

# from **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**

by Mary Wollstonecraft

**SETTING THE STAGE** Although a number of 18th-century British writers discussed the role of women in society, none became as celebrated for her feminist views as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). Early in her life, Wollstonecraft learned the value of independence and became openly critical of a society that treated females as inferior creatures who were socially, financially, and legally dependent on men. In 1792, Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she called for an end to the prevailing injustices against females. Although her opinions on women’s rights may seem conservative by modern standards, they were radical in 18th-century Britain.

## PRIMARY SOURCE

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets [terms] of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt. . . .

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavor by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine [indecent] notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves—the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: they dress, they paint, and nickname God’s creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio [harem]! Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?



▲ Mary Wollstonecraft

## DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. What is the subject and purpose of Wollstonecraft’s essay?
2. According to Wollstonecraft, why isn’t the system of marriage beneficial to women?
3. Would you like to hear Wollstonecraft speak on women’s rights? Why or why not?
4. How does a woman’s lack of education affect her husband and children?
5. Do you think that Wollstonecraft believes in the complete equality of men and women?
6. In your opinion, what social issues would concern Wollstonecraft today? Would she still feel a need to defend women’s rights?