

Mill-itant Ladies: A Look Into Mill's Thoughts on the Nature of Women By Molly Kuenzi

John Stuart Mill attacks the Victorian treatment of women with several reasonable points. These points may be generally summarized in that women need to be learned about honestly and objectively. His points all stem from or build off of this one basic idea: men do not know what or who women are. By explaining each of the major points as it grows out of the woman question and builds upon one another one may build a sort of cycle of reason as to how women came to be unknown by their own male peers.

The cycle is driven by fear and results in ignorance, which only leads to more fear. At the beginning of the cycle it is the manly fear of being equal to women. Women are not men and that difference—on the surface—appears like a great void or gap: how could something so different be equal, in some sense the same in value. This perspective leads to a fear of equality because if a man likes who he is something equal takes the efficacy out of individuality: humans are very competitive and therefore feel the need to be “better” than others, at least at something.

The fear-creating scenario leads into the next point that Mill makes that women have been made increasingly dependent on men, especially financially. Thus, the fear of being out-done by women is held in check by beginning to suppress the women so they may not perform in the same arenas as men. Out of the suppression comes control. Control creates a master/slave relationship because women are then totally dependent. At this point not only are women unable to support themselves, but they are unable to do anything other than “play the game.” In essence they must be increasingly obedient so that their own feelings are no longer of any extrinsic importance and the feelings the masters or men seek are the ones women display.

When the control is established it becomes less and less shocking. Thus, it becomes commonplace. As the treatment of women as a slave figure becomes commonplace it becomes a social norm—a sort of habit—and social or cultural customs are formed. The behaviors are not thought about, never naming questioned—they have become standard. As a result, it becomes the custom of the women to obey the men and treat them a specific way and to teach their female children what they need to know in order to make it in that society. Thus, the very natures of the women are concealed behind the fear they feel because of their obedient lot in life and they way they are educated on their role.

Because the women must hide their true feelings or are educated to not question their form of existence, men understand even less about them. When men are further distanced from the feelings, thoughts and attitudes of women and are only familiar with women's roles because they "have" one uneducated generalizations abound. The limited experience does not allow for an understanding of diversity so whatever a man's wife or mother is all women are and because women all share the same role they must all be the same thing. When men become so distanced from women they know even less about what women are capable of or their true natures. Mill explains that: people cannot truly know the person or people they are dominating. Thus, nothing is known of women because of their subjugated history (Greek slaves, traditional religious practices, feudalism, and Victorian expectations). Since no one knows anything about women, they are frightened when one steps a little too close to the line men have drawn. The fear returns and the bearing reins are once again tightened.

In essence, Mill's points do not create a pyramid to be torn down, but a cycle of abuse. One point leads into another. They are like dough: the yeasty fear spreads and grows and when it is torn into smaller pieces the process continues on again. Maybe women owe it to men to let

them know where they stand and who they are in hopes of educating men so they are not so fearful and realize that tightening the reins is of little help when women have the bit in their teeth. It is more likely that both sexes need to have their checks evened.