

## Mary Wollstonecraft



**Mary Wollstonecraft, detail of an oil painting on canvas by John Opie, c. 1797; in the National Portrait Gallery, London.**

*National Portrait Gallery, London*

**Mary Wollstonecraft** , married name **Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin** (born April 27, 1759, London, England—died September 10, 1797, London), English writer and passionate advocate of educational and social equality for women.

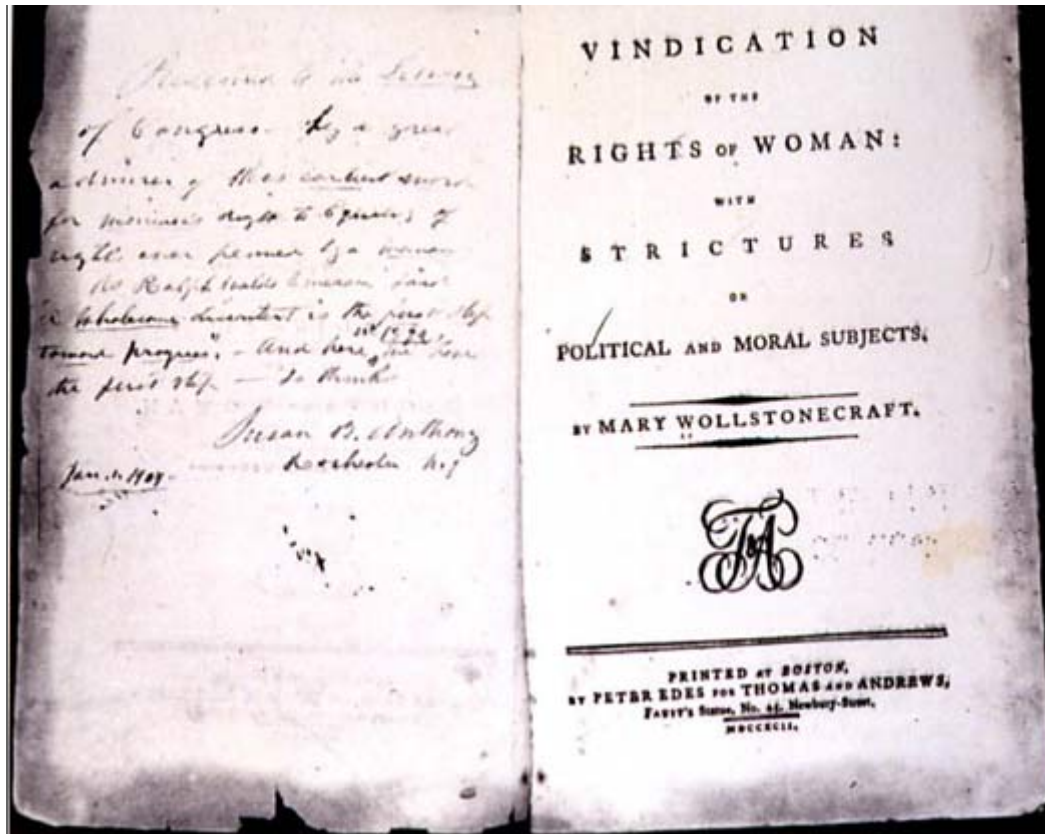
The daughter of a farmer, Wollstonecraft taught school and worked as a governess, experiences that inspired her views in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). In 1788 she began working as a translator for the London publisher James Johnson, who published several of her works, including the novel *Mary: A Fiction* (1788). Her mature work on woman's place in society is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which calls for women and men to be educated equally.

In 1792 Wollstonecraft left England to observe the French Revolution in Paris, where she lived with an American, Captain Gilbert Imlay. In the spring of 1794 she gave birth to a daughter, Fanny. The following year, distraught over the breakdown of her relationship with Imlay, she attempted suicide.

Wollstonecraft returned to London to work again for Johnson and joined the influential radical group that gathered at his home and that included William Godwin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Holcroft, William Blake, and, after 1793, William Wordsworth. In 1796 she began a liaison with Godwin, and on March 29, 1797, Mary being pregnant, they were married. The marriage was happy but brief; Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin died 11 days after the birth of her second daughter, Mary.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is one of the trailblazing works of feminism. Published in 1792, Wollstonecraft's work argued that the educational system of her time deliberately trained women to be frivolous and incapable. She posited that an educational system that allowed girls the same advantages as boys would result in women who would be not only exceptional wives and mothers but also capable workers in many professions. Other early feminists had made similar pleas for improved education for women, but Wollstonecraft's work was unique in suggesting that the betterment of women's status be effected through such political change as the radical reform





Title page of the 1792 American edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. The facing page contains an inscription by woman suffragist Susan B. Anthony.

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of national educational systems. Such change, she concluded, would benefit all society.

The publication of *Vindication* caused considerable controversy but failed to bring about any immediate reforms. From the 1840s, however, members of the incipient American and European women's movements resurrected some of the book's principles. It was a particular influence on American women's rights pioneers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Fuller.

The life of Mary Wollstonecraft has been the subject of several biographies, beginning with her husband's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798, reissued 2001, in an edition edited by Pamela Clemit and Gina Luria Walker). Those written in the 19th century tended to emphasize the scandalous aspects of her life and not her work. With the renewed interest in women's rights in the later 20th century, she again became the subject of several books. *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, assembled by Janet Todd, was published in 2003.

"Mary Wollstonecraft". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 22 feb. 2015  
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