**Mary Wollstonecraft Debates Jean-Jacque Rousseau, 1791**

*The Enlightenment was a time when writers and thinkers sharply debated questions about women’s rights. Issues of women’s options were framed in terms of “patriotic motherhood.” “liberty,” “natural rights,” and “emancipation” from familial control.*

*Both male and female Enlightenment thinkers and writers appeared on both sides of the issues. Mary Wollstonecraft, writer of the influential “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” responded to a French proposal to educate girls only up the the age of eight, when they then should be trained in domestic duties at home. She feared the ideas of the famous writer Jean-Jacque Rousseau, who in his novels, such as Emile (1762), drove home the point that women’s education must prepare them to serve men. While glorifying women as wife and mother, he thought that nature had made her “to submit to man and to endure even injustice at his hands.”*

**Rousseau:** “.....This habitual restraint produces a docility which woman requires all her life long, for she will always be in subjection to a man, or a man’s judgment, and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his. What is most wanted in a woman is gentleness…A man, unless he is a perfect monster, will sooner or later yield to his wife’s gentleness, and the victory will be hers.

Once it is demonstrated that men and women neither are nor, and should not be, constituted the same, either in character or in temperament, it follows that they should not have the same education…Boys want movement and noise, drums, tops, toy-carts; girls prefer things which appeal to the eye, and can be used for dressing-up-mirrors, jewelry, finery, and specially dolls. The doll is the girl’s special plaything; this shows her instinctive bent towards her life’s work. Little girls always dislike learning to read and write, but they are always ready to learn to sew…The search for abstract and speculative truths for principles and axioms in science, for all that tends to wide generalizations, is beyond a woman’s grasp.”

**Wollstonecraft responds:**  “What opinion are we to form of a system of education, when the author (Rousseau in Emile) says...‘Educate women like men, and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.’ This is the very point I am at. I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves. The most perfect education, in my opinion, is …to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason.

This was Rousseau’s opinion respecting men: I extend it to women…To reason on Rousseau’s ground, if man did attain a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper, in order to make a man and his wife one, that she should rely entirely on his understanding; and the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous. But, alas! husbands, as well as their helpmates, are often only overgrown children; nay, thanks to early debauchery, scarcely men in their outward form - and if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequence…

To be a good mother a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers…

If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot…make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers; that is-if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.”

**Main idea/thesis of Jean Jaques Rousseau:**

**Main idea/thesis of Mary Wollstonecraft:**

1. Do any of these arguments about essential difference in male/female attributes influence ideas about women’s intellectual abilities today?
2. Are there areas today where you think inequality in the education of girls and boys still exists? Where?
3. Are there events, places, or classes which you feel either gender mostly is excluded from? What are the?
4. Is this okay, or do you have ideas on how this could be changed?