The Enfranchisement of Women

HARRIET TAYLOR MILL

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The 1851 text

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INTRODUCTION

In October 1850 about a thousand people met at Worcester, Massachusetts, for the first National Woman's Rights Convention. Harriet Taylor (1807–1858), a London writer who married the philosopher John Stuart Mill the following year, read the report in the *New York Tribune* and answered it with this essay, published anonymously in the *Westminster Review* in July 1851. Mill later said that it was hers, with his help only as an editor.

Taylor Mill goes further than the convention itself. Women should have the vote, a place on juries and in parliament, and access to every profession, because no one can know what any person is fit for until all are free to try. She takes apart the standard objections one by one—that politics is incompatible with motherhood, that women would add to the competition for jobs, that public life would harden them—and argues that the subordination of wives corrupts husbands too: a man who lives with an inferior stops growing. The essay ends by turning on the women writers of her day who disclaim any wish for equality.

Slurs in the original are replaced by bracketed neutral words. The right-hand column is Taylor Mill in modern English; the left is the text of the *Westminster Review*.

Enfranchisement of Women

Reviewing the 1850 Worcester Women's Rights Convention, Taylor Mill argues for women's full political, civil and economic equality and answers the objections to it.

[0] *The New York Tribune for Europe.* October 29, 1850.[1]

[1] Most of our readers will probably learn from these pages, for the first time, that an organized agitation has arisen in the United States, in the most civilized and enlightened part of the country, on a new question. It is not new to thinkers, nor to anyone who feels the principles of free and popular government as well as acknowledges them. But it is new, even unheard of, as a subject for public meetings and practical political action. The question is the enfranchisement of women: their admission, in law and in fact, to equality with the male citizens of the community in all rights, political, civil, and social.

[2] Many will be all the more surprised by this news because the agitation now begun is not a case of male writers and orators pleading *for* women, while the women who are supposed to benefit stay indifferent or openly hostile. It is a political movement with practical aims, carried on in a form that shows an intention to persevere. And it is a movement not merely *for* women, but *by* them. Its first public appearance seems to have been a Convention of Women held in the State of Ohio in the spring of 1850. We have seen no report of this meeting.[2] On the 23rd and 24th of October last, a series of public meetings was

1 The newspaper report under review. The essay itself appeared anonymously in the *Westminster Review* in July 1851.

2 The Ohio Women's Convention met at Salem, Ohio, in April 1850.

held at Worcester, Massachusetts, under the name of a "Women's Rights Convention." Its president was a woman, and nearly all the chief speakers were women. They were, however, joined by many men, among them some of the most distinguished leaders in the kindred cause of Black emancipation. A general committee and four special committees were appointed to carry on the work until the next annual meeting.[3]

[3] According to the report in the New York Tribune, more than a thousand people were present throughout, and "if a larger place could have been had, many thousands more would have attended." The hall was described as "crowded from the beginning with attentive and interested listeners." As for the quality of the speaking, the proceedings compare favorably with those of any popular movement we know of, either in this country or in America. Very rarely in the oratory of public meetings is so little given to verbiage and declamation, and so much to calm good sense and reason. The result of the Convention was in every way encouraging to those who called it. It is probably destined to inaugurate one of the most important of the movements toward political and social reform that are the best feature of the present age.

[4] The promoters of this new agitation take their stand on principles, and they are not afraid to declare those principles in their widest extent, without opportunism or compromise. This can be seen from the resolutions adopted by the Convention, some of which we copy here:

[5] "*Resolved*—That every human being, of full age, and resident for a proper length of time on the soil of the nation, who is required to obey the law, is entitled to a voice in its enactment; that every such person, whose property or labor is taxed for the support of the government, is entitled to a direct share in such government; therefore,

3 "The Convention" throughout is this first National Woman's Rights Convention, Worcester, October 23–24, 1850, presided over by Paulina Wright Davis. Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass took part.

[6] "*Resolved*—That women are entitled to the right of suffrage, and to be considered eligible to office, . . . and that every party which claims to represent the humanity, the civilization, and the progress of the age, is bound to inscribe on its banners, equality before the law, without distinction of sex or color.

[7] "*Resolved*—That civil and political rights acknowledge no sex, and therefore the word 'male' should be struck from every State Constitution.

[8] "*Resolved*—That, since the prospect of honorable and useful employment in after life is the best stimulus to the use of educational advantages, and since the best education is that we give ourselves, in the struggles, employments, and discipline of life; therefore it is impossible that women should make full use of the instruction already accorded to them, or that their career should do justice to their faculties, until the avenues to the various civil and professional employments are thrown open to them.

[9] "*Resolved*—That every effort to educate women, without according to them their rights, and arousing their conscience by the weight of their responsibilities, is futile, and a waste of labor.

[10] "*Resolved*—That the laws of property, as affecting married persons, demand a thorough revisal, so that all rights be equal between them; that the wife have, during life, an equal control over the property gained by their mutual toil and sacrifices, and be heir to her husband precisely to that extent that he is heir to her, and entitled at her death to dispose by will of the same share of the joint property as he is."

[11] Here is a brief summary of the principal demands:

[12] "1. *Education* in primary and high schools, universities, medical, legal, and theological institutions.

[13] "2. *Partnership* in the labors and gains, risks and remunerations, of productive industry.

[14] "3. *A coequal share* in the formation and administration of laws—municipal, state, and national—through legislative assemblies, courts, and executive offices."

A QUESTION OF JUSTICE

Taylor Mill argues that the Declaration of Independence and English maxims of freedom both condemn excluding women.

[15] It would be hard to put so much true, just, and reasonable meaning into a style as poorly suited to recommend it as that of some of the resolutions. But whatever objection may be made to some of the wording, none, in our opinion, can be made to the demands themselves. As a question of justice, the case seems to us too clear for dispute. As a question of expediency, the more thoroughly it is examined, the stronger it will appear.

[16] It would be difficult for anyone to deny that women have as good a claim as men, as a matter of personal right, to the suffrage or to a place in the jury-box. Certainly the United States of America cannot deny it, as a people or as a community. Their democratic institutions openly rest on the inherent right of everyone to a voice in the government. Their Declaration of Independence was framed by the men who are still their great constitutional authorities, and it has been from the first, and still is, the acknowledged basis of their political system. It begins with this express statement:

[17] "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

[18] We do not imagine that any American democrat will evade the force of these words by the dishonest or ignorant dodge of claiming that "men," in this memorable document, does not mean human beings but one sex only; that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are "inalienable rights" of only half the human species; and that "the governed," whose consent is declared to be the only source of just power, means only that half of humankind which has so far taken on the role of *gov-*

ernors over the other. The contradiction between principle and practice cannot be explained away. The Americans have committed a similar abandonment of the fundamental maxims of their political creed in the flagrant case of the enslaved Black people, and they are now learning to recognize how shameful it is. After a struggle that, in many of its episodes, deserves to be called heroic, the abolitionists are now so strong in numbers and influence that they hold the balance between the parties in the United States. It was fitting that the men whose names will remain linked with rooting out the aristocracy of color from the democratic soil of America should be among the originators, for America and for the rest of the world, of the first collective protest against the aristocracy of sex: a distinction as accidental as that of color, and fully as irrelevant to every question of government.

[19] The claim of women to civil and political equality makes an irresistible appeal not only to American democracy, but also to the radicals and chartists in the British Isles, and the democrats on the Continent, who claim what is called universal suffrage as an inherent right, unjustly and oppressively withheld from them. For how could suffrage truly or rationally be called universal while half the human species remains excluded from it? To declare that a voice in the government is the right of all, and then demand it only for a part—namely, the part to which the claimant himself belongs—is to give up even the appearance of principle. The chartist who denies the suffrage to women is a chartist only because he is not a lord. He is one of those levelers who would level only down to themselves.

[20] Even those who do not regard a voice in the government as a matter of personal right, and do not profess principles requiring that it be extended to all, usually hold traditional maxims of political justice that cannot be reconciled with excluding all women from the common rights of citizenship. It is an axiom of English freedom that taxation and representation should go together. Even under the laws that give the wife's property to the husband, there are many unmarried women who pay taxes. It is

one of the fundamental doctrines of the British constitution that everyone should be tried by their peers. Yet women, whenever they are tried, are tried by male judges and a male jury. The law grants foreigners the privilege of demanding that half the jury be made up of foreigners; it grants women no such thing. Setting aside such detailed maxims, which express local and national rather than universal ideas, it is an acknowledged dictate of justice to make no degrading distinctions without necessity. In everything, the presumption ought to be on the side of equality. A reason must be given why anything should be permitted to one person and forbidden to another. But consider a case where what is forbidden includes nearly everything that those who are permitted it value most, and whose loss they would feel as the deepest insult; where not only political liberty but personal freedom of action is the privilege of a caste; where, even in working life, almost all occupations that call on the higher faculties in an important field, and that lead to distinction, wealth, or even financial independence, are fenced off as the exclusive domain of the dominant group, and scarcely any doors are left open to the dependent class except those that everyone who can get in elsewhere scornfully passes by. In such a case, the miserable considerations of expediency put forward as excuses for so grossly one-sided an arrangement would not be enough, even if they were real, to make it anything other than a flagrant injustice. And far from its being expedient, we are firmly convinced that dividing humankind into two castes, one born to rule over the other, is in this case, as in every case, an unqualified evil. It is a source of perversion and demoralization both to the favored class and to those at whose expense they are favored. It produces none of the good customarily ascribed to it, and while it lasts it forms an almost insurmountable barrier to any truly vital improvement, either in the character or in the social condition of the human race.

THE PREJUDICE OF CUSTOM

She answers the appeal to custom: women's subjection began in physical force, like slavery and conquest.

[21] These are the propositions we now mean to defend. But before turning to them, we will try to clear away the preliminary objections that, in the minds of people to whom the subject is new, tend to prevent a real and conscientious examination of it. The chief of these obstacles is the most formidable one of all: custom. Women have never had equal rights with men. Claiming the common rights of humankind on their behalf is regarded as ruled out by universal practice. It is true that this strongest of prejudices, the prejudice against what is new and unknown, has lost much of its force in an age of change like the present; if it had not, there would be little hope of overcoming it. Over three-quarters of the inhabited world, even today, the answer "it has always been so" ends all discussion. But modern Europeans, and their American kin, pride themselves on knowing and doing many things their forefathers neither knew nor did. And perhaps the most unquestionable way in which the present surpasses earlier ages is that habit is no longer the tyrant it once was over opinions and ways of acting, and that the worship of custom is a declining idolatry. An unaccustomed thought on a subject that touches the greater interests of life still startles people when it is first presented. But if it can be kept before the mind until the sense of strangeness wears off, it gets a hearing, and as rational a consideration as the hearer's intellect usually gives to any other subject.

[22] In the present case, the prejudice of custom is no doubt on the unjust side. Great thinkers, it is true, at different times, from Plato to Condorcet, along with some of the most eminent names of the present age, have protested emphatically in favor of the equality of women. And there have been voluntary societies, religious or secular, that recognized that principle, the best known being the Society of Friends. But there has been no polit-

ical community or nation in which women have not been, by law and custom, in a state of political and civil inferiority. In the ancient world the same fact was cited, with equal truth, in defense of slavery.[4] It could have been cited in favor of serfdom, the milder form of slavery, throughout the Middle Ages. It was urged against freedom of industry, freedom of conscience, and freedom of the press. None of these liberties was thought compatible with a well-ordered state until they had proved they were possible by actually existing as facts. That an institution or practice is customary is no presumption that it is good, when some other sufficient cause can be given for its existence. There is no difficulty in understanding why the subjection of women has been a custom. No other explanation is needed than physical force.

[23] That the physically weaker should have been made legally inferior fits perfectly with the way the world has been governed. Until very recently, the rule of physical strength was the general law of human affairs. Throughout history, the nations, races, and classes that found themselves strongest, whether in muscle, in wealth, or in military discipline, have conquered the rest and held them in subjection. If, even in the most advanced nations, the law of the sword is at last frowned on as unworthy, this has been so only since the much-maligned eighteenth century. Wars of conquest have ceased only since democratic revolutions began. The world is very young, and has only just begun to cast off injustice. It is only now getting rid of the slavery of Black people. It is only now getting rid of monarchical despotism. It is only now getting rid of hereditary feudal nobility. It is only now getting rid of legal disabilities on the grounds of religion. It is only beginning to treat any *men* as citizens except the rich and a favored part of the middle class. Can we be surprised that it has not yet done as much for women? As society was organized until the last few generations, inequality was its very foundation.

4 Plato's Republic (Book V) admits women to the ruling class of guardians. Condorcet argued in 1790 for admitting women to the rights of citizenship. The Society of Friends are the Quakers, who allowed women to preach.

Association based on equal rights hardly existed; to be equals was to be enemies. Two people could hardly cooperate in anything, or meet on friendly terms, without the law's deciding that one of them should be the other's superior. Humankind has outgrown this state, and everything now tends to replace the dominion of the strongest with a just equality as the general principle of human relations. But of all relations, the one between men and women, being the closest and most intimate, and bound up with the greatest number of strong emotions, was sure to be the last to throw off the old rule and accept the new. For the stronger a feeling is, the more tenaciously it clings to the forms and circumstances it has become associated with, even by accident.

THE "PROPER SPHERE"

She denies anyone's right to fix another's sphere and cites women rulers as evidence of ability.

[24] When a prejudice that has any hold on the feelings finds itself reduced to the unpleasant necessity of giving reasons, it thinks it has done enough when it has restated the very point in dispute, in phrases that appeal to the feeling already there. Thus many people think they have sufficiently justified the restrictions on women's field of action once they have said that the pursuits from which women are excluded are *unfeminine*, and that the *proper sphere* of women is not politics or public life, but private and domestic life.

[25] We deny the right of any part of the species to decide for another part, or of any individual for another individual, what is and what is not their "proper sphere." The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest they are able to reach. What this is cannot be determined without complete freedom of choice. The speakers at the Convention in America have therefore acted wisely and rightly in refusing to take up the question of the particular aptitudes of either women or men, or of the limits within which this or that occupation may be supposed

better suited to the one or to the other. They rightly maintain that these questions can be answered satisfactorily only by perfect freedom. Let every occupation be open to all, without favor or discouragement to any, and employments will fall into the hands of those men or women whom experience shows to be most capable of carrying them out well. There need be no fear that women will take from men any occupation that men perform better than they do. Each individual will prove his or her abilities in the only way abilities can be proved—by trial; and the world will have the benefit of the best faculties of all its inhabitants. But to interfere in advance with an arbitrary limit, and to declare that, whatever the genius, talent, energy, or strength of mind of an individual of a certain sex or class, those faculties shall not be used, or shall be used only in a few of the many ways in which others are allowed to use theirs, is not only an injustice to the individual and a harm to society, which loses what it can ill afford to lose, but also the most effective way of ensuring that, in the sex or class so shackled, the qualities that are not allowed to be exercised will not exist.

[26] We shall follow the very proper example of the Convention in not entering into the question of the alleged differences in physical or mental qualities between the sexes—not because we have nothing to say, but because we have too much; to discuss this one point even passably would take all the space we can

give to the entire subject.[5] But if those who assert that the "proper sphere" for women is the domestic one mean that women have not shown themselves qualified for any other, the assertion displays great ignorance of life and of history. Women have shown fitness for the highest social functions exactly in proportion as they have been admitted to them. By a curious anomaly, although women are ineligible for even the lowest offices of state, in some countries they are admitted to the highest of all, the throne; and if there is any one function for which they have shown a decided vocation, it is that of reigning. Without going back to ancient history, we look in vain for abler or firmer rulers than Elizabeth; than Isabella of Castile; than Maria Theresa; than Catherine of Russia; than Blanche, mother of Louis IX of France; than Jeanne d'Albret, mother of Henry IV. Few kings on record contended with more difficult circumstances, or overcame them more triumphantly, than these women did.[6] Even in Asia, which Europeans count as only half-civilized, princesses who have never been seen by any men except those of their own family, and have never spoken with

5 MILL'S NOTE. We cannot refrain from quoting an excellent passage on this part of the subject from one of Sydney Smith's contributions to the *Edinburgh Review*: "A great deal has been said about the original difference of capacity between men and women, as if women were quicker and men more judicious—as if women were more remarkable for delicacy of association, and men for stronger powers of attention. All this, we confess, seems to us very fanciful. That there is a difference between the understandings of the men and the women we meet every day, everybody, we suppose, must perceive; but surely there is none that cannot be accounted for by the different circumstances in which they have been placed, without appealing to any conjectured difference in the original makeup of their minds. As long as boys and girls run about in the dirt and roll hoops together, they are exactly alike. If you catch up one half of these creatures and train them to one particular set of actions and opinions, and the other half to a completely opposite set, of course their understandings will differ, as one or the other kind of occupation has called this or that talent into action. There is surely no need for any deeper or more abstruse reasoning to explain so very simple a phenomenon."—*Sydney Smith's Works,* vol. i, p. 200.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Sydney Smith (1771–1845), clergyman and wit, a founder of the *Edinburgh Review*; the passage comes from his 1810 essay on female education.

6 Blanche of Castile governed France as regent for her son Louis IX (1226–34, and again 1248–52); Jeanne d'Albret was queen of Navarre and a leader of the French Protestants.

them except from behind a curtain, have, as regents during their sons' childhood, given many of the most brilliant examples of just and vigorous government.[7] In the Middle Ages the distance between the upper and lower ranks was greater even than that between women and men; and the women of the privileged class, however subject to tyranny from the men of that class, stood less far below them than anyone else did, and often represented them in their functions and authority when they were absent. In that age numbers of heroic chatelaines, like Jeanne de Montfort, or—as late as the time of Charles I—the great Countess of Derby, distinguished themselves not only by their political but by their military ability.[8] In the centuries just before and after the Reformation, ladies of royal houses, as diplomats, as governors of provinces, or as confidential advisers of kings, equaled the foremost statesmen of their time; and the treaty of Cambrai, which gave peace to Europe, was negotiated in conferences at which no one else was present, by the aunt of the Emperor Charles V and the mother of Francis I.[9]

THE MATERNITY ARGUMENT

She names three objections and answers the first: motherhood excludes only mothers, and needs no law.

[27] As to the fitness of women for politics, then, there can be no question; the dispute is more likely to turn on the fitness of politics for women. When the reasons given for excluding women from active life in all its higher departments are stripped of their dress of rhetorical phrases and reduced to the plain expression of a meaning, they seem to be mainly three: first, the incompatibility of active life with motherhood and

7 She writes "semi-barbarous Asia," reflecting the Victorian habit of ranking peoples on a supposed scale of "civilization" with Europe at the top.
8 Jeanne de Montfort (c. 1295–1374) led her captive husband's cause in the War of the Breton Succession; Charlotte, Countess of Derby, defended Lathom House against Parliament's forces in 1644. A chatelaine is the mistress of a castle.
9 The "Ladies' Peace" of 1529, negotiated by Margaret of Austria and Louise of Savoy.

with the cares of a household; second, its alleged hardening effect on the character; and third, the inexpediency of adding to the already excessive pressure of competition in every kind of professional or paid employment.

[28] The first, the maternity argument, is usually stressed most, although (it hardly needs saying) this reason, if it is one, can apply only to mothers. It is neither necessary nor just to require of women that they be either mothers or nothing; or that, if they have once been mothers, they be nothing else for the whole rest of their lives. Neither women nor men need a law to exclude them from one occupation if they have taken up another that is incompatible with it. No one proposes to exclude the male sex from Parliament because a man may be a soldier or sailor on active service, or a merchant whose business requires all his time and energy. Nine-tenths of men's occupations exclude them *de facto* from public life as effectively as if they were excluded by law; but that is no reason for making laws to exclude even the nine-tenths, much less the remaining tenth. The reasoning in the case is the same for women as for men. There is no need for a law providing that a woman shall not manage the active details of a household, or of the education of children, and at the same time practice a profession or be elected to Parliament. Where the incompatibility is real, it will take care of itself; but it is gross injustice to make the incompatibility a pretext for excluding those in whose case it does not exist. And these, if they were free to choose, would be a very large proportion. The maternity argument deserts its supporters in the case of single women, a large and growing class of the population—a fact which, it is not irrelevant to remark, is likely to contribute greatly to the prosperity of all, since it tends to reduce the excessive competition of numbers. There is no inherent reason or necessity why all women should voluntarily choose to devote their lives to one animal function and its consequences. Numbers of women are wives and mothers only because no other career is open to them, no other outlet for their feelings or their energies. Every improvement in their education and every

enlargement of their faculties—everything that makes them better qualified for any other way of life—increases the number of those for whom it is an injury and an oppression to be denied the choice. To say that women must be excluded from active life because motherhood disqualifies them for it is in fact to say that every other career should be forbidden them so that motherhood may be their only resource.

COMPETITION FOR WORK

She answers the fear that women workers would lower wages: a wife who earns becomes a partner.

[29] But secondly, it is urged that to give women the same freedom of occupation as men would be a harmful addition to the crowd of competitors who choke the avenues to almost every kind of employment and drive down its pay. This argument, it should be noted, does not reach the political question. It gives no excuse for withholding from women the rights of citizenship. It does not touch the suffrage, the jury-box, or admission to the legislature and to office. It bears only on the industrial side of the subject. Let us grant it, then, its full force from an economic point of view; let us assume that opening to women the employments now monopolized by men would tend, like the breaking down of other monopolies, to lower the rate of pay in those employments; and let us consider how great this bad consequence is, and what the compensation for it would be. The worst ever claimed—much worse than is at all likely to happen—is that if women competed with men, a man and a woman together could not earn more than the man alone earns now. Let us make this supposition, the most unfavorable one possible: the joint income of the two would be the same as before, while the woman would be raised from the position of a servant to that of a partner. Even if every woman, as things now stand, had a claim on some man for support, how infinitely preferable it is that part of the income should be earned by the woman, even if the total were increased only a little by it, rather than that she

should be forced to stand aside so that men may be the sole earners and the sole dispensers of what is earned. Even under the present laws concerning the property of women,[10] a woman who contributes substantially to the support of the family cannot be treated with the same contemptuous tyranny as one who, however hard she toils as a household drudge, depends on the man for her living. As for the lowering of wages by increased competition, remedies for it will be found in time. Palliatives could be applied at once: for instance, a stricter exclusion of children from industrial employment during the years in which they ought to be working only to strengthen their bodies and minds for later life.[11] Children are necessarily dependent and under the power of others; and their labor, being not for themselves but for their parents' gain, is a proper subject for legislative regulation. As for the future, we do not believe that improvident multiplication, and the resulting excessive difficulty of earning a living, will always continue; nor that the division of mankind into capitalists and hired laborers, and the regulation of laborers' pay mainly by supply and demand, will be the rule of the world forever, or even much longer. But so long as competition is the general law of human life, it is tyranny to shut out half of the competitors. All who have reached the age of self-government have an equal claim to be allowed to sell whatever kind of useful labor they are capable of, for the price it will bring.

10 MILL'S NOTE. The truly horrible effects of the present state of the law among the poorest of the working population are displayed in those cases of hideous abuse of their wives by working men with which every newspaper and every police report teems. Wretches unfit to have the slightest authority over any living thing have a helpless woman as their household slave. These excesses could not exist if women both earned, and had the right to own, a part of the family's income.

11 Under English law at the time, a married woman's property and earnings belonged to her husband; this changed only with the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882.

THE HARDENING EFFECT

She argues that modern public life does not harden men in ways women are spared.

[30] The third objection to admitting women to political or professional life, its alleged hardening tendency, belongs to an age now past and is scarcely intelligible to people of the present time. There are still, however, people who say that the world and its business make men selfish and unfeeling; that the struggles, rivalries, and clashes of business and politics make them harsh and unamiable; that if half the species must unavoidably be given over to these things, it is all the more necessary that the other half be kept free of them; that to preserve women from the bad influences of the world is the only chance of preventing men from being wholly given over to them.

[31] This argument would have been plausible when the world was still in the age of violence, when life was full of physical conflict and every man had to redress his own injuries, or those of others, by the sword or by the strength of his arm. Women, like priests, being exempt from such responsibilities and from part of the dangers that went with them, may have been able to exercise a beneficial influence. But in the present condition of human life we do not know where to find those hardening influences to which men are subject and from which women are at present exempt. Individuals nowadays are seldom called on to fight hand to hand, even with peaceful weapons; personal enmities and rivalries count for little in worldly affairs; the general pressure of circumstances, not the hostile will of individuals, is what men now have to struggle against. That pressure, when excessive, breaks the spirit and cramps and sours the feelings—but no less in women than in men, since women certainly suffer no less from its evils. There are still quarrels and dislikes, but their sources have changed. The feudal chief once found his bitterest enemy in his powerful neighbor, the minister or

courtier in his rival for office; but conflict of interest in active life, as a cause of personal hostility, is out of date. The enmities of the present day arise not from great things but from small ones, from what people say about one another more than from what they do; and if there are hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, they are found among women fully as much as among men. In the present state of civilization, the idea of guarding women from the hardening influences of the world could be carried out only by secluding them from society altogether. The ordinary duties of ordinary life, as now constituted, are incompatible with any softness in women other than weakness. Surely weak minds in weak bodies must soon cease to be even supposed attractive or lovable.

WHY MEN WANT IT SO

She argues that women's subordination survives because men like it and teach women to call submission a virtue.

[32] But in truth, none of these arguments and considerations touches the foundations of the subject. The real question is whether it is right and expedient that one half of the human race should pass through life in a state of forced subordination to the other half. If the best state of human society is to be divided into two parts—one made up of persons with a will and an existence of their own, the other of humble companions to these persons, each attached to one of them for the purpose of bringing up *his* children and making *his* home pleasant to him; if this is the place assigned to women, then it is only kindness to educate them for it: to make them believe that the greatest good fortune that can befall them is to be chosen by some man for this purpose, and that every other career the world thinks happy or honorable is closed to them by the law—not of social institutions, but of nature and destiny.

[33] When, however, we ask why the existence of one half of the species should merely serve that of the other—why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man, allowed no interests of

her own, so that nothing may compete in her mind with his interests and his pleasure—the only reason that can be given is that men like it. It suits them that men should live for their own sake and women for the sake of men. And the qualities and conduct in subjects that suit rulers are what the rulers succeed, for a long time, in making the subjects themselves regard as their proper virtues. Helvetius has been much abused for asserting that people usually mean by virtues the qualities that are useful or convenient to themselves. How true this is of mankind in general, and how remarkably the ideas of virtue put into circulation by the powerful are caught up and absorbed by those under their dominion, can be seen in the way the world was once persuaded that the supreme virtue of subjects was loyalty to kings, and is still persuaded that the paramount virtue of womanhood is loyalty to men.[12] A moral code common to both is recognized in name. In practice, self-will and self-assertion form the model of what are called the manly virtues. Meanwhile self-denial, patience, resignation, and submission to power have been stamped by general consent as preeminently the duties and graces required of women, except when resistance is demanded by interests other than their own. All this means merely that power makes itself the center of moral obligation, and that a man likes to have his own way but does not like his domestic companion to have a will different from his.

COMPANIONS BUT NOT EQUALS

She traces women's dependence through history and argues that unequal companionship now weakens men.

[34] We are far from claiming that in modern, civilized times no reciprocal obligation is acknowledged on the part of the stronger. Such a claim would be very far from the truth. This reciprocity has stripped tyranny of its most revolting features,

12 Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771), French philosopher whose *De l'esprit* (1758) traced moral judgments to self-interest; the book was condemned and publicly burned.

at least in the upper and middle classes. But when combined with the original evil of women's dependent condition, it has in its turn introduced serious evils.

35 In the beginning, and among tribes that still live as people did in the earliest times, women were and are the slaves of men for the purposes of toil. All the hard physical labor falls on them. The Aboriginal Australian man is idle while women painfully dig up the roots on which he lives. A Native American man who has killed a deer leaves it and sends a woman to carry it home. In a somewhat more advanced state, as in Asia, women were and are the slaves of men for the purposes of sensuality.[13] In Europe a third and milder dominion took its place early on. It was secured not by blows, nor by locks and bars, but by being carefully instilled into the mind. Feelings of kindness and ideas of duty, such as a superior owes to inferiors under his protection, also became more and more bound up with the relation. But for many ages it did not become a relation of companionship, even between unequals: the two people's lives were apart. The wife was part of the furniture of home, of the resting place to which the man returned from business or pleasure. His occupations were, as they still are, among men; his pleasures and excitements, too, were for the most part among men—among his equals. He was a patriarch and a despot within his four walls. Power that answered to no one had its effect on him, greater or smaller according to his disposition: it made him domineering, demanding, and self-worshipping, when it did not make him capriciously or brutally tyrannical. But if the moral part of his nature suffered, the intellectual or active part did not necessarily suffer to the same degree. He might have as much vigor of mind and energy of character as his nature gave him and the circumstances of his times allowed. He might write "Paradise Lost," or win the battle of Marengo. This was the condition of the

13 Like most Victorians, the author ranks societies on a single ladder of "civilization"; her examples reflect the ethnography of her day, not modern knowledge.

Greeks and Romans, and of the moderns until recently.[14] Their relations with their domestic subordinates occupied a mere corner of their lives, though a cherished one. Their education as men—the formation of their character and faculties—depended mainly on influences of a different kind.

[36] It is otherwise now. The progress of improvement has imposed on all who hold power, domestic power among the rest, a sense of corresponding obligation, and that sense is still growing. No man now thinks his wife has no claim on his actions except what he chooses to grant her. All men with any conscience believe that their duty to their wives is among the most binding of their obligations. Nor is this duty thought to consist solely in protection, which women have almost ceased to need in the present state of civilization. It involves care for their happiness and consideration for their wishes, and men not infrequently sacrifice their own wishes to their wives'. The power of husbands has reached the stage that the power of kings had reached when opinion did not yet question the rightfulness of arbitrary power, but condemned its selfish use in theory, and to a certain extent in practice. This improvement in the moral sentiments of mankind, and this heightened sense of the consideration every man owes to those who have no one but him to depend on, has tended to make home more and more the center of interest, and domestic circumstances and society a larger and larger part of life and of its pursuits and pleasures. The tendency has been strengthened by the changes in tastes and manners that have so remarkably marked the last two or three generations. Not long ago, men found their excitement and filled their time with violent physical exercise, noisy merriment, and heavy drinking. Now, in all but the very poorest classes, they have lost their taste for these things, and for the coarser pleasures generally. They now have scarcely any tastes except those they share with women, and for the first time in the world men and women are really companions. This would be a most benefi-

14 Milton's epic poem (1667); Marengo was Napoleon's victory over the Austrians in 1800.

cial change if the companionship were between equals. But being between unequals, it produces a progressive deterioration among men in what had until now been considered the masculine excellences. Good observers have noticed this, though without seeing its cause. Those who take such care that women should not become men do not see that men are becoming what they have decided women should be—are sinking into the feebleness they have so long cultivated in their companions. People who share their lives tend to grow alike in character. Given how closely the sexes now associate, men cannot keep their manliness unless women acquire it.

[37] There is hardly any situation more unfavorable to keeping an elevated character or a vigorous intellect than to live in the society, and seek by preference the sympathy, of people inferior in mental endowments. Why is it that in life we constantly see so much intellectual and moral promise followed by such inadequate performance, if not because the aspiring person has compared himself only with those below him, and has not sought improvement or stimulus by measuring himself against his equals or superiors? In the present state of social life, this is becoming the general condition of men. They care less and less for any sympathies, and are less and less subject to any personal influences, except those of their own home. So as not to be misunderstood, we must expressly disclaim the belief that women are, even now, inferior to men in intellect. There are women who are the intellectual equals of any men who ever lived. And comparing ordinary women with ordinary men, the varied though petty details that make up most women's occupation probably call for as much mental ability as the uniform routine of the pursuits that habitually occupy a large majority of men. The companionship of women, as their present circumstances make them, so often has a dissolving effect on high faculties and aspirations in men. This comes not from anything in women's faculties themselves, but from the petty subjects and interests on which alone those faculties are exercised. One of the two may have no knowledge of, and no care for, the great ideas and

purposes that give dignity to life. She may care for none of its practical concerns beyond personal interests and personal vanities. If so, her conscious influence, and still more her unconscious influence, will, except in rare cases, push into a secondary place in his mind those interests that she cannot or does not share, if it does not extinguish them altogether.

THE MODERATE REFORMERS

She attacks the plan to educate women only as pleasant companions for their husbands.

[38] Our argument here brings us into collision with what might be called the moderate reformers of women's education. They are a kind of person who crosses the path of improvement on every great question: those who would keep the old bad principles while softening their consequences. These people say that women should be not slaves, nor servants, but companions, and should be educated for that role. (They do not say that men should be educated to be the companions of women.) But uncultured women are not suitable companions for cultured men, and a man who takes an interest in things above and beyond the family circle wants his companion to share that interest. So they say: let women improve their understanding and taste, acquire general knowledge, cultivate poetry and art, even flirt with science. Some stretch their liberality so far as to say: let them inform themselves about politics. This is not meant as a pursuit, but only enough to take an interest in these subjects and to hold a conversation about them with the husband, or at least to understand and absorb his wisdom. Very pleasant for him, no doubt, but unfortunately the opposite of improving. It is because they have intellectual communion only with people to whom they can lay down the law that so few men go on advancing in wisdom beyond the first stages. The most eminent men stop improving if they associate only with disciples. Once they have outgrown those immediately around them, if they want to keep growing they must seek out others of their own stature to

keep company with. The mental companionship that improves is communion between active minds, not mere contact between an active mind and a passive one. This priceless advantage is enjoyed even now, when by rare chance a strong-minded man and a strong-minded woman are united. It would be had far more often if education took the same pains to form strong-minded women that it takes to prevent them from being formed. The modern methods of educating women, which are regarded as improved and enlightened, renounce an education of mere show, as far as words go. They claim to aim at solid instruction, but by that phrase they mean superficial information on solid subjects. Apart from accomplishments, which are now generally held to be worth teaching well if taught at all, nothing is taught to women thoroughly.[15] Small portions of what there is an attempt to teach boys thoroughly are the whole of what anyone intends or wishes to teach women. What makes beings intelligent is the power of thought. The stimuli that call that power forth are the interest and dignity of thought itself, and a field for its practical application. Both motives are cut off from those who are told from infancy that thought, and all its greater applications, are other people's business, while theirs is to make themselves agreeable to other people. High mental powers in women will remain only an exceptional accident until every career is open to them, and until they, like men, are educated for themselves and for the world—not one sex for the other.

MARRIAGE BETWEEN UNEQUALS

She argues that a husband's power breeds selfishness in him and artifice in her.

[39] In what we have said about the effect of women's inferior position, combined with the present constitution of married life, we have so far had in view only the most favorable cases. These are

15 "Accomplishments" were the ornamental skills of a young lady's education: music, drawing, dancing, modern languages, needlework.

the cases in which there is some real approach to that union and blending of characters and of lives which the theory of the relation holds up as its ideal standard. But if we look at the great majority of cases, the effect of women's legal inferiority on the character of both women and men must be painted in far darker colors. We are not speaking here of the grosser brutalities, nor of the man's power to seize the woman's earnings or to compel her to live with him against her will. We are not addressing anyone who needs proof that these things should be remedied. We assume average cases, in which there is neither complete union nor complete disunion of feelings and of character. We affirm that in such cases the influence of the dependence on the woman's side is demoralizing to the character of both.

[40] The common opinion is that, whatever may be true of their intellectual influence, the moral influence of women over men is almost always beneficial. It is, we are often told, the great counterweight to selfishness. Whatever may be true of personal influence, the influence of the position strongly promotes selfishness. The most insignificant of men, the man who can win influence or respect nowhere else, finds one place where he is chief and head. There is one person, often far superior to him in understanding, who is obliged to consult him, and whom he is not obliged to consult. He is judge, magistrate and ruler over their joint affairs, and the arbiter of every dispute between them. The justice or conscience to which she must appeal is his justice and conscience: it is for him to hold the balance and weigh his own claims or wishes against those of another. His is now the only tribunal in civilized life in which the same person is both judge and party. A generous mind in such a situation tips the balance against its own side, and gives the other side not less but more than fair equality. In this way the weaker side may manage to turn the very fact of dependence into an instrument of power and, lacking justice, take an ungenerous advantage of generosity. The unjust power then becomes a torment and a burden to those who use it unselfishly. But what happens when average men are given this power, without reciprocity and

without accountability? Give such a man the idea that he comes first in law and in opinion, that his part is to will and hers to submit, and it is absurd to suppose that this idea merely glides over his mind without sinking in, or without any effect on his feelings and conduct. The tendency to make himself the first object of consideration, and others at most the second, is not so rare that it will be missing where everything seems deliberately arranged to let it be indulged. If there is any self-will in the man, he becomes the despot of his household, whether he knows it or not. The wife, it is true, often succeeds in getting what she wants, but only through one or another of the many forms of indirectness and maneuvering.

[41] So the position corrupts both equally: in the one it produces the vices of power, in the other those of cunning. Women, in their present physical and moral state, have stronger impulses and would naturally be franker and more direct than men; yet all the old sayings and traditions portray them as artful and deceitful. Why? Because the only way to their ends is by indirect paths. In every country where women have strong wishes and active minds, this result is inevitable. If it is less noticeable in England than in some other places, that is because Englishwomen, with occasional exceptions, have ceased to have either strong wishes or active minds.

[42] We are not speaking here of cases in which there is anything that deserves the name of strong affection on both sides. Where that exists, it is too powerful a force not to greatly modify the bad influences of the situation; it seldom, however, destroys them entirely. Far more often the bad influences prove too strong for the affection, and destroy it. The highest kind of lasting and happy attachment would be a hundred times more common than it is if the affection the two sexes sought from each other were that genuine friendship which exists only between equals, equal in privileges as in faculties. But take what is commonly called affection in married life: the habitual, almost mechanical feeling of kindliness and pleasure in each other's company that generally grows up between people who live

together constantly, unless there is actual dislike. There is nothing in this to contradict or soften the harmful influence of the unequal relation. Such feelings often exist between a sultan and his favorites, or between a master and his servants. They are merely examples of the adaptability of human nature, which adjusts itself to some degree even to the worst circumstances, and the commonest natures always do so most easily.

[43] As for the influence that women personally exercise over men, it no doubt makes men less harsh and brutal; in rougher times it was often the only softening influence that could reach them. But the claim that the wife's influence makes the man less selfish contains, as things now stand, fully as much error as truth. The wife's influence no doubt tends to counteract selfishness toward the wife herself and toward those she cares about, the children, though their dependence encourages it. But so long as her interests are confined to the family, the general effect of her character on him only tends to replace individual selfishness with a family selfishness, which looks amiable and wears the mask of duty. How rarely is the wife's influence on the side of public virtue; how rarely does it do anything but discourage any act of principle that might be expected to hurt the private interests or worldly vanities of the family. Public spirit, the sense of duty toward the public good, is of all virtues the one most rarely found among women as they are now educated and situated. They seldom have even what in men often partly substitutes for public spirit: a sense of personal honor tied to some public duty. Many a man whom no money or personal flattery could have bought has traded his political opinions for a title or for invitations for his wife. A still greater number are turned into mere hunters after the childish vanities of society because their wives value them. As for opinions: in Catholic countries, the wife's influence is another name for the priest's. In the hopes and emotions connected with a future life, he gives her consolation for the sufferings and disappointments that are her usual lot in this one. Elsewhere, her weight goes onto the scale of either the most commonplace opinions or the most outwardly

prosperous ones: those by which she will escape censure, or those most likely to bring worldly advancement. In England, the wife's influence is usually on the illiberal and anti-popular side, because that is generally the winning side for personal interest and vanity. And what is democracy or liberalism to her, when she has no part in it and it leaves her the outcast it found her? The man himself, when he marries, usually declines into Conservatism;[16] he begins to sympathize with the holders of power more than with its victims, and thinks his place is on the side of authority. As for mental progress, apart from the cruder accomplishments that serve vanity or ambition, it generally comes to an end in a man who marries a woman intellectually inferior to him, unless he is unhappy in his marriage or becomes indifferent to it. Once a man of twenty-five or thirty is married, an experienced observer seldom expects any further progress in his mind or feelings. It is rare for the progress already made even to be kept. Any spark of the *mens divinior* that might otherwise have spread and become a flame seldom survives for long without being put out. For a mind that learns to be satisfied with what it already is, and does not constantly look ahead to a degree of improvement not yet reached, grows slack and self-indulgent. It loses the spring and tension that keep it even at the level already attained.[17] And there is no fact of human nature to which experience bears more constant witness than this: all social or sympathetic influences that do not raise us up pull us down. If they do not tend to stimulate and elevate the mind, they tend to vulgarize it.

[44] For the sake, then, not only of women but of men, and of human improvement in the widest sense, the emancipation of women cannot stop where it is. The modern world often boasts of having achieved it, and gives the credit sometimes to civilization and sometimes to Christianity. If it were either necessary or

16 The original says "the Pariah," a Victorian borrowing from the Indian caste system for someone excluded from society.

17 *Mens divinior*: Latin, "a more divine mind," Horace's phrase (*Satires* 1.4) for the inspiration of the true poet.

just that one part of humankind should remain only half developed mentally and spiritually, the development of the other part ought to have been made as independent of their influence as possible. Instead, women have become the most intimate companions, and it may now be said the only intimate companions, of the men to whom they are still carefully kept inferior. They have been raised just high enough to drag the others down to their own level.

"WOMEN DO NOT WANT IT"

She answers the claim that women do not seek emancipation, blaming custom, dependence and literary women.

45 We have passed over a host of vulgar objections, either as not worth answering or as already answered by the general course of our remarks. A few words, however, must be said about one plea. In England it is much used to give an unselfish air to the defense of selfish privileges, and with unobservant, unreflecting people it passes for far more than it is worth. Women, it is said, do not desire, do not seek, what is called their emancipation. On the contrary, they generally disown such claims when they are made on their behalf, and fall with *acharnement* upon any one of their number who identifies herself with their common cause.[18]

46 Suppose the fact is true to the fullest extent ever claimed. Then if it proves that European women ought to stay as they are, it proves exactly the same about Asian women. They too, instead of complaining about their seclusion and the restraints placed on them, take pride in them, and are astonished at the impudence of women who receive visits from male acquaintances and are seen in the streets unveiled. Habits of submission make men as well as women servile in mind. The vast population of Asia does not desire or value political liberty, and probably would not accept it; nor do the peoples of the forest desire civilization. This does not prove that either is undesirable for them, or that they will not enjoy it at some future time. Custom

18 *Acharnement*: French for savage, relentless fury.

hardens human beings to any kind of degradation by deadening the part of their nature that would resist it. And in this respect the case of women is actually unique, for no other inferior caste that we have heard of has been taught to regard its degradation as its honor.[19] The argument, however, implies a secret awareness that women's alleged preference for their dependent state is merely apparent, and comes from their being allowed no choice; for if the preference were natural, there would be no need to enforce it by law. No legislator has yet thought it necessary to make laws compelling people to follow their own inclination. The plea that women do not want any change is the one that has been urged since time out of mind against every proposal to abolish a social evil: "there is no complaint." This is generally untrue. When it is true, it is only because there is no hope of success, and without that hope, complaint seldom makes itself heard by unwilling ears. How does the objector know that women do not desire equality and freedom? He has never known a woman who did not, or would not, desire it for herself individually. It would be very naive to suppose that if they do desire it they will say so. Their position is like that of the tenants or laborers who vote against their own political interests to please their landlords or employers. But they bear one unique addition: from childhood, submission is drilled into them as the special charm and grace of their character. They are taught to think that actively resisting even an admitted injustice done to themselves is somewhat unfeminine, and had better be left to some male friend or protector.[20] They are taught that to be accused of rebelling against anything that can be called an ordinance of society is to be charged with a serious offense, to say the least, against the proprieties of their sex. It takes unusual moral courage, as well as unselfishness, for a woman to express opinions in favor of women's enfranchisement, at least

19 "Civilization" here reflects the Victorian belief that all peoples were moving along a single scale of progress, with Europe at its head.

20 Until the Ballot Act of 1872, British votes were cast openly, so landlords and employers could see how their tenants and workers voted.

until there is some prospect of winning it. The comfort of her personal life and her standing in society usually depend on the goodwill of those who hold the undue power. To those who hold power, any complaint about its misuse, however bitter, is a less flagrant act of insubordination than a protest against the power itself. What women profess on this matter reminds us of the state prisoners of old who, on the point of execution, used to declare their love and devotion to the sovereign by whose unjust order they suffered. Griselda herself could be matched by the speeches Shakespeare puts into the mouths of male victims of royal caprice and tyranny: the Duke of Buckingham, for example, in *Henry VIII*, and even Wolsey.[21] The literary class of women, especially in England, make a show of disclaiming any desire for equality or citizenship and proclaiming their complete satisfaction with the place society assigns them. In this, as in many other respects, they have a most harmful influence on the feelings and opinions of men. Men unsuspectingly take the servility of toadyism for a concession to the force of truth, not considering that it is in these women's personal interest to profess whatever opinions they expect men will find agreeable. We do not look for the leaders of a democratic movement among men of talent who have risen from the people and are patronized and flattered by the aristocracy. Successful literary women are just as unlikely to put the cause of women ahead of their own social standing. They depend on men's opinion for their literary successes as well as their feminine ones. And their opinion of men is so low that they believe hardly one man in ten thousand does not dislike and fear strength, sincerity or high spirit in a woman. They are therefore anxious to earn pardon and tolerance for whatever of these qualities their writings on other subjects may show, by a studied display of submission on this one. They want to give vulgar men no occasion to say (what

21 Griselda is the patient wife of Boccaccio and Chaucer who submits without complaint to her husband's cruel trials. In *Henry VIII*, Buckingham on his way to execution and the fallen Cardinal Wolsey both speak of the king with loyal devotion.

nothing will stop vulgar men from saying) that learning makes women unfeminine, and that literary ladies are likely to make bad wives.

THE MOVEMENT AHEAD

She warns the American movement against sentimental demands and notes the first English petition from Sheffield.

47 But enough of this, especially since the fact that prompted this article makes it impossible to claim any longer that women (apart from individual exceptions) universally accept their dependent condition. In the United States at least, there are women, apparently many of them and now organized to act on public opinion, who demand equality in the fullest sense of the word. They demand it by a straightforward appeal to men's sense of justice, and do not plead for it while timidly begging men not to be displeased.

48 Like other popular movements, however, this one may be seriously held back by the blunders of its supporters. Judged by the ordinary standard of public meetings, the speeches at the Convention are remarkable for how much the rational outweighs the rhetorical. But there are some exceptions, and things to which no rational meaning can be attached have found their way into the resolutions. Thus the resolution that sets out the claims made on behalf of women first claims equality in education, in employment and in political rights. It then lists as a fourth demand something called "social and spiritual union," and "a medium of expressing the highest moral and spiritual views of justice," with other similar verbiage. This serves only to spoil the simplicity and rationality of the other demands, and it resembles the feeble attempt some people make to combine nominal equality between men and women with enforced distinctions in their privileges and functions. What women need is equal rights, equal admission to all social privileges; not a position apart, a sort of sentimental priesthood. This is the only just and rational principle, and both the resolutions and the

speeches for the most part hold to it. They contain so little like the nonsensical paragraph in question that we suspect it was not written by the same hands as most of the other resolutions. The strength of the cause lies in the support of those who are moved by reason and principle. To try to recommend it by sentimentalities that are absurd in reason, and inconsistent with the principle on which the movement is founded, is to put a good cause on the same level as a bad one.

49 There are signs that America's example will be followed on this side of the Atlantic. The first step has been taken in the part of England where every serious movement toward political progress begins: the manufacturing districts of the North. On February 13, 1851, the Earl of Carlisle presented to the House of Lords a petition of women claiming the suffrage, which had been adopted at a public meeting in Sheffield.[22]

22 George Howard, 7th Earl of Carlisle, was a Whig politician. The Sheffield petition was among the earliest petitions for women's suffrage presented to Parliament.