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On the Enslavement of Women's Minds: John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*

Katherine Smits

All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. They are so far in a position different from all other subject classes, that their masters require something more from them than actual service. Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. The masters of all other slaves rely, for maintaining obedience, on fear; either fear of themselves or religious fears. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to effect their purpose. All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of 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. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.¹

When liberal philosopher and Radical MP John Stuart Mill published *The Subjection of Women* in 1869, almost a decade after he began drafting it, and only four years before his death, the British House of Commons had recently debated and rejected for the first time the controversial issue of women's suffrage and property rights. Mill, who as a Member of Parliament had proposed an amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867 substituting the term 'person' for man, had delayed publication in the hope that his book might appear in a more auspicious climate and exert some persuasive force.

Although it would be almost another fifty years before women were granted the right to vote in Britain, *The Subjection of Women* was a key catalyst for the emerging women's suffrage movement. It offered the most detailed and powerful sustained argument for women's equality made before the twentieth century; one in which Mill describes the subordination of women as one of the chief obstacles to human and social improvement. The granting of full equality would result in an 'unspeakable gain in private happiness to the liberated half of the species' (212). Mill appealed not only to utilitarian arguments for women's equality, but also to broader social progress.

Mill asserted in *The Subjection* the political, civil and property rights of women, their right to be educated and to choose their own occupation (although he assumed the majority would still choose motherhood), their equal rights to divorce and their rights against rape in marriage. The text was a comprehensive attack on patriarchy not only as it was embodied in law and social practice in Victorian Britain, but also as it was justified in the system of social and moral beliefs we now call patriarchal ideology. The importance of deeply held conviction and belief in maintaining social and political power structures was signalled at the beginning of *The Subjection*: Mill observed that the stronger the feeling is about an opinion, the less likely it is to be shifted by the weight of evidence. Feeling about the status of women, and relations between the sexes, is so intense and deeply rooted, he continued, that it has been little altered by 'the progress of the great modern spiritual and social transition' (120). Like other advocates for women's rights in the nineteenth century, Mill had been a strong supporter of the abolition of slavery and invoked similar arguments for women's freedom and equality. He recognized, however, that the intimate relationships between men and women and the fundamental role of patriarchal ideas in private and public life posed greater challenges than convictions of race and class inferiority. He marshalled a range of powerful arguments to support his claim that women should be treated equally to men, but acknowledged that inherent and illogical belief as to their inferiority remained difficult to shift – not only in the minds of men, as we shall see, but also in those of women.

The Subjection was received by Mill's male friends and readers with a sense of dismay that reflected the controversial nature of his political claims and a lack of enthusiasm that has persisted through generations of critics. His first biographer, Alexander Bain, suggested that Mill contradicted himself in postulating the mental equality of women 'against the experience of the least biased observers.'² Many saw Mill's text as an intemperate polemic against the

established order and blamed it on the untoward influence of his wife, the radical feminist Harriet Taylor. As the equality of women has become accepted, Mill scholars have for the most part dismissed *The Subjection* as inferior to his philosophical writings, a text of merely historical interest dealing with the legal disabilities of women in Victorian Britain, or, at best, a practical application of his arguments for individual freedom in *On Liberty*. As Julia Annas commented in 1977, 'the predominant view seems to be that *The Subjection of Women* is obviously right but of little importance.'³ In Alan Ryan's revised study of Mill's philosophy (1987), there is not a single mention of *The Subjection*; nor is there any reference to it in John Skorupski's recent *Why Read Mill Today?*⁴

Since the emergence of the second-wave women's movement, however, *The Subjection of Women* has been recognized as a key text in the history of western feminism. It has been interpreted as a defence of liberal feminism, focussing on the civil and political rights of individual women, the potential radicalism of which is undercut by Mill's assumption that if given the choice, most women would choose to make care of the family their occupation. Only the exceptionally talented, Mill suggested, would choose a career outside the home – although the rights of women to make their choice must be protected. But, *The Subjection* introduced themes, evident in this extract, which are central to radical feminism and to continuing feminist debates over the construction of women's identity under patriarchy, over the status of women's cultural practices and affective relations, and over the relationship between sex and freedom. Mill's analysis of the ways in which women are socialized to accept and embrace the ideal of character prescribed for them by men helps to explicate women's continued resistance to feminism. His discussion of the role of sentimentality in this socialization illuminates the role currently played by popular, 'women-centered' culture in shaping women's identities, and his critique of sexuality presages continuing feminist debates about sex and freedom for women under conditions of inequality.

Mill's argument that ideas, ideology and values play a key role in circumscribing human action had already been established in *On Liberty*, his famous defence of individual freedom, published in 1851. Here, Mill argued that the greatest threat to individual freedom is no longer repressive state law, but rather the conformity of ideas expressed in public opinion and imposed through the tyranny of the majority.⁵ In *The Subjection*, he developed a more complex analysis, arguing that hegemonic social values have an impact not only upon individual behaviour, but also upon the ways in which dominant groups maintain their power over the subordinated. The only actual reason,

he suggested, for the original subordination of women was the greater physical strength of men, but this has long been replaced by men's settled conviction of their intellectual and moral superiority. This conviction, long inculcated into women, had come to be shared by at least the majority of them, shaping and circumscribing their beliefs about their own capacities and potential, and making them complicit in their own subjection. The emancipation of women required, Mill thought, not only the overturning of dominant values and beliefs, but also women's own settled ideas about their shortcomings and limitations.⁶ He regarded women's acceptance of their subordination not as evidence of their weak minds, but rather of their limited options: 'To those to whom nothing but servitude is allowed, the free choice of servitude is the only, though a most insufficient alleviation' (149).

Mary Wollstonecraft had made an argument about the shaping of women's characters by their circumstances in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (see Chapter 6 in this volume), but for Mill, this was part of a broader analysis of the ways in which social circumstances in general, and relations of power in particular, work on the minds of the subjugated. Women's view of themselves was socially constructed, as was all aspects of human character – 'character' being the term Victorians used for what we now understand as identity. Mill argued that character was profoundly shaped by membership in social formations, from the family, to social communities and classes, up to the nation. (He advocated a systematic study – 'ethology' – of the way influences worked to shape character.) In particular, character was shaped by membership in ascribed groups which were arranged in structures of power. In this context, women's characters, Mill argued, were not natural, but rather the products of socialization – although as we see here, he did not entirely dispense with the idea that in the absence of power relations, a 'natural' character might exist:

I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another 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. It may be asserted without scruple, that no other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation with their masters ... (138).

The idea that femininity is learned rather than inherent, and that men's domination of women's consciousness must be overturned, would become a central tenet for second-wave feminists; this is, fundamentally, the meaning

of the slogan 'the personal is political'. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* (1952): 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'⁷ (see Chapter 17 of this volume). De Beauvoir emphasized women's need to transcend their own internal dependence: 'The fact is that the traditional woman is a bamboozled conscious being and a practitioner of bamboozlement; she attempts to disguise her dependence from herself, which is a way of consenting to it. To expose this dependence is in itself a liberation ...'⁸ De Beauvoir argued that the choice of women to pursue freedom requires the determined overcoming of socialization, and other second-wave feminists have openly criticized women's complicity in their own subordination. In 'The Enemy Within' (1970), radical American feminist Susan Brownmiller wrote 'it was men who made the arbitrary rules of masculine/feminine that we suffer under, but it is women who continue to buy the stereotypes.'⁹

The second-wave focus on consciousness-raising emphasized the necessity for women to realize the objective nature of their position, thereby liberating themselves from male definitions of their identity and interests. Consciousness-raising transforms women's sense of their own experience as personal and individual into something collectively experienced and structurally caused. This constitutes the liberation of women from the false assumption that their situation is unique or natural or their own fault; it frees them from domination and enables their autonomy. While the situation of women has undoubtedly improved enormously in political, legal and economic terms since Mill published *The Subjection*, the much-documented and publicly lamented lack of confidence among girls in their ability to lead independent and self-determining lives suggests that internal subordination has been more difficult to dislodge.¹⁰ The continued unpopularity of the term 'feminism' with young women today is evidence of the reluctance of women, particularly young women active in the heterosexual marketplace to admit to any identity which might alienate them from men.¹¹

Mill points to the role of sentimentality in convincing women that love is their highest calling and must consume their attention; a view summed up by Byron in *Don Juan* as 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart/'tis women's whole existence'. It is easy to see in Victorian popular culture the role of sentimentality in persuading women that it was natural for them to discount themselves and serve the needs of others – to be, as Mill's contemporary Coventry Patmore put it in a poem of the same title, 'the angel in the house'. Mill was not alone in his critique of sentimentality: Marx and Engels assumed

it was in fact a cloak for the reduction of the family under capitalism to 'a mere money relation'.¹² But, while Marx and Engels focused on the way sentimentality maintains capitalist social structures, Mill, as is consistent with his broader analysis of power relations, was concerned rather with the role it played in ensuring women's willing acceptance of their subordinate role. This is a particularly important feminist critique today, given the emergence of a pervasive and commercially lucrative popular women's culture in modern liberal democracies, which works effectively to emphasize women's attachment to sentiment, feeling and the needs of others. 'Chick-lit' and 'chick-flicks' feature women expressing and discussing their feelings about their relationships with men and their children, commodifying their experience and veiling their interpellation in heterosexual structures and norms not in sentimental religiosity, as in the Victorian era, but rather in a rhetoric of female expression and bonding.¹³ Women's popular consumer culture draws its legitimacy from the claim that it empowers women through self-expression and creates a shared space for female bonding, but the role of heterosexual sentimentality in it also reinforces women's deferral to the claims of others and to an ideal of sentiment itself. Moreover, it celebrates women's identities and practices as they have been constructed under the constraints of patriarchy, rather than calling for their reformation in conditions of liberty. Women's public spaces promote sharing, feeling and sentimentality, rather than drawing attention to the need for fundamental social change: they are, as Lauren Berlant has pointed out, at best ambivalent about politics.¹⁴

While Mill established effective and durable critiques of women's internalized subordination and the role of sentimentality in *The Subjection*, his distinction in this passage between self-control and submission to the will of others is more challenging. On the surface, his claim is consistent with his argument for women's freedom (and for freedom in general) as argued in *On Liberty*. Understood as a form of positive liberty, liberty for women, as for men, meant governing themselves by their own wills. But, freedom thus defined means control over appetite and desire, and this must be interpreted in the context of Mill's broader thinking to refer to control over sexuality. There are many dismissive and critical references across his writings to sexuality as a debased animal instinct – typical of the public rhetoric of the Victorians. We might conclude that this dismissal represses female (as well as male) sexuality, paradoxically reinforcing women's association in Victorian thinking with

the moral high-mindedness characteristic of the 'angel in the house'. Susan Mendus argues that Mill's insistence on marriage as based on friendship and moral commonality rather than sex is consistent with the distinction in his utilitarian thinking between the 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures and implies a 'deeply depressing and distorted' view of women.¹⁵

However, Mill did not single out female sexuality for criticism – unlike Rousseau, for whom sex as a dangerous and corrupting influence was associated with women and must be controlled through modesty and shame.¹⁶ In fact, in much of Mill's writing on the subject, sex was defined as something done by men to women, an exercise of power performed in order to reinforce their domination: '...however brutal a tyrant [a wife] may unfortunately be chained to – though she may know that he hates her, though it may be his daily pleasure to torture her, and though she may feel it impossible not to loathe him – he can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her own inclinations' (148). Mill was a fervent critic in his newspaper articles of marital rape and sexual violence against women and consistently argued that the laws of marriage made it sexual slavery. This view of sex might be contrasted unfavourably with a contemporary feminist understanding of the importance of sexual self-expression, as a fundamental human capability and liberty. Mill's critique of sexuality must be situated, however, like all of his analysis of women's lives, in the real context of deforming power relations. In this sense, his argument is quite distinct from conventional Victorian puritanism and resembles more closely the critique of heterosexual sex as an expression of patriarchal power made by Andrea Dworkin and other contemporary feminist opponents of pornography and the sex industry (see Chapter 20 of this volume).

Critical studies of Mill as a liberal philosopher have for the most part missed the point and the force of his arguments in *The Subjection of Women*, which is as powerful a text analysing power, freedom and autonomy as the much more extensively discussed *On Liberty*. But, as Mill scholars have overlooked the power of the text, so too have feminists underrated its critical reach, consigning it to the category of liberal feminism and taking it to be limited in its concerns to the legal and civil impediments to the freedom of individual women under capitalism. This assessment reflects what we now might see as an outmoded division in second-wave thinking between 'socialist' and 'liberal' as defining categories of feminism. For

the radicalism of Mill's text is apparent now not only in its critique of the bourgeois institution of the family, but also in its foreshadowing of a post-Marxist analysis of the workings and effects of power. In its exploration of the construction of women's identity and subject consciousness, and its exposure of patriarchy's covert operation through commerce and popular sentimentality, and overt and deforming expression in sexual violence, *The Subjection of Women* anticipates essential concerns of feminist theory and politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.