

2

John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor on Women and Marriage

This paper focuses on two works of nineteenth-century feminism: Harriet Taylor's essay *The Enfranchisement of Women*, and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*.¹ My aim is to indicate that these texts are more radical than is usually believed: far from being merely criticisms of the legal disabilities suffered by women in Victorian Britain, they are important moral texts, which anticipate central themes within twentieth-century radical feminism. In particular, *The Subjection of Women* is not merely a liberal defence of legal equality; it is a positive statement of the inadequacy of 'male' conceptions of reason and its powers. So understood, I shall argue, it coheres with Mill's other moral and political writings, and draws much of its persuasive power from the doctrines advanced in Harriet Taylor's *The Enfranchisement of Women*.

The structure of my argument is as follows: first, I shall contrast nineteenth-century commentary on *The Subjection of Women* with twentieth-century criticism of it. The aim here is to draw attention to the gulf which separates the two. Where nineteenth-century commentators interpreted Mill as presenting a radical (and shocking) moral text, twentieth-century commentators, including feminists, have construed him largely as an apologist for liberal political theory who emphasized the inequity of legal disadvantage but was unmindful of the social structures which sustained and fostered it.

Second, I shall suggest that Mill's nineteenth-century critics were more nearly right than their twentieth-century counterparts. His text is indeed both moral and radical, and its radicalism is, I shall claim, its most important facet, both for Mill himself and for us.

Finally, I shall indicate the ways in which Mill's relationship with Harriet Taylor (both intellectual and emotional) served to inform the doctrines of *The Subjection of Women*. Far from being simply a rational liberal, compromised by his emotional commitment to a more radical and socialist feminist, Mill was, in *The Subjection of Women*, advocating the rejection of the reason/emotion dichotomy itself. This rejection brings him closer to modern feminism, and at the same time casts doubt on the attempt to distinguish between those of his thoughts which were 'reasoned' and those which were claimed to be merely the result of keeping the company of Harriet Taylor. Where his contemporary critics argued that his relationship with her impaired his judgement, he himself was determined to show that the very idea of judgement as something inherently superior to emotion or intuition, was itself flawed. I begin, then, with the nineteenth-century reception of Mill's work.

A work of rank moral and social anarchy

The publication of *The Subjection of Women* in 1869 was timed to coincide with the growing parliamentary and political movement for the reform of the franchise and, especially, with the campaign for votes for women. Although Mill's biographer, St John Packe, alludes to some buffoonery in the lobbies when the question of female suffrage was raised in the House of Commons,² other commentators have noted the more general seriousness with which the issue was treated in Parliament, and Ann Robson concludes that 'through all those years the question of the removal of women's political disabilities was . . . hardly ever, treated as a laughing matter in the House of Commons'.³

By contrast, *The Subjection of Women* outraged Mill's contemporaries. St John Packe says, 'of anything Mill ever wrote, *The Subjection of Women* aroused the most antagonism. Those who were always hostile became more hostile still . . . and even his friends were horrified.'⁴ Even at its worst, the Parliamentary campaign had caused only amusement, never outrage, but with *The Subjection of Women*, Mill had finally gone too far. Almost all the commentators of the time (both friend and foe) emphasize not the legal demands which Mill made on behalf of women, but rather the moral assumptions which underpin those demands. Predictably, James Fitzjames Stephen was