



MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT & HARRIET TAYLOR MILL

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Monterey Peninsula College
GENT 11/411: Reaction and Revolution (1775-1815)

Harriet Taylor Mill

(1807–1858)



- Difficult to assess her philosophical work and the provide appraisal → worked so closely with friend and husband John Stuart Mill
- Not easy to disentangle her ideas and contributions to the writings which emerged from their joint effort
- Conflicting reports about her contributions and abilities → and how much influence she had on Mill's work and philosophical trajectory

“The Enfranchisement of Women”

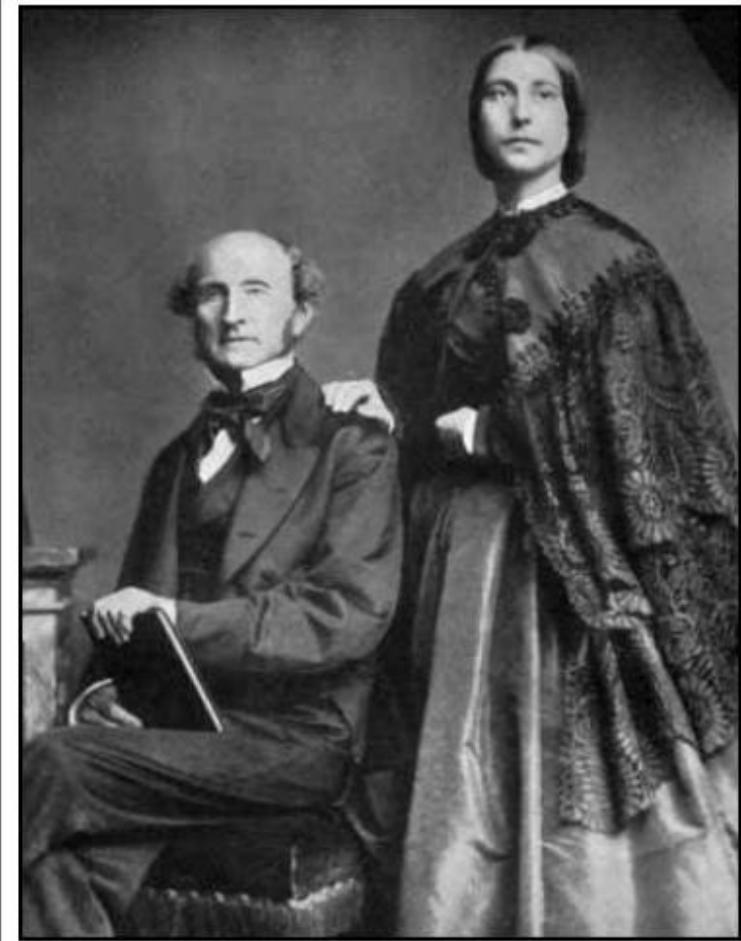
(*Westminster Review*, 1851)

- Best candidate for single-authored philosophical work
- Argues that women should not only been allowed to vote, but should be granted “equality in all rights, political, civil, and social, with the male citizens of the community.”
- Some of the phrases, sentences, language from this appears in John Stuart Mill’s “The Subjection of Women” → but Harriet Taylor Mill’s essay has more radical views on gender roles
- Tends to argue that women’s rights will help increase the moral and spiritual lives of men → for example, if women do not have similar educational rights, then wives will hinder their husbands’ intellectual and moral development
- J.S.M.’s essay suggests that the wife’s best place is in the raising of a family, H.T.M. argues that it’s best for married women to work outside the home.



“The Enfranchisement of Women”

(*Westminster Review*, 1851)



Even if every woman, as matters now stand, had a claim on some man for support, how infinitely preferable is it that part of the income should be of the woman's earning, even if the aggregate sum were but little increased by it.... Even under the present laws respecting the property of women, a woman who contributes materially to the support of the family, cannot be treated in the same contemptuously tyrannical manner as one who, however she may toil as a domestic drudge, is a dependent on the man for subsistence (H. T. Mill, [CW], 60–1)

The intertwined ideas of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill

John Stuart Mill:

“When two persons have their thoughts and speculations completely in common; when all subjects of intellectual or moral interest are discussed between them in daily life, and probed to much greater depths than are usually or conveniently sounded in writings intended for general readers; when they set out from the same principles, and arrive at their conclusions by processes pursued jointly, it is of little consequence in respect to the question of originality, which of them holds the pen; the one who contributes least to the composition may contribute most to the thought; the writings which result are the joint product of both, and it must often be impossible to disentangle their respective parts, and affirm that this belongs to one and that to the other.”

H.T.M. also contributed to works that J.S.M. was sole author:

“In this wide sense [...] not only during the years of our married life, but during many of the years of confidential friendship which preceded it, all my published writings were as much my wife’s work as mine; her share in them constantly increasing as years advanced”

Mary Wollstonecraft

(1759–1797)



- Moral and political philosopher → focus on the condition of women
- Still radical → assessment on the status of women part of a larger project of understanding how human relations have become increasingly dominated by society more and more dominated by consumption.
- First essay was on the education of daughters → continued to write about history, politics, novels and philosophy
- Best known for *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)
- Though she also influenced travel writing and the Romantic movement

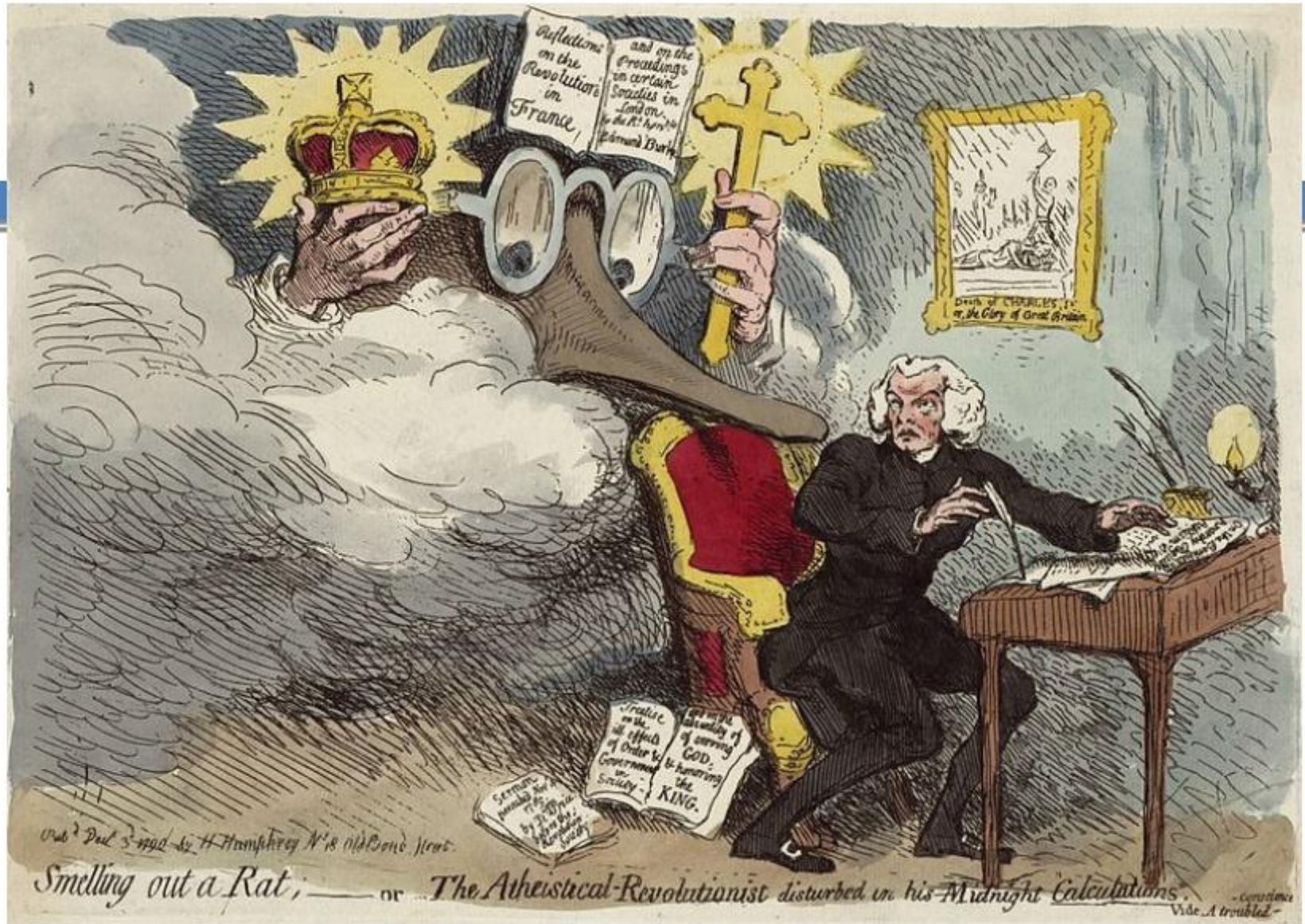
Wollstonecraft's defense of Reverend Richard Price

- One of her first engagements in political commentary was a review of Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*
 - Praised this work for its patriotism conceived as “the result of reason, not the undirected impulse of nature, ever tending to selfish extremes.”
 - Praised his defense of the Christian duty toward universal benevolence (argued against those who thought this was incompatible with patriotism)
- Liberty of conscience (freedom of religion) was a sacred right
- Reiterated Price's message which linked the American and French revolutions → plea for the end of despotism in Europe

Price, Wollstonecraft and Edmund Burke

- Wollstonecraft defends Price against Edmund Burke, utilitarian and empiricist politician and philosopher
- However, she agrees with Burke's characterization that Price's work is inflammatory
- Burke skeptical of the French Revolution → feared the consequences from the start
 - Concerned about the confiscation of property (after the National Assembly took Church property) → undermines property rights
 - This would result in anarchy





“Smelling out a Rat”, a caricature of Price with Edmund Burke's vision looking over his shoulder, by James Gillray, 1790.

Disagreements between Mary Wollstonecraft and Edmund Burke

- Most fundamental disagreement between Wollstonecraft and Burke was perhaps their respective views of the nature and function of civil society (and of political power more broadly)
- Price and Wollstonecraft: government, law, and human relations can be simplified to be made transparent → important task for all who seek liberty
- Burke: civil society is infinitely complex → countless ineffable links between individuals
 - Good political judgment the result of experience
 - Poor judgment to disregard established practices and institutions → also bad to consider politics to be mere administrations uninformed by culture and national character
- Concerned with France's finances and defends the royal family and the Church → better to have gradual reform
- Accuses Wollstonecraft of being naive, misinformed, and unpatriotic

Wollstonecraft's response to Burke

Vindication of the Rights of Man (1790)

- Powerful work → a primer for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
- More of an attack on Burke's ideas than a defense of the rights of man → took for granted John Locke's conception of God-given rights knowable through reason
- God made things good and all evil in the world was created by humans
- Accused Burke of being ignoring man-made poverty and injustice → claims that this stems from his infatuation with the royal family and rank
- Wollstonecraft does a close reading of two of Burke's works: *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and the *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775)
 - Argues that Burke is inconsistent → his sympathy for the American Revolution cannot be reconciled with his negative reaction to the French one.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

(1792)

- In this work, Wollstonecraft is not simply demanding rights → focuses instead on how rights entail important duties
 - However, no one should be expected to perform these duties if their natural rights are not respected
- Draws from David Hume's *History of England* (1754-62) to claim that English laws are the result of historical contingency
 - Only institutions that can be scrutinized with reason (shown to be in conformity with natural rights and God's justice) should be obeyed and respected
- No call for unquestioning reverence for the past and the past's legal legacy
- Skeptical of the even progress of history → dismissed politeness as a screen to obscure hypocrisy and greed
- Positioned herself as the true patriot and Burke as a Francophile → she was clearheaded (using reason) and he was the hysterical creature clinging to outdated vestiges of power

Wollstonecraft's Legacy

- Twentieth century feminist movement, women as different as Virginia Woolf and Emma Goldman embraced Wollstonecraft
- Woolf: Wollstonecraft's writings are "experiments in living" and immortal
"She is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living."
- Emergence of academic feminism in the 60s and 70s →
Wollstonecraft returns to prominence; six major biographies published
- Scholars such as Claudia Johnson, Virginia Sapiro, and Gary Kelly show the continuation of Wollstonecraft's ideas to other important 18th century philosophy on topics such as economics and politics.



