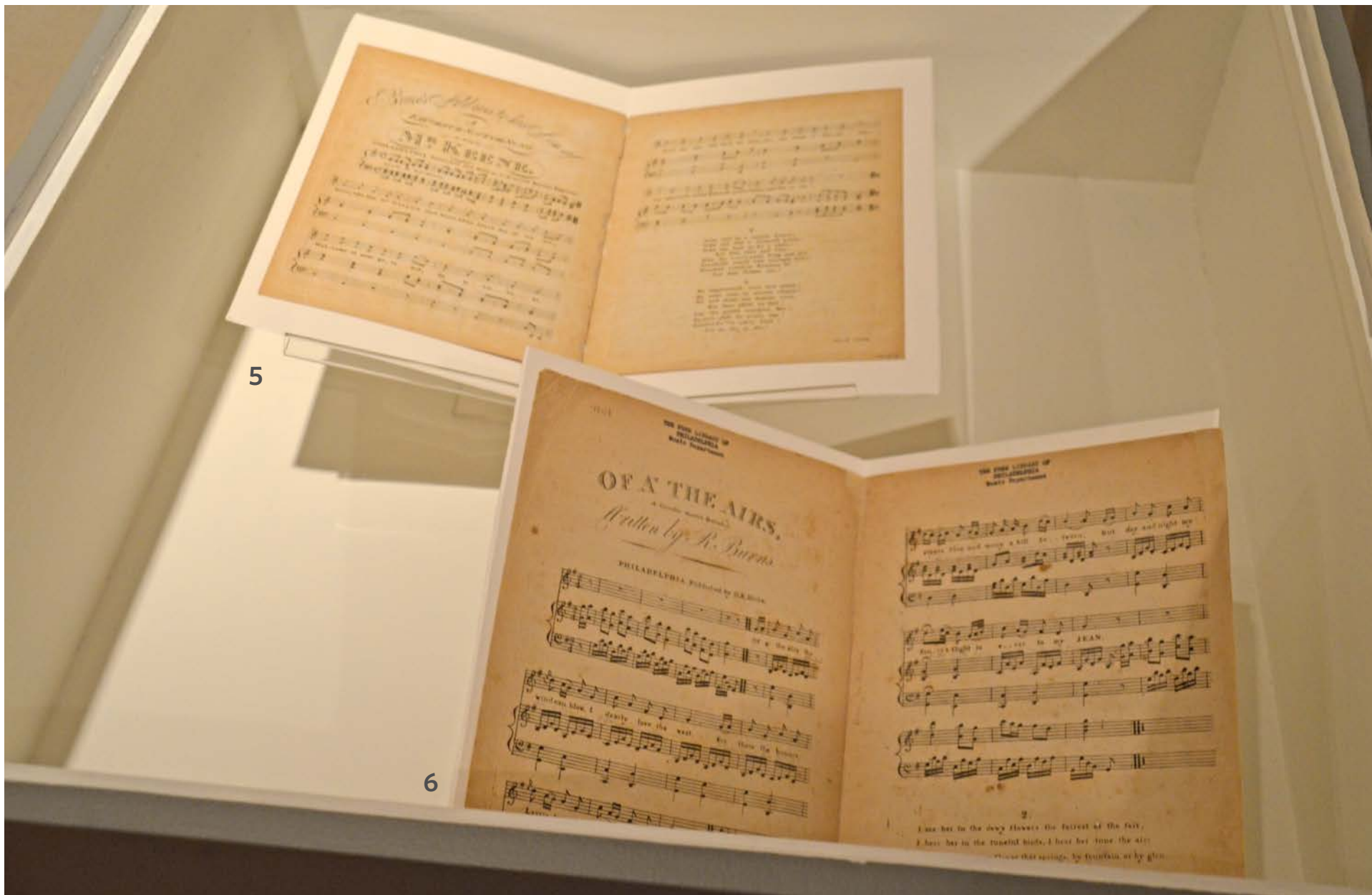
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*Lay the proud usurpers low!*  
*Tyrants fall in every foe!*  
***LIBERTYS in every blow!***  
***Let us do, or die!***

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 Airts,” 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.

Are you interested in learning more? Read Sarah Dunnigan, “Burns and Women,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, edited by Gerard Carruthers (2009); Robert Irvine, “Burns’s Politics ‘In Another View’: Late 1792/ Early 1793,” *Studies in Scottish Literature* (2015); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990), and Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Women’s Nature in the French Enlightenment* (1995).







## VISIT THE ROSENBACH

### 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](https://rosenbach.org/collections). Also, explore the various Collections Guides and databases accessible at [rosenbach.org/research/catalogs-databases](https://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](https://rosenbach.org/research/make-an-inquiry). Research appointments may be made at [rosenbach.org/research/make-an-appointment](https://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](https://rosenbach.org/visit) and [rosenbach.org/events](https://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](https://catalog.freelibrary.org) to discover resources including audiobooks available to Free Library of Philadelphia cardholders. Also, visit [freelibrary.org/collections](https://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.



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