CHAPTER 2

Masculinity in Early Feminist Philosophy

Abstract In this chapter we turn to early Western feminist political philosophy, with particular attention to Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor, and John Stuart Mill, to see what sort of visions for men and masculinity can be found there. Since Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Taylor's "The Enfranchisement of Women" (1851), and Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), liberal political philosophy has been a fertile ground for feminism. These texts in particular offer powerful critiques of traditional femininity and distinctive defenses of sexual equality. This is not to say Wollstonecraft, Taylor, and Mill have nothing to say about masculinity or men's relationship to sexual equality; the harmful effects of patriarchy on both women and men are central to their positions. Yet these foundational texts offer limited positive visions for men and masculinity, with a kind of partial androgyny on the one side and universal masculinity on the other.

Keywords Liberal feminism • Masculinity • Mill • Political philosophy • Rationality • Wollstonecraft

Victor Frankenstein was an absent father. Those who have read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) know that contrary to old monster movies, Frankenstein was the scientist not the creature. Still I think it is fair to call Frankenstein a monster: as Shelley tells her dark tale, the scientist was just

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as monstrous as the abominable being that he brought to life. Frankenstein abandons his creature in the very moment of its creation, and indeed denies him and flees from him (fruitlessly, it turns out) to the ends of the earth. Frankenstein's monster is let loose on the world without guidance, care, or education, forced to piece these things together himself while living alone in the shadows.

Mary Shelley has often been called the "mother of science fiction" (Freedman 2002; De Bruin-Mole 2018) as her own mother Mary Wollstonecraft has often been called the "mother of feminism" (Ford 2009; Lewis 2020). Both authors show an acuity for the responsibility that creators have for their creations and the repercussions that follow from them. And as we consider the place of men and masculinity in feminist philosophy, I find it fitting to begin with Wollstonecraft and her great contributions to classic liberalism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Both texts have specific targets, and yet both have also surpassed these immediate critical tasks in their lasting influences. The first *Vindication* is an ardent defense of liberalism and Enlightenment values against Edmund Burke's (1790) conservative critique of the French Revolution; the second is both a feminist response to and an internal critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy of education in *Emile* (1762). Against Burke, Wollstonecraft goes about dissecting the vagaries, inconsistencies, and essential hollowness of his position, and in the process reiterates the case for natural rights and rationality in liberal social contract theory. Against Rousseau, she argues for the reformation of gender-based education, again reiterating the value of rationality for both women and men.

Vindications of Masculinity

A common objection to Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism raised by patriarchal contemporaries and later feminist critics is that she aimed to achieve women's equality by turning them into men (Gubar 1994; Bryson 2003, 18). While this does not quite capture her position, it is not too far off. "*Rights of Woman* is preoccupied with championing a kind of masculinity into which women can be invited rather than enlarging or inviting a positive kind of femininity," writes Claudia Johnson (1995, 24). "Wollstonecraft posits rationality, independence, and productive bodily vigor as man's 'true' nature, which culture has perverted into trifling sentimentality, dependence, and weakness." Consider Wollstonecraft's withering

criticisms of Burke for his sentimentality and irrationality. “I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed principles to refute,” she writes, in the opening pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. “I perceive, from the whole tenor of your Reflections, that you have a moral antipathy to reason” (Solomon & Berggren 1983, 242). The essay ends on a similar note: “I pause to recollect myself; and smother the contempt I feel rising for your rhetorical flourishes and infantine sensibility” (263). Indeed, Wollstonecraft is contemptuous throughout of Burke’s appeal to sensibility and feeling rather than principle and reason. Of course the cultivation of reason can be difficult, she allows, “and men of lively fancy, finding it easier to follow the impulse of passion, endeavor to persuade themselves and others that it is most *natural*” (251). Burke’s conservative defenses of nobility, property, and the clergy are misplaced, she argues—“Man preys on man; and you mourn for the idle tapestry that decorated a Gothic pile, and the dronish bell that summoned a fat priest to prayer” (262)—but even more than that, what bothers Wollstonecraft is that they lack a rational foundation.

In this way, Ruth Abbey explains, Wollstonecraft positions Burke as *unmanly*: “integral to [her] attempt to gender Burke’s stands as feminine is her insistence that his attack on the Revolution is irrational” (2019, 7). Abbey continues:

> Indeed, on close inspection, we find that *Vindication of Rights of Men* is populated by a slew of unmanly men. Whole groups suffer from compromised manliness in Wollstonecraft’s reckoning although the reasons for, and sources of, their mitigations vary. Rich men, for example, find it hard to achieve independence because so much is done for them and they have no need to struggle…talented people need to endear themselves to the wealthy in order to make their way in the world…Those who are too moral to perform servility will suffer. [2019, 9–10]

Whatever manliness is, we will not find it by taking stock of features shared among existing men. “Manly men are more hypothetical than tautological: in Wollstonecraft’s estimation, the condition of manliness is something yet to be achieved on any widespread basis,” Abbey (2019, 12) explains. Men’s failure to be manly arouses Wollstonecraft’s ire for individual men and the social conditions that produce them: “I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for endeavoring to persuade them to become

more masculine and respectable" (Solomon & Berggren 1983, 271). This is why moral education is so important. Wollstonecraft believes that "every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason" (274), but this universal potential must be actively developed rather than stifled or perverted by a society's systems of education.

Many traditionalist critics would agree with Wollstonecraft that rationality, independence, and productivity are essential to man's true nature, from which we have disastrously diverged. Where they would disagree, and what makes her argument particularly fascinating, is the claim that these things are—cultural perversions aside—woman's true nature as well. Consider Rousseau, the main target of criticism in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In contrast to Burke in her earlier essay, Wollstonecraft's critical relationship to Rousseau is more disappointed than antagonistic. The crux of their disagreement is not whether reason is masculine but what Wollstonecraft saw as Rousseau's intellectually inconsistent, anti-Enlightenment assumption that masculine rationality is available to some people (men) but not others (women), as though God had not endowed all of humanity with a capacity for reason. Wollstonecraft writes, "it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women, and confidently assert that they have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement, and not by an endeavor to acquire masculine qualities" (274–275). To be consistent, Rousseau should either champion or resist the progress of reason in *both* sexes, Wollstonecraft reasons, "for if men eat of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste; but…only attain a knowledge of evil" (273).

Wollstonecraft assures her readers that women's masculinity—masculinity as she advocates it—is not something to be feared but welcomed: "all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me that every day they should grow more and more masculine" (269.) Part of the problem, she allows, is that readers might misunderstand her. Wollstonecraft is not suggesting that women join in hunting, shooting, or gaming. She is not encouraging them to abandon their duties as wives and mothers. Indeed, she argues, by cultivating masculinity as she envisions it, women will thus be more capable wives and mothers than they are under conditions of sexual inequality (347).

"Manly is not an adjective attached to a particular set of activities that had been seen as exclusively male," Abbey explains; "any activity can, in principle, be undertaken by any adult in a manly way" (2019, 12). If

manliness and masculinity are not about traditionally male activities, gender roles, or male embodiment, what does manliness as Wollstonecraft conceives it actually involve? "On closer inspection, manliness turns out to be a shorthand for the clutch of qualities Wollstonecraft admires," Abbey argues (2019, 12). She continues:

> Ultimately manliness has very little to do with either sex or gender for Wollstonecraft; the term summarizes a set of desirabilia that refer to admirable character traits, egalitarian and meritocratic social and political arrangements and terms of interaction, and the exercise and exchange of talent, effort, and power on just and rational terms. [2019, 15]

For Wollstonecraft the issue is too much sentimentality and not enough rationality, all around, in the education and enculturation of both women and men. Here we might contrast her vision for education with both Rousseau's *Emile*, which warns against educating women like men, but also her contemporary Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790), which as Valerie Bryson notes, goes "beyond uncritical acceptance of male values to demand that the education of boys too be changed to provide them with traditional female skills" (Bryson 2003, 14; see also Boos 1976; Frazer 2011).

In some ways, Wollstonecraft's advocacy of women's liberation through the further cultivation of reason anticipates Simone de Beauvoir's rejection of femininity in *The Second Sex* (1953). As Bryson observes, de Beauvoir "insisted that it is only by overcoming their biology that women can become 'fully human'" (2003, 24). Yet she did not seem to similarly regard either male biology or masculinity as an artificial construction in parallel to femininity that men must likewise overcome in order to achieve their own humanity. If women in patriarchal societies are characteristically and problematically positioned as Other, men's Subject position is not similarly problematized for de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism when it comes to their gender identities.

"The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other," Wollstonecraft writes. "This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending it to every virtue" (Solomon and Berggren 1983, 337). Both men and women have work to do, personally and culturally, in changing our vicious tendencies. As Gal Gerson puts it, "inequality breeds irrationality at *both* ends" (2002, 801). The goal here is not for men and women to meet in the middle, as it were, with women developing traditionally masculine

traits and men traditionally feminine ones. For Wollstonecraft, the goal is for both men and women to become more masculine in the sense of becoming more rational, independent, and physically and mentally stronger.

Much Thought and Much Feeling

In "Mill's Feminism: Liberal, Radical, and Queer," Martha Nussbaum (2010) notices several ways in which modern critics (feminist and otherwise) have failed to give John Stuart Mill a fair reading. His liberal feminism is actually more radical than commentators recognize, Nussbaum argues, not despite but because of its liberalism. Contrary to the idea that liberal feminism cannot address the serious inequalities that women face within marriage and in family structures, because these are "outside" of liberal justice, "Mill carries the traditional liberal critique of feudal and monarchical hierarchies into the sphere of gender relations," Nussbaum says. "He asks liberal thought to be thoroughgoing and consistent, where it has been half-hearted and inconsistent" (2010). Here she rejects the allegation that liberal feminism is insensitive to structural injustice and power dynamics. "Both historically and in today's most influential versions, liberalism is all about undoing hierarchies of power," she explains. "The problem, instead, is the problem that Mill identifies right at the outset of *Subjection*: men who think they are liberals, and in some ways are so, refuse to carry their insights into the domain of gender" (2010). In this way Nussbaum rejects the idea that liberal feminism, as Keith Burgess Jackson (1995, 372) puts it, "accepts the public sphere as it is and seeks to bring women into it on the same terms as men." Where Jackson sees Mill as a radical feminist *rather* than a liberal, Nussbaum sees Mill as radical *because* of his liberal feminism.

The pursuit of equality in the aftermath of patriarchal social and political divisions will certainly require dismantling artificial impediments to women's free and equal participation in public life. But men's experiences and cultivated characteristics will need to change, too. As Nussbaum (2010) notes, "Mill makes at least the beginning of an argument that emotional development, of a sort that many men do not get, is a crucial element of human flourishing." In this way Mill differs from Wollstonecraft, because the problem as he sees it is not limited to the cultivation of reason but the cultivation of sentiment too. For Jackson, his receptivity to femininity is one more thing that makes Mill a radical feminist. "Rather than

perpetuate the negativity of these [traditionally feminine coded] characteristics, radical feminism seeks to revalue them. And that is what Mill does," Jackson (1995, 380) argues. "Mill, in short, is cutting off the argument that because women have characteristic X, X is inferior."

If Mary Wollstonecraft argues for a more equal future in which women and men are both more masculine, Mill's view of sex equality deconstructs the artificial divide between (what people take to be) masculine and feminine properties. As young Mill asks in an 1833 letter to Thomas Carlyle, "is there really any distinction between the highest masculine and the highest feminine character?" (1963, 184). Consider a personal example: when John Stuart Mill praised his longtime intellectual partner (and eventual wife) Harriet Taylor, it was not because she was an exemplary woman nor because she was "as good as any man." For Mill, as Nadia Urbinati explains, "She represented the highest level of his human typology because she had 'much feeling and much thought'. She was an example of a human being beyond any gender distinction" (1991, 631). Or as Mill himself put it in his preface to Taylor's 1851 essay "The Enfranchisement of Women," "the foundation of her character was a deep seriousness, resulting from the combination of strongest and most sensitive feelings with the highest principles" (Rossi 1970, 91–92).

Some commentators have attributed Mill's appreciation for the importance of both reason and feeling in part to his philosophical and psychological reaction to the highly rational and intensive education that he received from a young age from his father James Mill and utilitarian luminary Jeremy Bentham (Rossi 1970, 12). It was a lesson in what not to do: as he would later describe it in his *Autobiography* (Mill 1873), this extraordinary education molded young Mill into a cold, logical machine and led to a devastating emotional breakdown. The two things that most spurred his eventual recovery, Mill says, were a new appreciation of the poetry of William Wordsworth and the start of his lifelong relationship with Taylor. After this, "cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed" (Rossi 1970, 18).

When Mill and Taylor met in the early 1830s, he was a bachelor and she a mother of three, five years into a marriage to John Taylor, and they would remain this way for nearly two decades until John Taylor's death in 1849. Harriet and John Stuart Mill wed two years later; seven years after that, Harriet herself died in 1858. But if the marriage was fairly brief, the intellectual partnership was not. In addition to co-authoring several newspaper articles throughout the 1840s and 1850s (Miller 2018), the two

worked closely together on *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), "The Enfranchisement of Women" (1851), and *On Liberty* (1859), the last of which Mill would later say "was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name" (Mill 1873). Well after Harriet's death, Mill published *The Subjection of Women* (1869), expanding on many of the moral, political, and social-epistemological arguments for sexual equality introduced in "Enfranchisement," which had originally been published without attribution in *The Westminster Review* and was later attributed to "Mrs. John Stuart Mill" when reprinted in 1868 by the Missouri Woman's Suffrage Association (Taylor 1868). Despite the conflicting evidence, Dale Miller notes that "today there seems to be a general consensus that Harriet is the article's primary author" (2018).

Consider this particularly Wollstonecraft-esque passage from "Enfranchisement" on the vicious and virtuous effects that men and women as companions can have on the other's intellectual and moral development:

> Those who are so careful that women should not become men, do not see that men are becoming, what they have decided that women should be—are falling into feebleness which they have so long cultivated in their companions. Those who are associated in their lives, tend to become assimilated in character. In the present closeness of association between the sexes, men cannot retain manliness unless women acquire it. [Rossi 1970, 110]

Both Taylor (1851) and Mill (1869) emphasize that men will change—more specifically, improve—in moving from patriarchal rule to a system of sexual equality. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill returns to an argument regarding epistemic justification previously made in *On Liberty* (1859, 22). Responsible and reliable belief formation is among an individual's intellectual duties, but not in isolation. Epistemic justification comes from exposing oneself and one's beliefs to real criticism and intellectual engagement by others and fulfilling that same sort of social epistemic function for them in return. Within a patriarchal system, however, boys and men are protected by their gender privilege from having to justify their opinions and ideas, and as a result, develop an inflated sense of their intellectual ability. "Think what it is to be a boy, to grow up to manhood in the belief that without any merit or any exertion of his own…by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all and every one of an entire half of the human race," Mill writes. "What must be the effect on

his character, of this lesson?" (Rossi 1970, 218). The pervasive unearned gender privilege of men and boys in a patriarchal society is epistemically pernicious. While life will undoubtedly be more challenging for men and boys in an equal society, this challenge is actually a good thing, not only for the women and girls whose opinions will get the fair hearings they deserve but also for their now more epistemically rigorous male counterparts. "The most eminent men cease to improve if they associate only with disciples," Taylor observes. "The mental companionship which is improving, is communion between active minds" (Rossi 1970, 112).

Consider Mill's prediction that, given equality, women would be less self-sacrificing and men more so than they had previously been. It is not that women are naturally more self-abnegating or men are naturally more selfish. A system of gender inequality teaches girls and women that they exist for others—Mill names exaggerated self-abnegation as "the present artificial ideal of feminine character"—while teaching boys and men to see "their own will as such a grand thing that it is actually the law for another rational being" (Rossi 1970, 172). The lesson is not that self-sacrifice is always virtuous or always irrational. Both sexes are misled about their relative importance, and both have room to improve in grounding their actions (self-sacrificing, self-serving, or otherwise) in a more accurate appreciation for women and men as equal beings.

Human Virtues, Gendered Roles

I do not mean to overstate the differences between Wollstonecraft on one side and Mill and Taylor on the other. As with Wollstonecraft and Macaulay, their similarities are as significant as their differences given how radical their views were compared to contemporary conventional wisdom and how conservative they can seem from a twenty-first-century perspective. Wollstonecraft, Taylor, and Mill are all skeptical of appeals to custom, history, or nature to justify social inequality. All three argue that the social conditions of sexual inequality have vicious effects on the intellectual and moral character of both women and men. Wollstonecraft is perhaps more focused on the ways in which subordination encourages women's tyranny, their use of flattery and guile in the absence of rational discourse between equals. Taylor and Mill focus more on the ways in which unearned superiority gives men an inflated sense of their self-worth and intellectual abilities. But all three writers identify and decry both of these tendencies.

In Taylor and Mill we find echoes of Wollstonecraft's earlier argument that men and women "mutually corrupt and improve" each other. The similarities are perhaps nowhere clearer than in their respective criticisms and defenses of marriage. Wollstonecraft, Taylor, and Mill each discuss ways in which marriage can serve to denigrate or elevate both wives and husbands. With unequal marriage, a family is "a school of despotism, in which the virtues of despotism, but also its vices, are largely nourished" Mill writes. When justly constituted it could instead become a school for sympathy, "the real school of the virtues of freedom" (Rossi 1970, 174–175). Given their visions for ideal marriage as an equal relationship between two people of similar interests and abilities rather than a union of feminine and masculine characters that balance and complement the other, modern readers might wonder whether consistency should have led these early liberal feminist philosophers to support same-sex marriage. But rather than extending marriage to include intimate same-sex relationships, I would suggest that the crux of their position is to extend the virtues of same-sex friendships to include marital relationships. The shared vision is marriage as friendship, where both parties relate to each other as equals, with intimacy and mutual influence, neither with power over the other, nor in control (Solomon & Berggren 1983, 283; Rossi 1970, 233).[1]

Even as Wollstonecraft, Taylor, and Mill envision women and men becoming more similar in temperament and character traits, there are still quite a lot of gendered configurations in social roles and activities throughout their accounts. "Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfill," Wollstonecraft writes; "but they are *human* duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same" (Solomon & Berggren 1983, 301). Masculinity as she envisions and advocates it for women and men is about developing our mental, moral, and physical capacities, but this is not the same thing as women and men *doing* the same things or fulfilling the same sort of functions in a family or society. For their part, Mill and Taylor argue that politics and other spheres of public life should be open to all men and women who show an ability to compete in their chosen sphere. Taylor further argues that it is not only permissible but desirable for women to secure employment outside the home (Rossi 1970, 105). By contrast, Mill says that generally

[1] Ruth Abbey (1996, 93, 1999, 80) argues that in modeling marriage on friendship, these authors fail to account for the importance of sexual love in marriage.

speaking it would be best for wives and mothers to refrain from doing so (Rossi 1970, 178–179).

How can Mill's larger commitment to sexual equality square with such an old-fashioned view? On one hand, as Nadia Urbinati puts it, "androgyny forms the philosophical foundation of Mill's vision of civil and political equality between men and women" (1991, 626). The Millian androgyne "was the Individual, the human being's exemplary, the subject of what in *On Liberty* he called *individuality*. It was the sexually blended type that would be developed in discussions with his wife transferred into ethical and political fields" (632). Yet Mill's feminist androgyny seems partial at best in its feminist principles, its underlying notion of androgyny, or both. Urbinati seeks to resolve the apparent contradiction by distinguishing between Mill's principles and his opinions on specific problems. A theme of epistemic humility runs through *The Subjection of Women*. None of us can justifiably claim to know women's and men's true natures, their proper spheres of activity, or that patriarchy is a better social-political system than equality, Mill argues, so long as the artificial conditions of patriarchy have never really been tested against the alternative. Mill allows himself the prediction that "In an otherwise just state of things, it is not, therefore, I think, a desirable outcome, that the wife should contribute by her labour to the income of the family." Immediately after this, he then urges that "the utmost latitude ought to exist for the adaptation of general rules to individual suitabilities; and there ought to be nothing to prevent faculties exceptionally adapted to any other pursuit, from obeying their vocation notwithstanding marriage" (Rossi 1970, 179). Here Mill is acknowledging that his own opinions about what women might do would not be an adequate basis for restrictive social policy. Each person must be free to decide for themselves, not as an inalienable natural right but as the best way to determine the truth of the matter at hand.

Alternative Masculinities and Feminist Androgynies

In this chapter we explored early feminist responses by liberal political philosophers to a world of sexual division and inequality. The first of these advocated better masculinity for all, in the sense of both social promotion and personal development of rationality, bodily vigor, and independence (which is not to say isolation or antagonism). The second was committed to the value of rationality as well but sought to complement it with emotional development, and more generally, to promote overall human

excellence for both women and men through reunification of good human properties that have been artificially divided into masculine and feminine. In highlighting these responses, I do not mean to imply that they are the *only* pathways that are possible as alternatives to patriarchal masculinity. Some might seek a kind of universal normative femininity, for example; others might repudiate manhood or masculinity of all kinds without specifically affirming another option. What is notable about these two responses to patriarchy from early feminist political philosophers is not that they are logically exhaustive, but that between them they presage many of the scholarly and popular alternatives to toxic masculinity that are still advocated today.

In arguing for rational masculinity for women and men, Wollstonecraft sets an early exemplar of a strategy we will see reiterated by a wide variety of writers: the attempt to revise and reclaim an alternative masculinity in contrast to traditional masculinity. The masculinity she advocates for men is (as Abbey puts it) more hypothetical than tautological. Men are not masculine in virtue of being men; in fact, Wollstonecraft was critical of the contemporary condition of most men and so advocated rationality masculinity as better for them. In this her work foreshadows numerous sorts of reclamations of masculinity to come, from conservative to mythopoetic to feminist, which vary considerably but all seek to offer new visions for how we can be better than under the status quo. Wollstonecraft's universal rational masculinity also invites a critical question that will recur in one form or another as we consider these other reclamations of masculinity: namely, why should we conceive of rationality or any other virtuous human quality as part of a revised masculinity, rather than as part of what can help free us from gender altogether?

In Mill's work we find an early, partial sort of feminist androgyny which regards the divisions between masculinity and femininity as artificial and pernicious. Better to remove them and work toward androgyny, toward an ideal of nongendered human well-being that combines the best bits for all of us. This ideal too recurs in both scholarly and popular texts as an appealing escape from patriarchal masculinity. It is this ideal and its appeal, ambiguities, and limitations to which we will turn our attention in the next chapter.

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