

Gender and the “Great Man”: Recovering Philosophy’s “Wives of the Canon”

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CLUSTER INTRODUCTION

“They’re called ‘my wife,’ and it seems they’ve done it all: typed, transcribed and even researched for their scholar husbands” (Mazanec 2017). In 2017, literary scholar Bruce Holsinger started a viral Twitter discussion when he tweeted about how the wives and partners of male scholars were acknowledged in published works. Looking through Google Books, Holsinger found variations of “thanks for typing” over and over again in the texts of male writers; his tweet prompted a wider discussion about “the politics of academic labor and writing, the role of women as collaborators, often even unacknowledged co-authors of academic work” (Mazanec 2017). The overwhelming response to Holsinger’s #thanksfortyping hashtag arguably suggests that a conversation about how we define intellectual labor, construct the boundaries of scholarly focus, and address the unseen and unpaid role of wives and partners in the academy is long overdue.

Discussions of gender politics in academia are gaining renewed attention in light of emerging data concerning the status of women in the academy and the gender dynamics of everything from publishing to institutional cultures. Studies of social science publications have shown, for instance, that female scholars tend to fare better with publication rates when they appear in collaborative works with men, whereas articles by a female author alone tend to take twice as long to move through the review process (Jaschik 2010; Elmes 2017; Hengel 2017; Teele and Thelen 2017). Relatedly, recent reviews of political science journals have revealed significant gender citation gaps—called the “Matilda effect”—which find female authors cited less, and their ideas attributed to male scholars (Rossiter 1993; Dion, Sumner, and Mitchell 2018).¹ Read together with the ongoing revelations of unchecked sexual harassment by male colleagues, these trends present a rather bleak picture of academia’s “gender troubles.”

Contemporary discussions of gender and academia might, however, benefit from a turn to the past—to examinations of where and how gender norms have historically constituted our understanding of intellectual labor and our criteria for evaluating what counts as scholarship. Thanks in large part to the efforts of feminist historians and scholars of philosophy and political thought, some progress has been made in this

regard. Duke's Project Vox is one such example of efforts to highlight the important contributions of women who have worked as philosophers, literary figures, and political activists (Duke 2018). Promoting thinkers like Lady Masham, Anne Conway, and the Marquise du Châtelet, these efforts recover women whose contributions to philosophy have not traditionally been considered canonical enough to include in studies of Western thought, but, by all rights, should be (Waithe 1995).

Yet, although these are laudable efforts to expand the canon to include female authors, they nevertheless fail to contest the underlying image of what scholarship—and intellectual labor more generally—looks like. Existing projects to recover women philosophers, for example, fail to capture the informal roles “academic wives” have played in developing the canon—from the mundane production of scholarly works (for example, #thanksfortyping) to organizing the social activities of departmental faculty. And though the private lives (and wives) of canonical figures are often used to flavor lectures in undergraduate courses on male thinkers, these kinds of anecdotal overtures seem to be the extent of scholarly interest. Alongside the recovery of women philosophers and literary figures, then, how might we situate the women who have long been held within the “private sphere” of academic life? And how might examination of that private sphere expand our historical perspectives of the canon as well as of the gender dynamics of intellectual labor today?

Focusing on the wives and intimates of five canonical men in the history of Western political thought—Socrates, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels—this cluster aims to initiate a more systematic discussion of the women who are “canon-adjacent.” By taking account of how women like Xanthippe, Mary Mottley, Harriet Taylor Mill, and the women associated with Marx and Engels have been received (and/or ignored), the cluster considers how “wives of the canon” have been placed on the periphery of scholarly focus in large part because they *did* play the role of wife and partner—roles regarded as personal rather than political in Western political thought. Indeed, one of the most common reactions we get to this project comes in the form of a question: “Okay, but what did she *do*?” The implication is, of course, that people must have produced something extraordinary to be worthy of remembering. More precisely, academia's focus on the production of “great texts” by solitary (male) authors has minimized other modes of intellectual work—namely, that of collaboration. Thus, as the articles variously discuss, the reduction of wives and partners to biographical trivia or background information tends to work in the service of producing the image of a single heroic intellectual—an image that is therefore inherently gendered.

But such assumptions about the nature of intellectual contributions may reveal less about the women (or men) in question and more about how academics have traditionally come to determine what stories are worth telling, and how, in their construction and reception of canonical texts and thinkers. By calling attention to these reception histories, and the narrative constructions that have worked to create the Western philosophical canon, the cluster authors not only begin the work of drawing into focus the private worlds of canonical men, and the women who have been kept

within this private sphere, but they also raise important and timely considerations about the gendered expectations of intellectual work more broadly.

Arlene Saxonhouse's and Terrell Carver's respective studies of Xanthippe and the wives and presumed mistresses of Marx and Engels, for instance, query the ways in which minimizing these women's presence affects both how we read canonical texts and how we characterize canonical men. For Carver, this line of inquiry takes the form of unpacking the frame of "greatness"—great texts, great men, great ideas—that underlies the very foundation of the canon. Framing our canonical thinkers as "great men" and their texts as "great books," Carver argues, necessarily shapes how we read those very texts and thinkers: "the youthful and middle-aged subjects seem already to have grown the much-pictured grey beards" (this issue, 596). By reifying "greatness," we also tend to privilege the abstract and theoretical approaches that are often associated with male authors. In short, he suggests that we make "men into minds" rather than taking seriously their lived experiences, which of course include the places and people they lived in and worked with. In contrast, by bringing to light the additional narratives of the supposedly "domestic" sphere of Jenny, Helene, Mary, and Lydia, Carver argues that we are better able to understand Marx and Engels and their texts as operating in and arising out of the particular material processes and spaces that shaped these subjects and their relations.

Saxonhouse's essay on Xanthippe takes up similar questions in the work of Plato. Approaching Xanthippe as more than a peripheral figure shows us the *work* that traditionally held "side characters" are doing in the text. More particularly, Saxonhouse finds that Xanthippe plays an important narrative role in adding depth and dimension to our perception of canonical figures like Socrates. From a handful of seemingly offhand remarks and punch lines verging on the cruel, the predominant reception history of Xanthippe has painted her as a shrew and a nag but—as Saxonhouse argues—we have a rather more meaningful picture of Socrates as a result. It is through Xanthippe's reduction to a "baby-making machine" (this issue, 615) that Socrates is cast as a "man without a body." He exists, in this characterization that again makes "men into minds," outside the confines of marriage and lust and all the bodily pursuits that exist within those spaces. Against Xanthippe, Socrates transforms into the philosopher *par excellence* who eschews the body for the pursuits of the mind. But in Saxonhouse's reading of the Platonic Xanthippe, she reminds us—as she argues Plato himself does—that this is an impossible ideal. Xanthippe and her baby-making body must *depart* before the philosophical discussion of the *Phaedo* can begin in earnest; this movement troubles, even as it helps to establish, the Socratic dichotomy between body and soul.

Alongside these investigations of narrative construction, the cluster touches upon the ways in which political theory—as a practice and pursuit—disciplines us as scholars by shaping how we come to understand and evaluate what constitutes "proper" intellectual labor and collaboration. As Menaka Philips argues, nowhere is this clearer than in the collaboration between John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill—a collaboration prominently credited by Mill himself but dismissed or downplayed by nearly all of his readers. Although feminist scholars over the years have tried to

recover a more generous view of Taylor Mill as a philosopher in her own right, Philips notes that these efforts, first, remain on the sidelines of traditional Mill scholarship, and, second, tend to maintain standard criteria about singular authorship and abstract intellectual reasoning as evidence of scholarly worth. Through her investigation into the Mill–Taylor partnership, however, Philips finds that the discipline has not only minimized Harriet Taylor Mill's influence on Mill but has also failed to recognize an alternative mode of intellectual work present in her own writings—what Philips calls Taylor Mill's "experiential politics." That politics is rooted in "critical perceptions of the 'everyday'" (this issue, 628)—perceptions that have too often have been rendered invisible by the ways in which we define intellectual and scholarly work.

Ross Carroll's study of Mary Mottley similarly challenges the common depiction of her as a mere "domestic manager" and "psychological prop," to recover her role as a valuable "political and intellectual interlocutor" to Tocqueville (this issue, 644). It is to Mottley that Tocqueville turns for not only political advice, but also editorial suggestions. And it is Mottley, crucially, as Carroll argues, that Tocqueville entrusts with his legacy. She is given responsibility for editing and publishing his papers, as well as for returning or destroying letters written to him. Despite this authorization, Mottley has long been vilified by Tocqueville biographers and ignored by political theorists, accused of overstepping her "prerogatives" as widow or passed over in favor of the narrative of Alexis's singular genius. Thus, by investigating Mottley's role(s), Carroll argues, we not only get a better sense of Tocqueville's ideal marriage and a picture of female citizenship—we also start to unpack how gender norms have disciplined scholarly assumptions about what and who counts in the realm of intellectual study.

In addition to these critical interventions, the cluster also offers us alternative visions for what political theory is and does. As Saxonhouse and Carroll both note, the "great man" narrative is an artificial construction. Texts, canons—even thinkers—do not spring into the world fully formed. Instead, they are *made* and are subject to editorial processes that are often deliberately constructed to reinforce the canonization of "great men." So what might it mean for political theory, as a discipline, if we were to overcome this practice? Philips's article provides one possible suggestion. Drawing on feminist reception history, and scholars like bell hooks's and Patricia Hill Collins's discussions of academic gatekeeping (hooks 1991; Collins 2008), Philips's reading of Harriet Taylor Mill reminds us that ignoring the embodied quality of intellectual labor and the different modes in which it operates has costs for interpretive work. Addressing those costs will require rethinking the scholarly assumptions that have kept the experiences and insights of certain figures out of view. Likewise, Carver highlights for us the importance of the *where* for political theory. Though intellectual historians often seek to contextualize the texts we read in a larger historical and biographical background, Carver notes that these broader movements are not enough. If we are to understand these texts, thinkers, and ideas properly, we also must situate them in the lived realities of those who created them—which might mean expanding our focus to include the labors of those surrounding the thinkers in question.

Taken together, the issues addressed by this cluster are not exhaustive, but rather attest to the rich lines of inquiry that open up by taking seriously the role of the wives and partners of canonical men. The themes raised highlight for us the collaborative editorial processes through which “canonical” texts are passed on to generations of readers. They highlight how, beyond overt misogyny or gendered roles, the very discipline of political theory has internalized expectations about what constitutes “real theory,” who can produce it, and how we ought to study it. And they show us that the material we work with as theorists—the biographies, texts, and canons—are not given. Instead, as all four articles suggest, we choose whose stories are important enough to tell, and those choices have interpretive and normative consequences for scholarly work.

Finally, the themes and challenges raised by this cluster are not limited to political theory and philosophy alone. Rather, the particular cases investigated here are better understood as an invitation to scholars working across disciplines. Indeed, posing questions about how intellectual labor and collaboration are defined opens a space to consider the ways in which academic disciplines more broadly operate with their own “private spheres.” Within that space, we might not only recover alternative forms of intellectual labor and expand the material available for scholarly study—we might also find new resources for addressing the ongoing politics of gender in academia today.

NOTE

1. First coined by Margaret W. Rossiter, the “Matilda Effect” is named for Matilda Joslyn Gage, “a nineteenth-century American feminist, suffragist, critic of religion and the Bible, and early sociologist of knowledge, who glimpsed what was happening, perceived the pattern, deplored it, but herself experienced some of the very phenomena described here” (Rossiter 1993, 335).

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