



**WOMEN**  
**REPRESENTATIVES**  
**IN BRITAIN, FRANCE,**  
**AND THE UNITED**  
**STATES**

HARRIET B. APPLEWHITE



# Women Representatives in Britain, France, and the United States



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Harriet B. Applewhite

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WOMAN REPRESENTATIVES IN BRITAIN, FRANCE, AND THE UNITED STATES  
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*For Eleanor Applewhite Terry*

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# Acknowledgments

The subject of this book grew out of my earlier work on eighteenth-century France. *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolutions*, coedited with Darline Levy and Mary Durham Johnson, includes documents that raised the question of women in legislatures, which was promptly dismissed. My own later work, *Political Alignment in the French National Assembly, 1789–1791*, furthered my interest in the attitudes and behavior of men elected to represent the nation. The British and American legislatures elected their first women representatives after World War I; the French waited until 1944.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Framing the Question in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, two classic liberals, Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, framed questions about gender, race, and class in England, France, and America as their political cultures were democratizing. Tocqueville and Mill were empirically minded political theorists whose understanding of the central values of democratic development grew out of astute observations and personal political activism. In their correspondence and published political work, they analyzed the impact of gender roles on the family, the society, and the state. Each of them believed that the social positions of women and men affected the legitimacy of the state, the common good, and the dynamics of political power and influence. Beginning with the first volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, Tocqueville linked gender socialization, religious institutions and practices, the cultural values of liberty and equality, and democratic stability. He accepted uncritically that biology constrained women in public; nonetheless as mothers, they had the central role in sustaining and transmitting the core principles of hard work and civic engagement that stabilized democratizing countries. He believed that women should not vote or participate in political action, yet they should be informed and observant about local affairs. In contrast, John Stuart Mill throughout his life strongly supported women's rights to support themselves, to own property, and to vote and stand for office. He became the first member of the House of Commons to try, unsuccessfully, to amend a franchise bill that would have given women the parliamentary ballot. Unlike Tocqueville, he believed that childrearing practices and education, and not biology, produced most of the differences between women and men.

Tocqueville and Mill each served in their national parliaments, Mill as member from Westminster from 1866 to 1868 and Tocqueville in the Chamber of

Deputies during the French Second Republic. They were intellectually close to one another, Mill having reviewed, very favorably, book two of *Democracy in America* for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1840.<sup>1</sup> Ill health prevented their meeting in person as much as they would have liked to, but they wrote to one another fairly regularly. Both valued individual liberty above all else. They frequently compared French, English, and American political cultures and institutions in their published writings and in their letters. Both men referred recurrently to the accelerating pace of social change that industrial capitalism was bringing to women along with men.

As democratic theorists, Mill and Tocqueville saw the line between private life and the public world as a threshold, not a barrier. Family life, especially the socialization of children, was critical to healthy politics and democratic stability. Mill was a feminist, active in the suffrage struggle; Tocqueville was not, and indeed he was acutely hostile to women's political participation. Nonetheless, he assigned to women the protection and transmission of good mores that he thought essential for legitimate democratic development. Both men addressed the different ways that women and men valued and needed liberty. Both considered a state legitimate only if it guaranteed individual liberty. The extensive literature on Mill and Tocqueville contains many exegeses of their writings about gender differences that I do not critique here. I contrast their comparative treatment of this question: what does the democratic state require of its citizens?

In a letter to Mill on December 5, 1835, Tocqueville remarked that the nature of representation would determine the future of modern democratic states: "For friends of democracy, it is less a question of finding the means to make the people govern, than of making the people choose those most capable of governing and retaining enough control to steer their overall conduct rather than the details of their actions or their methods of governing."<sup>2</sup> Mill and Tocqueville diverged radically in their views on women's part in that process, yet both paid considerable attention to the question of the capacity and accountability of representatives. Nearly two centuries later, legitimacy rooted in universal representation remains one of the touchstones of democracy.

The problem of democratic legitimacy is central to the thought of Mill and Tocqueville. So also is the concept of the common good. Only a government supported by a majority of its citizens could manage the tensions growing out of industrialization, urbanization, and accelerating social change. Mill and Tocqueville acknowledged the increasing value of equality in their nations and sought to accommodate it to individual liberty in a stable polity. How should women contribute to an equal and free society: by acting solely within their families, or in the larger public sphere and polity? Mill advocated women's suffrage in his published essays, his letters, his public addresses, and his speeches on the floor of the House of Commons. Tocqueville denied that women should

vote or hold office. They should remain the mainstay of the family, the cradle and the school of democracy. He believed that mothers properly shaped and transmitted his core cultural value—self-interest properly understood—which would safeguard liberty as a society became more equal.

In the mid-nineteenth century, women's private, family-based influence was moving out into the public world of work and politics. The growing power of public opinion made both Mill and Tocqueville apprehensive about the tyranny of the majority. Institutions that linked the individual to the state were expanding in size and influence: the popular press, political parties, and interest groups. Women could be dangerously or positively influential as half of society and the cornerstone of families, as well as economic consumers and producers. Mill wanted to channel that power through the ballot box; Tocqueville wished to keep it inside the home. As students of political culture, proponents of liberalism, and comparativists, these two theorists outlined themes of legitimacy, the common good, and political power that set the terms of the debate about women's suffrage in Britain, the United States, and France.

### **Personal Experience: Mill, Tocqueville, and Women**

Perhaps the very different personal experiences with women that Mill and Tocqueville encountered in their personal lives and political careers influenced their views on political economy and the liberal state. During Alexis de Tocqueville's travels in the United States in 1831–32, he found American women intriguing, and he took note of their contributions to democratic political culture. In contrast, his collisions with women of the popular classes in Paris in 1848 appalled him and confirmed his belief that women acting in public presented a collective threat, especially in revolutionary times. On May 21, 1848, marching as a member of the Chamber of Deputies in a political festival in Paris, Tocqueville described the coarse behavior of young women participants, parading in white dresses, singing the "Marseillaise," and throwing flowers at deputies so forcefully that it was like being in a hailstorm.<sup>3</sup> Violent women were even worse. Tocqueville called the bloody June Days of 1848 "a kind of servile war": "Women took as much a part as men did. While the men fought, women prepared and brought munitions; when at last all had to surrender, the women were the last to be reconciled to it." Horrified by the violence, Tocqueville understood women's economic plight even though he did not believe their circumstances were truly desperate: "It could be said that these women brought to combat the passions of housewives; they counted on victory to put their husbands at ease and to raise their children. They loved this war as they would have loved a lottery."<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville's reactions to these women grew from class differences as much as

gender. Whenever the popular classes took to the streets, democracy degenerated into mob rule. The “passions of housewives” were narrowly fixated on daily needs; women did not have sufficient reason to develop the “self-interest well-understood” that Tocqueville had argued earlier in the *Democracy* made the American republic function so well.

But Tocqueville was seldom blinded by his prejudices, and he had an ear for political astuteness, even in a woman. With Paris in crisis in late May 1848, he talked for an hour with George Sand—the woman novelist, political writer, and activist—at a luncheon given by Richard Milnes, an English friend and a member of Parliament who was visiting Paris. He was seated next to George Sand, whom he said he detested, partly because she had not read his book and partly because she was a woman author who wrote systematically about politics. He admitted that she knew more than anyone about what was going on in Paris and credited her political astuteness. Despite his discomfiture, Tocqueville was always true to his observations, even when they challenged his convictions. Sheldon Wolin exaggerates Tocqueville’s reaction to Sand’s prediction that Tocqueville and his political associates would perish in revolutionary violence.<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville, bitterly ironic, referred to “these consoling words,” but he acknowledged that Sand was also frightened, despite being aligned with supporters of the workers.

John Stuart Mill lived and worked much more than Tocqueville in the company of women. His long friendship and intellectual collaboration with Harriet Taylor, and their eventual marriage, broadened and deepened his early support for women’s rights to the franchise and legislation to improve the lot of women. After Harriet Taylor Mill’s death, he worked closely with his stepdaughter Helen, speaking and writing on women’s suffrage and keeping up an extensive correspondence concerning women’s issues. Mill believed that wives needed property rights and more equal treatment in marriage. Securing the franchise for the national parliament would give women voice, access, and the influence to change laws on marriage and divorce, occupation, public health, education, and any other policy issues of concern to them.

Mill’s writings contain few references to women of the working class: fishwives and flower sellers, factory workers and mill girls, shop clerks, and the like. He did support extension of the suffrage to men of the working class, provided they were literate, were not recipients of parish relief, and were not bankrupt. If women’s suffrage were achieved, these same exclusions would apply to women. Mill favored a universal capitation tax to give even minimal rate payers a stake in elections. Weighted voting, with greater weights for high scorers on examinations, would balance “the numerical weight of the least educated class.”<sup>6</sup> While political participation improved the abilities of everyone, “a counter current sets in when they [the less educated classes] are made the possessors of all power.”<sup>7</sup>

Mill wrote to Charles Dilke in 1870 that he did not think that working-class men would support enfranchising women: “When at last victory comes (universal male suffrage), there is sure to be a compromise, by which the working men would be enfranchised without the women, and the contest for women’s rights would have to be begun again from the beginning, with the working men inside the barrier instead of outside, and there with their selfish interest against our cause instead of with it.”<sup>8</sup>

Tocqueville found George Sand informative because she spoke just like a male politician. Mill disapproved openly of that line of thinking in a letter to Thomas Carlyle dated October 5, 1833. For Mill, character reduced gender differences to insignificance, and he did not believe it flattered a talented woman to refer to her as “almost rather a man.”

There was one thing in what you said of Madame Roland which I did not quite like—it was, that she was almost rather a man than a woman: I believe that I quite agree in all that you really meant, but is there really any distinction between the highest masculine and the highest feminine character? I do not mean the mechanical *acquirements*: those, of course, will very commonly be different. But the women of all I have known who possessed the highest measure of what are considered feminine qualities, have combined with them more of the highest masculine qualities than I have ever seen in any but one or two men, and those one or two men were also in many respects almost women. I suspect it is the second rate people of the two sexes that are unlike—the first-rate are alike in both.<sup>9</sup>

### **Legitimate Democracy: Liberty and Equality**

Tocqueville and Mill considered the intertwined values of liberty and equality to be the foundation of any legitimate democratic state. Tocqueville believed that in France and the United States, liberty and equality grounded political institutions and shaped policies. The democratic impulses at work in the American and French Revolutions underlay the written declarations of rights in both nations and the “habits of the heart” that influenced political behavior.<sup>10</sup> The passion for equality was the most vital force, stronger even than the love of liberty. People living in democratic societies, like Americans early in the nineteenth century, had “an instinctive taste” for freedom, but they cherished equality with “an eternal love.”<sup>11</sup> Love is stronger than taste. Americans enjoyed living with equal conditions, which they did not need a democratic revolution to create. In contrast, French society on the eve of the Revolution in the 1780s was aristocratic, full of vestiges of “feudal” hierarchies that their reformers set out to demolish, inspired by “an intense, indomitable hatred of inequality.”<sup>12</sup> They hoped to create “a new society in which men were as much alike and

their status as equal as was possible, allowing for the innate differences between individuals.”<sup>13</sup>

In both nations, social equality generated a desire for political equality. Tocqueville’s writings seem ambivalent about whether the rule of the people generated a social state of equal conditions or whether an equal state generated popular rule.<sup>14</sup> But he did say that political freedom could only come from the democratic principle. Americans, already remarkably equal in fortune and intelligence, sought to be equal to popular sovereigns. “Now,” wrote Tocqueville, “I know only two manners of making equality reign in the political world; rights must be given to each citizen or to no one.” This “manly and legitimate passion for equality” would produce either popular sovereignty or the “absolute power of one alone.”<sup>15</sup> The American Revolution created popular sovereignty; the French Revolution ended with the rule of one alone. But when the virile generation that had launched the Revolution had perished or (as usually befalls a generation engaging in such ventures) its first fine energy had dwindled and when, as was but to be expected after a spell of anarchy and “popular” dictatorship, the ideal of freedom had lost much of its appeal and the nation, at a loss for where to turn, they began to cast around for a master. Under these conditions, the stage was set for a return to one-man government.<sup>16</sup>

At the beginning of part II of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville imagined an idealized democracy where all citizens might enjoy an equal right to agree on the government and thereby gain liberty. “Then with none differing from those like him, no one will be able to exercise a tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free because they will all be entirely equal; and they will all be perfectly equal because they will be entirely free. This is the ideal toward which democratic peoples tend.”<sup>17</sup> Such absolute equality would fuse with absolute liberty. In 1789, the French revolutionaries believed that they were building a system of institutions that were at once democratic and free. Those dreams dissolved into dictatorship. Tocqueville was persuaded that conditions of perfect equality and freedom were not likely to be realized and certainly could never last. In democratic countries, the passion for equality tends to trump the love of liberty. People who are equal experience “a multitude of little enjoyments daily,” whereas freedom requires a commitment of time and energetic participation from each person.<sup>18</sup> Freedom could become excessive, threaten stability, and produce life-threatening conflict.

Nonetheless, freedom is a higher calling; it can make great citizens and great nations: “Freedom alone is capable of lifting men’s minds above mere mannan worship and the petty personal worries which crop up in the course of everyday life, and of making them aware at every moment that they belong each and all to a vaster entity, above and around them—their native land. It alone replaces at certain critical moments their natural love of material welfare by loftier, more



virile ideas; offers other objective than that of getting rich; and sheds a light enabling all to see and appraise men's vices and their virtues as they truly are."<sup>19</sup>

Tocqueville's ideal liberty was social and dynamic. This virile idea of freedom was difficult to sustain in periods when people cherish equality, mainly because individual self-absorption would intensify until the social glue that bonds communities together weakened and dissolved.<sup>20</sup> Such separateness and isolation favor the rise to power of a single despot or a tyrannical majority. In the early nineteenth century, Americans avoided these dangers by participating in voluntary associations: "Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States."<sup>21</sup> This "art" and "science" of association muted egotistical individualism and fostered the development of self-interest properly understood.<sup>22</sup> Energetic participation in public affairs in one's own community produced a calm, moderate democracy that avoided opposing dangers: a return to a hierarchy of "natural" inequalities like those in an aristocracy or the development of a tyrannical majority forcing everyone to conform.<sup>23</sup>

One of the worst potential threats to a free government and equal society would be the erosion of these participatory voluntary associations. As Tocqueville put it, "the idea of a right inherent in certain individuals is rapidly disappearing from the minds of men; the idea of the all-powerful and so to speak unique right of society comes to fill its place."<sup>24</sup> This centralized and collectivized right had already happened in France despite guarantees in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Collective rights—the rights of men in society—ended up riding roughshod over the rights of the individual man, first under the Jacobin Terror and then under Napoleon: "The nation as a whole had sovereign rights, while the individual citizen was kept in strictest tutelage; the former was expected to display the sagacity and virtues of a free race, the latter to behave like an obedient servant."<sup>25</sup>

Voluntary associations were one important remedy for this weakening of individual autonomy. The other cure lay in the character of the citizen: heroic courage, lofty ideals, manly and virile virtues, and a manly passion for equality.<sup>26</sup> For Tocqueville, the love of freedom and the passion for equality were masculine virtues, qualities of manliness. Women, if intelligent and experienced, could possess these virtues too and ought to teach them to their sons, but they could act on them properly only within their families and churches, not in the public square. Laws could give women civil rights and status; laws could not give women the manly and virile qualities of the democratic citizen and hence should not grant them political rights.

John Stuart Mill equaled Tocqueville's devotion to liberty as the supreme value in a political culture. Liberty had three dimensions: an "inward domain"

of thought, autonomous control over one's life choices, and "freedom to unite."<sup>27</sup> Whereas Tocqueville believed that majority tyranny was one of the risks in a society with equal conditions, Mill argued that holders of power were accountable to the "strongest party" in the community. If a majority became that strongest party, it would become tyrannical. Threats to liberty came not so much from equality of social conditions as from political power directly in the hands of an "ascendant class."<sup>28</sup> Political rights curbed the authority of the state. The highest duty of the state was to protect all three aspects of individual liberty by restraining people from doing harm to others.<sup>29</sup> The legal sphere regulated the social sphere, and legal subordination of one sex to the other was wrong, both as a matter of justice and as a matter of expediency. Subordination harmed human progress, by "neither admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other."<sup>30</sup>

Equality was the greatest threat to liberty, according to Tocqueville. For Mill, cultural conformity was the greater danger, the "despotism of custom."<sup>31</sup> European progress was nourished by "diversity of character and culture."<sup>32</sup> Like Tocqueville, Mill believed that a state of liberty required an engaged citizenry: "The ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty, or supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community; every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty, but being, at least occasionally, called on to take an actual part in the government, by the personal discharge of some public function, local or general."<sup>33</sup> Mill's citizen should participate directly in politics; Mill did not discuss voluntary associations.

### **Gendering Liberty: The Common Good and Political Power in Different Political Cultures**

According to Tocqueville, natural reproductive functions restricted women to family roles. He never brought slave women, factory workers, and domestic servants into his sociological analysis beyond the occasional anecdote. He did write in detail about bourgeois and aristocratic women and the wives of frontier settlers in America. He had complicated ideas about women and citizenship. Americans were raised in families that imbue them with "ideas and sentiments which first prepare them for freedom and then allow them to enjoy it."<sup>34</sup> Boys and girls were not treated drastically differently. The natural bonds of "filial love and fraternal affection" tighten, reinforcing the social ties that equality of conditions tends to loosen.<sup>35</sup> "It is woman who shapes these mores."<sup>36</sup> Mores included both sensibility and sense: affections and passions, the "habits of the heart," along with "notions," "opinions," and the "sum of ideas that shape mental habits."<sup>37</sup> Since women had the responsibility to develop in their children

the qualities that fit future citizens for a democracy, they could hardly be closed in a private world of hearth and home. Habits of the heart could grow through family affection within the home; opinions and the sum of ideas had to come from experience in the larger community.

Cultural mores that make democracy flourish began with the love of order that, in the United States, began with the “regularity of life” found in families. This calm center, restraining the excesses of audacious pursuits of fortune, came from religion, which “reigns supreme in the souls of woman.”<sup>38</sup> Religious morality was a stable, fixed reference for men in the hustle and bustle of economic enterprise and political activity.

It was not some natural quality that placed women at the center of democratic mores; it was their training to cultivate virile and manly mores as wives and mothers, the crucial molders of personal and public ethics. American women, with their religious souls, built conjugal happiness; they were faithful wives with faithful husbands. Marital bonds were keys to a thriving democracy.

In Europe, almost all the disorders of society are born around the domestic hearth and not far from the nuptial bed. It is there that men come to feel scorn for natural ties and legitimate pleasures and develop a taste for disorder, restlessness of spirit, and instability of desires. Shaken by the tumultuous passions which have often troubled his own house, the European finds it hard to submit to the authority of the state’s legislators. When the American returns from the turmoil of politics to the bosom of the family, he immediately finds a perfect picture of order and peace.<sup>39</sup>

Americans were more severe than Europeans in condemning and punishing adultery and “the vices which tend to impair the purity of morals and the stability of marriage.” Americans considered it “a point of honor to be chaste.”<sup>40</sup>

American girls enjoyed exhilarating experiences that made grown women able tutors of citizens and staunch protectors of democratic mores: “Before she has completely left childhood behind she already thinks for herself, speaks freely, and acts on her own. All the doings of the world are ever plain for her to see.” A girl’s parents did not shelter her from “the vices and dangers of society” but taught her to perceive and evaluate such dangers with confidence. Her European counterpart had little chance to develop such confidence because her girlhood was too sheltered, even from her own “burgeoning desires,” and her education is “almost cloistered,” with the result that a European woman was ill-equipped for her adult responsibility to mold citizens.<sup>41,42</sup> Tocqueville’s recommendations are unequivocal: “A democratic education is necessary to protect women against the dangers with which the institutions and mores of democracy surround them.”<sup>43</sup>

Tocqueville contrasts the perceptive, freethinking, and independent American girl and the wife who must “submit” to her duties and “sacrifice” her pleasures: “Thus in America inexorable public opinion carefully keeps woman within the little sphere of domestic interests and duties and will not let her go beyond them.”<sup>44</sup> Paradoxically, women themselves shape the mores that then constrain their civic participation. How does the spirited girl become the submissive wife? She uses her firm reason and “the manly habits inculcated by her education.”<sup>45</sup> The educated girl/woman has learned to reason like a man; her independent childhood has given her the masculine quality of courage so that she willingly consents to sacrifice adult independence. Why would a courageous, knowledgeable person willingly sacrifice her independent reason to submit to a husband whose rule would be much stricter than the authority of her father? First, American women marry relatively late and “only when their minds are experienced and mature.” Second, because of nineteenth-century economic realities, a woman must depend on a man for her support, so she must marry. Furthermore, her husband’s fortunes will rise and fall “from poverty to opulence and then come down again.”<sup>46</sup> He may well drag her off to “the utmost confines of the wilderness,” to live in “leaky cabins in the depths of the forest,” where she will need all her courage to survive “fever, solitude, and boredom.”<sup>47</sup> European women avoid the leaky cabin but lack the childhood freedom and education that would prepare them to be the calm and stabilizing center of democratic political culture. Women, particularly French women, have no opportunities to gain the experience that would permit them to develop good mores; instead, abstract theories of human society fire their political passion.<sup>48</sup> Looking backward from 1840, Tocqueville remarks on fifty years of “universal confusion of thought undermining all established concepts” that destabilized both public virtue and private morality.<sup>49</sup> Members of the aristocratic classes who had not lost their heads during the French Terror had lost their economic security in the years since and had come to value domestic tranquility; the rest of the nation had lost their moorings in family stability and had fallen into moral disorder.<sup>50</sup>

Like Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill was a student of comparative political culture. He believed that women were absolutely central to the establishment and preservation of the common good and should have a much larger presence in the public world than Tocqueville endorsed. Like Tocqueville, he deplored the French upbringing of girls that taught them that their effect on the opposite sex should determine their conduct.<sup>51</sup> French women were energetic and passionate and, with smaller families than the English and the more extensive practice of wet nursing, were less domestic and not as good household managers as English women.<sup>52</sup> English girls got a “more sexual” education, by which he meant they learned more about biological reality and less about coquetry. English women

grew up to think of themselves as human beings first and as women second (Comte). Their capacities as human beings were not inferior to men's.

But even in relatively enlightened England, girls were trained from "the very earliest years" that the ideal of womanhood was "submission, and yielding to the control of others."<sup>53</sup> Cultural socialization practices shaped gendered self-understanding and social roles.

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 . . . in the case of women, a hot-house and stove cultivation has always been carried on of some of the capabilities of their nature, for the benefit and pleasure of their masters. Then, because certain products of the general vital force sprout luxuriantly and reach a great development in this heated atmosphere and under this active nurture and watering, while other shoots from the same root, which are left outside in the wintry air, with ice purposely heaped all round them, have a stunted growth, and some are burnt off with fire and disappear; men, with that inability to recognise their own work which distinguishes the analytic mind, indolently believe that the tree grows of itself in the way they have made it grow, and that it would die if one half of it were not kept in a vapour bath and the other half in the snow.<sup>54</sup>

Once the young woman became a wife, she had no basis for a thoughtful opinion. Tocqueville idealized the American wife as a civilizing, calming, and encouraging presence for her husband. For Mill, the uneducated and ill-informed wife could be pernicious. Her self-sacrificing behavior only encouraged her husband to be willful and selfish.<sup>55</sup>

Mill, like Tocqueville, was apprehensive about the power of trained and knowledgeable women unless it was channeled into enlightened marriages and a reformed public sphere. Lacking a creative outlet for their talents, educated women were dangerous: "Women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic servant."<sup>56</sup> Changing the "existing constitution of things" would transform educated women into a social asset. Whereas Tocqueville found George Sand to be an exception to his general disapproval of women who write, Mill's remedies for their "disturbing element" were egalitarian marriages and political rights. Tocqueville believed that equality threatened liberty; for Mill, equality within families was a precondition for liberty. He went so far as to compare women's current state with that of serfs.

The servitude of women, although much lighter [than that of serfs], is a servitude without end that extends to every activity and relieves them even more

completely than serfs of all foresight and true management of their own conduct, either in society or in the sense of individual interest. The comparative lightness of this servitude is one more reason why it lasts. I do not believe that there is one man in one hundred thousand who, having never enjoyed liberty, would be capable of preferring it to the state of a cherished slave, a state so in line with universal laziness and cowardice that is characteristic of our species.<sup>57</sup>

Mill called the family as he knew it “a school of despotism,” but it would become “the real school of the virtues of freedom” if wives and husbands were equal and men ceased to believe that freedom meant self-importance.<sup>58</sup> Law could change family dynamics, beginning with the establishment of a wife’s right to keep her own property, whether inherited or earned: “The *power* of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property.”<sup>59</sup>

The problem for men was likewise a problem of power that began at home, “for every one who desires power, desires it most over those who are nearest to him, with whom his life is passed, with whom he has most concerns in common, and in whom any independence of his authority is oftenest likely to interfere with his individual preferences.”<sup>60</sup> A husband who relinquished this kind of power over his wife would find instead his “individual preferences” enriched and expanded in an egalitarian marriage.

Wives were different than single women. When a woman made the choice to marry, her employment would consist thereafter of undertaking family responsibilities. Mill did hedge and qualify his view, saying that exceptional women might take on “other pursuit[s],” as long as their family responsibilities were provided for. These rare circumstances did not require legal regulation; reputation or “opinion” would suffice, since in his day, “power holds a smoother language, and whomsoever it oppresses, always pretends to do so for their own good.”<sup>61,62</sup> Mill did not move very far from the nineteenth-century conventions that middle- and upper-class wives managed households and did not seek outside employment, but he did not elevate those expectations into a principle. He allowed room for exceptional women in the public world of work.<sup>63</sup>

In politics, women required the vote as a right and also for self-protection. Unlike Tocqueville, Mill linked marital choice to electoral choice. Since women were considered competent to select a husband who would govern them in private, they were competent to select representatives who would govern them in the public world. Women of the same class were not likely to band together against men of the same class, since class determined the interests of both sexes. Mill denied that there were any natural or biological differences, beyond reproductive functions, between the sexes and then enumerated differences

that cultural practices produced. In the event that a particular issue involved the specific interests of women, women would need the vote to secure “just and equal consideration.” To make his case for suffrage, Mill folded together the principles of justice and expediency, the protection of interests.

Some feminists have charged Mill with advocating women’s suffrage mainly because of benefits it would bring to men. In making his case that suffrage would strengthen families, he did contend that boys raised in an egalitarian family would be disabused of a self-centered sense of entitlement and would learn that “merit, and not birth, is the only rightful claim to power and authority.”<sup>64</sup> Husbands would be more virtuous: “If the wife does not push the husband forward she always holds him back.”<sup>65</sup>

Beyond the family, women’s influence, even without the vote, could benefit or harm public policy. Women’s pacifism contributed to the European aversion to war (Mill was writing in 1869) and “addiction to philanthropy.”<sup>66</sup> Liberal individualist that he was, Mill disapproved of charity and philanthropy because such practices discouraged self-dependence. If women themselves were free, the “formation of general opinion” would be strengthened.<sup>67</sup>

That said, women themselves would gain the most from empowering reforms. Women would win “rational freedom,” what we might call agency, defined as “the liberty of each to govern his [sic] conduct by his own feelings of duty, and by such laws and social restraints as his own conscience can subscribe to.”<sup>68</sup> Women able to vote would cease to cultivate personal power through improvident spending and immorality. Mill constrained the liberty of young middle-class women by offering them a choice between marriage and a career, whereas young men of course could have both, automatically. Women were free to choose marriage and ought to be freer within marriage, but only the most unusual women in rare circumstances could combine marriage with gainful employment or a political career.

Mill paid attention to very specific issues that divided women’s interests from men’s. Parliament should pursue these to advance the common good. Mill was pleased by the 1869 repeal of the law excluding women from the municipal suffrage and the later passage of the first Married Woman’s Property Act. If women had choices of whether to marry and whom to marry, Mill believed they should also have the choice to end a marriage. Divorce reform would never come “until women have an equal voice in deciding it.”<sup>69</sup>

Most women desired to marry, and marriage constrained women more than it did men, but Mill allowed women choices that contemporary scholars have overlooked. It was indeed the rare woman who would combine successfully marriage, motherhood, and career, and the rare woman who would seek divorce, but these options should not be categorically denied or legally prevented.