The Ethics and Economics of Middle Class Romance

Wollstonecraft and Smith on Love in Commercial Society

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Abstract

This article shows the philosophical kinship between Adam Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject of love. Though the two major 18th century thinkers are not traditionally brought into conversation with each other, Wollstonecraft and Smith share deep moral concerns about the emerging commercial society. As the new middle class continues to grow along with commerce, vanity becomes an ever more common vice among its members. But a vain person is preoccupied with appearance, status, and flattery—things that get in the way of what Smith and Wollstonecraft regard as the deep human connection they variously describe as love, sympathy, and esteem. Commercial society encourages inequality, Smith argues, and Wollstonecraft points out that this inequality is particularly obvious in the relationships between men and women. Men are vain about their wealth, power and status; women about their appearance. Added to this is the fact that most middle class women are both uneducated and encouraged by the conduct literature of their day to be sentimental and irrational. The combined economic and moral considerations of Wollstonecraft and Smith show that there is very little room for love in commercial society as they conceived it.

Keywords Mary Wollstonecraft · Adam Smith · Love · Conduct literature · Sentimentality · Commercial society

Introduction

Adam Smith is not traditionally counted among the great romantic philosophers. And yet, the supposed father of modern capitalism and “inventor” of the invisible hand of the free market regards love as the main driver of both our personal lives and economic activity. We desire “to be loved, and lovely,” he writes in his *Theory*

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of *Moral Sentiments*, and we go to great lengths to gain the status, power and riches that we believe will make us lovable (Smith 1982a [1759]: 234). Proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft—another late 18th century author not particularly known for her philosophy of love—warns her readers about the influential “nonsense” written about romantic love by the likes of J.J. Rousseau, and the morally corrupting effects of wealth on an individual’s ability to love and be loved. The picture that emerges from Smith’s and Wollstonecraft’s combined theories is a bleak one: romantic love in commercial society is made all but impossible by the expectations imposed on women and men alike.

Though Adam Smith’s moral theory has experienced a significant revival in the late 20th and early 21st century and Mary Wollstonecraft is a staple of historical textbooks and courses on feminism, little scholarship deals with the theoretical affinity between the two late 18th century authors who were both very interested in what constituted “proper conduct” for the middle class (Dimand et al. 2004; Leddy 2014, 2016). The lack of attention to this shared interest may be explained by the fact that while Wollstonecraft is regarded as a “proto-feminist,” Smith barely mentions women at all in either *The Wealth of Nations* or *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (England 1993; Justman 1993). As a result, most scholarship on Smith and gender focuses on the implications of the absence of women from the economy as he describes it (Bodkin 1999; Rendall 1987; Shah 2006). And yet: Wollstonecraft refers to Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and quotes Smith’s *Theory* repeatedly and at length in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, extending his moral theory to women and using it to offer moral-economic analyses of the “proper ladies” described in conduct literature (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]). The basis for the philosophical affinity between Wollstonecraft and Smith is their concern about vanity as a main driver of the economy and corrupting force of moral character (Luban 2012; Slegers 2018). The remedies Smith suggests against the moral ills of commercial society are given a new twist by Wollstonecraft who argues that marriages based on “true” love will be possible only in a society that fosters female rationality and independence. In combining Wollstonecraft’s early feminist arguments with Smith’s moral and economic thought, we see that moral issues related to love and gender have been central to middle class life since its inception. Increasing prosperity may be desirable from an economic point of view, but it also hinders “true” love.

The goal of my argument is to show that on Smith’s and Wollstonecraft’s combined accounts, there was little to no room for love between middle class men and women in commercial society. Smith at times uses words like love, admiration, respect, and esteem almost interchangeably and only occasionally reserves the word “love” for what we might call romantic love. At one of the rare instances in the *Theory* where he explicitly talks about love in the romantic sense, it is to make fun of it: love is a ridiculous passion to anyone but the lover (Smith 1982a [1759]: 36). But when Smith writes about our desire “to be loved, and lovely,” the phenomenon he has in mind is much closer to what Wollstonecraft calls “esteem”: a profound, stable, unsentimental affection between independent equals (Smith 1982a [1759]: 167; Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 74). There is nothing in the *Theory* or the *Wealth of Nations* to suggest that Smith thought men and women could (or should) be equal partners in a marriage. His concern, rather, was that *any* feelings of “true” love,

admiration, respect, or regard were hollowed out and reduced to frivolity in a commercial society built on vanity and economic interests. Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* takes up this troubling idea and applies it to the marriage market of the late 18th century.

Reading Smith and Wollstonecraft today, one comes away with a picture of love (romantic and otherwise) not dissimilar to the way we think about it still. Much of what Smith and Wollstonecraft write about is recognizable and this raises the question to what extent we have managed to move beyond the middle class conceptions of love that marked commercial society in the late 18th century. I will mostly let Wollstonecraft and Smith speak for themselves so the reader may determine to what extent their theories resonate today.

Middle Class Ladies, Conduct Literature and Sentimentality

Mary Wollstonecraft dismisses much of what passes for love in her day as sentimental “nonsense” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 228, 255, 320). After six months of marriage, a man's love is apt to change into indifference or even contempt and the beloved's graces that used to inspire great passion now appear to him piteous and boring. Women, taught by sentimental novels to dream of a man “who could love them with a fervid increasing affection every day, all day,” find that marriage does not deliver on the promises made to them as young girls and are apt to look elsewhere for the flattery they no longer receive from their husbands (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 44). A typical middle class marriage in the late-18th century as Wollstonecraft describes it is characterized by loneliness on both sides because there is no mutual understanding. It lacks “the charm of life,” which, in the words of “a grave philosophical reasoner” is “sympathy; nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 114). This “grave philosophical reasoner” is Adam Smith—enlisted in the *Vindication* to help Wollstonecraft make her case against the perniciously sentimental mores of her time that stand in the way of respect, esteem and friendship between men and women. A true marriage, Wollstonecraft argues, is based not on romantic passion but on friendship—yet friendship is possible only between independent equals. Since societal and economic forces conspire to make women both dependent and ignorant, what is called “love” between men and women rarely rises above the level of transient sentimental affection.

Who is sentimental, and why is sentimentality an obstacle to “true” love? Furthermore, what is the connection between sentimentality and economics? The answers to these questions help clarify Wollstonecraft's position and also give a first indication of the way Smith's theory fits into her argument. Wollstonecraft's scorn for sentimentality is equally divided between middle class “ladies” (Wollstonecraft uses the word derisively and reserves “women” for the “rational” members of her sex) and the authors who describe proper female middle class behavior and appearance in the conduct literature of her time (e.g. Darwin 1798; Fordyce 1767; Gregory 1796; Richardson 1741; Wilkes 1766). The need for advice on how to be a “proper” lady was tied to the emergence in early commercial society

of a new class distinct from the aristocracy and clergy on the one hand and the working poor on the other. This class needed to distinguish itself and find its own identity, and a strict definition of the role of the middle class woman was central to this endeavor (Bilger 1998; Jones 2006; Pujol 1998). The “proper lady’s” sphere was the home and her pursuits were all of a facilitating kind: taking care of husband and children, she played no public roles and did not contribute to the economy as Adam Smith defined it (Smith 1981 [1776], 1982a [1759]). Furthermore, these ladies, especially in their youth, were expected to combine aesthetic features (beauty and grace) with morally desirable attributes: they were meant to be gentle, complacent, and submissive so that they would “naturally” take the edge off the masculine endeavors pursued by their suitors and husbands (Browne 1987; Okin 1981). The middle class woman Wollstonecraft takes aim at does very little at all except worry about her appearance and the propriety of her behavior. Perfectly useless in all practical respects, she is physically and mentally weak and, perhaps worst of all, her capacity for sympathy is so poorly developed that she fails to make rational distinctions and decisions. She cries over her dead canary but does not think twice about leaving her coachman and horses out in the freezing rain for hours while she takes her tea. She is a slave to her “person,” that is to say her body, because she has learned from a young age to care first for her manners and only second (or not at all) for her morals. Much as Wollstonecraft scorns this class of perfectly useless females, she indicates that the real blame rests with society, female education (or what passes for it) and particularly with those whose writings shaped and defined “proper” female conduct. First among these authors is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who has done more than any of the less philosophical conduct-writers to cement public opinion on proper feminine behavior. Throughout the *Vindication*, the reader senses Wollstonecraft’s outrage at Rousseau’s failure to apply to women the principles of equality and rationality that he claims hold for all men. She quotes Rousseau frequently and at length, e.g.:

Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her *natural* cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself... obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour. What nonsense! (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 36)

To address the question “Who is sentimental?” the answer, then, is twofold: middle class “ladies” and the authors who, like Rousseau and other popular conduct writers, write about women as fragile, overly emotional creatures. Because sentimentality has become a central feature of ideal femininity, it is not just a frivolous folly but a serious obstacle to virtue and reason. This is as true for Rousseau, who as Wollstonecraft points out seems unable to keep his wits about him when he waxes poetic about Sophia (Emile’s ideal wife), as it is for the middle class ladies for whom Sophia is to serve as a role model (Rousseau 1921 [1762]). Worse yet, these ladies are explicitly told to be sentimental; to be too reasonable or commonsensical (let alone wise) would put off their suitors who, the conduct authors assure them, are

not looking to them for reason but for personal charm, subservience and perhaps a touch of whimsy. “How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 39).

Yet mixed in with the sentimental attitudes that the conduct authors aim to instill in their female readers are tacit economic considerations. Young women are supposed to have sentimental motivations for marriage, but those sentiments may be indulged only in case of a wealthy suitor. Wollstonecraft observes: “Girls marry merely to *better themselves*, to borrow a significant vulgar phrase, and have such perfect power over their hearts as not to permit themselves to *fall in love* till a man with a superior fortune offers” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 96). To be a middle class lady in love, one has to first and foremost insure that one stays in the middle class and hence marry a man wealthy enough to support a stay-at-home wife. Cold economic calculation hence has to precede the sentimental business of falling in love. This economic premise is rarely made explicit in the conduct literature but functions as a very clear prerequisite for any kind of romantic endeavor because the ideal lady sits at home does not work. If she is to “better herself” she must do it through marriage.

The phrase “bettering oneself” or “bettering our condition” comes from Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* where—though it is applied only to men—it is used to describe the universal human desire to improve one’s lot, primarily in economic terms (Smith 1982a [1759]: 99). In this context it is, for Smith, a non-pejorative term. Combined with prudence, generosity, humanity and the other virtues, the desire to better oneself may in fact have very beneficial consequences for both the individual and society at large. Where the virtues are not sufficiently developed, however, this desire comes to take up so much space in an individual’s character that everything else is sacrificed to the acquisition of status, power and wealth. Smith devotes much attention in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to the description and analysis of the morally harmful effects of the desire to better one’s condition (see Smith 1982a [1759], Part I, Section III in particular). But while Smith is concerned only with men and typically male pursuits, Wollstonecraft traces the implications of his theory into the domestic sphere of the middle class lady.

Love, Sympathy and Vanity According to Smith and Wollstonecraft

A proper lady of course never allows her husband or anyone else to believe that economic considerations factored into her decision to marry. As stipulated in countless conduct books, she is supposed to be motivated by love alone. Bearing in mind this tension and the picture of middle class ladies, love, and marriage sketched above, we now turn to Smith’s work to show how commercial society encourages vanity and further exacerbates the moral issues Wollstonecraft identifies.

Adam Smith’s thinking has traditionally been reduced to a number of oversimplifications related to concepts discussed in *The Wealth of Nations*: self-interest, the division of labor, and the metaphor of the “invisible hand” of the market. Over the last few decades, however, Smith’s other major work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* has gone through a bit of a revival. Central to the *Theory* are the notion of

sympathy and the human need to live in a “harmony of sentiments” with others. In the *Theory* we find a very different Smith from the caricature that to this day is trotted out in defense of laissez-faire capitalism: not a proponent of self-interested individualism but a subtle moral psychologist who recognizes the universal desire to be recognized and loved by others—and to recognize and love them in return. This capacity for sympathy is central to Smith’s thoughts on morality. Meanwhile sympathy’s corrupted cousin vanity is an essential driver of the economy.

The two major Smithian themes of sympathy and vanity in commercial society serve Wollstonecraft in writing her own ethics of love and marriage. As for Wollstonecraft the word “love” is too bound up with the passion promoted by the sentimental novels of her time, she prefers terms like “friendship,” “respect” and “esteem.” Whatever term she uses, it is clear that she is aiming for something very close to what Smith calls sympathy. In the passage referred to in the introduction, Wollstonecraft explains:

The man who can be contented to live with a pretty, useful companion, without a mind, has lost in voluptuous gratifications a taste for more refined enjoyments; he has never felt the calm satisfaction, that refreshes the parched heart, like the silent dew of heaven, - of being beloved by one who could understand him. - In the society of his wife he is still alone, unless when the man is sunk in the brute. “The charm of life,” says a grave philosophical reasoner, is “sympathy; nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast.” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 114)

Love is the sympathy of someone who understands us, not only intellectually but emotionally. This partner has to be our intellectual equal, argues Wollstonecraft, and someone who has developed a moral character independently from ourselves. They truly see us for who we are and we feel at home with them because there is no need to pretend or keep up appearances. Smith takes for granted that this “harmony of sentiments” manifests only in friendships between men while Wollstonecraft holds it up as a picture of what marriage ought to be like. They do agree, however, on what gets in the way of this kind of love: vanity.

When we sympathize with someone, we “enter into” their situation, and “bring home to ourselves” the other person’s circumstances, sentiments and motivations (Smith 1982a [1759]: 61). But many of us fear that if someone knew these things about us (not only relevant factual information but also our feelings and desires), they might not like us as much as we want them to like us. The human desire to be sympathized with, to be regarded, noted with interest and appreciation, is so great that we are often inclined to pretend to be friendlier, richer, braver, etc. than we really are. The vain person prioritizes whatever they think will make them noticed with approval and admiration, seeking praise rather than praiseworthiness (e.g. Smith 1982a [1759]: 70–78; 168–176). More than anything, the vain person wants to be *seen*—both in the sense of being visible to others and of being esteemed by them. There is nothing worse than being invisible and therefore unnoticed. So while the wise person is content to be truly known and loved by just a few good friends, most of us are so hungry for love that we fall victim to vanity in one way or another. And since commercial society dictates that the best way to get noticed and admired

is to accumulate material wealth and financial success, we exert much of our energy to “better our condition” and climb the social ladder. The higher up we are, the more people may see and admire us. Smith writes: “And thus place, that great object which divides the wives of aldermen, is the end of half the labours of human life” (Smith 1982a [1759]: 47).

It is worth nothing that in this quote the *wives* of relatively important men in small towns to gossip about status. Now of course gossips would be stereotypically female but there is a more interesting point underlying Smith’s off-hand remark. Smith’s ethics is one of spectatorship: it is all about seeing and being seen, ideally for what we are so others may sympathize with our real feelings and concerns, but in practice often for what we seem to be—for better and for worse (Griswold 1999, Smith 1982a [1759]: 165–167). Vanity is a corruption of our desire for sympathy and hinges on being visible. How is someone else to “bring home to themselves” our situation when they do not even know we exist? First we need to be noticed, then we can receive sympathy—or be gossiped about. So who gets noticed? Those with rank, power, and wealth—and those three elements often (though not always) go together. In commercial society, rank and power can be bought and wealth is the main goal of those who wish to gain (public) “respect.” In that same society (i.e. the one both Smith and Wollstonecraft write about) poverty is tantamount to invisibility: a poor man “in the midst of a crowd is in the same obscurity as if shut up in his own hovel” (Smith 1982a [1759]: 99). And judging by their almost complete absence from his major works, women are even more invisible to Smith than the poor. While Smith is aware of the invisibility of the poor, his blind spot regarding the “fairer sex” is genuine and consistent. Wollstonecraft does not criticize him on this point—unsurprisingly as of course Smith is only one example in a large group of philosophers who write primarily for and about men. Instead, Wollstonecraft engages Smith’s theory to drive home the point she makes over and over again in the *Vindication*: the whole of society would be better off if both men and women had the chance to develop themselves intellectually and morally. Only then can true love—that is to say sympathy and respect—exist between men and women.

Educating Proper Ladies: Romantic, Inconstant, Vain and Mean

The conduct literature of the time makes clear that Wollstonecraft’s ideal of female independence and equality between the sexes is a distant one. Middle class women are completely financially dependent, have no access to education and if they somehow manage to develop their reason they are recommended to keep it secret. Dr. Gregory advises in his *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*: “be rather silent in company,” because if you display your intelligence it “will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company ... if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding” (Gregory 1796). To attract a husband, women need to be amiable, pliant, docile, and angelic. But this angel needs to also be cunning and calculating because she knows that the only way up the social ladder (or, at least, out of the parental home) is through a

good match, i.e. a rich husband and/or one with solid earning potential. The sad fact is that for middle class women, barred from almost all professions and usually lacking personal wealth, the only way to improve their social standing is by making themselves dependent on a rich husband. In addition to their formal education aimed at perfecting their personal charms, there is the economic reality that these charms ought not to be wasted on an undeserving (read: poor) man.

This tension between the romantic notions expressed in sentimental novels and conduct literature on the one hand and the unwritten but equally strong requirement to be prudent and calculating on the other is a recurring theme in the *Vindication*: the angelic bride turns out to be a useless wife because she has never been encouraged to develop common sense—let alone learned to run a household. Praised by Rousseau and other authors of the then-popular advice literature as a softening influence on the harsh masculine character and meant to make men less brutish with her gentle humanity, most middle class ladies have never been challenged to develop their sympathetic abilities and so lack both the interest and the ability to “perfect” their husband’s character (e.g. Fordyce 1767; Gregory 2008; Rousseau 1921 [1762]; Richardson 1981 [1776]). As Wollstonecraft puts it in the *Vindication*: “The whole tenor of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 96). Romantic because they consider love (or what passes for love in sentimental novels) as the end-all be-all of their existence; inconstant because they have been taught to live for flirtatious attention and will seek a new source of flattery once the old one has run dry. Vanity is the almost inevitable result of the constant focus on dress and personal charms and meanness is the consequence of never exerting one’s mental capacities.

Wollstonecraft argues that a man’s desire for sympathy makes him feel isolated at home if his wife is uneducated and so cannot understand him. Wollstonecraft envisages a marriage of equality in which husbands and wives are at the same level intellectually and morally, and are both rational creatures of the enlightenment. It should be noted, however, that though her notion of equality between men and women in terms of rationality was a radical one, the wives Wollstonecraft has in mind are still the facilitators of men’s public affairs. They may be “citizen-wives” but proper their place is still in the home. The home, the family, and marriage are all improved if the mother/wife is educated, but this does not mean she should go out and be a public figure. How, then, are we to “enter into” women’s situations so that we may sympathize with them? And more to the point, how should girls be educated and brought up so that they develop the capacity for sympathy and become the kind of persons deserving of sympathy in return?

First of all, Wollstonecraft suggests, they should be educated together with boys so that friendships can form at an early age and there is no mystery about the other sex. Second, girls, like boys, should read works of history and study the liberal arts. What they should steer clear of, according to Wollstonecraft, is the sentimental novel, a genre very popular in the late eighteenth century and closely related in both tenor and content to the conduct literature of the time. What made Wollstonecraft suspicious of the novel as a genre was its sentimentality, its focus on dreamy notions of love and romance that, according to Wollstonecraft, led

young female readers to believe that they could and would marry for love and achieve happy unions with men whose character they, as domestic angels, would ennoble and improve. Sentimental novels encourage young women to make sentiments into events and engrain in them the idea that “the mighty business of female life is to please” men so that they may marry a good (read: wealthy) husband and so acquire both love and status in one fell swoop (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 598). This attitude is marked by vanity in at least two ways: to please men, young women are encouraged to pay attention to nothing but their appearance and in striving for status through marriage they pay attention not to the character of their suitors but to their potential to attract public notice because of their wealth. This preoccupation with appearance and riches, Smith and Wollstonecraft agree, becomes a real obstacle to the development of a moral character—and with it, the capacity to love.

As discussed above, when we are overly concerned with the way we appear to others, we become vain. Vanity hence is a corruption of our natural desire for sympathy, and though it is a blemish on one’s moral character, it stimulates the economy: the vain person seeks to impress others with “trinkets” and public displays of wealth and power (Smith 1982a [1759]: 200; Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 274). This creates a tension for Smith: the very tendency that corrupts the moral individual stimulates the economy and promotes the “wealth of nations” (Smith 1981 [1776]). What is worse, the division of labor required for the economy to grow, confines a large number of people to jobs in which their intellect and imagination are never challenged and so depresses individual flourishing (Smith 1981 [1776]: 168). Without suggesting that it would eradicate vanity or make full, morally developed lives possible for everyone, Smith argues that at least some of the damaging effects of the division of labor could be counteracted through freely accessible and well-structured public education. Government investment in public education is necessary to protect the lower classes from sliding into almost sub-human conditions—public education, that is, for boys, not for girls. Smith writes the following about the schooling girls enjoyed at the time:

There are no publick institutions for the education of women... They are taught what their parents and guardians judge it necessary or useful for them to learn; and they are taught nothing else. Every part of their education tends evidently to some useful purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, to oeconomy; to render them both likely to become the mistresses of a family, and to behave properly when they have become such (Smith 1981 [1776]: 168).

As this passage makes clear, Smith’s view aligns with the conduct literature of his day. Writing about the workforce as entirely male, he implicitly confined female activity to the private sphere and restricted it to the kind of things that the conduct authors describe as befitting an attractive lady. Smith does not mention the preparation that (one assumes) would be required for a young woman to be a capable domestic manager. Here the tension Wollstonecraft noted earlier is again apparent: conduct literature contains much advice about how to be attractive (both as a potential bride and as a married-but-still-attractive wife), but pays little attention to

the practical know-how required for running a household once a husband has been acquired. Compare Erasmus Darwin's *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (Darwin 1798), one of the more famous conduct books popular around the time when both Smith and Wollstonecraft were formulating their ideas:

The female character should possess the mild and retiring virtues rather than the bold and dazzling ones; great eminence in almost anything is sometimes injurious to a young lady; whose temper and disposition should appear to be pliant rather than robust; to be ready to take impressions rather than to be decidedly marked; as great apparent strength of character, however excellent, is liable to alarm both her own and the other sex; and to create admiration rather than affection. (Darwin 1798: 3)

As the very few passages in the *Wealth of Nations* which explicitly mention women make clear, Smith does not depart from the commonly accepted late 18th Century views on middle class ladies. Having made his point about the virtues of women's private education as compared to the useless public education many boys are subject to, he barely acknowledges the existence of women in the remainder of this work.

The current state of the average lady is a deplorable one: "Civilized women are, therefore, so weakened by false refinement, that, respecting morals, their condition is much below what it would be were they left in a state nearer to nature" (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 78). Civilized women, i.e. proper middle class ladies, are capable only of "sentimental nonsense" and "romantic passion." They neither experience nor inspire the kind of love that is based in sympathy and respect. Already this does not bode well for the possibility of conjugal (and therefore at the time of course heterosexual) love in commercial society: if the wife is incapable of true love, the husband, even if he has a strongly developed moral character, will be unable to either value his wife's superficial affection or esteem her as a person. This is why, as noted at the outset, most middle class marriages are lonely affairs in which the partners are cut off from each other intellectually, morally, and emotionally. But the situation is worse than even this bleak picture suggests, for in commercial society most husbands do *not* have developed moral characters. To understand why, we must look at the effect on commercial society of the "folly and vanity" of the rich (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 324).

The Effeminacy of the Rich Affects Commercial Society as a Whole

It should be clear by now that Wollstonecraft's repeated reference to Smith does not imply that Smith in any way envisaged marriage—if he in fact thought much about marriage at all—as a bond between equals the way Wollstonecraft did. Where Smith touches on marriage in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, he focuses on issues related to adultery and the related legal ramifications (Smith 1982b [1763]). Wollstonecraft holds that it is exactly their confinement to the household that makes women into "house-slaves" and "domestic drudges" (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 328). This

makes it a bit surprising that Wollstonecraft turns to Smith to help her make her case for female independence. The best that can be said for *The Wealth of Nations* and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* from the perspective of the fight for female independence is that women are largely absent from these works, in contrast to e.g. *Emile*, cited in almost every chapter of the *Vindication* because of Rousseau's explicitly sexist remarks on women and their proper place in society. Still, pretending women barely exist, or exist only as facilitators of the public sphere, hardly makes for (proto-) feminist writings.

To explain Wollstonecraft's adoption of Smith we must take a closer look at the main themes that draw Wollstonecraft to Smith's work, and in particular to his *Theory*. One of these themes, as already discussed, is Smith's notion of sympathy: the natural "fellow-feeling" that makes people strive for a "harmony of sentiments" with those around them. A second, related theme of major importance to Wollstonecraft is Smith's account of the vanity and folly of the rich. While Smith takes for granted that sympathy of the highest order can exist only between men, Wollstonecraft adopts his theory while ignoring Smith's implication that it holds for just one of the sexes. This is relatively easy for her to do since Smith does not (unlike Rousseau) bother to make an explicit case for excluding women from his theory of sympathy—he simply takes for granted that sympathy, like all other virtues, finds its highest and purest expression in men. Yet Smith does clearly state that sympathy can occur on many different levels and that therefore there is a difference only of degree and not in essence between the sympathy experienced by children, women, and men (Smith 1982a [1759]: 61). Wollstonecraft's adoption of Smith's complaints and speculations about the rich and their typical follies and vices is more straightforward as for Smith "the rich," as a category, include both men and women. More importantly, it does not even really matter whether the rich as a group are identified as male and/or female because they are for the most part "effeminate" (Smith 1982a [1759]: 269, 297). This means that while Smith devotes very few words to women, he does dwell, frequently and at length, on what he regards as typically feminine vices—most notably vanity—that have always marked the wealthiest portion of society. With a growing middle class aspiring to emulate the riches of the aristocracy, these vices are becoming more common; so common, in fact, that they come to characterize commercial society as a whole.

Wollstonecraft shares with Smith the view that (inherited) wealth presents a threat to morality and that a life of leisure and idleness tends to corrupt the individual character. Never challenged to exert themselves either physically or intellectually, the rich become frivolous and vain. Wollstonecraft quotes Smith's description of "Lewis XIV" at great length, agreeing with Smith that among the wealthy, things like the way one walks or dresses become more important than virtue and character (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 195). Money and manners threaten to overshadow morals for everyone in the middle class but, and this is where Wollstonecraft sets out on her own and leaves Smith behind, for middle class "ladies" this problem is most pronounced. Economic considerations, sentimentality and a one-sided education make them into little Sun Kings: worshipped from a young age not for their character but for their appearance and "graces," their moral sentiments remain underdeveloped and they are incapable of the sympathy, friendship and respect that

Wollstonecraft identifies as the necessary foundation for a loving marriage. “Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 78). Their “romantic passion... feeds on itself” and is the product of too much novel reading untempered by any real-life experience or rational education (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 43).

In short, women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit,” Wollstonecraft states (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 206). She explicitly refers to Smith to defend her lumping together of women and “the rich of both sexes:” “In Dr. Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments, I have found a general character of people of rank and fortune, that in my opinion, might with the greatest propriety be applied to the female sex” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 198). Why do we never hear about women making a name for themselves based on their actions and virtues? Because nobody expects anything from them and they are isolated or, as Wollstonecraft puts it, “localized.” She explains: “Women, commonly called Ladies, are not to be contradicted in company, are not allowed to exert any manual strength; and from them the negative virtues only are expected, when any virtues are expected, patience, docility, good-humour, and flexibility; virtues incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 201). They share the fate of “people of rank and fortune” whose “local situation swallowed up the man, and produced a character similar to that of women” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 200). It is no coincidence that, except for a few warriors, no “great men” ever stood up from among the ranks of the rich. “Courtesy” makes the rich into unremarkable people limited by their exalted position in society. Very little is expected of them except to appear in certain ways and Wollstonecraft quotes Smith on “Lewis XIV” as an extreme example of a rich person whose character and virtues do not matter: “He had a step and a deportment, which could suit only him and his rank, and which would have been ridiculous in any other person” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 195; Smith 1982a [1759]: 75). Wollstonecraft is in full agreement with Smith that we expect very little of people of rank and fortune except that they act their part, i.e. walk, dress and talk in a way that affirms their status in society and makes their inferiors embarrassed about their own lack of elegance and fashion. Women, according to Wollstonecraft, are treated in much the same way with the difference that while from the rich we tend not to expect any obvious virtues at all, women are supposed to display the passive virtues of “patience, docility, good-humour, and flexibility.

Wollstonecraft’s use of Smith’s account of the rich as a means to diagnose what is wrong with middle class “ladies” of her time is original: Smith nowhere makes the connection. He does, however, remark in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: “The respect paid to women in modern times is very small; they are only put to no trouble for spoiling of their beauty. A man will not exempt his friend from a laborious piece of business, but he will spare his mistress” (Smith 1982b [1763]: 44). This is one of the few places where Smith acknowledges that to demand very little of someone indicates a lack of respect. Women (i.e. the people Wollstonecraft refers to as “ladies”) it is clear, are valued primarily for their beauty and the common assumption is that any serious exertion—physical or mental—will negatively affect

that beauty. Wollstonecraft writes: “Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex.... She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 45). A marriage with a spaniel-like lady cannot be founded on respect, nor can it ever change into a friendship because there can be no equality or any independence of mind. Unfortunately, “the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding: yet virtue can be built on no other foundation!” Wollstonecraft’s exasperation clearly comes through in these passages: “Female folly” arises “from narrowness of mind,” yet female education teaches girls only that marriage is “the grand feature in their lives.” Therefore, “to rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted.” Girls and ladies encounter “the same obstacles” as do the rich: neither the rich nor middle class women ever learn to deal with adversity and are never challenged to exert themselves either mentally or physically. “Pleasure is the business of woman’s life, according to the present modification of society, and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 72).

As we know from Smith’s account of vanity, he too is very concerned about the “follies and vices of civilization.” While Wollstonecraft explicitly refers to the morally problematic consequences for middle class marital bonds, Smith worries about the moral degradation of commercial society as a whole. Though commerce increases the wealth of nations, a “bad effect of commerce is that it sinks the courage of mankind, and tends to extinguish martial spirit” (Smith 1981 [1776]: 257). Because of the ever increasing division of labor, “every one’s thoughts are employed about one particular thing” and “war becomes a trade also.” “The defence of the country is therefore committed to a certain set of men who have nothing else to do, and among the bulk of the people military courage diminishes. By having their minds constantly employed on the arts of luxury, they grow effeminate and dastardly” (Smith 1981 [1776]: 258). The narrowness of mind that concerns Wollstonecraft clearly also plays a significant role in Smith’s work. In the early pages of the *Wealth of Nations*, just after explaining how the division of labor increases efficiency and productivity, he warns about the effects of the process on the character of the individual laborer. Reduced to performing only one very simple task over and over again, all day, the laborer becomes “as stupid and ignorant as it is possible” for a person to be (Smith 1981 [1776]: 168). Returning home from work, he is too exhausted to do anything but rest, plus the tedium of his daily employment stunts intellectual and moral growth. Meanwhile the people profiting by his labor live a life of ease and luxury and give their vanity free rein, stimulating the economy with their purchases and so increasing the need for efficient and productive labor.

No Room for Love in Commercial Society

Smith and Wollstonecraft together paint a bleak picture of commercial society: the laboring masses do not get the chance to develop either their moral or their intellectual capacities and are caught in the machinery that runs on the division of labor. The rich are, in Wollstonecraft's words "localized... by courtesy" and lead lives in which nothing is expected of them other than to conduct themselves in a manner befitting their station. The people in between, aspiring to be rich but not quite there yet, imagine how happy they would be if they had the "ease" and "luxury" which they see on display in the sumptuous lifestyles of the people of rank and fortune. And a sure sign that a man either has made it or is about to make it in the "toil and bustle" involved in "bettering one's condition," is to have a wife who does not exert herself in any way, outsources the care of her children to nurses and governesses, and looks elegant doing nothing. As Wollstonecraft puts it: "Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch" (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 72).

Wollstonecraft sums up the predicament of commercial society: "Wealth and female softness equally tend to debase mankind" (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 67). But where Smith does not appear to expect anything but softness from women (when, again, he acknowledges the existence of women at all), Wollstonecraft argues that women are rational creatures just like men and therefore capable of developing the same intellectual and moral virtues. She, too, regards "effeminacy" as a regrettable effect of commercial life but holds that it is not so much the opposite of the "martial spirit" Smith writes about as the opposite of reason (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 504). Effeminacy grows out of narrowness of mind—whether in men or women—and a narrow mind cannot love.

Civilization, which here to a large extent means commercialization, thus encourages in women "romantic passion" and "false refinement" which hamper the capacity to either give or receive love of the kind valued by both Smith and Wollstonecraft. But while "civilized women" are incapable of sympathy and undeserving of respect because of their underdeveloped rational and moral capacities, civilized men do not fare much better. Though they have access to education and opportunity to actively engage in the public sphere, they, too, are subject to vanity. Striving for commercial success and acclaim, most men choose not a life of (moral) wisdom but become slaves to appearances just as much as their wives and daughters. This enslavement may manifest in excessive personal grooming and attention paid to one's "step" and physical "deportment" (Smith 1982a [1759]: 75). But men's economic pursuits—legitimized by a society focused on commercial success—are no less vain: the goal, in most cases, is to show off their financial success through the accumulation of material goods such as fancy carriages (Smith 1982a [1759]: 260). Since, as we already established, vanity is a corruption of sympathy, and sympathy is the essence of love, it is starting to look like commercial society leaves little room for the deep connection both Smith and Wollstonecraft promote.

Of course Smith is more interested in sympathy and our need to be respected, heeded, and admired in general than he is in the particulars of romantic love. He

does touch on this specific kind of love a few times however, most notably in the *Theory*. Writing about the changes that go hand in hand with society becoming more commercial, he observes: “Love, which was formerly a ridiculous passion, became more grave and respectable. As a proof of this, it is worth our observation that no ancient tragedy turned on love, whereas now it is more respectable and influences all the public entertainments. This can be accounted for only by the changes of mankind” (Smith 1982a [1759]: 36). The emerging middle class causes a shift in mores and a passion which used to be ridiculous is now respectable. Smith here merely hints at something that Wollstonecraft makes explicit: love, understood as romantic passion, is still ridiculous—but unfortunately societal forces have conspired to make it appear like serious business. Sentimental feeling (the subject of 18th century novels and conduct literature alike) is confused with something deeper and more real, i.e. sympathy (Smith) and friendship and esteem (Wollstonecraft). Wollstonecraft writes:

Mankind, including every description, wish to be loved and respected by *something*; and the common herd will always take the nearest road to the completion of their wishes. The respect paid to wealth and beauty is the most certain, and unequivocal; and, of course, will always attract the vulgar eye of the common minds (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 74).

We want to be loved but—influenced by the interplay between economic considerations and societal prejudice—mistake “the respect paid to wealth and beauty” for the real thing. And the more we give into the vanity that results from this attention, the less room there is in our lives for sympathy, i.e. true love as Wollstonecraft and Smith understand it. Their shared outlook is therefore rather pessimistic: as commercial society will only continue to grow, fed by the universal human desire to “better oneself” and acquire status, equality will never be our highest goal. Status, as Smith understands it, is a positional good which can only exist in a hierarchy. Furthermore, “the pride of man makes him love to domineer,” writes Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1981 [1776]: 325). And in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* he adds: “Slavery therefore has been universall in the beginnings of society, and the love of dominion and authority over others will probably make it perpetuall” (Smith 1982b [1763]: 180). Love, be it in the shape of friendship between men (Smith) or between men and women (Wollstonecraft) depends on equality, while the “love of dominion” cannot but result in inequality. This contrast does not preclude friendship entirely: men could still be friends with some other men while they dominate or enslave others). But Wollstonecraft points out that because of all the circumstances discussed, middle class women are almost always dependent on, and therefore dominated by, men. Women, according to Wollstonecraft, suffer from a particularly deceptive form of slavery: “To their senses are women made slaves, because it is by their sensibility

that they obtain present power” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 79). As she explains elsewhere in the *Vindication*:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 28).

Women are subjected to the dictates of proper feminine behavior and appearance but realize that this subjection gives them a certain power.¹ Exerting her “cunning,” a woman plays her part and allows herself to be admired by a man ready to believe that the domestic angel as depicted in conduct literature is real: “To see a mortal adorn an object with imaginary charms, and then fall down and worship the idol which he had himself set up—how ridiculous!” (Wollstonecraft 2004 [1792]: 359). Wollstonecraft’s scorn applies to both the *lady* who exploits and aspect of her enslavement to gain an advantage and the man who is too stupid to see that the object he admires is a product the collective imagination of conduct writers and sentimental novelists. Whatever one might call this dynamic, it is far from the loving bond between equals who esteem and respect each other.

Conclusion

As the middle class comes into its own in the late 18th century, the desire described by Smith to better oneself and place oneself above others meets with another phenomenon centered around inequality: the sentiment that Wollstonecraft derisively calls “romantic passion.” Considered from the perspective of those promoting this passion, women are either angels (admired from a distance) or “asses” (“sunk below the dignity of rational creatures”) (Wollstonecraft 2004: 250). Wollstonecraft describes how the first few months of marriage tend to convert an angel into an ass unless friendship, “the most sublime of all affections,” replaces passion (Wollstonecraft 2004: 254). This, however, rarely happens as friendship is possible only between rational, independent equals—and as we have seen, these criteria are hard to meet for the rich and those aspiring to be rich. Not only are there very few women who are (economically) independent of men, rationality is in scarce supply among both sexes because of the vanity of the middle class as a whole. “Till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education,” adds Wollstonecraft to this pessimistic outlook (Wollstonecraft 2004: 30–31). Only a radical overhaul of society will make middle class love possible.

¹ One might well suggest that this very pragmatic approach to feminine “virtues” is in itself proto-feminist. The women who instrumentalize “outward obedience” for economic gain recognize (at least implicitly) that the “virtues” expected of them are not to be taken too seriously. Thanks to my anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

A question that presents itself to today's readers of Smith and Wollstonecraft, then, is whether commercial society has undergone an essential change since the late 18th century when they both published the (final editions of) the *Theory* and *Vindication* respectively. This is too large a question to address here, and I will merely draw attention to the fact the "feminine" virtues Wollstonecraft railed against (and Smith took for granted) are still very much at the heart of the debate in feminist economics (see for example Barker and Feiner 2004, Bjørnholt and McKay 2014, Ferber and Nelson 2003, Jacobsen 2007). For their part, both Wollstonecraft and Smith believed commercial society was there to stay, and they also agreed that vanity (which encourages us to spend money and so drives industry) was an ineradicable element of this type of society. What we are left with is the perhaps troubling observation that today, both our conceptions of romantic passion and of status bear an uncomfortably close resemblance to the notions discussed by Smith and Wollstonecraft.

I have argued that, based on the combined account I offer of Smith and Wollstonecraft's thoughts, there is little room in commercial society for love in general—let alone for romantic love between men and women in particular. I have provided a sketch of the moral issues emerging from the murky mixture of economic considerations and romantic sentimentality that marked middle class conceptions of love and "femininity" in the 18th century. In the process, I have illustrated Smith's and Wollstonecraft's largely overlooked and (given their very different legacies) surprising philosophical kinship. I hope this study of early middle class ways of thinking about love and economics will encourage others to think about the ways in which Smith's and Wollstonecraft's legacies reverberate in today's late capitalist society.

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