

# The Subjection of Women

John Stuart Mill

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. The phrase ‘the subjection of women’ occurs quite often in this version, because it helps to keep things clear; in Mill’s original it hardly occurs except in the title. The chapter-titles are added in this version. So are the section-breaks and -titles; these are offered not as formal structure but only as rough guides to where new topics are launched.—As a background to this work, you should know: In 1830 at the age of 24 Mill formed an extremely close moral and intellectual friendship with Mrs Harriet Taylor; this continued, with no sexual impropriety, until her husband died in 1851, whereupon she and Mill married. She died seven years later, and the present work was written a few years after that.

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## CHAPTER 3

### Occupations for women outside marriage

If you agree with me about the equality of women in the family, I don't expect to have much trouble convincing you about the other aspect of the just equality of women, namely their admissibility to all the functions and occupations that have until now been the monopoly of the stronger sex [Mill's phrase]. Why have women's disabilities outside the home been clung to? I mean, of course: why have *men* clung to their *belief* in the disabilities of women outside the home? I think it has been in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life, because the general run of the male sex still can't tolerate the idea of living with an equal. If it weren't for that, I think that almost everyone—given the actual state of opinion in politics and economics—would admit the injustice of excluding half the human race from most money-earning occupations, and from almost all high social functions [see note on page 12], decreeing from their birth that either

- they aren't, and can't possibly become, fit for employments that are legally open to the stupidest and lowest of the other sex, or else
- however fit they may be, those employments will be barred to them and reserved for the exclusive benefit of males.

In the last two centuries, when it was thought necessary (it usually wasn't!) to justify the exclusion of women from those functions and occupations, this wasn't often done in terms of their inferior mental capacity. (Actually, no-one back then really believed in that, because in those times the struggles of public life sometimes provided a real test of personal abilities, a test in which women sometimes took part.) The reason given for the exclusion of women in those days was

not women's unfitness but rather the interests of society, meaning the interests of men; just as the most wicked crimes were thought to be explained and excused by the *raison d'état*, meaning the convenience of the government and the support of existing authority. These days power speaks with a smoother tongue: when it oppresses people it always claims to do so for their own good. Thus, when any activity is forbidden to women, it is thought necessary to say (and desirable to believe) that they are incapable of doing it, and that in aiming for it they are leaving their real path of success and happiness. But to make this reason plausible (I don't say valid!), those who offer it must be prepared to push it much further than anyone ventures to do in the face of present experience. It's not enough for them to maintain that

- (1) Women on average are less gifted than men on average, in certain of the higher mental faculties that are needed for higher social functions.

What they have to maintain is that

- (2) No women at all are fit for those functions; the most eminent women are the intellectual inferiors of the most mediocre of the men who currently fulfill those functions.

You may at first think that (2) is wildly extravagant; but think about (1)'s short-fall from what is needed to defend the status quo. All you can get from (1) is

- (3) fewer women than men are fit for occupations and functions of the highest intellectual character.

If that is as far as we can go, then if the performance of a given important function is decided by competition or in any other way that respects the interests of the public, there's

no need to fear its falling into the hands of women inferior to average men, or to the average of their male competitors. The only result will be that there will be fewer women than men in such employments; and that is bound to happen in any case, if only because most women are likely to prefer the one vocation in which there's nobody to compete with them. Now, *no-one* will now support (2), not even the most determined depreciator of women. Down through the years, women—*many* women—have shown themselves to be capable of everything that men do, and of doing it successfully and creditably. The most that can be said is that there are many things that no woman has succeeded in doing as well as they have been done by some men—many in which women have not reached the very highest rank. But there are extremely few activities depending only on mental skills in which women haven't attained the second-to-highest rank. Isn't this *more* than enough to make the refusal to let them compete with men for these roles a tyranny to them and a detriment to society? Isn't it a mere truism to say that such functions are often filled by men who •are far less fit for them than plenty of women and •would be beaten by women in any fair competition? 'Perhaps there are some, fully employed in other ways, who are even better qualified for the functions in question than these women.' What of it? Isn't this the case in all competitions? Is there such a surplus of men fit for high duties that society can afford to reject the service of any competent person? Finding a man who is just right for some duty or function of social importance that falls vacant—are we *always* so sure we can do this that we lose nothing by ruling out half of mankind, refusing in advance to make any use of their abilities, however distinguished they may be? And even if we could do without them, would it be *just* to refuse to them their fair share of honour and distinction. . . .? And the injustice isn't confined to them: it is shared by all

who might benefit by their services. To ordain that no-one of a certain kind may be a physician, or a lawyer, or a Member of Parliament, is to injure not only persons of that kind but also anyone who employs physicians or lawyers, or elects Members of Parliament. . . .

### Women as governors

Perhaps it will be enough if in the details of my argument I confine myself to functions of a public nature: if I succeed regarding those, it will probably be readily granted that women should be admissible to *any* occupation where it matters whether they are admitted or not. Let me begin by selecting one function. . . .their right to which is entirely independent of any thesis about their abilities. I mean the vote, both parliamentary and municipal. The •right to share in the choice of those who are to exercise a public trust is utterly distinct from the •right to compete for the trust itself. If to vote for a Member of Parliament one had to be fit to be a candidate, the government would be a narrow oligarchy indeed! To have a voice in choosing those by whom one is to be governed is a means of self-protection that everyone should have, even ones who are for ever excluded from the function of governing; and that includes women. They must be thought fit to have such a choice, because the law already gives to a woman the most important choice of all—the choice of the man who is to govern her throughout her life, which is always supposed to be voluntarily made by herself. . . . There's not a shadow of justification for not allowing women the vote under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are allowed it. The majority of women of any class are unlikely to differ in political opinion from the majority of the men of the same class, unless the issue somehow involves the interests of women as such; and

in that case women require the votes as their guarantee of just and equal consideration. This ought to be obvious even to those who reject every other doctrine I have been arguing for: even if every woman were a wife, and every wife ought to be a slave, these slaves would stand in need of legal protection, and we know what legal protection slaves have when the laws are made by their masters.

With regard to women's fitness not only to participate in elections but themselves to hold offices or practise professions involving important public responsibilities: I have already remarked that this consideration isn't **essential** to the practical question under discussion, because any woman who succeeds in an open profession thereby proves that she is qualified for it. As for public offices: if the country's political system excludes unfit men, it will equally exclude unfit women; and if it doesn't, there is no *additional* evil in the fact that the unfit persons whom the system admits may be either women or men. Thus, as long as it is admitted that even •a few women may be fit for these duties, the laws that shut the door on those exceptions can't be justified by any opinion that can be held regarding the abilities of •women in general. But though this last consideration is not **essential**, it is far from being irrelevant. An unprejudiced view of women's competence strengthens the arguments against their subjection, reinforcing them by high considerations of practical benefit.

Let us start by entirely setting aside all psychological considerations tending to show that any of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are only effects of differences in their •education and circumstances, and don't indicate any radical difference—let alone any radical inferiority—of •nature. Let us consider women only as they actually are or are known to have been, and the abilities that they have already shown in practice.

Anything that they have done at least proves that they can do *that!* When we consider how carefully they are all trained away from (rather than towards) any of the occupations or objects reserved for men, it becomes evident that I am taking a very humble ground for them [Mill's phrase] when I base their case on what they have actually achieved, because in this matter negative evidence is worth little, whereas any positive evidence is conclusive. No woman has yet actually produced works comparable to those of Homer, Aristotle, Michelangelo, or Beethoven, but it doesn't follow from this that that no woman *can* attain any such height as they did. The negative fact merely leaves the question uncertain, and open to psychological discussion. On the other hand, it is quite certain that a woman *can* be a Queen Elizabeth or a Deborah or a Joan of Arc, because this is not inference but fact. [Deborah was a judge and had command of an army in ancient Israel. See Judges 4–5.] It's an odd thing that the only things the existing law excludes women from doing are the very ones that they have proved they *can* do! There is no law to prevent a woman from having written all the plays of Shakespeare, or composed all the operas of Mozart. But if Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria had not inherited the throne they couldn't have been entrusted with the smallest political duties—the sort of duties in which Queen Elizabeth showed herself to be supreme.

If anything conclusive could be inferred from empirical data without psychological analysis, it would be that the things women aren't allowed to do are the very ones for which they are specially qualified. Their aptitude for government has become conspicuous through the very few opportunities they have been given; whereas in lines of distinction that apparently were freely open to them they have by no means so eminently distinguished themselves.

History presents us with far fewer reigning queens than kings, but a talent for ruling has been shown by a higher proportion of the queens than of the kings—despite the fact that many of the queens have occupied the throne in difficult periods.

It is remarkable too that they have often been distinguished by merits flatly opposite to the imaginary and conventional character of women: they have been noted for their rule's firmness and vigour as much as for its intelligence. When to queens and empresses we add regents and viceroys of provinces, the list of eminent women rulers swells to a great length.<sup>2</sup> This is so clearly the case that someone once tried to run the argument in reverse, turning the admitted truth into an additional insult by saying that queens are better than kings because under kings women govern, but under queens men do.

It may seem a waste of reasoning to argue against a bad joke; but such things do affect people's minds, and I have heard men quote this saying in a manner suggesting that they thought there is something in it. Anyway, it will serve well enough as a starting-point for my discussion. So: it is not true that under kings women govern. Such cases are entirely exceptional, and weak kings have governed badly through the influence of male favourites as often as of female. When a king is governed by a woman merely because of his love relationships, good government is not probable, though even then there are exceptions. But French history counts

two kings who chose to have affairs directed for many years by a woman—one to his sister, the other to his mother. One of them, Charles VIII, was a mere boy, but in giving power to his sister he was following the intentions of his father Louis XI, the ablest monarch of his age. The one whose mother was powerful in his reign was Louis IX, since canonized and now known as Saint Louis. He was the best and one of the most vigorous rulers since the time of Charlemagne. Both of these princesses—Charles's sister and Louis's mother—ruled in a manner hardly equalled by any prince among their contemporaries. The Emperor Charles V, the most politic prince of his time, had as many able men in his service as a ruler ever had, and was utterly unlikely to sacrifice his interests to personal feelings; yet he made two princesses of his family successive governors of the Netherlands. . . . Both ruled very successfully, and one of them, Margaret of Austria, was one of the ablest politicians of the age. So much for one side of the joke. As for the other: When it is said that under queens men govern, is this meant to be taken in the same way as the statement that kings are governed by women? Is it meant that queens choose the associates of their personal pleasures as their instruments of government? The case is rare even with queens who are as unscrupulous in their love affairs as Catherine II [Catherine the Great, of Russia]: and we won't find in these rare cases the good government that is supposed to arise from male influence on queens. So if it is true that the administration of a country is in the

<sup>2</sup> Especially if we bring in Asia as well as Europe. If a Hindu principality is strongly, vigilantly, and economically governed; if order is preserved without oppression; if the people are prosperous and culture is growing among them, three times out of four that principality is under a woman's rule. [The bit about 'culture' replaces Mill's 'cultivation is extended', which could mean something more like 'agriculture is thriving'.] I have gathered this surprising fact from a long knowledge of Hindu governments. There are many examples of this; for although Hindu institutions won't let a woman reign, she is the legal regent of a kingdom while the heir to the throne is a minor; and minorities are frequent in India because male rulers there often die young through the effect of inactivity and sensual excesses. Bear in mind that these princesses have never been seen in public, have never conversed with any man not of their own family except from behind a curtain, don't read, and if even they did there's no book in their languages that could give them the slightest instruction on political affairs—they provide a very striking example of women's natural capacity for government.

hands of better men under a queen than under an average king, it must be that queens are better able to choose good men; and women must be better qualified than men both to be sovereign and to be Prime Minister, because the Prime Minister's principal business is not to govern in person but to find the fittest people to run every department of public affairs. . . . But actually most great queens have been great by their own talents for government more than by their talent for picking good ministers. . . . They kept the supreme direction of affairs in their own hands; and if they listened to good advisers, that was itself the strongest proof that their judgment fitted them for dealing with the great questions of government.

Is it reasonable to think that those who are fit for the greater functions of politics can't qualify themselves for the less? We know this:

(1) The wives and sisters of monarchs, when they are called on, are found to be as competent as the monarchs themselves in the business of royalty.

There is no reason *in the nature of things* why this shouldn't also be true:

(2) The wives and sisters of statesmen, administrators, company directors, and managers of public institutions are capable of doing what is done by their brothers and husbands.

If in fact (2) is not true, the reason for that doesn't lie in the nature of things. The real reason why wives etc. of kings have done better than we would expect the wives etc. of business men to do is plain enough. It has to do with how princesses have related to the common run of men; their *rank has put them above* men to a greater extent than their *sex has put them below* them. So they haven't been taught that it was improper for them to concern themselves with politics; but have been allowed to feel the wide-ranging

interest that is natural to *any* cultivated human being in the great events occurring around them, events in which they might be called on to take a part. The only women who are allowed the same range of interests and freedom of development as men are the ladies of reigning families, and it is precisely in their case that no inferiority is found. Women's capacities for government have been found adequate in every place where they have been tried, and to the extent that they have been tried.

### Practice versus theory

This fact fits with the best general conclusions that our imperfect experience seems to suggest concerning the special tendencies and aptitudes that are typical of women, as women have hitherto been. I don't say '...as they will continue to be' because (I repeat) it would be presumptuous to make claims about what women are or are not, can or cannot be, by their natural constitution. They have always been kept in such an unnatural state (as regards spontaneous development) that their nature must have been greatly distorted and disguised; and no-one can safely assert that any significant difference would show up between men's and women's characters and capacities if women's nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men's. . . . I'll show later on that even the most undeniable differences that now exist between the sexes may have been produced merely by circumstances, without any difference of natural capacity. Still, looking at women as they are known in experience, we can say (with more truth than most generalisations about women possess) that the general bent of their talents is towards *the practical*. This statement is consistent with all the public history of women, past and present. It is also confirmed by common and daily experience. The mental

capacities that are most characteristic of a woman of talent are all of a kind that fits them for practice, and makes them tend towards it. What is meant by a woman's being good at *intuitive* perception? It means *rapid and correct insight into present fact*. It has nothing to do with general principles: nobody ever perceived a scientific law of nature by intuition, or reached a general rule of duty or prudence by it. These laws and rules are results of slow and careful collection and comparison of empirical data, and 'intuitive' people—men or women—don't usually shine in this department, unless they can acquire the needed experience by themselves. That 'unless...' condition is crucial, because their so-called 'intuitive' insight makes them especially good at arriving at such general truths as can be collected from their individual observations. So when they happen to be as well provided as men are with the results of other people's experience, by reading and education, women are better equipped than men generally are with what is needed for practical success. (I say *happen* to be, because it won't be a result of anyone's designs; in respect of the knowledge that tends to fit them for the greater concerns of life, the only educated women are self-educated.) Highly educated men are apt to be deficient in the sense of *present fact*; in the facts they have to deal with they don't see what is really there but what they have been taught to expect. This is seldom the case with women of any ability: their capacity for 'intuition' preserves them from it. When a man and a woman are equal in what experience they have had and in general intellectual level, she will usually see much more of what is immediately before them than he will; and this awareness of the present is the main quality that is needed for practical (as distinct from theoretical) ability. . . . Of course there can be no good practice without principles; and I admit another drawback in this aspect of a woman's abilities, namely that her quickness of observation has

such a dominant place in her abilities that she is especially apt to form rash generalisations on the basis of her own observation; though she is equally ready to correct those generalisations when her range of data widens. But the corrective to this defect is access to the experience of the human race, i.e. general knowledge, which is exactly the thing that education can best provide. A woman's mistakes are like those a clever self-educated man, who often sees things that are overlooked by men who have been through training-drills, but falls into errors through ignorance of things that have long been known. . . .

Women's minds, then, are drawn to the present, to the real, to actual fact; this can be a source of errors because of what it leaves out, but it is also a useful antidote to the contrary error. Where theorising minds primarily and typically go wrong is through having too little of this lively perception and ever-present sense of *objective fact*. [Mill says this about 'speculative minds'. In this version, his uses of 'speculation' and its cognates will be replaced by 'theorising' and its cognates.] For lack of this they often overlook conflicts between outward facts and their theories, and also

lose sight of the legitimate purpose of theorising in the first place, and let their theory-building skills stray into regions that are populated

not by real beings, animate or inanimate or even idealised, but by personified shadows created by the illusions of metaphysics or by the mere entanglement of words,

and think these shadows are the proper objects of the highest philosophy.

For a theorist who is engaged not in collecting empirical data but in working data up by processes of thought into comprehensive truths of science and laws of conduct, hardly anything can be of more value than to do this work with a



really superior woman as a companion and critic. There's nothing comparable to this for keeping his thoughts within the limits of real things and the actual facts of nature. . . . A woman's mind is always directed towards dealing with things as individuals rather than in groups, and—closely connected with that—to having a more lively interest than a man does in the present feelings of persons; and this aspect of her mind determines how she approaches anything that claims to have practical applications. For her the first question is always 'How will individual people be affected by this?' So she is extremely unlikely to put faith in any theory that loses sight of individuals and **(a)** deals with things as if they existed for the benefit of some imaginary entity, some mere creation of the mind that doesn't **(b)** boil down to the feelings of living beings. [Mill has in mind here (perhaps among other things) the difference between two views of morality: **(a)** in one kind, questions like 'Was that action **wrong**?' and 'Would that be a **good** outcome?' are somehow basic; **(b)** in the other, such questions are mere conceptual vehicles for really basic questions such as 'Did that **hurt** anyone?' and 'Is that something we would **try to bring about**?' In the last chapter of *Utilitarianism* Mill tries to explain the **(a)** notion of *justice* in terms of **(b)** facts about how people think and feel and act.] Women's thoughts are thus as useful in giving reality to thinking men's thoughts as men's thoughts are in giving **breadth** and **scope** to women's. In **depth**, as distinguished from breadth, I strongly suspect that women, even now, do as well as men.

If it's true that women's existing mental characteristics are valuable aids even in •theorising, they are still more important in •applying theories to the world. I have explained why women are less likely than men to fall into the error of sticking to a rule in a case whose special features make the rule inapplicable or require it to be specially modified. Another of the admitted superiorities of clever women is

greater quickness on the uptake; isn't this pre-eminently a quality that fits a person for practice? In •action, everything constantly depends on prompt decisions; in •theorising nothing does. [In reading on, remember that in Mill's day 'philosophy' was still used to cover science. A magazine of that day includes an advertisement for 'a more philosophical way of making coffee'.] A mere thinker can wait, take time to consider, collect more evidence; he isn't under pressure to complete his philosophy at once so as not to miss his opportunity. [Mill says that the theorising 'philosopher' may be helped by an ability to draw plausible conclusions from inadequate data; but that is a side-help to his work, not at the centre of it; and anyway the theorist doesn't have to do it in a hurry; he can slog away slowly 'until a conjecture has become a theorem'. Mill continues the contrast thus:] For those whose business is with the fleeting and perishable—with individual facts, not kinds of facts—*speed* of thought is second only to *power* of thought in importance. If someone dealing with the contingencies of action doesn't have his faculties under *immediate* command, he might as well not have them! He may be fit to criticise, but he isn't fit to act. Now, *this* is what women are agreed to excel at—women and men who are most like women. The other sort of man, however able he may be, arrives slowly at complete command of his faculties: rapidity of judgment and promptness of judicious action, even in the affairs he knows best, are the gradual and late result of strenuous effort grown into habit.

### 'Nervous temperament'

It may be said that women's greater nervous susceptibility disqualifies them for any practical activities except domestic ones, by making them

- mobile,
- changeable,
- too intensely under the influence of the moment,
- incapable of dogged perseverance,
- uneven and uncertain in their command of their faculties.

Those phrases, I think, sum up most of the objections commonly made to women's fitness for the higher class of serious business. In so far as the phrases apply, much of this is the mere overflow of nervous energy run to waste, and would cease when the energy was given a definite purpose. Much is also the result of conscious or unconscious cultivation [i.e. results from social leads and pressures]; as we see from the almost total disappearance of 'hysterics' and fainting-fits since they have gone out of fashion. Moreover, when people are brought up as . . . a kind of hot-house plants, shielded from the wholesome ups and downs of air and temperature, and not trained in any of the occupations that make the blood flow and strengthen the muscles, while the emotional part of their nervous system is kept in unnaturally active play, it's no wonder if those of them who don't die of consumption [= 'tuberculosis'] grow up with constitutions that are liable to be upset by slight causes, both internal and external, without the stamina to keep up any physical or mental task requiring continuity of effort. But women brought up to work for their livelihood show none of these morbid characteristics, unless indeed they are chained to sedentary work in small unhealthy rooms. Women who in their early years have shared in the healthy physical upbringing and bodily freedom of their brothers, and who have enough pure air and exercise in adult life, rarely have excessively fragile nervous systems that would disqualify them for active pursuits. There are indeed some people—men and women—who have an unusual degree

of nervous sensibility as a feature of their constitution, a feature which they have so strongly that it has more influence than anything else does over every aspect of their health. Like other aspects of one's physical constitution, this so-called 'nervous temperament' is hereditary, and is transmitted to sons as well as daughters; but it could be—and apparently *is*—inherited by more women than men. Assuming that this is so, let us ask: Are *men* with the nervous temperament found to be unfit for the duties and pursuits usually followed by men? If not, why should *women* of the same temperament be unfit for them? Peculiarities of temperament are, within certain limits, obstacles to success in some employments though aids to success in some others. Men of high nervous sensibility have succeeded brilliantly in occupations that are suitable to that temperament—and sometimes even in one's that aren't. The main way in which the temperament contributes to a man's practical success is this:

Because he is susceptible of a higher degree of excitement than people with a different physical constitution, the difference between •his powers when they and he are aroused and •his powers at other times is greater than the corresponding difference in other people. In his excited state he is raised above himself, as it were, and easily does things that he couldn't possibly do at other times.

This lofty excitement is usually not a mere flash that •leaves no permanent traces and •is incompatible with persistent and steady pursuit of an objective. It is typical of the nervous temperament to be capable of *sustained* excitement that holds out through long-continued efforts. It is what is meant by 'spirit'. It is what makes the high-bred racehorse maintain his speed till he drops down dead. It is what has enabled so many delicate women to maintain the most sublime constancy. . . .through lengthy mental and bodily

tortures. People with this temperament are particularly well suited for the *executive department* of the leadership of mankind. They are the material of great orators, great preachers, impressive spreaders of moral influences. You might think that their constitution makes them less suitable for the role of a statesman in the cabinet, or of a judge; and so it would, if it were the case that people who are excitable must always be in a state of excitement. But this is wholly a question of training. Strong self-control can grow out of and contain strong feeling, but strong feeling has to be trained to go that way. When it is, it creates not only the heroes of impulse but also the heroes of self-conquest. History and experience prove that the most passionate characters are the most fanatically rigid in their feelings of duty, when their passion has been trained to act in that direction. The judge who gives a just decision in a case where his feelings draw him strongly to the other side gets *from that same strength of feeling* the fixed sense of the obligation of justice that enables him to win this victory over himself. [And the fine things that such a person achieves in states of high excitement, Mill says, come to affect his character in general, providing standards that he sets for himself at other times. Then:] The thesis that people with excitable temperaments are on average less fit than others for theory or for practice is shown empirically to be false not only of individuals but also of races. The French, and the Italians, are undoubtedly by nature more nervously excitable than the Teutonic races; their habitual daily emotional life is a richer affair than that of the English, at least. But have they been less great than the English in science, in public business, in legal and judicial eminence, or in war? There is abundant evidence that the Greeks of ancient times, like their descendants today, were one of the most excitable of the races of mankind, and they excelled in every kind of human achievement. As an equally

southern people, the ancient Romans probably had the same native temperament: but the stern character of their national discipline, like that of the Spartans, made them an example of the opposite type of national character. The main way in which the strength of their natural feelings showed up was in the intensity with which they worked on replacing their natural temperament with an artificial one. If these cases show what a naturally excitable people can be turned into, the Irish Celts provide a fine example of what such people are when left to themselves (if they can be said to be 'left to themselves', given centuries of indirect influence from bad government and the direct influence of Catholic teaching and of a sincere belief in the Catholic religion). The Irish character must be considered as an unfavourable case, i.e. a naturally excitable people who have not *as a race* achieved anything great. But whenever the circumstances of *individual* Irish Celts have been at all favourable, what people have shown greater capacity for the most varied individual excellence? Like

the French compared with the English,  
the Irish compared with the Swiss,  
the Greeks or Italians compared with the Germans,

so also

women compared with men

may be found on average to do the same things, though with some variety in the details. I don't see the smallest reason to doubt that they would do them every bit as well if their education and development were adapted to correcting instead of worsening the infirmities that their temperament brings.

Suppose for purposes of argument that all this is true:  
Women's minds are naturally more mobile than men's,  
less able to persist for long in one continuous effort,  
more fitted for dividing their abilities among many

things than for travelling a single path to the highest point that can be reached by it; . . . which is why they have climbed as high as the best men in precisely the endeavours that seem to need most of this absorption of the whole mind in one set of ideas and occupations.

[Mill speaks of 'supposing' that to be true, but he crams two qualifications into his 'supposition': it only concerns 'women as they now are', and there are 'great and numerous exceptions' to it. With those two qualifications, it seems, the indented passage expresses something that he thinks probably *is* true.] Still, this difference between women and men can only affect what sort of excellence and achievement each has, not how excellent it is or how practically valuable it is. And the underlying hint in all this that the man's kind of mind is somehow primary, central, optimal, should be challenged. This exclusive working of a part of the mind, this absorption of the whole thinking faculty in a single subject and concentration of it on a single work—is this the normal and healthful condition of the human faculties? It hasn't been shown to be so, even in theorising activities. What this concentration gains in specialised projects is lost, I believe, in the capacity of the mind for the other purposes of life; and even in abstract theorising, I am firmly convinced, the mind achieves more by frequently returning to a difficult problem than by sticking to it without interruption. Anyway, in practical projects, great and small, the ability to pass promptly from one thing to another without letting the active spring of the intellect lose energy between the two is a much more valuable power than the ability to stick at a problem without any breaks; and this more valuable power is one that women pre-eminently possess because of that very 'mobility' of which they are accused. . . . People have often noticed women's ability to do their thinking in circumstances and at times that almost any man would make an excuse to himself for not even trying; and a woman's mind, though it

may be occupied only with small things, can seldom permit itself to be *vacant*, as a man's mind so often is when he isn't engaged in what he chooses to consider the business of his life. . . .

### The size and quality of brains

This is sometimes said: 'There is anatomical evidence that men's mental capacity is superior to women's: they have a larger brain.' In fact, it is by no means established that a woman's brain *is* smaller than a man's. . . . The size of the brain in human beings, anatomists say, varies much less than the size of the body or even of the head, and the one can't be at all inferred from the other. Some women certainly have as large a brain as any man. I know of a man who weighed many human brains and said that the heaviest he knew of. . . . was that of a woman. Furthermore, the precise relation between the brain and the intellectual powers is a controversial matter that isn't yet well understood. We can't doubt that there is a very close relation. The brain is certainly the material organ of thought and feeling (never mind the ongoing controversy about which mental abilities correspond to which parts of the brain); and it would be anomalous—an exception to everything we know of the general laws of life and organisation—if brain-size didn't contribute *something* to mental power. But it would be an equally anomalous exception if the brain influenced thought *only* through its size. In all nature's more delicate operations—of which the physiology of living things are the most delicate, and the workings of the nervous system by far the most delicate of these—differences in the effect depend on differences of •quality in the physical agents as much as on their •quantity; and if we judge by outputs, the level of fineness of quality in the brains and nervous systems of women is higher on

average than that of men. Never mind abstract difference of quality, which is hard to verify. We know that an organ's efficiency depends not only on its •size but on its •activity: and we can get a rough measure of this in how energetically the blood circulates through the organ, because the organ's activities and its ability to repair itself depend mainly on blood-circulation. The differences that we see between the mental operations of the two sexes suggest that men on the average have the advantage in the size of the brain, and women in the activity of blood in the brain. That conjecture about difference of brain-organisation, based on analogy, suggests differences in output of kinds that we do most commonly see. ]Mill goes into this a little, along lines already developed. Women are quicker in having thoughts and feelings, but less apt to stay with a given line of thought or activity after it has become tiring. In the first place, men's mental operations might be expected to be slower than women's; men wouldn't be as prompt as women in thinking, or as quick to feel. Mill suggests (though he doesn't explicitly state it) a comparison with wheels: small ones are easier to start going but also easier to stop. Then:] This speculation is *entirely* hypothetical; all it does is to suggest a line of inquiry. I repeat that we don't yet know for sure that *there is any* natural difference in the average strength or direction of the mental capacities of the two sexes. And this can't be known when •the psychological laws of the formation of character have been so little studied. . . .and when •the most obvious *external* causes of difference of character are habitually disregarded—left unnoticed by the observer, and looked down on with haughty contempt by the prevalent schools of natural history and of mental philosophy. Those schools disagree about what the source is of what mainly distinguishes human beings from one another—disagree about whether it is material or spiritual—but they agree in

belittling those who explain these differences in terms of the different ways in which human beings relate to society and to life.

### **Different nations, different views**

People's views about the nature of women are mere empirical generalisations, formed on the basis of the first instances that present themselves, with no help from philosophy or analysis. This is so true that the popular idea of women's nature differs in different countries, according to how women have been shaped by the opinions and social circumstances of the country in question. An oriental thinks that women are by nature peculiarly voluptuous. . . . An Englishman usually thinks that they are by nature cold. The sayings about women's fickleness are mostly French. . . . The English commonly remark on how much more constant women are than men. The attitude that inconstancy is discreditable to a woman has been prevalent in England for much longer than in France; besides which Englishwomen are in their inmost nature much more subdued to opinion •than Frenchwomen are. Incidentally; Englishmen are especially poorly placed to judge what is or isn't natural—to women, or to men, or to human beings altogether—if they have only English experience to go on; because there is no place where human nature shows so little of its basic structure as it does in England. For better and for worse, the English are further from a state of nature than any other modern people; more than any other people, they are a product of civilisation and discipline. England is the country in which social discipline has most succeeded not so much in •conquering as in •suppressing whatever is liable to conflict with it. The English, more than any other people, not only act according to rule but *feel* according to rule. In other countries, the

taught opinion or the social requirement may be the stronger power, but the promptings of the individual nature are always visible under it, and often resisting it: rule may be stronger than nature, but nature is still there. In England, rule has largely *replaced* nature. [Mill develops this line of thought: an Englishman will get human nature wrong because he doesn't see it; a Frenchman sees it, but only in a form distorted by civilisation, so that he gets it wrong too.]

I have said that we can't now know ·for sure· how much of the existing mental difference between men and women is natural and how much artificial, or whether there are any natural differences at all, or *what* they are if there are any. . . . But where certainty can't be had, there may be ways of arriving at some degree of probability. The first question to tackle, and one we have the best chance of answering, is: What is the origin of the differences between women and men that we actually observe? I'll explore for the answer to this along the only path by which it can be reached, namely by tracing the mental consequences of external influences. We can't isolate a human being from his ·social· circumstances, so as to learn experimentally what he would have been by nature; but we can consider •what his circumstances have been, and •what he is, and whether one could have produced the other.

So let us consider the only conspicuous example we can see of apparent inferiority of women to men, apart from the merely physical one of bodily strength. No top-ranking production in philosophy, science, or art has been the work of a woman. Can we explain this without supposing that women are naturally incapable of producing them?

### **Women in the arts and sciences**

The first point is that we don't have enough empirical evidence to support an induction. With a very few exceptions, women didn't begin to try their abilities in philosophy, science, or art until the past three generations. Only in England and France have many made the attempt even today. Calculating the probabilities, was it to be expected that a mind having the requisites of first rate eminence in •theorising or creative work would have shown up during that ·rather short· period of time among the women whose tastes and social situation allowed them to devote themselves to •these pursuits? In every kind of activity that there has been time for, women have done quite as much (at all but the very highest ranks in the scale of excellence), and have obtained as many high prizes as could be expected, given the length of time and the number of competitors. This is especially true in the art in which they have been active for the longest, namely literature—both prose and poetry. If we go back to the time when very few women even tried, some of those few were highly successful. The Greeks always counted Sappho among their great poets; and we may well suppose that Myrtis, who is said to have been •Pindar's teacher, and Corinna, who five times defeated him in the competition for the poetry prize, must at least have been good enough poets to be compared with •that great name. Aspasia did not leave any philosophical writings; but it's an acknowledged fact that Socrates went to her for instruction and reports that he obtained it.

If we consider women's works in modern times, and contrast them with men's, either in literary or in the ·fine· arts, the inferiority that we can see boils down to one thing—a very significant thing—namely a lack of originality. Not a total lack; for any production that has any substantive value

has an originality of its own—is a conception of the mind that produced it, not a copy of something else. The writings of women abound in thoughts that are ‘original’ in the sense of being not borrowed but derived from the thinker’s own observations or intellectual processes. But women haven’t yet produced any of the great and luminous new ideas that form an era in thought, or any of the fundamentally new conceptions in art that open a vista of possible effects not before thought of, and found a new school. Their compositions are mostly based on the existing fund of thought, and their creations don’t deviate far from existing types. This is the sort—the only sort—of inferiority that their works do manifest. There is no inferiority in execution, the detailed application of thought, the perfection of style. In respect of composition and the management of detail, our best novelists have mostly been women; and modern literature doesn’t contain a more eloquent vehicle of thought than the style of Madame de Staël, or a finer specimen of purely artistic excellence than the prose of Madame Sand, whose style acts on the nervous system like a symphony of Haydn or Mozart. What is mainly lacking, I repeat, is high originality of conception. Let me consider how we might explain this deficiency.

Let us remember. . . .that

during all the period in the world’s existence and development of civilisation in which great and fruitful new truths could be arrived at by sheer force of intellect, with little previous study and accumulation of knowledge

women didn’t concern themselves with theorising at all. From the days of Hypatia [a famous mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, 4th century] to those of the Reformation, the illustrious Heloisa is almost the only woman for whom such an achievement might have been possible; and we don’t

know how great a capacity for theory-building may have been lost to mankind by the misfortunes of her life. [Héloïse, as she is usually named these days, was a notable scholar of the 12th century; the ‘misfortunes of her life’ refer to troubles arising from her being the lover of Abelard]. And in the times when a significant number of women have begun to cultivate serious thought, originality has never been easy to achieve. Nearly all the thoughts that can be reached by mere strength of basic intellect were reached long ago; and *originality* in any high sense of that word is now scarcely ever attained except by minds that have undergone elaborate discipline, and are deeply versed in the results of previous thinking. Someone remarked regarding the present age that its most original thinkers are those who have known most thoroughly what their predecessors had thought: and this will always be the case. Every fresh stone in the structure has to be placed on the top of so many others that anyone who wants to take a share in the present stage of the work has to go through a long climb, carrying up materials. How many women have gone through any such process? Mrs. Somerville may be the only woman who knows as much mathematics as is needed for making any considerable mathematical discovery; she happens not to be one of the two or three persons who in her lifetime have been associated with some striking advance in mathematics; is this a proof that women are inferior? Since economics became a science, two women have known enough of it to write usefully on the subject; countless men have written on economics during the same time—of how many of those can we claim more than that they have written usefully? If no woman, so far, has been a great historian, what woman has been learned enough for that? If no woman is a great philologist, what woman has studied Sanscrit and Slavonic, the Gothic of Ulphila and the Persic of the Zendavesta? Even in practical matters we all know

how little value the originality of untaught geniuses has. It means re-inventing in a rudimentary form something already invented and improved on by many successive inventors. When women have had the preparation that all men now need to be importantly original, then we'll be in a position to *begin* judging by experience their capacity for originality.

No doubt it often happens that someone who •hasn't widely and carefully studied the thoughts of others on a subject has through natural intelligence a bright idea which he can suggest but can't prove, but which when matured may be an important addition to knowledge. But justice can't be done to it until someone who •does have the required knowledge takes it in hand, tests it, gives it a scientific or practical form, and fits it into its place among the existing truths of philosophy or science. Does anyone think that women don't have such ideas? They occur by the hundreds to every woman of intellect. But they are mostly lost for lack of a husband or friend who has the knowledge that enables him to value them properly and bring them before the world; and even when that happens, they usually appear as his ideas, not their real author's. Who can tell how many of the most original thoughts put out by male writers belong to a woman by •suggestion, to the man only by •verifying it and working it out? If I may judge by my own case, a very large proportion indeed! [See the last four lines of the editorial introduction to this text.]

If we turn from pure theory-building to •*literature* in the narrow sense of the term and •the fine arts, there is a very obvious reason why women's literature is broadly...an imitation of men's. Why is Roman literature, as critics proclaim until we are sick of it, not original but an imitation of Greek literature? Simply because the Greeks came first. If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would

have had a literature of their own. As it is, they haven't created one, because they found a highly advanced literature already created. If the knowledge of antiquity hadn't been in abeyance for several centuries, or if the Renaissance had occurred before the Gothic cathedrals were built, they never would have been built because the builders would have had models in mind—ancient Greek temples or Renaissance buildings—which would have deprived them of the *freedom* to be original. We see that in France and Italy imitation of ancient literature stopped original development even after it had started. All women who write are pupils of the great male writers. A painter's early pictures, even if he is a Raphael, are indistinguishable in style from his master's. Even a Mozart doesn't display his powerful originality in his earliest pieces. What years are to a gifted individual, generations are to a mass. If women's literature is ever to have a different collective character from men's because of differences in their natural tendencies, it will need much more time than it has had so far before it can free itself from the influence of accepted models and guide itself by its own impulses. I don't think that there will turn out to be any natural tendencies common to women that distinguish their highest intellectual capacities from those of men; but even if that is right, every individual woman writer has her own individual tendencies, which at present are still subdued by the influence of precedent and example; and it will require generations more before their individuality is well enough developed to make headway against that influence.

It is in the *fine arts*, properly so-called, that the prima facie evidence of inferior original powers in women is the strongest, because (it may be said) opinion doesn't exclude them from these but rather encourages them, and in the affluent classes the education of women is mainly composed of training in the fine arts. [In that sentence as Mill wrote it,



there is a charming triple dose of caution: ‘. . . the (i) *prima facie* evidence (etc.) (ii) at first sight (iii) appears to be the strongest.’] Yet the gap between the best that women have done and the highest eminence attained by men has been greater in this line of activity than in many others. What explains this, however, is the familiar fact—more universally true in the fine arts than anywhere else—that professionals are vastly superior to amateurs. Nearly all women in the educated classes are taught a certain amount of some branch of the fine arts, but not so that they can earn their living or their social consequence by it. Women artists are all amateurs. The only exceptions to this confirm the general truth: women. are taught music, but only as performers, not as composers; and accordingly men are superior to women in music only as composers, not as performers. The only one of the fine arts that women do seriously follow as a profession and an occupation for life is the theatrical; and it is commonly agreed that in that they are as good as men if not better. To be fair about this, we should compare the productions of women in any branch of art with those of men who don’t follow it as a profession. Women have surely produced musical compositions, for example, that are every bit as good any produced by male amateurs. There are now a few women, a very few, who practise painting as a profession, and these are already beginning to show quite as much talent as could be expected. Even male painters (*pace* Mr. Ruskin) haven’t done anything very remarkable in the last few centuries, and it will be long before they do so. The reason why the old painters were so greatly superior to the modern is that a greatly superior class of men took up painting. In the 14th and 15th centuries the Italian painters were the most accomplished men of their age. The greatest of them had encyclopaedic skills and powers, like the great men of ancient Greece. But in their times fine art was felt and thought to be among the

grandest things in which a human being could excel; and through it men became the companions of sovereigns and the equals of the highest nobility—which they can’t become these days by anything but political or military distinction. In the present age, men of anything like that calibre seek to become famous and useful to the world by something more important than painting; and it is only now and then that a Reynolds or a Turner (of whose relative rank among eminent men I don’t offer an opinion) applies himself to that art. Music belongs to a different order of things; it doesn’t require the same general powers of mind, and seems to depend more on a natural gift; and it may be thought surprising that no great musical composer has been a woman. But even this natural gift can’t be made available for great creations without study and professional devotion to the pursuit. [The only first-rate composers, Mill says, have been German or Italian; and those are countries where the development of women’s intellects is grossly neglected, far worse than France and England. And he adds another point about Germany and Italy: there have probably been *thousands* of men who have learned ‘the principles of musical composition’ and barely *scores* of women who have done so. From this guess, Mill does the math:] On the doctrine of averages, we can’t reasonably expect to see more than one eminent woman to fifty eminent men; and the last three centuries have not produced fifty eminent male composers either in Germany or in Italy.

There are other reasons, too, that help to explain why women remain behind men even in the pursuits that are open to both. For one thing, very few women have time for them. This may seem a paradox, but it is an undoubted social fact. **(1)** The superintending of the family and the domestic expenditure which occupies at least one woman in every family, usually the one of mature years and long

experience; unless the family can afford to hire domestic help, opening the door to waste and dishonesty. Even when the superintending of a household isn't laborious in other ways, it's a very heavy burden on the thoughts; it •requires incessant vigilance, an eye that catches every detail, and it •constantly presents inescapable problems to be solved. If a woman has the rank and wealth to be somewhat relieved from these cares, she still has on her shoulders the management of the family's relations with other families—its relations with 'society', as it is called—and the less she has to do on the domestic side, the greater becomes the 'social' task: dinner parties, concerts, evening parties, morning visits, letter-writing, and all that goes with them. In addition to all this, society imposes on women, and only on them, the engrossing duty of making themselves charming. A clever woman of the higher ranks finds her talents being exercised almost to the full by her development of graces of manner and the arts of conversation. Let us look just at the outward side of the subject. Any woman who attaches any value to dressing well (I don't mean expensively, but with taste and awareness of what is naturally and socially appropriate) must give to her own clothes and perhaps those of her daughters an amount of time and thought that would go a great way towards achieving respectable results in art, or science, or literature<sup>3</sup>. . . . And there is another burden. Independently of the regular domestic and social duties that are laid on a woman, she is expected to have her time and abilities always at the disposal of everybody. Even if a man doesn't have a profession to exempt him from such demands,

no-one is offended if he devotes his time to some pursuit that he has chosen; 'I am busy' is accepted as a valid excuse for not responding to every casual demand that may be made on him. Are a woman's occupations, especially the ones she chooses, ever regarded as excusing her from any of the demands of society? Even her most necessary and recognised duties are barely allowed as exempting her. To be entitled to give precedence to her own •business over other people's •amusement [those are Mill's nouns], she needs an illness in the family or something else out of the common way. . . . Is it surprising, then, if she doesn't reach the highest eminence in activities that require unbroken attention and have to be focussed on as the chief interest of life? Such is philosophy, and such above all is art, in which besides the devotion of •the thoughts and feelings •the hand must also be kept constantly at work to attain high skill.

[Mill now has a paragraph about what is required for 'the great productions that immortalise a name'—far more than what's needed to earn a living as a professional artist. That higher level requires a passionate desire for fame, which carries the person through years of drudgery; and Mill continues:] Women seldom have this eagerness for fame. . . . The influence they seek is over those who immediately surround them. They want to be liked, loved, or admired by those whom they *see*, and they usually settle for the level of proficiency in knowledge, arts etc. that suffices for that. [This fact about women, Mills says, is a product of the circumstances in which society has placed them; it isn't part of their nature; but it is real, and shouldn't be forgotten.

<sup>3</sup> The sound turn of mind that enables a man to acquire a just idea of what is *right* in •ornaments seems to be the same as what gives him good judgment in •the more stable principles of art. Ornamentation has the same centre of perfection as the more serious arts; it's just that it is the centre of a smaller circle.—To illustrate this by fashion in dress, in which there is agreed to be a good or bad taste. . . . He who invents with the most success, or dresses in the best taste, if he had employed his skills and insight to greater purposes, would probably have revealed himself to have just as much skill—i.e. to have formed the same correct taste—in the highest labours of art.—Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*, Disc. vii.

Also, men are *encouraged* to seek fame, whereas for women] the desire of fame is considered daring and unfeminine. . . . If you have *any* ability to estimate •the influence on the mind of the entire domestic and social position and the whole habit of a life, you'll see that •that influence completely explains nearly all the apparent differences between women and men, including all that imply inferiority •on the part of women•.

### Moral differences

As for moral—as distinct from intellectual—differences, it is commonly said that women are 'better than men'. This empty compliment will provoke a bitter smile from every woman of spirit, because it implies that the situation of women is unique: there's no other context in which it is regarded as natural and suitable that the better should obey the worse! If this piece of idle talk is good for anything it is only as men's admission that power corrupts; because that is the only truth that is proved or illustrated by the fact, if it is a fact, that women are better. And •it may indeed *be* a fact, because• it is true that servitude, except when it actually brutalises, is less corrupting to the slaves than to the slave-masters. Of these two situations:

- being restrained, perhaps by arbitrary power,
- being allowed to exercise arbitrary power without restraint,

it is the former that is more wholesome for one's moral nature. Far fewer women than men commit crimes, it is said, and no doubt far fewer slaves than free men do so. Those who are under the control of others cannot often commit crimes, unless commanded by their masters and serving their purposes. The world, including the herd of studious men, blindly ignore and pass over all the influences of social circumstances; and I don't know of any more blatant

example of this than men's silly. . . .hymns of praise to the moral, nature of women.

The complimentary dictum about women's moral superiority might be paired off with the disparaging one about their greater liability to moral bias. Women, we are told, can't resist their personal partialities: their judgment in serious affairs is warped by their sympathies and antipathies. Even if this is so, it is still to be proved that women are oftener *mised* by their personal •feelings than men are by their personal •interests. The chief difference *there* seems be that men are led from the course of duty and public interest by their concern for •themselves, whereas women (not being allowed to have private interests of their own) are led astray by their regard for *somebody else*. Bear in mind also that all the education that women get from society •instills in them the feeling that the only duty of care that they owe is to individuals who are •personally• connected with them, and •doesn't introduce them to the ideas—even the elementary ideas—that are involved in any intelligent concern for larger interests or higher moral objects. The complaint against them resolves itself merely into this, that they fulfill only too faithfully the only duty they are taught, which is also almost the only one that they are allowed to practise.

When the privileged make any concession to the unprivileged, it is nearly always because the unprivileged have had the power to extort those changes. This is so much so that no arguments against the subjection of women are likely to be attended to by people in general as long as they can tell themselves that 'women don't complain of it'. [See also the section starting on page 8.] That fact certainly enables men to retain their unjust privilege some time longer, but it doesn't make it less unjust. . . . Actually, women *do* complain of the general lot of women; plaintive elegies on that are very common in the writings of women, and were still more

so back when the lamentations couldn't be suspected of having any practical objective. ·But· their complaints are like men's complaints about the general unsatisfactoriness of human life; they aren't meant to imply blame or to plead for change. But though women don't complain about the power of husbands, each complains about her own husband, or the husbands of her friends. It is the same in all other cases of servitude, at least at the start of the movement towards liberation. The serfs at first complained not about the power of their lords but only about their tyranny. The commoners began by claiming a few municipal privileges; then they asked to be freed from being taxed without their

own consent; but they would have thought it very presumptuous [= 'thoroughly] out of line' to claim any share in the king's sovereign authority. The only rebellion against established rules that is viewed in that way today is that of women against their subjection. A woman who joins in any movement that her husband disapproves, makes herself a martyr, without even being able to be an apostle, for the husband can legally put a stop to her apostleship. Women can't be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women until considerable numbers of men are prepared to join with them in the undertaking.