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Giving Voice to Feminist Political Theory: The Radical Discourse of Anna Doyle Wheeler and William Thompson

Jim Jose

Black slaves are not insulted with the requisition to ... vow obedience to their masters ... For white slaves – parcelled out amongst men (as if to compensate them for their own cowardly submission ... to ... political power), ... – ... is reserved this gratuitous degradation ... of kissing the rod of domestic despotism ... Was it not enough to deprive women, by the iniquitous inequality of the marriage, or white-slave, code, of all the attributes of personal liberty? ... without the cruel mockery of exacting from her trained obsequiousness the semblance of ... devotedness to her degradation? ... Are not the laws, supported first by the individual strength of every individual man ..., and next ... by the united strength of all men, sufficient to control ... this helpless creature? Would not the pleasure of commanding ... be complete, without the ... banquet of despotism ...? Would not the simple pleasure of commanding be sufficient, without the gratification of ... taunting the victim with her pretended voluntary surrender of control ...?

Woman is then compelled, in marriage, ... by the positive, cruel, partial, and cowardly enactments of law, by the terrors of superstition, by the mockery of a pretended vow of obedience, and to crown all, and as the result of all, by the force of an unrelenting, unreasoning, unfeeling, public opinion, to be the literal unequivocal slave of the man who may be styled her husband ... I say emphatically the slave; for a slave is a person whose actions and earnings, instead of being, under his own control, liable only to equal laws, to public opinion, and to his own calculations, ... are under the arbitrary control of any other human being, ... This is the essence of slavery, and what distinguishes it from freedom. A domestic, a civil, a political slave, in the plain unsophisticated sense of the word – in no metaphorical sense – is every married woman.¹

This passage is taken from *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women: Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political, and Thence in Civil and Domestic, Slavery; in Reply to a Paragraph of Mr. Mill's Celebrated 'Article on Government'* first published in 1825. Officially, William Thompson (an Irish landowner, socialist utilitarian and feminist who lived mostly in London) was listed as the author, though he had an uncredited collaborator, Anna Wheeler (a modestly well-to-do upper-class woman born in Ireland in 1785, who by 1825 was also a London resident).² As the title suggests, the book responded to a claim made in James Mill's 'Essay on Government'³ that women did not need voting rights because such rights could be subsumed under those of their fathers or husbands. Although Mill's claim was relatively conservative, he was part of a circle of thinkers subsequently known as Philosophical Radicals who championed liberal utilitarianism, and whose ideas developed serious challenges to the prevailing orthodoxies. Across Europe, liberal utilitarianism, variations of socialism and various strands of cooperative thought all competed for influence within the dominant intellectual circles.⁴ To this unstable and changing mix, Thompson and Wheeler added a distinctly feminist voice.

The central point in this passage from the *Appeal* is that women were slaves in every sense of the word 'slave'. A woman's freedom was totally circumscribed by the authority of a man; she was deemed to have no mind of her own; her body was not hers to command, being the property of her father (or guardian) and, on marriage, that of her husband who was empowered to use it and command it at will.⁵ Granted there were class differences that meant in practice working-class women were sometimes less constrained than their wealthier counterparts, but this did not really affect their legal status.

For Wheeler and Thompson, the condition of women was even worse than that of slaves because slaves did not volunteer to become slaves, they were captured and forced on pain of death to obey. Women on the other hand entered into an apparently voluntary contract, namely marriage, a fate for which they were groomed and educated from a very young age. To emphasize the difference, Wheeler and Thompson invoked an extremely provocative sexual metaphor, namely 'kissing the rod of domestic despotism',⁶ an act they described as 'gratuitous degradation'. While Wheeler and Thompson were well aware of the degrading conditions slaves commonly endured, the point they wanted to accentuate was that women were obliged to go further in acknowledging their status. Women had to pay homage to that which symbolized their enforced obedience.

Wheeler and Thompson were not the first to invoke the terminology of slavery to describe the condition of women. Wollstonecraft and others had used similar terminology.⁷ However, the earlier usage was mostly figurative, whereas Wheeler and Thompson appear to have been the first to insist on its literal application. Their book was produced at about the same time that the anti-slavery movement in England had begun to gain momentum. The Anti-Slavery Society had been formed in 1823,⁸ and the memory of the temporarily successful slave rebellion in Haiti (1791–1803) would still have been fresh in the minds of many English thinkers.⁹ By invoking the imagery of slavery, Wheeler and Thompson were tapping into an already existing discourse that they could invoke to lend resonance to their arguments.

Underscoring the slavery theme, and in some ways even more radical, was Wheeler and Thompson's framing of women's social and political position in terms of a deeply embedded sexual subordination. In their view, this sexual subordination was the *a priori* basis for men's political, legal and social privileges: it ensured men's access to women's bodies as a matter of right, a right that subtended all subsequent rights and privileges. That is, the sexual subordination of women was for them the means whereby sexual difference was transmuted into political difference, a point made with some power 160 years later by Carole Pateman and her idea of the 'the sexual contract'. For Pateman, the 'sexual contract', (what she called 'the law of male sex right'), was 'a story of subjection' which created 'men's freedom and women's subjection' such that it 'establishe[d] men's political right over women.'¹⁰ A similar contention was very much the central theme of Wheeler and Thompson's critique, but unlike Pateman, for Wheeler and Thompson the idea of a contract was a misnomer. Women could not consent to hand over their power to others since they were not free agents to begin with. There could be no contractual agreement of any sort – social, political or sexual – between a free and an unfree being. This was one of the key political points underpinning Wheeler and Thompson's appeal to the language of slavery. A second and equally important point was their exposure of the hypocrisy of the language of contract.

Any doubt about the sexual basis for women's subordination was clearly dispelled by their sexually explicit metaphor about 'the rod of domestic despotism'. This obvious double entendre was a bold rhetorical move at a time when sensibility and propriety were at a premium. Yet, it was far more than a double entendre. Going much further than Mary Wollstonecraft (see Chapter 6 of this volume) or other predecessors arguing for women's rights, Wheeler and Thompson made explicit the symbolic place of the phallus in ordering social

relations between women and men and the essentially patriarchal nature of their society. Women were trained to ignore their feelings and desires; instead what passed for women's education 'trained her to be the obedient instrument of man's sensual gratification', denied her 'any gratification for herself' and forced her to conceal 'her natural desires' (64). Rather a woman 'must have no desires: she must always yield' and 'must blush to own that she joys in his generous caresses, were such by chance ever given' (64). In short, they spoke the reality of women's sexual experiences in which women's pleasure could only be legitimized in terms of pleasing their men. This is a recurring theme of the *Appeal* (64 and *passim*), and it informed their argument.

Thus far in this discussion, Wheeler has been given equal authorial status with Thompson, yet her name does not appear on the title page. So what grounds are there for giving Wheeler equal authorial status with Thompson? As noted, Wheeler lived in London and hosted an intellectual salon. In that capacity, she was able to occupy a semi-public space within which she could foster and legitimately participate in the exchange of ideas between philosophers, radical thinkers and political reformers.¹¹ It is unclear how she came to meet Thompson, but both were frequent participants in Jeremy Bentham's intellectual circle, and they attended similar public meetings and intellectual gatherings.¹²

In the first place, Thompson himself points us in that direction in the opening section of the book, entitled 'Letter to Mrs Wheeler', by referring directly to her contribution. Thompson pointed out that she was neither muse nor patron. In his view, 'the days of dedication and patronage' had passed (vi). In a radical move, Thompson explicitly rejected here the gendered roles implied by the artist/muse relationship, namely that of active, masculine creator and passive, feminine inspiration. Likewise, he also rejected the active/passive (though not necessarily gendered) relationship between artist and patron. Thompson was not dependent upon Wheeler for financial support, though he clearly was for her contribution to the substantive ideas within the *Appeal*. He was most explicit that the letter was a 'debt of justice' that acknowledged the contribution and importance of her ideas to the finished work, even though, as he noted, the actual words physically penned by Wheeler amounted to just a few pages. He was adamant that the work as a whole was in effect 'our joint property' (vii), and he felt obligated to acknowledge that fact because he 'love[d] not literary ... piracy' (vi).

Taylor has speculated that Wheeler's poor spelling and grammar might have been a reason 'why Thompson took the initiative in writing the *Appeal*, rather than Wheeler'.¹³ However, it is probably more plausible to attribute it to the

fact that, as Thompson himself claimed, her crippling neuralgia affected her spelling and grammar since much of her handwriting was often barely legible. But another, equally plausible, reason was a concern to avoid the sort of public opprobrium often levelled against women writers of the period, particularly infamous ones like Wollstonecraft whose name had become synonymous with improper behaviour and social disgrace. While ideas about women's emancipation did not disappear entirely from public discourse at the turn of the century, within respectable circles their proponents needed to be circumspect in advancing them. As a modestly well-to-do upper-class woman living independently, her activities as a salonnère notwithstanding, Wheeler would have been very mindful of protecting her reputation. The fact that she used a pseudonym, 'Vlasta', to publish writing that was about 'very personal or highly sensitive issues' would seem to support this interpretation.¹⁴ Given that the *Appeal* canvassed many personal and sensitive issues not usually aired in polite society, it is not surprising that Wheeler deferred to Thompson's authorship.

While the authorship question ultimately might be undecidable, it is clear that Wheeler's voice has a presence. That much is affirmed by Thompson himself. Dooley has noted that Wheeler's style as exhibited in her other writings can be found in various passages throughout the *Appeal*, in particular her habit of being 'direct and personal', contrary to the prevailing literary conventions in which authors were expected to avoid references to personal and emotional experiences. There was also Wheeler's penchant for using various grammatical foils such as 'emphases, exclamations and upper case letters' to get her point across as clearly as possible in terms of its content, as well as enabling her to amplify the level of emotional commitment to her ideas.¹⁵ This is particularly pronounced in the concluding pages of the *Appeal* which Cory argues displays the 'typical characteristics of [Wheeler's] work: the passionate, vivid language; the frequent use of italics and exclamation points; and an indignant and ironic tone'.¹⁶

The book's final twenty pages are significant for two reasons, both of which bear on placing Wheeler's voice at the heart of the *Appeal*. First, these pages served in the book as a rousing call to arms typical of the type of public address for which Wheeler was renowned. It was written in the form of a direct address to readers in which Wheeler 'inhabited the conventionally male role of public speaker' and used a range of oratorical techniques to deliver its message.¹⁷ This would be consistent with what is known about her practices as a public speaker. She often drew on personal experience to frame her political views in her lectures.¹⁸ In this way, she could convey pathos to and evoke sympathy

in her audience and in so doing draw them into her manner of thinking and understanding. Moreover, in the concluding pages of the *Appeal*, the speaking position of the writer was one of mutuality and sympathy with the readers. The writer did not adopt a position of superiority but rather, through a range of oratorical techniques, projected a relationship that was 'equitable rather than hierarchical'.¹⁹ In this way, the text served to model a way of speaking the future, of providing a vision of future social relations that were non-hierarchical and non-exploitative. Again, this is consistent with what is known about Wheeler's politics and other writings and speeches.²⁰ While the same might be said about Thompson on this point, Cory has amply demonstrated that even though his 'Letter' placed him in the role of scribe, of amanuensis, thus subverting the then prevailing gendered writing conventions (in particular that of man author-woman scribe), he nevertheless left the position of scribe and author intact and hence their inherent power relationship remained unchanged.²¹ Clearly, Wheeler was not simply the minor contributor in terms of composing the text as might be understood from Thompson's 'Introductory Letter'.

While the concluding pages of the *Appeal* give the most sustained examples of the rhetorical features of public speaking, and hence of Wheeler's contributions to the text, such examples can be found throughout the book as a whole. This is amply illustrated in various ways within the excerpted passage. Consider the following sentence.

Woman is then compelled, in marriage, ... by the positive, cruel, partial, and cowardly enactments of law, by the terrors of superstition, by the mockery of a pretended vow of obedience, and to crown all, and as the result of all, by the force of an unrelenting, unreasoning, unfeeling, public opinion, to be the literal unequivocal slave of the man who may be styled her husband (66).

Here, Thompson and Wheeler summarize their view of women's lot in marriage. They also invest that view with a powerful emotive force that sets up their concluding point in this passage: namely that women are slaves, not just figuratively or metaphorically, but literally.

Four key clauses are laid out, each one beginning with 'by'. Each clause highlights how women's compulsion within marriage is implemented. Of considerable power is the deferral between the third and fourth clauses. There, Wheeler and Thompson inject a pause with: 'and to crown all, and as the result of all'. This builds a sense of suspense by deferring the expected denouement of the sentence. But the deferral was not gratuitous. These two phrases perform the important function of highlighting the point of their message about women's lack of rights, their lack of humanity. The crown symbolizes sovereign authority,

the entity ruling over the rest and imposing order and meaning on them. Women's lot in marriage is also the product of the combined effects of all the other factors, the issue (in the legal sense) of their conjunction. Finally, there is the repetition of the 'un' suffix to emphasize the negative sentiment being highlighted and to set up the use of a fourth word beginning with 'un' several words later, 'unequivocal'. In this one sentence, Wheeler and Thompson marshal the emotional power behind their argument to ensure that the theme of woman as slave is delivered with maximum impact.

The rhetorical power of the passage is reinforced by the use of a series of questions following the 'rod of domestic despotism' metaphor. The paragraph is largely structured around these questions. The first asks why it is necessary to rub the salt of extracting a pledge of 'devotedness to her degradation' into the wound of 'the iniquitous inequality of marriage'. The second asks why the laws that men as a sex have conspired to implement to keep women in their unfortunate place are insufficient for the task. A third question asks why the 'banquet of despotism' is needed to support the 'pleasure of commanding', and a fourth why men need to supplement their power by 'taunting the victim with her pretended surrender of *voluntary* control' (66). These last two questions begin with the phrase 'would not the pleasure of commanding' which contributes to the rhetorical rhythm of the passage. The sequential arrangement of these questions reflects again a style of writing more attuned to oral delivery, of building and teasing audience expectations towards a particular conclusion. The effect of the paragraph structure is to enable their political punchline to be delivered with powerful effect, namely that married women are slaves 'in the plain unsophisticated sense of the word' (67). In its structure and rhythm, this paragraph suggests that it was written by someone whose forte was oral delivery. It demonstrates that Wheeler's input was not restricted to just a few pages of their work.

The two excerpted paragraphs encapsulate the radical nature of the discourse of Wheeler and Thompson. At a time when gender equality was all but non-existent and rarely discussed in polite company, they formulated an in-depth critique of the prevailing gender order. At the centre of their analysis was the recognition that the sexual subjugation of women underpinned and justified their subordinate social status and lack of political rights. From this central proposition, they developed an extended argument for women's liberation. In so doing, they gave feminist political theory a voice, one that is as radical today as it was in 1825.