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# Our Sex's Rights Have Seen Such Autocratic Treatment: Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht on Women's Rights

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## Abstract

This article discusses Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht's (1718–63) poem *Fruentimrets Försvar, Emot J. J. Rousseau Medborgare i Genève* (Nordenflycht 1761) [Defense of the female sex against J. J. Rousseau, citizen of Geneva], written as a response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre sur les spectacles* (1758; in Rousseau 1968). Heretofore, Nordenflycht's poem has been considered primarily from the perspective of national literary and intellectual history, but here it is maintained that the poem should be related to the context of the European Enlightenment. Specifically, I argue that Nordenflycht uses key political concepts to create an argument for women's rights as a form of natural, human rights. By focusing on Nordenflycht's contentions regarding natural equality and artificial inequality, the tyrannical treatment of women, and women's right to liberty and occupations, this article elucidates how a woman writer from the periphery of the Enlightenment had created and presented, by the 1760s, a sustained argument—in verse—for female liberty in public life, for the benefit not only of women but of all humankind.

## Becoming Bold Enough

In a 1759 letter to Swiss scientist Albrecht von Haller, Swedish poet Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht (1718–63) expresses her disappointment with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre sur les spectacles* (1758):

I am a little irritated with a compatriot of yours, monsieur, it is the famous Rousseau, who has treated the fair sex unceremoniously (*sans ménagement*) in his letter against the theatre. I am bold enough (*assez hardie*) to dare oppose him one day in my own language; . . . I wonder how, when he has combatted prejudice so forcefully, he can also harbor it?<sup>1</sup> (Stålmarch 1959, 114)

Two years later, Nordenflycht published the poem *Fruentimrets Försvar, Emot J. J. Rousseau Medborgare i Genève* [Defense of the female sex against J. J. Rousseau,

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citizen of Geneva (henceforth *Fruentimrets Försvar*]). Comprising 648 lines, seventy-one footnotes, and a ten-page prose preface, *Fruentimrets Försvar* is the prolific poet's *magnum opus*. In the poem, Nordenflycht adds a philosophical argument for women's rights to a catalogue of exemplary women from ancient to modern times. The result is a powerful refutation of the gender philosophy that Rousseau begins to develop in his letter to Jean d'Alembert, as well as of contemporary gender prejudice more generally.

As a Swedish woman arguing publicly against misogyny, Nordenflycht was preceded only by Sophia Elisabeth Brenner (1659–1730). Yet *Fruentimrets Försvar* stands out as the most radical discussion about women published in the country during the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, though written in Swedish, the poem seems to have been intended as an international debut. In a 1761 letter, Nordenflycht writes that a French translation of the text was being prepared by Queen Louisa Ulrika's (1720–82) royal translator (Nordenflycht 1938, 293). Regrettably, the translation was never completed.

*Fruentimrets Försvar* thus remained unknown to most eighteenth-century European readers. Nonetheless, the poem constitutes an intriguing example of women's philosophical writing, and of philosophical writing about women, in Enlightenment Europe. Nordenflycht was one of the first European women to publicly respond to Rousseau's views on gender, composing her refutation before the publication of *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762).<sup>3</sup> From what might be considered the “periphery of the Enlightenment” (Butterwick, Davies, and Sánchez Espinosa 2008), she spearheaded a critical discussion about Rousseau and gender that would engage thinkers like Louise d'Épinay, Germaine de Staël, and, most famously, Mary Wollstonecraft (Trouille 1997; Green 2015). Uniquely, Nordenflycht did so through poetry.

Nordenflycht's choice of genre may be one reason why scholars have discussed *Fruentimrets Försvar* chiefly as an argument for metaphysical equality and as a defense of (elite) women's engagement with literature and learning in the tradition of early modern *gynaeceae* (see Hansson 1991; Öhrberg 2001; Mansén 2017). In her prose preface, Nordenflycht certainly does home in on Rousseau's claim that women lack poetic “genius” [*génie*] (Rousseau 1968, 103). But as I hope to show, in the actual poem Nordenflycht's critique springboards her into political philosophy. In the poem's opening section, both Rousseau—not mentioned until line 110—and the issues of poetry and learning are abandoned. Instead, Nordenflycht develops an argument for women's rights that builds on some of the period's central political concepts. In so doing, she prefigures Wollstonecraft's later, iconic critique of Rousseau (and others) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft 1792) (henceforth *Rights of Woman*).<sup>4</sup>

In this article I will analyze Nordenflycht's argument for women's rights as it is presented in *Fruentimrets Försvar*. My analysis will focus on three of Nordenflycht's primary concerns: 1) the natural equality and artificial inequality of the sexes; 2) the tyrannical treatment of women; and 3) women's rights in civilized society. Since Wollstonecraft addresses similar issues, *Rights of Woman* will provide an illustrative counterpoint throughout the analysis. Additionally, though Nordenflycht does not explicitly address Rousseau in her philosophical discussion—she does so in the preface and in the poem's catalogue—I will attempt to draw connections between her argument and *Lettre sur les spectacles*. To contextualize *Fruentimrets Försvar*, I will begin by briefly outlining the environment in which the poem was written.

### Nordenflycht's Intellectual Identity and Context

In Nordenflycht scholarship, *Fruentimrets Försvar* has sometimes been read as an isolated text motivated by the poet's frustration with *Lettre sur les spectacles* (see Hansson 1991; Mansén 2017). Eighteenth-century readers almost certainly viewed matters differently. At the time of publication, Nordenflycht was one of Sweden's most prominent poets. After being widowed at age twenty-three in 1741, she published her first poetry collection in 1743. Thereafter, composing poems in all genres, from occasional to philosophical, she quickly became the first Swedish woman to earn a living by her pen (on this, see Byström 1980). In 1752, parliament granted her a lifelong stipend in recognition of "beautiful, witty and edifying poetic writings" (*vackra, sinnrika och uppbyggliga poetiska skrifter*). In effect, this stipend constituted the equivalent of a state official's salary (Bexell, Ahlqvist, and Lignell 1835, 352). A couple of years later, Nordenflycht was elected as the only female member to the literary society *Tankebyggarna* [The thought builders], one of the foremost proponents of French, classicist aesthetics and Enlightenment thought in Sweden alongside Queen Louisa Ulrika's *Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien* [The royal Swedish academy of letters, history, and antiquities] (on this, see Stålmärck 1986, 37–49).

Tankebyggarna's joint publications *Våra Försök* [Our attempts] (1753–56) and *Witterhets Arbeten, Utgifna Af et Samhälle I Stockholm* [Works of wit, published by a society in Stockholm] (1759–62), the second volume of which includes *Fruentimrets Försvar*, contain some of the first Rousseau-inspired poems published in Sweden. Nordenflycht pioneered the practice with the poem "Skalde-bref til Criton. Öfver den frågan: Hvilket mera bidrager til Menniskjans nöje och frid kundskap eller okunnighet, samt om det varit nyttigare för menniskjan at konster upfunnets eller icke?" [Verse-epistle to Criton. On the question: what most contributes to the happiness and peace of man, knowledge, or ignorance, and had it been more useful for man if the arts had been invented or not?], included in *Våra Försök* vol. II (1754) (Sahlberg 1934). Moreover, the title of the later *Fruentimrets Försvar* links it to two poems by society member Gustaf Fredrik Gylleborg (1731–1808), *Färgringens Försvar* [The defense of beauty] and *Ungdomens Försvar* [The defense of youth] included in *Våra Försök* vol. III (1756). *Fruentimrets Försvar* was, consequently, not an isolated text but the pinnacle of an almost decade-long collective engagement with both Enlightenment and Rousseauian philosophy. Yet significantly, this was Nordenflycht's—and Tankebyggarna's—first and only attempt to bring that philosophy to bear on the political issue of women's rights.<sup>5</sup>

When writing *Fruentimrets Försvar*, Nordenflycht could, in short, speak as a respected advocate of Enlightenment philosophy, building on and directing herself toward a philosophical and poetic context in which she was a central figure. As a professional woman writer her position was doubtless precarious, and she was occasionally the subject of ridicule. Nevertheless, Nordenflycht did occupy a position in Swedish intellectual life from which she could speak on political and philosophical issues with remarkable authority.<sup>6</sup> She used this opportunity to not only refute Rousseau, but to advance a notion of women's rights that would remain radical for decades.

### Natural Equality and Artificial Inequality

In *Fruentimrets Försvar*, Nordenflycht wastes no time before embarking on her political-philosophical discussion. After a brief opening passage in which she critiques

the tendency to alternately revere woman as angelic and reject her as sinful—both of which are condemned—she goes on to lament the fate of her “noble sex”:

At times you are revered as if divinely mighty,  
 At times denied a soul, reduced to beastlike status,  
 At times your word is law at heaven’s very door,  
 At times an ass gets in and you are left outside.  
 O noble sex, please say, why are you so ill-fated?  
 You are yourself one part that holds the world together,  
 And born with sense and drive, with feelings and desires,  
 And Woman, just like Man, as human is complete:  
 Shall he who loves you most deny your right as human?<sup>7</sup> (Nordenflycht 2016, 13)

In this introductory passage, Nordenflycht contends that women are “complete” (*full-komlig*) humans. Thereby they are entitled to a specific “human right” (*människorätt*). As Ann Öhrberg has pointed out, in making this assertion Nordenflycht is linguistically as well as politically innovative—this is the first known use of the Swedish word “*människorätt*” (human right) (Öhrberg 2001, 266). A second mention of the word in Nordenflycht’s 1762 poem “Til Hans Kejslerliga Höghet Paul Petrowitz” [To his imperial highness Paul Petrowitz] suggests that Nordenflycht equates these human rights with natural rights. There, she describes human rights as “the oldest Daughter of Nature” (*Naturens äldsta dotter*) (Nordenflycht 1996, 201).

Nordenflycht’s claim to human rights for women has clear parallels to Wollstonecraft’s extension of natural rights to encompass women in *Rights of Woman*, published three decades after *Fruentimrets Försvar*. In the introduction to her edition of *Rights of Woman*, Eileen Hunt Botting suggests that Wollstonecraft’s idea of women’s rights as, essentially, human rights was one of her most original contributions to political philosophy (Botting 2014, 4. For a fuller account, see Halldenius 2015; Botting 2016). It seems, however, to have been partly prefigured by Nordenflycht.<sup>8</sup>

As a development of Enlightenment natural rights-debates based on John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke 1689/1988), Wollstonecraft’s book contends that women and men are naturally equal with regard to reason. Since it is reason that defines human beings, women and men must thus be equally human and therefore share the same natural rights (cf. Locke 1689/1988, II.63. On Locke’s influence on women writers in the period, see Green 2017). Against such a backdrop, Wollstonecraft strongly condemns that women:

are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural scepter in a feeble hand. (Wollstonecraft 2014, 30)

Wollstonecraft argues that women’s present inferiority of mind cannot be used as grounds for denying them rights. Such inferiority is, namely, not natural. Rather, it is the result of inadequacies in education and upbringing—a point made in explicit opposition to Rousseau:

I still insist, that not only the virtue, but the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavor to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the *same* means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of *half* being—one of Rousseau’s wild chimeras. (65)

Like Wollstonecraft, Nordenflycht bases her theory of equal human rights on equal reason. Continuing from the passage quoted above, she notes that women are denied their “rights as humans” because of their perceived natural weakness. As she explains, writing of an unspecified “they” that suggests a wide argumentative scope: “reasons for this ban [of women from their rights] they seek to draw from Nature / Our blood is volatile, they claim, our minds are feeble, / Our build is not as strong as in the other sex” (Nordenflycht 2016, 13). Though Nordenflycht does not explicitly address Rousseau here, such a notion of female weakness is certainly present in *Lettre sur les spectacles*. One of many examples is a passage where Rousseau claims that French women manipulate men to adapt a female lifestyle because they are too weak to live like men (Rousseau 1968, 100. On Rousseau and “nature,” see Reuter 2014, 930ff).

In Nordenflycht’s assessment, her contemporaries consider women’s right to rights to be determined by the natural equality or inequality of the sexes with regard to strength of “mind” (*själens verktyg*) and bodily “build” (*byggnad*). Those who—like Rousseau—deny women equal rights believe women to be naturally inferior in both areas, the former generally because of the latter. Nordenflycht, on the other hand, concedes that women are physically weaker than men—she writes that “[t]he other sex has drawn that lot to its advantage”—but rejects any connection between bodily strength and reason. This position prefigures *Rights of Woman*, but also harks back to much older feminist texts like Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la cité des dames* (cf. Pizan 1405/1986, I. XXVII; Wollstonecraft 2014, 30).

And like Pizan, but unlike Wollstonecraft who rejects the explanatory power of the “remote annals of antiquity” (Wollstonecraft 2014, 82), Nordenflycht defends her position using both philosophical and historical-anecdotal arguments. On the one hand, Nordenflycht asserts that “ancient Greeks proclaimed/That strength and intellect not always are combined,” pointing out that from “Gothic lore” we know a bee to be more intelligent than a whale (Nordenflycht 2016, 14). Reasonably, this rule of nature should apply to humans as well. On the other hand, as Ruth Nilsson has noted, Nordenflycht presents a Cartesian ontology of mind and body (Nilsson 1973) and draws the consequent, skeptical conclusion that no observable evidence indicates that women’s weak bodies influence their minds:

Has any mortal mind been able to observe  
 The origin of thought, how mental powers function?  
 The fire, the precious juice, that courses in our nerves  
 Is not yet understood, much less where it prevails  
 And who can measure up, however he examine[s],  
 The dense coils of the brain to ascertain a genius?  
 Can passions and desires and fancies be revealed  
 By studying the blood, its color, weight and course?  
 Until that has been done, it is a sheer illusion  
 To think that intellect depends on blood and body. (Nordenflycht 2016, 13f)

Nordenflycht was one of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European women philosophers who made use of Cartesian ontology to argue for some form of equality—Mary Astell is another notable example (on Cartesianism, see Broad 2017a; Reuter 2019). In *Fruentimrets Försvar*, the door opened by such an ontology leads to a radical conclusion: “blood and body” (*kropp och blod*) in no way affect women’s reason. Those who believe otherwise do not base their evaluations on observation but on “illusion” (*dröm*).

Nordenflycht was probably familiar with Descartes, but none of his works are listed among her books (Kruse 1895, 384–400) and he is not referenced in any of her poems. Rather than building directly on Descartes, Nordenflycht was probably inspired by Danish philosopher Ludvig Holberg. As Sven Hansson has pointed out, all arguments and examples discussed above can be found in Holberg’s 1722 *Zille Hans Dotters Gynaecologia eller Forsvars-Skrift for Qvinde-Kiønnet* [Zille Hans’s Daughter’s Gynaecologia or defense of the female sex] (Holberg 1722; Hansson 1991).<sup>9</sup> Holberg, in turn, was directly influenced by François Poulain de la Barre’s ground-breaking Cartesian treatises *De l’Égalité des deux sexes* (1673), *De l’Éducation des dames* (1674), and *De l’Excellence des hommes* (1675) (Bjørby 2014). Even though we cannot know if Nordenflycht was aware of Poulain de la Barre’s works, *Fruentimrets Försvar* may thus productively be considered part of the European debate about gender equality instigated by them and conducted more famously in, for example, Madeleine de Puisieux’s *La Femme n’est pas inférieure à l’homme* (1750), the pseudonymous Lady Sophia’s *Woman Not Inferior to Man* (1739) and *Woman’s Superior Excellence Over Man* (1740), and the anonymous *Female Rights Vindicated* (1758) (Bloch 2005, 248; Green 2015, 151).

As the passage quoted above illustrates, Nordenflycht’s conception of men’s and women’s equal capacity for reason leads her to dismiss as “sheer illusion” (*att i dvala drömman*) the argument that female physical weakness provides justification for denying women their “right as humans.” Nordenflycht never references Locke, though she did own both his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and Montesquieu’s *De L’Esprit de lois* (1748). Nevertheless, here she seems to develop her argument according to a Lockean framework, intricately linking natural rights to the capacity for reason (cf. Locke 1689/1988, II.63).

Like Wollstonecraft, Nordenflycht acknowledges that at present women’s minds are inferior to those of men. But such inferiority is not natural. Instead, it is the artificial result of a defective education and upbringing that teaches women to cherish their own ignorance. Wollstonecraft deplores this state of affairs in her preface, where she writes:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.—One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education[.] (Wollstonecraft 2014, 29)

Nordenflycht offers an analogous analysis in *Fruentimrets Försvar*:

A sex whose benefit all came from other’s bliss  
Has for this purpose found its beauty quite enough.

In darkness it remained and now enjoys its slumber,  
 As for the major part, there is not much to praise;  
 Most women's minds, alas, are nurtured by pure nonsense,  
 Their virtue has its ground in habits, nothing more.  
 For women, it is claimed, can never grasp what truth is,  
 Men wish to have the sport of scoffing at their folly;  
 But when, from folly's seed, the fruits of vices grow,  
 Then poison is poured forth and plentiful reproach.  
 The stifling of her mind is not viewed as the reason;  
 She is a woman born and thus the weaker vessel.  
 So Nature gets the blame, and blood and heart likewise  
 For causing what is due to nurture, nothing else. (Nordenflycht 2016, 14f)

In this passage, which is reminiscent of Lockean epistemology, Nordenflycht dismisses the notion of woman as a “weaker vessel” (*svaghets kärl*)—explicitly employed by Rousseau in *Lettre sur les spectacles* (Rousseau 1968, 100)—as prejudiced and incorrect. According to her, women's present inferiority of mind is not, as Rousseau so famously will argue in *Emile*, natural. It is wholly artificial, “due to nurture, nothing else” (*har [blott] grund i fostrings-sättets fel*).

The detrimental effects of women's poor education had been pointed out already in Pizan's *La cité des dames* (cf. Pizan 1405/1986, LXXVIII), and the call for women's education was voiced throughout the eighteenth century as educated women became a hallmark of civilized society. In fact, this is one of Rousseau's—an opponent of women's education—critiques against such society (cf. Rousseau 1968, 82f). To name a few examples, Poulain de la Barre, Astell, and Holberg all linked women's inferiority of mind to faulty education, as did later critics of Rousseau such as d'Épinay (Trouille 1997; Bloch 2005; Schmidt 2017). But even against this backdrop, Nordenflycht's account of women's intellectual abilities is striking. Not only does she take a strongly empiricist standpoint, arguing that women's shortcomings are exclusively the result of “nurture” and “habit”; like Wollstonecraft will also do, she links women's faulty education to men's self-interest—expressed in the quote above as a desire to “scoff” (*skratta*) at female companions. In making this connection, Nordenflycht implies that men have ulterior, and unreasonable, motives for keeping women in ignorance. Nordenflycht does not explicitly link male self-interest to the exclusion of women from human rights. But her discussion enables a radical inference: at present, artificially created inequality of mind is utilized to deny women their natural rights.

As the above quoted passages make clear, Nordenflycht's philosophical discussion has much in common with *Rights of Woman*. Yet this discussion encompasses fewer than 100 of the poem's 650 lines. The remainder of the poem is devoted to a catalogue of exemplary women, who are presented in the preface as “the most binding proof” (*de mest bindande bevis*) of “how preposterous their [Rousseau's and his supporters'] way of thinking is” (Nordenflycht 2016, 12). Here, Nordenflycht and Wollstonecraft differ markedly. Nordenflycht relies on the evidential value of female exemplars, but Wollstonecraft rejects it. As she is interested in universal causes, Wollstonecraft explains in *Rights of Woman*, she will “not lay any great stress on the example of a few women who, from having received a masculine education, have acquired courage and resolution” (Wollstonecraft 2014, 104).

And indeed, in choosing to append a catalogue of exemplary women to her philosophical discussion, Nordenflycht seems to be going against her own position on

natural rights. The exemplary argument, popular throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was more typically used in relation to a Neoplatonic conception of equality of excellence, according to which the best of women could equal the best of men. Such views on equality are seemingly at odds with a theory of women's rights, which proposes equality between *all* men and women regardless of personal qualities (Stuurman 2005; for a useful overview concerning "equality," see O'Neill 2011). Yet on closer consideration, it is quite possible to harmonize Nordenflycht's philosophical position with her use of the catalogue genre.

Of course, Nordenflycht was not alone in combining philosophical and historical arguments for women's rights. As Philip Hicks has pointed out, this argumentative strategy was continuously employed over the course of the eighteenth century—for example, by the previously mentioned pseudonymous Lady Sophia (Hicks 2015, 184). As history was still considered to have strong evidential value, the combination of philosophical argument and historical *exempla* may be understood as a rhetorical strategy aimed at making *Fruentimrets Försvär* doubly convincing. But though she builds on a tradition of "women worthies," Nordenflycht does not celebrate the unique abilities of exceptional women. Instead, as promised in the preface, exemplary women are offered as "proof" of the poem's philosophical argument. A passage on philosophers Émilie du Châtelet (1706–49) and Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679–1749) provides an illustrative example:

How far our sex can go in every learned branch!  
 Though many can be seen, I name here just a few:  
 We see how Châtelet expounds the works of Newton,  
 How Cockburn helps John Locke, defending his ideas,  
 Though Albion's great minds reject their philosophe:  
 A woman's first to show she understands his book:  
 And with her unknown hand reveals the hidden treasure,  
 That Locke becomes admired, and doubters must surrender.  
 So good is her defence that Locke himself is pleased,  
 What greater proof of light, sharp brains and lofty thought? (Nordenflycht 2016, 19)

Nordenflycht does not present Châtelet and Cockburn as exceptional, but as a "few" (*få*) examples of "many" (*många*) possible cases that demonstrate the intellectual capabilities of "our sex" (*Könet*)—that is, of women in general. Rather than being praiseworthy in themselves, Châtelet and Cockburn are important because they provide evidence that when allowed to develop their minds, women can equal men "in every learned branch" (*[i] varje lärdoms-gren*). Nordenflycht underscores the point by pairing each woman with an iconic male philosopher—Châtelet with Newton and Cockburn with Locke.

One might understand conventional *gynaecea* or catalogues of "women worthies" as collections of Platonist *paradeigmata*, ultimately unattainable female ideals that other women may strive to emulate but whom they can never equal. As such, their relevance for broader arguments in favor of women's abilities is limited. Nordenflycht, on the other hand, uses *exempla* in a more Aristotelian fashion, as rhetorical devices that serve to validate a general thesis (on these two traditions of exemplarity, see Gelley 1995, 1–4). Rather than displaying the excellence of specific women, Nordenflycht's catalogue illustrates that if given the right opportunities, women overall have the capacity to equal men. In that respect, Nordenflycht's approach to "women worthies" constitutes



an intermediate step between the woman-friendly but exclusionary *gynaecea* tradition according to which only women who possess certain (often male-coded) qualities could equal men, and the more explicitly universal, feminist philosophy developed by Wollstonecraft.

In Nordenflycht's view, Châtelet and Cockburn prove that under the right circumstances women's intellects equal men's—making them entitled to natural, human rights founded on the capacity for reason. Yet at present women are kept from developing their reason. Thus they are forced into an artificial inequality that is used as justification for barring them from such rights. This analysis leads Nordenflycht to a conclusion that Wollstonecraft, too, will reach. The present treatment of women is not an appropriate extension of natural laws but an example of tyranny.

### The Tyrannical Treatment of Women

Nordenflycht both opens and closes her argument about women's natural equality of mind with references to tyranny. By way of introduction, she offers the following remarks about those who deny women their rights:

Our 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 (*höga sysslor*). (Nordenflycht 2016, 13)

According to Nordenflycht, her "sex's rights" (*könets rätt*) are treated "autocratically" (*enväldigt*)—that is, they illegitimately remain unacknowledged. Here, Nordenflycht may be alluding to Rousseau's 1755 *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, where he contends that "we find no more substance than truth in the so-called voluntary establishment of tyranny" (Rousseau 1994, 74). Reasonably, Nordenflycht may have sought to imply that such an argument should be equally valid for women as for men.

In the Swedish context, however, the word "autocracy" most obviously refers to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caroline autocracy. This long period of absolute monarchy ended with a minor political revolution in 1718, after the death of Charles XII. It was followed by what was already in the 1750s being referred to as an "age of liberty" (*frihetstid*) characterized by limited monarchical power and a strong parliament.<sup>10</sup> By choosing such a politically charged concept to describe women's situation, Nordenflycht seems to suggest that whereas Swedish men have recently been able to progress into an age of liberty, women have unjustly been denied the same right. Instead, they are still subject to an autocratic rule that "bars" (*stänger ut*) them from their rightful liberty.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft similarly compares patriarchy and kingly autocracy, describing men's power over women as tyrannical since it is founded on arbitrary prejudice. Her contention is clear:

Let not men then in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannical kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so. (Wollstonecraft 2014, 71)

Wollstonecraft condemns all forms of tyranny but is especially concerned with husbands' tyrannical power over their wives, an issue previously discussed by early modern

philosophers such as Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, and Mary Astell (Broad 2017b; Deslauriers 2019). The basis for Wollstonecraft's argument is the Locke-inspired standpoint that husbandly tyranny is unjust because it is unreasonable—that is, in conflict with natural law—and because it denies women their natural right to liberty (cf. Locke 1689/1988, II.199–202; see Halldenius 2015).<sup>11</sup> The notion that husbandly power was potentially tyrannical was thus strongly connected to the claim that women, as human beings, were entitled to liberty (see Halldenius 2007).

In *Fruentimrets Försvar*, Nordenflycht's argument about the artificiality of women's inferiority follows directly from the statement about autocracy quoted above. This ordering indicates that she too considers the treatment of women to be founded on arbitrary prejudice. In addition, at the close of the previously quoted passage about education, yet another aspect of tyranny is brought into play. There, Nordenflycht writes:

So female drive is bound by upbringing and habit,  
To vie among themselves to see who is more stupid,  
With ignorance the yoke they bear as ornament,  
For it's a woman's shame to be well read and wise.  
Oh cruel tyranny, how can our world grow better,  
When half mankind is bound in ignorance and fettered,  
And lack of brains displayed in [occupations] and pursuits (*sysslor och i värv*).  
(Nordenflycht 2016, 15)

Here, Nordenflycht contends that men's treatment of women is tyrannical not only because it is unreasonable, but also because it is wasteful. As women are kept in ignorance, the world is kept from progressing. Though Nordenflycht does not specifically address Rousseau here, this argument appears to be directed at the connection made throughout *Lettre sur les spectacles* between women who publicly display that they are “well read and wise” (*lärd och klok*) and the deterioration of both morals and society.

Nordenflycht's words about wastefulness could allude to Lockean political theory, according to which using power for private gain rather than for the good of the public is considered tyrannical (cf. Locke 1689/1988, II.199). Moreover, the passage invokes the utilist ideology that underpinned Swedish politics throughout the “age of liberty.” From the 1720s onward, an economic goal to accumulate assets within the state led to a philosophy of usefulness permeating every aspect of Swedish political culture (Lindberg 1994). Reasonably, Nordenflycht has such utilism in mind when claiming that “our world” (*vår värld*) needs all the “brains” (*hjärnor*) it can get, wherefore it simply cannot afford to keep women in “ignorance” (*okunnighet*).

Here, Nordenflycht is again likely building on Holberg, who advanced similar arguments several times. One example is the preamble to his biographies of Zenobia and Catherine I of Russia in *Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds sammenlignede Historier* [The compared lives of several great heroes and admirable men]. There, Holberg writes:

The world will lose nothing by letting them give advice and judge, who have the best understanding, and let them keep economy, who have most insight and care (*Agtsonhed*), they may be called Peder or Maria, they may be black or white.<sup>12</sup>  
(Holberg 1739, 119)

As Hansson has pointed out, Holberg's recurrent insistence on (at least some) women's inherent ability to thus participate in society was undoubtedly an important inspiration

for Nordenflycht (Hansson 1991; on Holberg and gender, see Owesen 2010). Yet Holberg does not imply that women are entitled to rights. In fact, later in the preamble he explicitly declares that he does not wish to encourage any such claims:

My goal by stating this is not to encourage women to vindicate (*vindicere*) themselves to any rights (*nogen Rett*), but to caution (*formane*) men not to speak too boastfully (*prægtigt*) of their glory, nor to base it on Nature. (Holberg 1739, 121)

Nordenflycht thus develops the Danish philosopher's argument in a new, radical direction by doing exactly what Holberg says he does not want to do: using the natural equality between the sexes as grounds for claiming equal rights.

It is perhaps because she draws on Holberg that Nordenflycht, unlike Wollstonecraft, concentrates on women's situation independent of their familial relations. Though as an unmarried, childless, professional writer, it is perhaps unsurprising that marriage was not her main concern. In *Fruentimrets Försvär*, Nordenflycht bypasses women's roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Instead, her focus—in the passages quoted above and throughout—is on the multifaceted concepts “light” (*ljus*), “pursuits” (*sysslör*), and “occupations” (*värv*), the meaning of which I will return to in the next section.

But although Wollstonecraft and Nordenflycht emphasize different aspects of the tyrannical subjugation of women, they both conclude that at present, women are subject to a form of slavery. In a famous passage, Wollstonecraft forcefully condemns this state:

Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? (Wollstonecraft 2014, 174)

According to Wollstonecraft, this unjustifiable social structure can be traced back to the beginnings of history, and there related to man's self-interest and physical strength:

[M]an, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to shew that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure. (52)

In a passage that examines the origins of men's authority over women, Nordenflycht offers a comparable analysis:

[I]t is in brute force, in muscles and in fists (*näv-rätt*),  
That men's supremacy is from the start concealed.  
It has authority to pass new laws and statutes;  
The greatest rights are had where strongest force prevails,  
When reason and good sense face pressure, force and threats,  
When power says “Obey!” resistance is in vain.  
I think I see the world as when it first was savage,  
When by barbaric force society was governed,  
How then a manly arm, which wrote the law with sword,  
Compelled to live as slaves the sex with least to say.  
That age of darkness was the source of all abuses. (Nordenflycht 2016, 14)

Portraying a distant “age of darkness” (*mörk tid*) evocative of a Lockean state of war, Nordenflycht argues that men’s supremacy was there won by violence. In glaring contrast to the previously celebrated “*människo-rätt*” (human right) founded on reason and the law of nature, Nordenflycht uses the old Swedish word “*näv-rätt*” (the right of fists) to describe this process. By their right of fists, upheld through “barbaric force” (*barbari och våld*), men coerced women to “live as slaves” (*i tvång och trälldom*) (cf. Öhrberg 2001, 264). Even though it constitutes an “abuse” (*missbruk*) of reason, this enslavement has continued until the present day. Though Rousseau is not mentioned here, the passage presents a powerful challenge to his theory that woman’s nature made her naturally fit for a “a domestic and retired life” as wife and mother (cf. Rousseau 1968, 87).

In this passage, Nordenflycht draws on a notion of history as conjectural, developed by Poulain de la Barre and highly influential at the time (Stuurman, 2005; Hicks 2015). Her point is, arguably, that the subjugation of women is a remnant from an earlier stage of history that is unworthy of enlightened, civilized society. Once again, Nordenflycht seems to suggest that whereas men have progressed into such a civilized, enlightened society, women—routinely forgotten in contemporary political theory—have been left behind. Their rights are still unacknowledged, and their lives are still controlled by the violent power of tyrants. Unlike Rousseau, many Enlightenment *philosophes* considered the respectful treatment of women and women’s education to be defining characteristics of civilized society (Goodman 1994, 6; Green 2015, 10ff). In her argument about tyranny, Nordenflycht calls attention to the hypocrisy of such a position in a society where women are still denied their human rights.

### Women’s Rights in Civilized Society

Like Wollstonecraft, Nordenflycht develops a critique of women’s present circumstances which are described as irreconcilable with the ideals of civilized, enlightened society. While she presents her poem as a defense, Nordenflycht is evidently not only interested in protecting elite women’s access to education and salon society in the face of Rousseau’s attack; she also argues for change. So, how must the lives of women change if they are to progress into civilized society and begin to enjoy their rights?

In addition to arguing for educational reforms, Wollstonecraft demands that women be rendered political subjects by being included in the new constitution of revolutionary France. Addressing Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, she writes in her preface:

But, if women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason—else this flaw in your new constitution will ever shew that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant. (Wollstonecraft 2014, 22)

Nordenflycht wrote *Fruentimrets Försvar* before the American and French Revolutions drastically reoriented notions of political rights. Unlike Wollstonecraft, she was not critical of the aristocracy or monarchy—at least not in the moderated form of mid-eighteenth-century Sweden. Nothing indicates that Nordenflycht was thinking of the political rights of citizens when claiming rights for women. Her focus, I suggest, is Lockean natural rights. Although she never uses the word *liberty*, Nordenflycht is obviously concerned with women’s right to freedom. As I have demonstrated above, she argues both for negative liberty—that is, the right to not be “barred” (*utestängd*) from developing one’s reason and pursuing worthy causes along the lines of Enlightenment

ideals—and for positive liberty, or the right to freely contribute to human flourishing and the happy progress of “our world” (*vår värld*) in accordance with Swedish utilist ideology (on positive and negative liberty, see Broad and Detlefsen 2017, 1f).

In addition, Nordenflycht seems to suggest that women have the right to something a little like Lockean property—or the possibility to enjoy the fruits of their labor (cf. Locke 1689/1988, II.6, II.27). In the two passages on tyranny quoted above, Nordenflycht laments that women are kept from three things: “light” (*ljus*), “pursuits” (*sysslor*), and “occupations” (*värv*). These concepts require elucidation. The word “light” (*ljus*) doubtlessly alludes to Enlightenment imagery of the light of knowledge, virtue, and progress. “Pursuits” (*sysslor*) denotes unspecified but important and worthy tasks. The second time “pursuits” (*sysslor*) appears in the poem it is paired with the word “occupations” (*värv*). This multilayered concept can be interpreted as a synonym for pursuits. But it can also, more specifically, denote professions. And according to Gunnar Qvist, who briefly discusses *Fruentimrets Försvär* in the introduction to a study of female nineteenth-century professionals, this seems the most reasonable interpretation given Nordenflycht’s background as well as common usage of the word (Qvist 1960, 54ff; see also Öhrberg 2001, 269). In stark contrast to Rousseau’s contention in *Lettre sur les spectacles* that women contribute to the prosperity of society by “prudently governing the home,” Nordenflycht seems to argue for women’s right and ability to work (cf. Rousseau 1968, 88).

As Qvist details, there was a political discussion about women and work in Sweden during the 1750s. In 1755 for example, politician Niklas von Oelreich published an essay in which he argued for refined workhouses where middle- and upper-class women could earn their living (Qvist 1960, 59ff). But these discussions were concerned primarily with the practical problem of providing for impecunious and unmarried genteel women. In *Fruentimrets Försvär*, Nordenflycht is advocating something else entirely. In the passages about tyranny, she appears to claim for women the *right*, regardless of necessity, to make use of their “brains” (*hjärnor*) by practicing professions—and, in extension, to thus earn a living. This radical appeal is developed and elucidated in the appended catalogue of female exemplars. There, the word “occupations” (*värv*) appears no less than three times.

Nordenflycht first mentions “occupations” in a passage where she presents Plato’s *Republic* as a model social order “free from all abuses”:

Plato too explained our rights when he displayed  
His vision of a state with wise and happy people,  
Where laws and thought were pure and free from all abuses,  
He lavished equal praise on men’s and women’s skills. (Nordenflycht 2016, 21)

In the Swedish original, the final line of this quotation reads, “Han delar Heder, Värv, emellan bägge Kön,” which in a more direct translation may be rendered as “He shares honour (*heder*) and occupations (*värv*) between both sexes.” As Öhrberg has pointed out, the passage clearly refers to Plato’s admission of both men and women to all classes (Öhrberg 2001, 266; on Plato, see Taylor 2012). According to Nordenflycht, a social order free from prejudice or “abuse” (*missbruk*) is one where women have the “rights” (*rätt*) to contribute to a “happy” (*lyckligt*) society by participating equally in all occupations.

This statement is followed by a long passage depicting women who have contributed to the betterment of society through courage, virtue, and wisdom—from ancient

Egyptian priestesses and judges to Amazon warriors, ancient rulers, and noblewomen who have sacrificed their lives and happiness for their countries. Just as philosophers Châtelet and Cockburn were used to demonstrate that women and men have the same natural intellectual abilities, these exemplars prove women's natural ability to equal men in all forms of occupation—or at least all that Nordenflycht considered appropriate for the middle and upper classes. Nordenflycht's choice of exemplars make it evident that, however universal her philosophical claims may be, she is concerned primarily with the higher strata of society and with occupations connected to state service. This is true for the catalogue as a whole, which has a clear and consistent emphasis on women's achievements in public and political life.

In the passage quoted above, Nordenflycht maintains that in Plato's social order, laws are free from "abuses" (*missbruk*). In other words, his is a society governed by reason—as contemporary, enlightened society also strives to be. The suggested inference is easily discernible: in such a reasonable society, women should "share" (*dela*) with men the right to make use of their abilities in public and political life.

In some ways, this is a more radical vision of women's rights than the one offered by Wollstonecraft three decades later. Considering that, it is a little ironic that Nordenflycht closes her argument with a celebration of monarchs—something entirely at odds with any notion of radical enlightenment. The last section of *Fruentimrets Försvär* is devoted to queens, most of whom ruled in their own name. It opens with this panegyric passage:

You heroines who [had a grand and precious occupation]  
 For all your people through your wise, courageous rule,  
 You have enhanced your thrones, brought fortune to great nations,  
 Preserved in memory, adorned by hands of glory,  
 Some man would now contest your splendor, virtue, fame;  
 A scholar seeks to prove you never lived at all;  
 Denying courage, soul, good sense and strength to women. (Nordenflycht 2016, 25)

In the Swedish original, the first line of this quotation reads "Och I! som skött ett värv för alla stort och dyrt." In this passage about queenship, we thus find the second mention of the word "occupations" (*värv*). Shortly thereafter, the word turns up for the final time as Queen Zenobia of Palmyra is said to demonstrate "our right to high occupations" (*vår rätt till höga värv*) (Nordenflycht 2016, 27).

The claim that queens illustrate women's *right* to occupations is key to understanding Nordenflycht's lengthy discussion about them. Unlike almost all other European women, queens—especially ruling ones—could be considered a type of public official, holding occupations within the state. For Nordenflycht, the "high occupations" (*höga värv*) held by queens demonstrates that women were both able and entitled to hold public official occupations, through which they could contribute to the flourishing of society.

Given Nordenflycht's personal situation, this inference was an obvious one. She became a member of the influential *tjänstemannaadel* [nobility of public officials], a Swedish *noblesse de robe*, when her father was ennobled in 1727. Olof von Dalin, Sweden's leading poet alongside Nordenflycht, received the same honor in 1751. Dalin subsequently spent the 1750s holding various positions within the royal chancellery, which enabled him to live a comfortable life as a public intellectual and thereby contribute to the happy progress of Swedish society. Most members of

Nordenflycht's literary society Tankebyggarna were public officials, a form of employment that was both closely linked to Swedish utilist ideology and offered opportunities for social advancement. But because she was a woman, Nordenflycht was excluded from all "honor" and "occupations" related to civil service. Though her stipend from parliament in effect constituted a state salary, she did not have the freedom to use her "brain" to better either her own lot or society in public service. And unlike her male peers in Tankebyggarna, she was not entitled to her own circumstances but had been granted them as a favor. In short, Nordenflycht had no unquestionable right to live as she did.

Against that backdrop, it is hardly surprising that Nordenflycht's primary concern in *Fruentimrets Försvär* is women's right to participate freely in the public realm where she had labored most of her adult life. And whether informed by her own circumstances or by adherence to a theory of natural rights, Nordenflycht's conclusion is clear. In a civilized society governed by reason, women have the right to liberty not only in relation to their families but independent of them, in society. Moreover, they have the right to use their "brains" to improve both their own lives and society as professional civil servants. Strikingly, Nordenflycht's critical reading of *Lettre sur les spectacles* leads her to construct a positive argument for a social order that seems to go beyond Rousseau's worst fears.

### Philosophical Poetry, Poetic Philosophy

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, feminist scholars have begun to reestablish *Fruentimrets Försvär* as a central work in Nordenflycht's poetic *oeuvre* (see Nilsson 1973; Öhrberg 2001; Mansén 2017). In this article, I have attempted to show that the poem is also a philosophical work linked to the European history of women's rights. By attempting to unpack Nordenflycht's arguments regarding natural equality and artificial inequality, the tyrannical treatment of women, and women's right to liberty and occupations, I have tried to elucidate how a female philosopher from the periphery of the Enlightenment already in the 1760s had created and presented a sustained argument—in verse—for female liberty in public life, for the benefit not only of women but of all humankind. In doing so, I hope to reclaim some of the philosophical authority that Nordenflycht seems to have had in her own time.

Letters written by Nordenflycht indicate that contemporaries admired *Fruentimrets Försvär* as a major intellectual achievement by a celebrated public *philosophe* (Nordenflycht 1938, 293). But in the nineteenth century, the genre of philosophical poetry waned. As literature and philosophy began to develop into distinct academic disciplines, readers and scholars lost sight of Nordenflycht's public, intellectual identity, and of *Fruentimrets Försvär's* philosophical and political significance. Instead, Nordenflycht became famous as the first sentimental, personal lyricist in Swedish literature. Though such an assessment is not wrong, it gave rise to a sadly one-dimensional image of a poet whose sentimental lyrics constitute a small part of her substantial and multifaceted *oeuvre*. Nordenflycht's identity as a public philosopher, using her "brains" to serve society, has been underemphasized for too long. In addition, in an international context, the Swedish poet has been all but unknown. I hope that this article provides impetus for further exploration of how Nordenflycht's many philosophical poems can present productive challenges to the history of philosophy with regard to gender, genre, and geography.

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## Notes

- 1 The original quotation is in French, my translation.
- 2 The only comparable text is Thomas Thorild's *Om qvinnökönets naturliga höghet* [On the natural highness of the female sex] (1793). Several researchers have discussed *Fruentimrets Försvar* as an emancipatory (though not a political/philosophical) poem. My research is especially indebted to Nilsson 1973; Hansson 1991; Öhrberg 2001; Mansén 2017. In analyzing Nordenflycht's philosophical thought, I am indebted to Öhrberg 2001 and Blomqvist 2016. However, neither Öhrberg nor Blomqvist discuss Nordenflycht's political philosophy.
- 3 Octavie Belot's *Réflexions d'une provinciale sur le discours de M. Rousseau*, which is concerned primarily with class relations, was published in 1756.
- 4 Mansén has pointed out the similarity between *Fruentimrets Försvar* and *Rights of Woman*, but without in-depth discussion (Mansén 2017, 185).
- 5 Nordenflycht published a few more poems discussing women, such as "Fruentimmers Plikt att uppöva deras Vett" [Women's duty to practice their understanding] (1744). These are focused primarily on women's education.
- 6 Nordenflycht's strategic work to establish herself in the Swedish public sphere has been discussed by Byström 1980; Öhrberg 2001; Fischer 2004.
- 7 I use Alain Crozier's 2016 translation of *Fruentimrets Försvar* throughout (Nordenflycht 2016). When I disagree with the translation, I offer my own suggestion in brackets. When giving the Swedish originals of terms and expressions, I have modernized the spelling.
- 8 Sven Hansson has also noted Nordenflycht's use of theories of natural rights, without in-depth discussion (Hansson 1991, 126, 133f).
- 9 Nordenflycht owned Holberg's collected works and cites both *Zille* and other texts in *Fruentimrets Försvar*. Hansson has provided a discussion about the parallels between Holberg's work and *Fruentimrets Försvar*, though his conclusion that the differences between the two authors are determined by their gender is highly problematic (see Hansson 1991, 136).
- 10 The "age of liberty" lasted from 1718 to 1772 and was ended by a coup by King Gustav III.
- 11 This, of course, is in opposition to an Aristotelian tradition.
- 12 My translation from Danish.

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