

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Rousseau on the Subjection of Men

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that he was an egalitarian feminist. Men, he says, have always treated women as either their slaves or their masters, but must treat them as their equals before either sex can ever be happy.¹ He argues that true equality between the sexes requires a balance of power between them. A wife must “maintain herself as [her husband’s] equal and govern him while obeying him” (712).²

Apparently in the service of this egalitarian end, Rousseau advocated a number of social arrangements that most egalitarian feminists after him have not appreciated. In book 5 of *Emile*, describing the education of the fictional Sophie, Emile’s intended companion, Rousseau explains how she ought to learn to be pleasing to men (702–3). In this way she will gain affection and commitment from her future husband, which Rousseau says is necessary for her material well-being, the cultivation of her character, and her domestic happiness (697–98, 713). Women are pleasing to men, he argues, insofar as they are dependent on men, they are beautiful, they are respectable, and they use feminine wiles and coquetry to enhance their attractiveness (701, 716–18, 731–32). Sophie ought to learn how to flatter her husband’s pride by proving

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Le Levite d’Éphraïm*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–95), 2:1221. All translations are our own.

² Parenthetical citations in this introductory section refer to Rousseau, *Émile; ou de l’Éducation*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4.

his strength to him through her relative weakness, and how to spark his imagination by her charms (746, 806–7). All this comes somewhat naturally to women, Rousseau argues, for they are predisposed to use concealment and false impressions to gain power over their physically stronger mates (695–97, 712–13). Given the physical differences between men and women and their psychological, moral, and social consequences, the truly egalitarian arrangement between the sexes will have to combine men’s outward power over women with women’s psychological power over men (720, 766–67).

This article will examine two early feminist critics of this Rousseauian understanding: Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. The two offer distinct, but in many ways quite similar, criticisms of the aspect of Rousseau’s thought that we might call “the subjection of men.” After exploring those criticisms, we will close with some suggestions as to why Rousseau would not have accepted them.

1. WOLLSTONECRAFT

Rousseau is the single opponent whom Mary Wollstonecraft most discusses in her chief work on feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. A lengthy chapter of the book is taken up mostly with a series of block quotations from book 5 of *Emile*, interlaced with Wollstonecraft’s rebuttals and criticisms. In her view, Rousseau’s better judgment—as evinced by his condemnations of modern society and oppression, encomia to virtue, and theological apologies for God and the afterlife—is overwhelmed by “transient effusions of overweening sensibility” (94, 171–72).³ He is pathologically attracted to a certain feminine type (271), and his proposed plan for female education serves his own voluptuousness, rather than the attainment of human virtue that he admits to be the ultimate purpose of both sexes (93–94, 165). Wollstonecraft’s real opponent is the feverish, intoxicated side of Rousseau, whenever it gets the better of his more moderate, rational, virtue-loving, pious side.⁴

³ In this section, parenthetical citations refer to Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvania Tomaselli (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ Wollstonecraft does read Rousseau one-sidedly by continually supposing that making women pleasing to men is, for him, the *sole* goal of female education (rather than one, admittedly important, goal). She does not address, for example, Rousseau’s distinction between illicit coquetry and the good coquetry of a decent woman (*Emile*, 734–35); his preference, shared with Wollstonecraft, for cleanliness and simplicity over adornments (*ibid.*, 713); or his argument that women should not simply follow others’ opinions but must judge those opinions by their own “inner sentiment” (*ibid.*, 730). Cf. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 96, 90n.

Wollstonecraft is not, after all, engaged in an academic exercise of even-handed theoretical critique of a fellow author. Her fervent rhetoric is employed in an attempt to change the real circumstances of women. Rousseau is her principal opponent because, in *Emile*, he offers a powerful justification for certain contemporary practices and mores that Wollstonecraft finds abhorrent (111). She thinks that, put into practice, Rousseau's ideas take on their most extreme and voluptuous form, for his argument that it is right and good for women to be pleasing to men in order to extract what they want from them predicably has more currency than, say, his arguments that girls should be trained to confront mortality and have deference to the rights of humanity over their selfish interests (165).⁵ What she most objects to, and intends to rebut, is Rousseau's contribution to the degradation of "one half of the human species," and to rendering women "pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue" (90).

A. FEMALE TYRANNY, FEMALE DEGRADATION

Wollstonecraft does not dispute Rousseau's claim that women gain a great deal of indirect power over men by flattering male pride. She is fully convinced of Rousseau's assessment that the master is a slave to his slaves, and that a woman can exercise control over men when she is in a position of dependence on him (e.g., 170n). Wollstonecraft likens this feminine power over men to the power of monarchs, describing it as "royal" (83, 130), "tyrannical" (107, 117), "unjust" (117), "sinister" (88), "illegitimate," "arbitrary" (90), and "despotic" (78, 129). She describes how women teach their daughters "that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man" (87). The ubiquitous female obsession with physical appearances, Wollstonecraft notes, "arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power" (97). Women from time immemorial have used deceit and wiles to "indirectly...gain too much power" over men (262), so as to secure from them "food and raiment" (130), "protection" (87), and "adoration" itself (75). She writes that "history brings forward a fearful catalogue of the crimes which [women's] cunning has produced, when the weak slaves have had sufficient address to over-reach their master" (262). Wollstonecraft clearly concedes to Rousseau that he has described (and also attempted to justify) a feminine power already well known to women.

⁵ See Rousseau, *Emile*, 722–28, 810–13.

Wollstonecraft's disagreement with Rousseau is not over whether this power of women exists, but over whether female education should discourage its use. In her view, contemporary female education, which shares some characteristics with the education of Sophie described in *Emile*, is degrading to women. For one thing, it omits the cultivation of women's independent reasoning and moral judgment. Without this cultivation, women cannot be truly virtuous, since "it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason" (90). Women lack the freedom to experience life and learn from their own mistakes (193). They lack gainful employment, which might broaden their understanding of the world (135). They lack an education in sciences, which could teach them to "compare what has been individually observed with the results of experience generalized by speculation" (90; see also 128). Instead of having their own reason cultivated, they have been inculcated with virtues that are "incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect": "patience, docility, good-humor, and flexibility" (133). Wollstonecraft doubts that a woman can possess even these virtues (or apparent virtues) if they do not result from the exercise of her own reason (163). But even if she could, this would only mean that her good conduct would be owed to the arbitrary fortune of her happening to have depended on good authorities. It could not bring her the merit that, according to Wollstonecraft, wins eternal blessedness (126–27).

Even this massive omission in contemporary women's education, though, is not as insidious as the education they do receive: an education in coquetry. The coquette learns to flatter men's pride and spark their imagination by refining her senses and by giving into, or even by merely appearing to give into, her sensual pleasures. Contemporary women's education thus makes them slaves to pleasure and thereby weakened by their "over exercised sensibility, [which] not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome... to others" (136). Because of this education in sensibility, women become anxious, frivolous, insipid, selfish, and whimsical. They are also taught to pay too much attention to their appearance, which does further damage to their bodies and souls. The desire to be beautiful and delicate makes them ugly and weak (91). The desire to be well dressed makes them spend too much time indoors over their needlework and confines their minds to their finery (136, 153). Although they are continually assessing whether things are tasteful, even their aesthetic judgment is corrupted by their lack of understanding and by their dependence on the opinions of others (204). In the name of delicacy and "refined taste," women are taught to be slaves to their own sensuality and to male voluptuousness.

Rousseau had said that attention to the appearances of propriety is a major part of female duty.⁶ But for Wollstonecraft, such attention, like the duplicity involved in coquetry, is incompatible with “greatness of mind” (165). Honesty and sincerity are the foundation of morality (101). Women, like men, should have decency of mind and heart, and so women should not be taught to concern themselves with the appearance of propriety, or else they will mistakenly learn that the appearance of propriety is all that is required of them (176). Likewise, sincerity is undermined when women are forced continually to act in a manner contrary to their own reason and desires, and are constantly dependent on the authority of others. Rousseau advises women to be docile so that their husbands will not abuse them.⁷ But even if we suppose that such docility has the desired effect on husbands, the moral effects of caressing one’s abuser are supremely degrading (263), and leave women confused about right and wrong (162). By adopting the role of the weak in order to control the strong, and by paying consummate attention to the appearance of propriety, women lose their moral compass and the simple sincerity necessary for moral improvement.

Although women do gain power and authority over men by degrading themselves and placing themselves in the weaker position, even that power is itself degrading. It is only the “reason of an individual” that “demands... homage” and submission, and even then, “the submission is to reason” itself and “not to man” (107). When women receive irrational homage and submission from men, it is not to be celebrated, for “every external advantage that exalts man above his fellows, without any mental exertion, sinks him in reality below them” (116). Women then “lose the rank which reason would assign them” (117). Like an “absolute monarch” who must practice “servility” to the irrational passions of the people he rules in order to maintain his power and rule, so too must women slavishly serve the irrational desires of men in order to maintain their power over them. When kings enjoy unjust rule through the arbitrary quality of inheritance, it harms their souls; when women enjoy unjust rule through the arbitrary qualities of beauty and charm, it harms theirs (107).

Besides degrading its possessors, this illegitimate feminine power does not even accomplish enough. Coquetry is a means of controlling lovers or potential lovers, but under the current economic arrangements, unmarried

⁶ See Rousseau, *Émile*, 702–3.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 710–11.

women have no independent means of supporting themselves and so are often dependent on the support and goodwill of brothers. Wollstonecraft is likewise concerned about widows. The material dependence of a wife on her husband might shore up his desire to protect her, but what is to happen to her when he dies (141)? And in any case, coquetry is a much more powerful tool in the hands of a young beautiful maiden than it is in the hands of a matron. An older wife who has lost her mystique through familiarity loses this power to control her husband. Wollstonecraft quotes Anna Aikin's saying that woman "is quickly scorn'd when not ador'd" (131). Finally, a weak and docile woman might make men gallant, but gallantry is always mixed with contempt and can easily be drowned out by it. Romantic love, even when it is continually enlivened by feminine wiles, is not constant enough to keep marriages happy and stable, and therefore causes instability throughout society (101). Like the tyrant whom she resembles, the coquette wields an intoxicating amount of immediate power over her subjects, but that power remains incomplete, superficial, precarious, and eventually destructive to tyrant and subject alike.

B. RATIONAL EDUCATION AND EQUALITY

The most fundamental premise of Wollstonecraft's critique of contemporary society is that women are first and foremost human beings and fellow creatures, and the aim of their lives is the same as that of every other human being, namely, to obtain rational virtue that can merit eternal blessedness (82).⁸ She argues that "the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; . . . secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone" (76–77). All social and political arrangements ought to be judged by whether they encourage the use and perfection of individual reason, and no one ought to be forced to obey arbitrary authority (i.e., authority other than reason) (see again 107). *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is the sequel to *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, in which Wollstonecraft defends the French Revolution from Edmund Burke's criticisms. At least at the time when she writes these works, she displays a fervor for equal democratic citizenship and disgust with the arbitrary hierarchies that undermine the divine end of each individual.⁹

⁸ See Eileen Hunt Botting, *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 168–69, 173; Botting, *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 70–115.

⁹ Wollstonecraft may have later moderated these views after seeing the results of the French Revolution. See Sylvia Tomaselli, introduction to *Vindication*, xxviii–xxix; Botting, *Family Feuds*, 136, 155–56.

Against those who would consider her political principles “utopian” (107), Wollstonecraft does discuss the more fair and rational society that could realistically be constructed on those principles, and offers suggestions about women’s role in that society. Her most concrete prescription is a plan for coeducational day schools, in which boys and girls together will learn largely the same subjects (except that some students will receive sex-specific vocational education in the afternoons after age nine) (263–64). She outlines a curriculum for these schools, defending them first as good for women simply, and then also as a necessary preparation for fulfilling the duties of motherhood well and for finding pleasure in the domestic sphere (262, 265). She does not intend this equal education to prepare women and men for identical roles in the economy. Although she wants more occupations to be opened to women, she predicts that only a few exceptional women will forgo family life for the sake of these newly available careers, and that once a woman is married, her duties will be largely or exclusively inside the home, depending on her social class (139–40). Most women will choose to have families and so will have a domestic career. Their education should therefore have the improvement of domestic life as its goal. Wollstonecraft even boasts that keeping male and female teenagers together in the same class will lead to earlier marriages (264).

Wollstonecraft does hope that allowing women into more occupations will make them less materially dependent on men. But she sees this as helping women to fulfill their duties within (primarily) the domestic sphere, not as pulling them out of that sphere. She believes women ought to be more materially independent because having a gainful occupation outside the home improves their understanding (155) and makes them more satisfied with domestic life and better capable of fulfilling its duties (270). She also thinks that women ought to be able to practice generosity with their own resources (236), and wants single women and widows to have better means of supporting themselves (141–42). But in general, she is less concerned with changing the material circumstances of women’s lives than with changing their manners and thereby their souls.

When Wollstonecraft speaks of female independence, she often means independence of thought and moral agency, not necessarily material independence (see 230). Women should no longer be expected to defer to the opinions and judgment of their husbands. They should be recognized as independent moral agents, and they should be judged by the universal standard of rational, unsexed virtue. Women should endeavor to be as capable, strong,

and virtuous as men, and men should no longer have gallant contempt for women by judging them merely by how docile and pleasing they are. Instead of attempting to be pleasing to men through their wiles and charms, women should give up all forms of dishonesty (101, 181, 183). Instead of seeking beauty, they should seek health and cleanliness (215). Instead of frivolity, they should seek “serious employments” and wholesome work through the fulfillment of their duties (153). Wollstonecraft employs some of her most powerful rhetoric in her attempt to persuade women to stop degrading themselves by seeking to please men above all else.

In light of these new and egalitarian aspirations, men and women ought to change their expectations about marriage. Wollstonecraft argues that mutual respect and friendship between the sexes will have to be recognized as more important than romantic love and fondness. Women should endeavor to win a man’s respect for their capabilities and virtue, instead of flattering his pride by always appearing to be his inferior and sparking his imagination. Women should gain those qualities of character that any good man cannot fail to respect, instead of trying to manipulate men’s emotions. The force binding marriages together should not be unstable and fleeting romantic love fed by coquetry. Wollstonecraft goes so far as to say that friendship is incompatible with romantic love. Friendship is “a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time,” whereas “vain fears and fond jealousies, the winds which fan the flame of love, when judiciously or artfully tempered, are both incompatible with the tender confidence and sincere respect of friendship” (151; see also 100–101). Although a friendship can form on the basis of affection between the sexes, it will ultimately require rational mutual respect, an eschewal of all dishonesty and reserve, and intellectual equality. Commenting on Rousseau’s depiction of the pleasure Emile will take in tutoring his wife Sophie on subjects of which her prior education left her ignorant, Wollstonecraft demands to know “how friendship can subsist when love expires, between the master and his pupil” (122n). If women are to cease degrading themselves by their unjust exercise of power over men, then they will need to be satisfied with being respected for their virtue, and with the cooler affection of a husband’s friendship.

C. FEMALE HAPPINESS

Wollstonecraft predicts that women will be reluctant, until “the manners of the times are changed, and formed on more reasonable principles,” to relinquish their power and “return to nature and equality” (90). As long as

men hold arbitrary power, it seems likely women will attempt to retain their own unjust authority over them. Even once their society does come around to “more reasonable principles,” Wollstonecraft worries that women might not give up their “illegitimate power”; they would thereby “prove that they have *less* mind than man” (90, emphasis original). But at least, Wollstonecraft argues, they would then have been proved inferior to men through a fair contest (106–7). Such a contest can only be had in a reasonable society in which women are given the same education as men, held to the same standard of virtue, and not handicapped by social forces encouraging their degradation. Wollstonecraft admits she cannot be certain, but having traced so many existing feminine vices directly to women’s subordination, she believes she has good evidence to think that women will fare well enough in any fair contest over virtue.

But Wollstonecraft also does not think that women ought to wait to stop degrading themselves until society has been reconstructed. She acknowledges that men will tend to prefer a woman who suits their own voluptuousness over “a fine woman, who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty.” Some will therefore conclude that “the [female] sex is degraded by a physical, if not by a moral necessity.” But she retorts that women ought nevertheless to “be pure as your heavenly Father is pure,” and that they ought not to be “restrained by mechanical laws.” If they “co-operat[e] with the Father of Spirits” and enact the revolution in female manners that Wollstonecraft calls for, then they will “contribute to, instead of disturbing, the order of creation” (120).¹⁰ Wollstonecraft states in a number of places that men ought to be more chaste (e.g., 91, 229), but it is clear that she did not mean for women’s moral improvement to wait until men ceased preferring pretty and charming women to virtuous ones, and all social authority was granted to reason alone. Women, she says, must give up their power over men in order to have power over themselves (170).

For Wollstonecraft, “virtue...should have an appearance of seriousness, if not of austerity.” She concedes that “virtue and pleasure are not, in fact, so nearly allied in this life as some eloquent writers have laboured to prove.” She even hopes that fortunate “circumstances” may help to set limits to the passionate romance of newlyweds so that their affections can subside into friendship (although she does at times allow that some degree of romance is compatible with egalitarian marriage) (151). She wants women to be given

¹⁰ For an account of Wollstonecraft’s theological optimism in the *Vindication*, see Botting, *Family Feuds*, 164–67.

more independence to think for themselves and freedom to learn from their mistakes, but she realizes that they may then need a great deal of self-control and virtue in order to keep to the steep and thorny way to heaven rather than the primrose path of dalliance. Nonetheless, she resolutely calls for a revolution in manners that must begin with women making the initial sacrifice: they must quit the coquette's gambit and relinquish their feminine power over men.

2. MILL

In contrast to Wollstonecraft, Mill never responds directly to Rousseau's views on the relations between the sexes—not even when those views reappear in the writings of Tocqueville, Mill's friend and correspondent.¹¹ Facing a widespread and deeply entrenched prejudice against a view that had always seemed obvious to him, yet also aware that his own view might soon come to dominate social and political life (thanks in part to his own considerable efforts), Mill is much more concerned to attack and tear down the prejudices that oppose his political project than to reconstruct and engage sympathetically with the strongest arguments that could be offered in defense of those prejudices (261–63).¹²

Because Mill's primary opponents in the project of women's emancipation are Victorian Englishmen and Englishwomen, many of the prejudices he attacks are almost as anti-Rousseauian as they are anti-Millian. Some of his Victorian opponents believed that women are, as such, morally superior to men (292). Some believed that the "ideal" of "feminine character" is one of utter self-abnegation and sacrifice, or "that it is [women's] nature, to live for others" (293, 272). Some credited modern industrial civilization and/or Christianity for having already fully liberated women from the barbaric subjection in which prior Christian or pagan ages had held them.¹³ In the interest

¹¹ See John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works*, ed. John M. Robson (New York: Routledge, 1963–1991), esp. the indexes in vol. 33, s.v. "Rousseau, Jean-Jacques" and "Tocqueville, Alexis de."

¹² In this section, parenthetical citations refer to John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 21. On the major role played by Mill in the fledgling women's suffrage movement, see Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 413–48.

¹³ *Subjection*, 283–84; J. S. Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women," in *Collected Works*, 21:412. When Mill published this latter essay after the death of his wife Harriet, he claimed in an introductory note (393–94) that she had written it while he merely transcribed it. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Liberty and Liberalism: The Case of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 183–86, shows that this claim is likely exaggerated. Still, Mill's willingness to make the claim raises the possibility that "Enfranchisement" may contain views he did not himself accept. Pending a more detailed study, we have tried here to avoid any argument from "Enfranchisement" that visibly conflicts with any argument from

of reconstructing a dialogue between Mill and Rousseau, we will pass over Mill's critiques of these and other views that Rousseau did not hold.

But Mill also mentions that according to some of his opponents, "the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother," so that her "real path of success and happiness" must lie in fulfilling that vocation (281, 299). Some even claim that "equality between men and women," in its true understanding, is fully compatible with "enforced distinctions in their privileges and functions" within society.¹⁴ Some regard the obvious and real disadvantages that accrue to women from their legal subordination to men as "the price paid" for a "great good" (286). Some defend the legal and social distinctions between the sexes by offering "vain fears" about "the evil" that they think "would outweigh the good" of abolishing those distinctions (323, 340). At no point in his collected works does Mill explain what his opponents have in mind by any of these Rousseauian claims, much less what reasons they might be able to offer in support of them.

In at least one area, however, Mill does identify a potential "evil" that will accompany women's emancipation and that might well "outweigh the good" of that emancipation in some women's eyes. For Mill shares Wollstonecraft's expectation that when society liberates women from being dominated by their husbands, it will also in a way be liberating husbands from being dominated by their wives. We will therefore examine why Mill wishes to overturn women's legal subordination in spite of the loss in women's power that he admits will (paradoxically) accompany their emancipation.

A. WOMEN'S POWER VS. WOMEN'S FREEDOM

According to Mill, the women of his day already exercise quite a significant power over their husbands. Their power is great enough to balance out what, on paper, would have seemed to be an unlimited legal "despotism" exercised by every husband over his wife (286). Women's power is so great that, despite their apparent legal position as something less than household slaves, in reality they tend "on the whole" to achieve a balance of power with their husbands that is "acceptable to both" (284–86, 292). In fact, the wife "frequently" exercises "too much" power over her husband for his and her own good (290).

Subjection (which Mill did acknowledge as his own work).

¹⁴ Mill, "Enfranchisement," 415.

Among the British middle and upper classes, this ascendancy of women may perhaps be explained by the recently acquired Victorian prejudice in favor of a theory of equality between the sexes: Mill can even claim that “the only object” of all his proposed legal reforms is “to make all other married couples similar to what these are now” (where “these” refers to “probably a great majority” of couples within the “higher classes”).¹⁵ Yet even among the lower-class couples who are Mill’s main targets for moral reform, many other factors still conspire to give each wife a strong hold on her husband’s will. Among those factors, Mill expressly downplays the importance of the “mere feminine blandishments” related to sexual attractiveness (289). Much more important, he says, are the wife’s gender-neutral sources of power over her husband: his “personal affection” for her that grows naturally out of a shared life together; their “common interests” in the shared projects of domestic life; the daily “comforts and enjoyments” that she offers him, together with the natural process by which his need for her develops into genuine concern; and the natural “influence” (both conscious and “unconscious”) that our daily companions always exercise over our sentiments and opinions.¹⁶

All these factors together give the women of Mill’s day “often...a degree of command over the conduct of” their husbands that is “altogether excessive and unreasonable” (290). Mill therefore emphatically denies that his proposals for women’s emancipation are intended to bring about any net gain in women’s influence over men, which “always...has been very considerable” even in barbaric ages, and has only increased as the modern economy has brought the two sexes into more regular daily contact.¹⁷ After the emancipation that he advocates, “the moral influence of women” over men will not become any “greater” than it currently is, but only “more beneficial” (327).

Nor does Mill’s phrase “more beneficial” refer to any benefit accruing specifically to women. On the contrary, Mill’s stated objection to the moral power currently wielded by women over their husbands is that they use it to serve their own “interest,” or the “private advantages...[and] interests of [their] family,” at the expense of any devotion to abstract “principle,” particularly when that principle would “withdraw their men from them” (329). This “family selfishness” may “wear an amiable guise” and “put on the mask of duty,” but it is in reality “morally wrong.” It elevates a mere “animal function

¹⁵ *Subjection*, 295; “Enfranchisement,” 407.

¹⁶ *Subjection*, 289–90; for “unconscious,” see “Enfranchisement,” 408, and *Subjection*, 334 (“her occult influence”).

¹⁷ *Subjection*, 327, 335; “Enfranchisement,” 407–8.

and its consequences” above “public virtue,” “public spirit,” “principle,” “sense of duty towards the public good,” and indeed “any legitimate purpose” (as illustrated by the fact that it generally produces political “Conservatism” rather than “liberalism”).¹⁸ Mill’s austere expectation for wives is thus that they stop using their “very considerable” influence over their husbands to benefit themselves, and instead redirect it to benefit society as a whole, even at their own and their children’s expense.

Of course, Mill does not expect women to make this apparent sacrifice of their interests until society has first secured their interests much better than it currently does. So long as women’s personal interests are entirely dependent on their husband’s will, it is only reasonable that they should seek to maximize their power over that will. “Where liberty cannot be hoped for, and power can, power becomes the grand object of desire” (338). The first step of reform must therefore be to eliminate this dependence. Within the heart of women, the “natural” and “healthy...love of liberty” can indeed displace the depraving “love of power” (which is its “eternal antagonist”)—but only once women are permitted “the undisturbed management of their own affairs,” so that “each of them individually is able to do without” (i.e., is able to secure her individual interests without) exercising any “power over” her husband (338). Society must be reordered so as to “render the existence of [women]...tolerable to them, without reliance on the chivalrous feelings of” their husbands or other men (329).

Thus the whole political-legal program of *Subjection of Women* is required in order (among other things) to make it both possible and reasonable for women to give up the excessive power that they currently enjoy over their husband’s will. The modern wife is in the position of the “Sultan’s favourite slave [who] has slaves under her, over whom she tyrannizes.” Mill’s analogy is evidently imperfect, since in this case the Sultan himself is also her chief slave. Still, “the desirable thing would be that she should neither have slaves nor be a slave” (290). “Modern society,” he says, must exercise its now-enormous accumulated powers over the private lives of its members in order to set the marriage relationship for the first time on its legitimate foundations, namely, “the respect of each for the rights of [the] other, and the ability of each to take care of himself” (328). These are of course already the foundations of modern economic life, and Mill repeatedly emphasizes that the relationship between spouses (in its legal aspect) needs to become much more like what

¹⁸ *Subjection*, 329, 290; “Enfranchisement,” 403, 411–12.

a business partnership among men already is (see 272–75, 290–92, 328). In short, the whole system of women’s legal subordination needs to “be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (261).

Yet Mill’s use of the term “equality” here can easily be misunderstood. Mill does occasionally speak as if he expected to bring about equality of outcomes between the sexes, particularly in educational attainment (334–35). And he does insist with unusual vehemence that the companionship of two highly and equally educated individuals is the “only...ideal of marriage,” and that “all opinions, customs, and institutions which favour any notion of [marriage], or turn the conceptions and aspiration connected with it into any other direction, are relics of primitive barbarism” that must be eliminated from civilized society (336).

Nonetheless, Mill insists with even greater frequency that what his legal reforms will actually secure is equality of opportunity, not outcome.¹⁹ His strongest objection is not to either spouse’s wielding any power over the other, but only to his or her wielding *unmerited* power over the other.²⁰ “Not what men are, but what they do, constitutes their claim to deference;...merit, and not birth, is the only rightful claim to power and authority” (325). In a marriage characterized by equality in this relevant sense, one spouse might well exercise real decision-making power over the other, but this power would be apportioned fairly and “naturally”—that is, on the basis of “comparative qualifications” such as “mental superiority,” “decision of character,” age, and earned income (291). Here is perhaps the clearest sign of Mill’s meritocratic understanding of equality: he believes that all of the qualifications just listed are currently concentrated more among husbands than among wives, he expects this to remain the case to at least some extent after women’s emancipation, and he gives no sign of being bothered by this inequality of outcome.²¹ One explanation for the somewhat unfair charges of inconsistency leveled against Mill by twentieth-century feminists is that they seem not to have appreciated how little he shares their concern for equality of outcomes

¹⁹ Mary Lyndon Shanley, “Marital Slavery and Friendship: John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*,” *Political Theory* 9, no. 2 (1981): 241, asserts that the two claims are reconcilable because equality of opportunity is for Mill a mere means to the promotion of egalitarian companionate marriage.

²⁰ See *Subjection*, 293 (“an arbitrary preference of one human being over another,” emphasis added).

²¹ See *Subjection*, 291, 297–98. Others of these discrepancies between the sexes will be lessened or eliminated by women’s emancipation: see 331–36; Mill, “Enfranchisement,” 410–11.

between men and women.²² Equality within marriage in Mill's relevant sense means only that power should be distributed on the basis of "merit," which consists in "superiority" of "ability and judgment" (324–25). Only in this way will each marriage partner come to occupy the position for which he or she is "most fit," so that "the collective faculties of the two sexes can be applied on the whole with the greatest sum of valuable result" (280–81). Mill's focus here on a meritocratic understanding of equality leaves unclear whether the power distribution in any given marriage that is most "valuable" to mankind will also be the most valuable for the parties themselves.

B. WHY WOMEN'S FREEDOM DIMINISHES WOMEN'S POWER

The question of what is valuable for the parties themselves can be answered better once we explain Mill's insistence that women after emancipation will have no more moral power over men than they already do. From what we have seen so far, it is not clear why this should be the case. For one thing, we have seen Mill say that wives would have to be "able to do without" their husbands before they could lose the "love of power" that material dependence naturally engenders in the human soul, and he does not seem to expect that all wives will ever be so independent. In fact, according to his explicit prediction, most of the lower-class wives at whom his legal reforms are primarily targeted will remain economically dependent on their husband's income, and hence "naturally" subordinate to his will to at least some extent (see again 291, 297–98, 295). Moreover, even granting that legal emancipation will indeed leave women (in the aggregate) less materially dependent on men and hence less in need of a counterbalancing power over them, legal emancipation would still appear to leave fully intact all the gender-neutral factors that Mill had listed as the actual sources of a wife's power within marriage: the man's personal affection, common interests, daily companionship, and so on, should hardly be lessened when the marriage is set on a legally egalitarian footing. To those existing factors will also now be added a greater share of genuine merit among (at least) the many upper-class women who Mill

²² Cf. Elizabeth S. Smith, "John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*: A Re-Examination," *Polity* 34, no. 2 (2001): 181–203; Christine Di Stefano, *Configurations of Masculinity: A Feminist Perspective on Modern Political Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 144–86; Jennifer Ring, "Mill's *The Subjection of Women*: The Methodological Limits of Liberal Feminism," *Review of Politics* 47 (1985): 27–44; Richard W. Krouse, "Patriarchal Liberalism and Beyond: From John Stuart Mill to Harriet Taylor," in *The Family in Political Thought*, ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 145–72; Susan M. Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 197–230; Julia Annas, "Mill and the Subjection of Women," *Philosophy* 52 (1977): 179–94. This aspect of Mill is noted approvingly by Himmelfarb, *Liberty and Liberalism*, 170–74, who on this point prefers him to his feminist critics.

expects will benefit from new educational opportunities. This increase in women's collective "ability and judgment" should, as we have seen, give them greater power within a system of meritocratic marriages (see 331–36). If we take seriously Mill's assertion that emancipation will not increase women's collective power over men, then we must expect emancipation to bring about some as-yet-unexplained diminishment in that power, which will offset its more easily predictable augmentation.

Mill never explains in so many words the mechanism by which this diminishment in women's power would take place. But we can find him pointing to three such mechanisms. The first is that, in contradiction to Mill's earlier denigration of the importance of "feminine blandishments," a wife's influence over her husband actually turns out to draw strength from certain non-gender-neutral arts that require practice, and that therefore fall into disuse where women have less of a material incentive to practice them. "By making it the business of her life to work upon his sentiments, a wife" will in fact achieve greater "influence" over those sentiments (290). The "natural attraction between opposite sexes," which (Mill admits) "may" thrive on an artificial heightening of differences between men and women, is at any rate a major "means of influence" by *men* over their wives (272, 333). Presumably the converse also holds, since "all men, except the most brutish" want their wives to love them and not merely obey them (271). In fact, Mill suggests that women's whole "passion for personal beauty, address, and display"—for what one might call feminine blandishments—is attributable precisely to their desire for influence and power over men (338). Either these women are all badly misled, or else these blandishments do secure more real power over men than Mill had previously seemed to grant. At any rate, Mill is explicit in his hope that women's emancipation will diminish this "passion" for the arts of feminine attractiveness, which he regards primarily as a source of "mischievous luxury and social immorality" (338).

Second, Mill regards men's "pride," which is enormously flattered by the subjection of women (268), as another basis of women's reciprocal power over them. A wife gains more power over her husband precisely "by having no will (or persuading him that she has no will) but his, in anything which regards their joint relation" (290). Hence the existing legal structures render family life a veritable "school" of the "morality of chivalry," which uses the husband's "agreeable sense" of power over his wife to induce him to serve her interests—even as that sense also leads ineluctably to his unjustified and unnatural "self-worship" (294–95, 296, 293). In this way, a man who has been

taught by law to view his wife and children “as parts of [his] own interests and belongings” will be thereby induced to “sacrifice” and “care for them,” and indeed to think well of himself for doing so.²³ Legal emancipation will diminish or eliminate this confused tangle of chivalric sentiments that induce men to care for their wives’ interests out of what Mill calls a “double-dyed and idealized selfishness” grounded in a false sense of superiority (289).

Third, women will lose some power over men by losing some of the respect that they currently receive on the basis of their mere social role, as distinguished from the (relatively rare) meritocratic qualities that would actually deserve that respect. “Society” currently teaches women that their own family members “are the only ones to whom they owe any duty—the only ones whose interest they are called to care for” (321). According to this widespread (especially male) prejudice, “the cares of a family” are a woman’s “sole duty” and indeed her “only *social* duty,” by which she fully discharges her “debt to society”: those cares are not an alternative to higher social duties but are rather her best way of fulfilling those duties (321, 338–39, emphasis added). Precisely this widespread belief about female duties must, in Mill’s view, be eradicated from society. He wishes to “get rid of the idea,” in the minds of men and women alike, that cares outside the family “are man’s business”; his legal reforms will teach both men and women to *think* of a woman as “a human being like any other, *entitled* to choose her pursuits... [and] to interest herself in whatever is interesting to human beings” (327, emphasis added). Since society naturally awards “honour and distinction” to those whom it regards as serving its interests, this change in public opinion will mean a diminishment in the share of “consideration” or reputation (which is “the principal object of human pursuit”) that a woman can win by serving the mere “private interest” of her family (300, 327, 272). After this change, it will no longer be the case that “a married woman is *presumed* to be a useful member of society unless there is evidence to the contrary,” while “a single woman must establish, what very few either women or men ever do establish, an *individual* claim.”²⁴ Husbands, who are both part of society and influenced by it, may be presumed to be at least somewhat affected by this diminishment of the honor shown to those wives (i.e., the large majority) who cannot independently earn societal honors through rare meritocratic

²³ *Subjection*, 288–89; on the law’s educative function in this regard, see 291, 324–26.

²⁴ J. S. Mill, “On Marriage,” in *Collected Works*, 21:41–42 (emphasis original). This youthful unpublished text takes the form of a private letter to his still-married beloved, Harriet Taylor. The views it expresses must be taken with a grain of salt for multiple reasons, but there is no particular reason to doubt the sincerity of its description of contemporary social prejudices.

qualities. The respect that a minority of women will earn in their husbands' eyes by exercising their newly cultivated faculties on behalf of broader social improvement will be at least partly offset, in the aggregate, by a diminishment of the respect that most women had previously earned through ordinary care for their own families.

In all three of these cases, Mill never denies—he even strongly suggests—that the female power that he wishes to diminish has brought with it many concrete material benefits for women. Nor does he try to argue that the diminishment of this power will be compensated by equal or greater material improvements. Rather, he rejects those material benefits on moral grounds. The confused and “idealized selfishness” of chivalry merits “disgust and indignation,” as it derives from a “depraved state of...mind” in the man (296, 289). Similarly, women’s willingness to pander to their male rulers in exchange for material sustenance “is corrupting” to the women themselves, for “it produces the vices...of artifice” (i.e., dishonesty and manipulateness).²⁵ Indeed, all the moralizing that society attaches to women’s and men’s reciprocal care for one another and for their children is only so much offensive hypocrisy: women manipulate men “for their own purposes,” men care for women and children “as part of [their] own interests and belongings,” and both sexes congratulate themselves on a false virtue found in the fulfillment of nonexistent duties (338, 289). So it must be, as long as spouses’ dependence on one another is anything other than a mutual and “reciprocal superiority,” with perfect alternation of “leading and being led,” bound by “affections” that positively disdain to be bound by any tie other than “free and spontaneous choice,” “renewed and renewing at each instant.”²⁶ For “genuine moral sentiment” can only be cultivated in the society of “equals”; “the true virtue of human beings is fitness to live together as equals; claiming nothing for themselves but what they as freely concede to everyone else...and preferring, wherever possible, the society of those with whom leading and following can be alternate and reciprocal” (293–94).

Mill’s protest against women’s unjust power over men appears to rest ultimately on his revulsion at the thought of women’s degrading themselves by playing along with this moral hypocrisy merely in order to secure their own material well-being. “Men think it base and servile in men to accept food as the price of dependence, and why do they not deem it so in women? solely

²⁵ Mill, “Enfranchisement,” 410.

²⁶ *Subjection*, 336; “On Marriage,” 42. The sentence from “On Marriage” is extravagantly romantic but expresses a logical consequence of views we have seen stated in *Subjection*.

because they do not desire that women should be their equals.”²⁷ Mill recurs to this political analogy many times in the *Subjection*. Just as in “the affairs of states,” so too within the marriage bond: despotism must be overthrown no matter how kindly the despot may be, as the French Revolution rightly taught us (286; similarly at 271, 272, 290, 321–22). Men feel “twice as much a human being” when they are free citizens rather than subjected to another’s will, and the same is “every particle as true of women as of men”—or rather, it will become so once women taste this freedom, which many of them are not yet even educated enough to desire.²⁸ There are certain “satisfactions of personal pride” that only civil freedom can offer, and we rightly feel contempt for any human being degraded and servile enough to pursue any number of material benefits at the cost of those higher satisfactions (337). Mill’s feminism is thus one species of what is often rightly identified as his “perfectionist” liberalism. For him, a truly liberal society must aim at its members’ (including women’s) highest moral cultivation, even at the expense of their base material interests.

3. ROUSSEAU

We have seen that, in their largely overlapping critiques of the subjection of men that Rousseau defends, Wollstonecraft and Mill appeal to considerations that appear frequently in Rousseau’s own writings: freedom, virtue, intellectual independence, egalitarianism. Our study of Wollstonecraft and Mill therefore points toward further research into the reasons why Rousseau applied these principles differently than these feminist authors did. We suggest three fruitful areas for such research.

First, while Wollstonecraft and Mill are concerned about moral egalitarianism between the two sexes, Rousseau appears to be even more concerned about moral egalitarianism among human beings in general, including among members of the same sex. Rousseau does emphasize the importance of extraordinary moral exemplars as patterns for others to imitate, but he believes we should be imitating their qualities of soul rather than their external actions.²⁹ He rejects any definition of human moral duties that would require us all to act (or try to act) like extraordinary moral exemplars.³⁰ Moral

²⁷ Mill, “On Marriage,” 42–43. As the next sentence above shows, this is only a more vivid expression of a view that Mill would repeat in *Subjection*.

²⁸ *Subjection*, 336–37, 271; “Enfranchisement,” 413.

²⁹ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 2:223–24, 391–92.

³⁰ See Rousseau, *Émile*, 741–46.

norms must take their bearings from the ordinary case, not the extraordinary.³¹ And for ordinary people, family life is the locus of our most cherished and (usually) most important moral duties, and is “the best counterpoison to [the] bad morals” of modern society.³² We should distrust any moral theory that denigrates our duties toward those nearest to us in favor of abstract principles or the supposed interests of humanity as a whole.³³

Rousseau therefore appears to worry that by denigrating child rearing as mere “selfishness” or “an animal function,” Mill would in effect be inviting most people to become less moral, not more. And Rousseau accuses authors like Wollstonecraft, who call women to an austere standard of intellectual and moral virtue that asks them to subordinate their natural desires for romantic love and pleasant living, of committing a typically Christian error that God himself would never commit: the error of proposing rigorous moral duties while attacking the very sentiments that allow frail humans to fulfill those duties.³⁴ Rousseau is skeptical of all attempts to hold human beings to a standard of moral improvement that would demand too much sacrifice of their natural desire for happiness—a happiness that men and women alike will find primarily in family life, home of the “sweetest sentiments known to man.”³⁵ And he is especially skeptical of any purported moral standard that only a few intellectuals could hope to meet, such as Mill’s highly educated “ideal of marriage” or Wollstonecraft’s conception of independent rationality. He worries that such rigid moral doctrines lack the “humanity” that is at the center of his own moral understanding.³⁶

Second, Rousseau’s strong appreciation of the natural desire for freedom and independence is tempered by his belief that this natural desire can never be given full rein within a healthy society. Humans in general have not been mentally independent of their society’s prejudices, as Wollstonecraft wants them to be, since at least the invention of agriculture; women have not been physically independent of men, as Mill wants them to be, since the first invention of the family itself.³⁷ “By becoming sociable,” human beings become each

³¹ Ibid., 699.

³² Ibid., 257–58.

³³ Ibid., 249.

³⁴ Ibid., 716, 728–29.

³⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 3:168.

³⁶ Cf. Rousseau, *Émile*, 302, 467, 508, 523.

³⁷ Rousseau, *Discours sur l’inégalité*, 171–85, 168.

other's "slaves."³⁸ We cannot simply eliminate the sentiments of servility, nor the dishonesty that accompanies them, without going back into the forests to live with the bears.³⁹ Rousseauian social morality therefore requires, not a simple attack on all forms of dependence and enslavement, but a judicious acceptance of the right forms of dependence that will maximize the freedom that we can enjoy while remaining social animals. As an example, Rousseau says that by demanding that women in society be fully honest about their sexual desires, we would in effect be demanding that they become *less* honest overall, since unrestrained indulgence of those desires within society will unavoidably lead them into even worse forms of deception.⁴⁰ This means that, while Rousseau would be quite interested in Wollstonecraft's and Mill's critiques of women's dependence and servility, he would also insist that these can only be evaluated by comparison with the new forms of dependence and servility that will unavoidably take their place after women's legal emancipation.

Finally, Wollstonecraft and Mill both appear to take for granted that a sufficient number of men and women will continue to marry and have children even after their own proposed reforms are implemented. Wollstonecraft is very concerned that men and women should perform the duties of parenthood well, but she never shows any worry that they will fail to form families in the first place.⁴¹ Almost a century later, Mill already sees a significant rise in the number of women who choose not to marry, but he denies that this should be an object of social concern; he is likely moved by the thought that the British birth rate is too high anyway.⁴² Yet Rousseau predicts that civilized morality, in conjunction with Enlightenment critiques of religion, will lower the birthrate so much as to lead to the depopulation of Europe.⁴³ He recommends his own model of female domesticity specifically as a means of forestalling that outcome.⁴⁴ For all we know, Wollstonecraft and Mill might have been equally concerned with major declines in fertility and family

³⁸ Ibid., 139.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 207.

⁴⁰ Rousseau, *Émile*, 734–36.

⁴¹ She is comfortable, for example, disparaging the "arbitrary" and "common passions" that she says bring men and women together in the majority of cases. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 203.

⁴² See Mill, *Subjection*, 338–39; "Enfranchisement," 403. Mill saw population control as a further argument in favor of women's emancipation: see Nadia Urbinati, "John Stuart Mill on Androgyny and Ideal Marriage," *Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (1991): 640–41. On the general importance of population control to Mill, see Himmelfarb, *Liberty and Liberalism*, 119–23.

⁴³ Rousseau, *Émile*, 256, 633n.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 256–59.

formation, had they anticipated how great those declines would one day become. It does not seem likely to us that they would even then have accepted the Rousseauian solution to this problem, but it is at least worth investigating why Rousseau was so much more concerned with it than they were.

In our own society, arguments like Wollstonecraft's and Mill's have carried the day, and Rousseau's would-be feminism is generally viewed as patriarchal and oppressive. We doubt that Rousseau would try to reverse women's legal emancipation today, any more than he tried to reverse other social changes in his own time that he considered corrupting.⁴⁵ But a better understanding of his reasons for rejecting arguments like Wollstonecraft's and Mill's could well point us toward further social reforms that might help average men and women harvest more of the benefits of that emancipation.

We wish to conclude by expressing our deep and abiding gratitude to Christopher Kelly, who introduced us to the serious study of Rousseau long before either of us could have imagined we would ever get to write an article like this one (let alone do so together). For us and many others who have been fortunate enough to study with Chris in person, he has been an ever-generous mentor and a model of the scholarly life that we seek to lead. For the many more who will know him only through his writings, we hope and expect that his signal contributions toward the revival of Anglophone Rousseau studies will continue to inspire others to follow his example, as we have tried to do here.

⁴⁵ See Jean Starobinski, "The Antidote in the Poison: The Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau," in *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil* (Oxford: Polity, 1989), 118–68.

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