

Marriage and Mill: A (Re)Constitution of Victorian Ideals

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Within the Western political theory canon, women are ...shadowy, mute characters... rarely speak[ing] in their own voices...[,] featured... as mere... others who do not own or rule but live under the reign of ideas about 'humanity' spun and reflected by political theorists. [M]ysterious to these ideas and these theorists... even as women are characterized by political theory, they remain opaque to it... not seen, caricatured (Brown, 1987: 3).

These caricatures abound even in those very rare texts that deliberately focus on the 'woman question,' such as John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1993). As Mill examines the systematic inequality of women in Victorian society, 'woman' remains the murky object, as opposed to a dynamic subject, of Mill's analysis.

This essay is a textual critique of Mill's tract. The first section is a consideration of Mill's work as an attempt at the immanent critique of marital relations in Victorian society.¹ As such, I contextualise Mill's analysis in the *Subjection of Women* within the broader Victorian era debates around the 'woman question'. It is within this frame of reference that one most notes the radical nature of Mill's insights. Unlike his contemporaries, Mill considers marriage as more than simply a natural, private or

domestic affair. Rather, he asserts that marriage is a social institution that, unjustly constituted, has a profoundly adverse impact on societal development. This critical scrutiny of marital and domestic relations marks Mill as an important authority for early feminist theorising and organising.

Despite his initial, radical contentions, however, the immanent character Mill's work is rendered stillborn due to the subsequent elaboration of a disturbingly conventional social project. An analysis of Mill's proposed reforms is as crucial as the analysis of the elements of Mill's initial critique. Through such an examination, one begins to understand that Mill's central preoccupation is not the emancipation of women, the fundamental alteration of marital relations, or a transformation of the status quo. Instead, the latter part of Mill's tract can be interpreted as a strategic plan geared towards social transformations that help improve the status quo, fulfilling its potential.² Given the fulfillment-oriented nature of Mill's project, the radical aspects of the initial critiques within *The Subjection of Women* are quickly eroded.

In its examination of Mill's social project, the second section of this essay is underpinned by the premise of 'fulfillment'. Mill's reforms fall short of radical innovation or the realisation of the nascent possibilities to which his initial critique alludes. Once distilled, they amount to little more than the programmatic and pragmatic re-assembly of the social norms of his time. In effect, Mill achieves the reinstatement of an idealised form of the traditional notion of Victorian womanhood. Thus, 'woman' as Mill (re)constructs her is, ironically, little more than a

modernised, more willing version of the 'willing slave' that he so vehemently criticises at the outset of his tract.

Marriage and the Victorian Ideal: Ruskin's Queens and Mill's Martyrs

Progressive for his time, feminist critics seem torn when it comes to Mill's work on the 'woman question'. It seems ungenerous to take issue with Mill's textual treatment of women given his emphatic theoretical and political concern for women's social subordination. Indeed, criticisms of Mill can seem even more belaboured in the context of the way in which women were traditionally conceived in Victorian society, where they were rarely or, if so, disparagingly mentioned. This perplexing situation is exemplified in Kate Millett's comparison between the works of Mill and John Ruskin (1972).

Ruskin's *Of Queen's Gardens* presents a sentimental and, in reaction to a gradually heightening call for emancipation, nostalgic view of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Ruskin insists that the model woman is not inferior to her male counterpart. Rather, she is his complement, his other half. In asserting these corresponding natures, he describes man as

...active, progressive, defensive. [Man] is eminently the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure and war and for conquest. ...[Through] rough work in the open world, [he] must encounter... peril and trial... always hardened (Cited in Millett, 1972: 126).

Woman's talents, in contrast,

[are]... not for invention or recreation, but sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation... (Cited in Millett, 1972: 126).

In other words, since man actively engages in the difficulties and tensions of worldly affairs, woman's talents are geared towards the management of his home. Her goal is to produce a relaxing, well-ordered, non-worldly environment to which her male counterpart can retreat, taking a break from the taxing nature of activity in the public realm. Her most pressing public duties are to inspire and comfort her partner. It is in successfully fulfilling these domestic roles that women excel to become the queens of their, private (non)worlds. For Ruskin, fundamental to the attainment of this ideal is a happy relaxed husband. Thus, it is not surprising that he suggests that female education and experience be geared not towards self-development, but self-renunciation (Millett, 1972: 128).

Mill's writings on the subject of female emancipation, as well as his political activities concerning the advancement of women's civic rights, present an important counterpoint to the widely held beliefs regarding the place of women in Victorian society contained in Ruskin's popular tract.³ In the first sections of *the Subjection of Women*, Mill puts forth an insistent argument that seriously questions the two institutions valorised in Ruskin's work: marriage and the idealised notion of Victorian womanhood. Mill seriously contemplates the

social circumstances that compel a woman "...to have her time and faculties always at the disposal of everybody" (1993: 75). Instead of extolling such behaviour as Ruskin does, Mill problematises it. In doing so, he articulates a web of oppressive connections between Victorian custom, education and socialisation. Though he does not frame his argument in these terms, Mill points to the naturalisation of the social construction of women as a method of deliberately reifying and, thereby, justifying women's subordination to men (Tulloch, 1989: xiii).

Mill begins by drawing an analogy between the marital servitude of women and slavery. He suggests that man's social superiority is not based on any rational foundations, rather it originated in connection to his greater physical strength (1993: 7). Mill argues that marital authority has its origins in the primitive value given to might, explaining how,

as [l]aws... convert... mere physical fact into... legal right[,] ...[what went] from being a mere affair of force between the master and the slave... [has] for the female sex... been gradually changed into a milder form of dependence (1993: 7).

For Mill, however, this dependence "...has not lost the taint of its brutal origin" (1993: 7). Thus, based as it is on the ethic of command and obedience, nothing about the institution of marriage can be valorised.

Mill makes equally emphatic arguments concerning the degree to which women's true natures can be distinguished from what they are trained to believe is appropriate conduct for women.

All women are brought up... in the belief that their ideal character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-

will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. ...[Therefore, what] is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing... the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. ... [N]o other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation to their masters (Mill, 1993: 22).

Mill argues that women, indeed, are the unwitting martyrs of their social environments. His discussion illustrates the logical flaws of customary beliefs regarding the relations between the sexes. He moves on to attack as irrational the long-standing and popular practice of ascribing as natural or instinctive characteristics that women have acquired through socialisation.

A comparison between the works of Mill and Ruskin illustrates, first, the slow progress towards women's emancipation "...against enormous odds of cultural resistance" (Millett, 1972: 122). Second, it underscores the unique and radical quality of Mill's assertions. In terms of his social context, it is no exaggeration to suggest that "[Mill] was perhaps the man of the century who best managed to free himself from the domination of customary prejudices".⁴ For him, questioning the nature of woman and demanding legal equality between the sexes was but one point in a much larger discussion regarding the improvement of marriage from an institution based on inequality to one which promotes a more equal and, thus, happier relation between the sexes.

The improvement of society and an increase in social satisfaction are the two elements that underpin Mill's desire to reform the marital contract. If marriage is an

atavistic institution based on the primitive notion that might is right, then, as an institution, it gives one half of the human population the legal and customary right to enslave, abuse, even violate the other. As such, Mill argues that the marital contract was a profound hindrance to human progress.

The law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous contradiction to all the principles to the modern world... It is the sole case, now that negro slavery has been abolished, in which a human being in the plenitude of every faculty is delivered up to the tender mercies of another human being, in the hope forsooth that this other will use the power solely for the good of the person subjected to it. Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house (Mill, 1993: 80).

Since this legal bondage legitimises the arbitrary abuse of power by men against women, Mill concludes that marriage effectively corrupts men and, thereby, society, suggesting that the origins of human self-interest can be traced to the unequal relations between men and women (1993: 76).⁵

It is this critique of marriage and the relationship between the sexes it legitimises that marks Mill as radical. Whereas for Ruskin and the bulk of English society, marriage is not a matter of choice or design but a simply articulated and accepted natural arrangement, for Mill this institution, as it was socially constituted in Victorian times, is indicative of a society in sorrowful need of reform. Thus, far from an innocuous private relation, it is within the

unjust social institution of marriage that civic dangers percolate.

Mill notes that, while in some cases the threat of tyrannical abuses are tempered by more sympathetic sentiments and goodwill, husbands - particularly, he emphasises, among the lower classes - do "indulge the utmost habitual excesses of bodily violence towards the unhappy wife..." (1993: 35). Therefore, noting the absence of rules governing whether or not a given man is fit to exercise absolute power over his marital counterpart, Mill suggests that "...laws... require to be adapted, not to good men, but to bad" (1993: 35). Legalising women's social freedom will increase their opportunities for self-development and happiness, granting them access to education, the right to vote, the right to control their own property after marriage and the right to work outside the home. Such freedom, Mill argues, is the basis for equality within marriage, making the relations between the sexes "consistent with justice... and conducive to the happiness of both [partners]..." (1993: 43). Moreover, Mill warns his audience that not undergoing such social reforms may, in fact, retard societal development. For,

the tendencies of progressive human society, afford not only no presumption in favour of this system of inequality of rights, but a strong one against it. ...[T]his relic of the past is discordant with the future and must necessarily disappear (Mill, 1993: 17).

Hence, the elimination of the command and obedience ethic underpinning marriage must be followed by its replacement with a more equal state of affairs if, in fact, humanity is to continue progressing.

Since most of Mill's contemporaries favoured Ruskin's assessment of marital and domestic relations, Mill's more radical assertions, not surprisingly, received enormous criticism.⁶ The proposition that most enflamed his peers is that women, especially wives, should be able to seek employment outside the domestic sphere if they so chose. In fact, Mill's work was popularly reduced to the absurd notion "that woman is man in petticoats".⁷ For instance, as Sigmund Freud iterates:

...[a] prominent argument [in Mill's work] was that a married woman could earn as much as her husband. ...[That] the management of the house, the care and bringing up of children demands the whole of a human being and almost excludes any earning, [Mill] had simply forgotten... [O]ne could never gather from [his work] that human beings consist of men and women and that this distinction is the most significant one that exists. ...It is a really stillborn thought to send women into the struggle for existence exactly as men. ... [C]hanges in upbringing may suppress all women's tender attributes. ...[I]n such an event one would not be unjustified in mourning the passing away of the most delightful thing the world can offer us - our ideal of womanhood (cited in Tulloch, 1989: xiii).⁸

Despite their anger and anxiety, however, Mill's critics had little to fear in terms of the realisation of Mill's social reforms.

Mill's 'Willing Slave': Plus ça change...

Popularly interpreted as supporting a reckless, radical, and foreign notion of womanhood, Mill's critique of

marriage is often conflated with his proposed reforms to that institution. While the former may exhibit elements of an immanent critique of the Victorian marital arrangement, the latter negates such insights, reasserting conventional assumptions regarding the relationship between men and women. In effect, Mill's proposed reforms not only fail to measure up to the critique he put forward in his preliminary discussions, but re-impose a naturalised, traditional division of labour within the context of the family. For instance, in his attempt to reformulate the decision-making process within the marital contract, Mill suggests that, similar to discussions among business partners, a 'fairer' apportionment of authority within the family can be reached through an agreement between spouses. However, as he unabashedly concedes, age and earning-power would generally furnish the male spouse with greater control in their affairs (Mill, 1993: 40). Thus, despite previously critiquing the troubling Victorian customs and disparity in social power which mark the relationship between men and women, Mill's own reforms tend to sustain these very proclivities. Seemingly oblivious to the implicit assumptions underpinning his suggestion, Mill argues that creating an environment of joint authority is a strategy that will radically alter the domestic environment for both marital partners and their children. In effect, Mill proposes that this minor change would transform the family from a "school of despotism... to a school of the real virtues of freedom" (1993: 44). Moreover, Mill threatens that without such alterations within the private sphere, "[t]he moral training of mankind

will never be adapted to the conditions of the life for which all other human progress is a preparation..." (1993: 45).

Before such small changes can have such profound social effects, however, Mill argues that Victorian women will require re-education and re-socialisation. Despite previous assertions regarding the distortions wreaked upon women's characters through the highly socialised notion of Victorian femininity, the latter sections of Mill's tract focus on the social implications of improving women themselves. Specifically, Mill contends that a new programme of education would help to reformulate women's learned behaviours, allowing them to overcome the handicaps of some of their natural predispositions. For instance, while a woman's intuition was a general asset and aided her talents for dealing with practicalities, such intuitiveness could easily lend itself to the development of overhasty generalisations. Mill argued that a defect such as this could be overcome through education (1993: 57). Additionally, education was the key in terms of disciplining the strong feelings underpinning a woman's excitable nature - changing passion to strength of will and self-control (Mill, 1993: 62).

The benefits of equal marital partnerships with the re-socialised Victorian woman are numerous, especially for the cultivated man. As Mill notes, "[h]ardly anything can be of greater value to a man of theory... than to carry on his speculations in the companionship, and under the criticism, of a truly superior woman" (1993: 59). It seems, then, that Mill offers women greater freedom and access to education in order to initiate a process of re-

programming that will make them more predictable and be useful members of society.

The desire to re-code women reflects yearnings similar to those exhibited in Ruskin's work. Mill expresses these desires in his nostalgic view of women during the period of chivalry. For Mill, chivalry represents a heightened period of human progress that resulted from "the influence of women's sentiments on the moral cultivation of mankind" (1993: 85). This ability to, on the one hand, soften men and, on the other, inspire them to greatness is, in Mill's estimation, an asset that can only truly be realised when women's natural talents are re-ordered to benefit humanity. Thus, Mill's discussion, from the first to the latter sections of his tract, exhibits a significant and contradictory re-positioning of women. Initially, he suggests that they are the products of social construction and, as such, have no specific, identifiable, natural talents. As he elaborates his social reforms, however, women are endowed with natural, feminine traits that, effectively managed, can inspire mankind to greatness.

Social progress is a crucial element within Mill's discussion of the (re)socialisation of women. He clearly articulates the relationship between women and progress in his discussion of philanthropy, arguing that, untrained in such matters, as women are allowed marginal participation within the public sphere they developed an "addiction to philanthropy". Given their "education in sentiments not understanding", women are unable and unwilling to assess the impact of their charity work (Mill, 1993: 88). As Mill asserts,

[t]he great and continually increasing mass of unenlightened and short-sighted benevolence, which, taking the care of people's lives out of their own hands, and relieving them from their disagreeable consequences of their own acts, saps the very foundations of the self-respect, self-help, and self-control which are the essential conditions both of individual prosperity and of social virtue - this waste of resources and of benevolent feelings in doing harm instead of good, is immensely swelled by women's contributions, and stimulated by their influence. ...A woman born to the present lot of women, and content with it, how should she appreciate the value of self-dependence? She is not self-dependent; she is not taught self-dependence; her destiny is to receive everything from others, and why should what is good enough for her be bad for the poor? (1993: 88)

The reform of women is key to social progress (Zerilli, 1994: 117).

Education, Mill argues, would certainly improve the quality of women's participation within the public sphere. Moreover, given the influence women exert within their families, such education would provide women with the basis of evaluating public opinion as opposed to becoming its proponents. Thus, rather than acting as a "dead weight... upon every aspiration of his to be better than public opinion requires him to be," educated woman, cultivated and refined, would rise above mediocrity, raising her man and family along with her (Mill, 1993: 89). On this basis, Linda Zerilli argues that Mill considers women without the proper education to be a potential "retarding influence on democracy, if not on civilization itself" (1994: 123). While marital reform is crucial to the progression of

human development, such legal amelioration requires the concomitant (re)education and (re)socialisation of women.

Given his assertions, it is no exaggeration to characterise Mill's discussion regarding women's education as instrumental. Once educated, women would double "the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity" (Mill, 1993: 82). However, while they would be capable of entering the public sphere to work if they so desire, Mill notes that only women who prove to be exceptionally fit for public participation will choose to devote their lives to such undertakings. In these rare circumstances, he argues, women will forsake marriage and family in order to pursue careers - unless, that is, they have the financial means to care for a family while they pursue a career (1993: 49).

Mill notes that, in contrast to these few, exceptional women, the majority of women will choose to remain devoted to their families and husbands. Again, instead of questioning the traditional division of labour within the family, Mill insists that it is neither necessary nor desirable that women work outside the home. Rather, justly constituted, marriage becomes a woman's profession. Thus, Mill's reconstitution of marriage is merely a reformulation of familial slavery - albeit one based on a milder command ethic. It requires from the now-educated woman those very same duties that are required from Ruskin's queens.

In essence, Mill can be seen as educating, then (re)exiling his ideal woman - now, the modernised 'willing slave' - back to the domestic sphere (1993: 48). This glaring slippage undermines the immanent nature of Mill's

preliminary critique of the marital contract. The factors Mill once labelled loathsome, primitive and unjust are rendered moot within his constitution of the just marriage. For instance, in a letter to Harriet Taylor, Mill suggests that "[t]he great occupation of woman should be to beautify life: to cultivate, for her own sake [and] that of those who surround her, all her faculties of mind, soul, and body; all her powers of enjoyment... [spent] to diffuse beauty, elegance, [and] grace everywhere" (1993: xi). Hence Mill, through his programme of education, (re)institutionalises the very character of women which he decries. He suggests:

If women have a greater natural inclination for some things than others there is no need of laws or social inculcation to make the majority of them do the former in preference to the latter. Whatever women's services are most wanted for, the free play of competition will hold out the strongest inducements to them to undertake (Mill, 1993: 27).

As a result, Mill's ideal woman in the justly constituted marriage ends up looking very similar to the nostalgic notions of the Victorian ideal promoted by many of his contemporaries. In fact, based on the vision of woman he puts forth, one could argue that it is no longer only individual men who long for a willing slave; now, in fact, a better-trained, more willing slave becomes the lynch-pin upon which societal success is based.

Conclusion

Textual analyses may offer important critiques of canonical texts, however they tend to offer very little in the way of explaining an author's motives or the reasons behind the gaps in an author's theories and policy prescriptions. While the above analysis attempts, to some extent, bridge context and text, it does not go into enough detail regarding Mill's personal motivations and situation. Therefore, in this conclusion I briefly sketch two possible explanations that may account for Mill reproducing the very logic that he criticises.

First, it is important to note that Mill's tract takes the form of a short, incisive, political treatise. In this context, one can argue that Mill is more concerned with making not only a logical and rational case, but also assertions that, for the sake of political expedience, are non-threatening to the average reader (Okin, 1979: 225). Thus, perhaps Mill's text should be read in the context of its author's goals - social reform. Doing so may explain why Mill is careful to outline the social benefits of the reforms he proposed and, at the same time, emphasise that these reforms would not result in great social upheavals. Of course, such a reading is generous to Mill, suggesting that any logical fallacies on his part should be interpreted as an attempt to mollify the Victorian (upper middle/middle-class) audience's sense of social power and privilege.

A more popular way to explain the disparity between Mill's initial critique and his proposed reforms is to question *whether The Subjection of Women* is actually

Mill's own work. Authorship of the tract is often attributed, either in part or in its entirety, to Harriet Taylor, a long-time, close friend, who later became Mill's wife (Rossi, 1970: 22-4). Taylor and Mill met during her first marriage, forming a close association despite the constraints of Victorian customs. Some suggest that Mill's feminist sympathies strengthened throughout his relationship with Taylor. As a result, *The Subjection of Women* is sometimes thought to be the product of a joint mental endeavour between Taylor and Mill, the former responsible for the more radical elements of the tract, the latter responsible for the more politically expedient notions which permeate throughout. While certainly provocative, these questions of authorship serve sometimes to deflect attention from the actual tensions that reside in the text, as well as the fact that Mill signed his name to the text and claimed ownership of it in whole.

These types of contextual explanations may provide an important base upon which to evaluate Mill's intentions and motivations, however they are not the only way to enhance knowledge of Mill's work. Similarly, while the critique of Mill's deployments of gender and gender relations are the most obvious and, arguably, the most important element of *The Subjection of Women*, they are far from the only one meriting further analysis. While some studies interrogate Mill's work for the relationship between the deployment of gender and Mill's elitism regarding class, they do so exclusively within the national context. What remains to be explored are the mutually-reinforcing relationships between gender, race and class in the political, economic and social context that, to a large

extent, defines Victorian society - the fixation with imperial conquest. I suspect that such studies will provide further elaboration of the disjunction between critical and conventional insights which mark the broader body of Mill's work.

Endnotes

¹The understanding of immanent critique employed herein is based on Seyla Benhabib's discussion of the origins of critical theory (1986). As Benhabib notes, "...critique refuses to stand outside its object and instead juxtaposes the immanent, normative self-understanding of its object to the material actuality of this object.Immanent critique is... a critique of the myth of the given and of the juxtaposition to the given of a formal principle to which the former must be subordinated" (33, 42). Since Mill's scrutiny of marriage points to that institution as far from given and since Mill illustrates the conflicts between the reality of Victorian marital inequality and the nascent, radical possibilities that reside therein, one can identify initial strains of an immanent critique within *The Subjection of Women*.

² In terms of evaluating projects of emancipation, Benhabib points to an important distinction characterised by the terms 'fulfillment' and 'transfiguration'. While the latter suggests "...that emancipation signifies a radical and qualitative break with aspects of the present..." (Benhabib, 1986: 41-2), fulfillment is based on a view of social transformation in which emancipation is designated as the realisation of "...the implicit but frustrated potential of the present" (41).

³ For most of his adult life, Mill was actively engaged in movements seeking to expand women's political, social and economic rights.

⁴ Such was Sigmund Freud's estimation of Mill in a letter Freud wrote to his fiancée, Martha Bernays, discussing his translation of Mill's *Subjection of Women* (cited in Tulloch 1989: xiii-xiv).

⁵ Mill argues that while servitude is corrupting to both master and slave, it more so to the former. For, "[i]t is wholsomer for the moral nature to be restrained, even by arbitrary power, than to be allowed to exercise arbitrary power without restraint" (Mill, 1993: 76-7).

⁶ It should be noted, however, that Mill was aware of and, indeed, predicted the strong opposition his views would produce (1993: 3-5).

⁷ Quoted in a review of Mill's work in the *Edinburgh Review* (Mill, 1993: xx).

⁸ Again, Mill anticipated such criticism of his work, suggesting in *The Subjection of Women* that the idea of women working would be difficult to accept for men "cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal" (Mill, 1993: 50).

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