



Marriage in Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858)

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Harriet Taylor Mill writes about marriage both privately in the 1830s and in 1851 with the publication of her “Enfranchisement of Women.” According to HTM, marriage is designed to satisfy men’s sensuality. Women’s lack of sexual experience on entering marriage means they enter the contract without knowing its terms, hence neither partner is likely to experience the best kind of pleasure. “Every pleasure would be infinitely heightened both in kind and degree by the perfect equality of the sexes.” Without equality, marriage amounts to a kind of prostitution. Further, without wives’ right to earn, inherit, and control their own money, or to divorce, husbands own their wives, thus feel they have the right to abuse them.

If women had sexual knowledge, education, ability to provide for themselves and their children’s economic needs, and easy no-fault divorce, marriage as an institution could and should be abandoned. The state should have no part in the “regulation of affection.” “Every human being has a right to all *personal* freedom which does not interfere with the happiness of some other.” (Here HTM forecasts the basic tenet of *On Liberty*.)

In 1851, Harriet published “Enfranchisement of Women.” In this work, Harriet does not assert that marriage as an institution should be abandoned, but continues to maintain that economic independence before and after marriage is central to a marriage of equals. To the argument that if women worked they would double the number of competitors for jobs, and thus decrease wages, Harriet responds that even if true, if the total household income were the same if husband and wife both worked, women would be lifted from servant to partner in the relationship.

Further, economic independence requires equality in education. Girls should not be trained to be interesting companions of their future husbands, but should be educated “for themselves and for the world—not one sex for the other.” Without educated wives, husbands often cease to advance themselves, so men too would gain. Women’s education and economic independence both support the kind of marriages that will allow humanity to progress. Inequality in marriage is both fundamentally unjust and inexpedient.

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