



Women's rights in Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht (1718–1763)

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Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht develops the concept of women's rights in her 1761 poem *The Defence of Women. Against J. J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva* [Fruentimrets Förvar. Mot J. J. Rousseau, medborgare i Genève]. In the 600-line poem, Nordenflycht begins by critiquing Rousseau's *Lettre sur les théâtres* (1758) but quickly widens her scope to prejudice against women more generally.

In a central passage, Nordenflycht claims that as human beings, women have the same rights as men: “[B]orn with sense and drive, with feeling and desire / [...] Woman, just like Man, as human is complete / Shall he who loves you most deny your right as human [människorätt]?” (2016: 13). This is one of the earliest known uses of the Swedish word “människorätt” [human right]. Thus, like Mary Wollstonecraft would a few decades later, Nordenflycht advances the notion that women's rights and human rights are, essentially, the same. And like Wollstonecraft and many others, Nordenflycht links human rights to human reason, or “sense”, which she claims is equal in women and men.

Nordenflycht's goes on to argue that refusing women their human rights is “autocratic” [enväldigt]. She writes that: “[o]ur sex's rights have seen such autocratic treatment / Transformed at times to God, at times into a maggot / Yet always in accord with one severe decree / To keep us from the light, and bar from high pursuits” (2016:13). Following the natural rights theory that underpins the poem (though no specific source is given), Nordenflycht seems to imply that the present treatment of women is philosophically unjustifiable as well as politically illegitimate. Moreover, Nordenflycht homes in on two specific fields that women have a right to engage in: “light”, or education, and “high pursuits”. This concept reappears throughout the poem and seems to imply some form of civil service.

Primary Sources:

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