

Harriet Taylor Mill

1

1 Introduction

Harriet Taylor Mill is a somewhat forgotten figure in the history of political thought, even though *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) alone should earn her a place in the history of feminism, as should her short (unpublished) essay *On Marriage* (1833), and the pieces she co-authored with John Stuart Mill (1846–51) on domestic violence (by intimate partners, parents and employers) and other abuses of power. Her legacy has, however, been overshadowed by her co-authoring, and romantic, relationship with Mill, which produced much more than a series of newspaper articles. Indeed, Mill says he and Taylor Mill wrote the whole of *On Liberty* together. Given the fame, and importance, of this foundational liberal text, Taylor Mill ought to be better recognised in the canon of political theory more broadly. She was an unwavering champion of personal liberty and the need to freely develop our individuality so long as we do not cause unhappiness to others. She was an ardent egalitarian and democrat, in terms of personal relationships, civil rights, and political economy. She had a rich and nuanced understanding of happiness, and wrote insightful and interesting pieces on ethics, political philosophy, religion and economics. Although some of her arguments and insights have been surpassed by more recent writers, her central concerns remain of contemporary relevance.

The main sections of this Element will consider different elements of Taylor Mill's philosophical work and contribution. For the remainder of this introduction, I will give a biographical account of her life and work, as she is unlikely to be well-known to most readers.

Harriet Taylor Mill was actually never known by that name. She was born Harriet Hardy, became Harriet Taylor and after being widowed became Harriet Mill. (Indeed, according to the conventions of the time, she was Miss Hardy then Mrs John Taylor and then Mrs John Stuart Mill.) But calling her Taylor Mill helps distinguish her from both her husbands, and from her daughter, Helen Taylor (herself a feminist campaigner and activist).

Taylor Mill was born, in London, on 8 October 1807. Her father, originally from Yorkshire, was a gynaecologist (or 'man-midwife', as her birth certificate records).¹ She had four brothers and a sister and, like most women of her class in that period, was educated at home. She learned several languages, read widely in history, literature and philosophy, and kept abreast of current events. On 14 March 1826, at the age of eighteen, she married John Taylor, a wholesale 'druggist or "drysalter"' eleven years her senior.² He too had radical and 'free-

¹ Mill-Taylor Archive, *London School of Economics Library Archive and Special Collections*, Box III.

² See Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor*, 24.

thinking' sympathies, becoming a founder member of the Reform Club in 1836 (which was intended as the headquarters of the Liberal Party, and a home for Radicals and Whigs who had supported the Great Reform Act of 1832) and being involved in the affairs of the new University of London.³

The newly-weds mixed in radical circles, particularly the free-thinking congregation of Unitarian minister William Johnson Fox. They had three children in relatively short succession: Herbert (1827), Algernon (1830) and Helen (1831). Extant letters show Taylor Mill, at least, was very much in love, and happy in her married life. She wrote poetry and literary reviews, including of books on contemporary politics. Although her earliest remaining writings on women's rights post-date this, it seems likely she was already interested in questions around women's education; women's vulnerability to abuse and domination both by parents and by their husbands; and women's political, social and economic rights.⁴ It was this last subject which brought Mill into her orbit, probably in the summer of 1830.⁵

Already a well-known radical writer, who went against his father James Mill on the question of female suffrage, Mill was then exploring a variety of views outside the radical-utilitarianism which he had been born and bred to champion.⁶ This was, in part, the result of what he later called 'a crisis in my mental history',⁷ caused by Mill's realisation that achieving all the reforms for which he was fighting would not make him, personally, happy. Worse, he felt his education had left him lacking any meaningful emotional capacity at all. His faith in his father and Jeremy Bentham's educational, political and ethical project faltered, and he was left in despair. Reading Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry, among other things, helped him recover, and he deliberately set about exploring different political views, from the conservatism of Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle through the socialism of the Saint-Simonians to the Unitarian radicalism of the circle surrounding Fox.

Taylor Mill had, at this time, been married for six years. Although Mill later insisted that it was a long time before their friendship became in any way 'intimate', they were undoubtedly drawn to each other from their first meeting.⁸ They were soon exchanging frank opinions on marriage – and Mill was addressing his side of this correspondence to 'she to whom my life is devoted'.⁹ Mill later recalled that, though people might assume Taylor Mill's feminism was what made him a champion of women's rights, it was rather that his own feminist opinions were the root of his attractiveness to her.¹⁰

³ *Ibid.* ⁴ *Ibid.*, 26. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 23, 36–7. ⁶ Mill, *Autobiography*, 107, 137–91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 137–8. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 193. ⁹ Mill, *On Marriage*, 37. ¹⁰ Mill, *Autobiography*, 253.

By the autumn of 1833, things had come to a head. Taylor agreed to a trial separation, and Taylor Mill took her children to Paris, where Mill joined her (after some soul-searching on both sides, given how much this move would involve them both sacrificing).¹¹ They were extremely happy¹² – but divorce was impossible at this date, and both knew they were causing a great deal of unhappiness to Taylor.

Eventually, they determined on a utilitarian compromise – that which would secure most happiness for most people, including Taylor Mill’s husband and children. She returned to London to live with Taylor, but, as she expressed it, was ‘to neither of the two men more than a *Seelenfreundin*’ (a ‘soulmate’).¹³ She refused to give up ‘the liberty of sight’,¹⁴ continuing to see Mill frequently, including travelling abroad with him. The original agreement was altered after a relatively short period, with Taylor Mill moving into her own home in Keston Heath in June 1834.¹⁵ This seems to have been, in the main, a well-kept secret, with Taylor Mill’s family (apart from her children) apparently unaware she no longer lived with her husband, directing, for example, all their letters to her marital address.¹⁶ Generally, her relations with Taylor seem to have remained cordial, with the family meeting for birthdays and to celebrate Christmas, and her letters being addressed to ‘my dear John’.¹⁷ She also stayed with him when visiting London.¹⁸

This said, the course of her and Mill’s love did not run entirely smoothly, and Taylor Mill evidently did not find the situation an easy one – in a letter probably from 1834 she wrote ‘[h]appiness has become to me a word without meaning’, and in one probably from 1835 she refers to the ‘petty annoyances’ which were ‘wearing and depressing not only to body but to mind’ which she had ‘on account of our relation’, but Mill did not.¹⁹ The compromise, though it endured, was evidently fragile, at least at the beginning: Taylor Mill yearned for a more complete relationship with Mill, but ‘hesitate[d] about the rightfulness of, for my own pleasure, giving up my only earthly opportunity of “usefulness”’ which was ‘marked out as duty’. ‘I should’, she said, ‘spoil four lives [i.e. her husband and three children] & injure others [i.e. her family]. Now I give pleasure around me, I make no one unhappy; & am happy tho’ not happiest myself’.²⁰

¹¹ See Mill, Letter 84, to Thomas Carlyle, 5 September 1833, *CW* XII, 174–5 and Mill, Letter 89, to William Johnson Fox, 5 and 6 November 1833, 185–90.

¹² Mill, Letter 89, 185–90. ¹³ See Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor*, 56.

¹⁴ Mill, Letter 89, 186. ¹⁵ See Jacobs, ‘Chronology’, xlii.

¹⁶ Though there was some gossip about Mill and Taylor Mill’s relationship, see Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor*, 79–90.

¹⁷ See, for example, Taylor Mill, *Complete Works*, 442.

¹⁸ See Mill, *Autobiography*, 237, as well as indications in Taylor Mill’s letters.

¹⁹ Taylor Mill, *Complete Works*, 329–30. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

Taylor Mill does not appear to have written anything in the remaining years of the 1830s, or for some time into the 1840s, with an eye to publication. Apart from some letters, her only remaining writing is a journal from the spring of 1839 when she travelled in Italy with her children and Mill.²¹ (There are also some undated fragments in her manuscripts which might come from this period, and she may have contributed to Mill's unpublished letter about 'Enlightened Infidelity' from 1842.²²) She was probably busy bringing up her children: her sons went to school, but her daughter Helen was educated at home. Her circumstances kept her out of most society, though this seems also to have been her inclination. She wrote to Mill: 'I know what the world is, and have not the least desire either to brave it or to court it', and to Taylor, of potential guests for Christmas, 'a very little society is most agreeable to me'.²³

This said, Mill recalled that 'during many of the years of confidential friendship' they enjoyed in the 1830s and 1840s, 'all my published writings were as much her work as mine; her share constantly increasing as years advanced' because:

When two persons have their thoughts and speculations completely in common; when all subjects of intellectual or moral interest are discussed between them in daily life, and probed to much greater depth than are usually or conveniently sounded in writings intended for general readers; when they set out from them same principles and arrive at their conclusions by processes pursued jointly, it is of little consequence in respect to the question of originality which of them holds the pen . . . the writings are the joint product of both.²⁴

During the 1830s and 1840s, Mill was becoming increasingly well-known as an author. His first 'best-seller' was *System of Logic* (1843). His next 'hit', *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), was, he said, the first work in which Taylor Mill played 'a conspicuous part'.²⁵ She suggested the addition of a key chapter ('On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes'), and the dichotomy it explores between the dependence and independence of working people. She also influenced the whole 'tone' of the book, and its efforts to make plain that the laws of production are pretty much 'fixed' by hard facts about the world (the finite nature of some resources, for instance), but the laws of distribution are human-made, and thus changeable and subject to considerations of justice.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 170–5. ²² *Ibid.*, 340.

²³ *Ibid.*, 333, 490. Of course, there could be something of sour grapes in this, given that Taylor Mill was cut off from society by her irregular relationship with her husband and with Mill. Her preference for little society, and a quiet life, however, seems to have also persisted after she married Mill.

²⁴ Mill, *Autobiography*, 251. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

Taylor vetoed Mill's plan to dedicate *Principles* to Taylor Mill, though the proposed inscription was included in some copies given to friends.²⁶

Between 1846 and 1851 (spanning the time *Principles* was being written and first published (1847–8), and she and Mill were working on the second edition (1849)), Taylor Mill and Mill also worked together on a series of articles for the *Morning Chronicle* broadly engaging with themes around cruelty, violence and the tyrannical abuse of power. The first, about 'The Acquittal of Captain Johnstone', who had been charged 'with the brutal murders of three seamen under his command during a return voyage from China' deals with the poor judgment of juries and judges, as do several others.²⁷ 'The Suicide of Sarah Brown' highlights the issue of men being able to break the law (in this case regarding allowing a mother access to their illegitimate child, in others regarding domestic violence) with apparent impunity because of the bias of judges and juries.²⁸ These pieces show Taylor Mill's deep engagement with current events, and her anger at the injustice of the legal system and the apparent unconcern from most people (or at least most men) about cruelty and abuse of power (particularly towards those whom society rendered weaker, from employees through women and children to animals).

Taylor Mill suffered from bouts of illness throughout her life, as did Mill. Like many other middle- and upper-class people at the time, she often went to the coast, or to warmer regions of the continent, to try to improve her health. In 1849, she went to the French Pyrenean coastal resort of Pau, which was becoming increasingly popular with British people after the Scottish physician Alexander Taylor (no relation) recommended it as a cure for 'winter depression' and respiratory disease.

Even before she left for Pau, Taylor Mill was concerned about her husband's health, and offering advice over how to protect and improve it.²⁹ He continued to send poor reports of his physical condition throughout the spring.³⁰ Taylor Mill was torn between returning to London 'in the hopes of being to be of use' to him, and what she felt was her duty to stay in Pau to be with Mill, who had effectively lost his sight over the winter – doctors prescribed complete rest in a healthier climate as a cure.³¹ She decided to stay on in Pau, spending around a month there looking after Mill.

On their return, Taylor Mill discovered that Taylor had been diagnosed with cancer. She moved back into the marital home to nurse him, fighting on his

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 257. ²⁷ Taylor Mill and Mill, 'The Acquittal of Captain Johnstone', 865–6.

²⁸ Taylor Mill and Mill, 'The Suicide of Sarah Brown', 916–19.

²⁹ Taylor Mill, *Complete Works*, 489–90, 495. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 501.

³¹ *Ibid.* Mill's sight loss was, fortunately, only temporary.

behalf for second opinions and new treatments, but ultimately she was unsuccessful. Taylor died on 18 July 1849.

It was during her period of mourning that Taylor Mill worked on *Enfranchisement of Women*. Mill sent her the notice of a meeting of American suffrage organisations (of which *Enfranchisement* is ostensibly a review) because he knew she was ‘out of spirits’ and hoped she might be cheered by it.³² *Enfranchisement* praises not only most of the aims of the American suffrage organisations but also the way in which they are organised and led by women themselves. It contains radical arguments for both women’s right to, and need to, vote. Although published anonymously, it seems to have been a relatively open secret that Taylor Mill penned it (with some involvement by Mill).³³

Despite their criticisms of marriage as an institution, Mill and Taylor Mill married on 21 April 1851. Her two younger children were their witnesses, a sign that Taylor Mill’s immediate family approved of her decision, even if Mill’s family did not. (His brother George, in particular, was shocked that Taylor Mill would contemplate entering, again, into an institution she had so strongly criticised.³⁴) Mill did his best to legally divest himself of the powers given to husbands in and by marriage while delighting in the fact of their union, addressing Taylor Mill in several letters as ‘my darling wife’.³⁵ They moved to a house in Blackheath, Kent.

In the 1850s, both Taylor Mill and Mill suffered further ill health, including bouts of serious sickness from tuberculosis in the winter of 1853–4, which prompted them to make a list of topics they wanted to record their thoughts on before they died. These included ‘[d]ifferences of character (nation, race, age, sex, temperament). Love. Education of tastes. Religion de l’Avenir [religion of the future/religion of humanity]. Plato. Slander. Foundation of morals. Utility of religion. Socialism. Liberty. Doctrine that causation is will ... Family, & Conventional’.³⁶

It is not clear how much work was done on these topics immediately. Some appear not to have been addressed at all, or at least manuscript drafts did not survive. Several are addressed in essays published after Mill’s death (including religion of humanity, utility of religion and socialism) – it is not always clear

³² Mill, Letter 30, to Taylor Mill, after 29 October 1850, *CW* XIV, 49.

³³ I engage at more length with the question of Mill’s involvement in Chapter 5.

³⁴ See Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor*, 179. Mill’s mother and remaining unmarried sisters did not immediately call on Taylor Mill when told of Mill’s engagement. Their reasons are unclear, but it seems to have been a cause of offence for which Mill never forgave them.

³⁵ Mill, *Statement on Marriage*, 99; Mill, Letter 102, to Taylor Mill, 29 August 1853, *CW* XIV, 110; Mill, Letter 103, to Taylor Mill, 30 August 1853, *CW* XIV, 111.

³⁶ Mill, Letter 126, to Taylor Mill, 7 February 1854, *CW* XIV, 152.

when Mill started work on them. He wrote a review of George Grote's *Plato* in 1866.³⁷ (He had already engaged with two publications on Plato in 1840.)³⁸ His *Utilitarianism* (1861) may also be an outcome of a desire to write on the '[f]oundation of morals'. 'Family' is at least partially tackled in *Subjection of Women*, which was published in 1869, though first written in 1860.³⁹

Of all the proposed topics, liberty is the one most closely associated with Mill. He went on a long journey to Italy in the winter of 1854–5 for his health, where he was inspired to restart work on the essay which would become *On Liberty*.⁴⁰ On his return, he recalls that he and Taylor Mill worked on the manuscript together, going through every sentence in collaboration as co-authors.⁴¹ The manuscript was with them when they started a journey to warmer climes together in autumn 1858. Tragically, at Avignon, Taylor Mill was overcome by a massive haemorrhage, and died on 3 November 1858. *On Liberty* was published in February 1859. The dedication reads:

To the beloved and deplored memory of her who was the inspirer, and in part the author of, all that is best in my writings – the friend and wife whose exalted sense of truth and right was my strongest incitement, and whose approbation was my chief reward – I dedicate this volume. Like all that I have written for many years, it belongs as much to her as to me. . . . Were I but capable of interpreting to the world one half of the great thoughts and noble feelings which are buried in her grave, I should be the medium of a greater benefit to it, than is ever likely to arise from anything that I can write, unprompted and unassisted by her all but unrivalled wisdom.⁴²

Taylor Mill was buried in Avignon, under a gravestone of Carrera marble Mill had especially imported. Mill bought a house near the graveyard, and lived there for several months of each year, even when he was an MP (1865–8). He died on 7 May 1873, and is buried in the same grave.

Some of Mill's most famous works (including *Utilitarianism*, *Subjection of Women* and *Considerations on Representative Government*) were published in the decade after Taylor Mill's death. However, properly understanding their close, collaborative relationship (not least, long and deep conversations over almost their whole adult lives) means we should recognise Taylor Mill contributed even to books published posthumously. (This also includes Mill's *Autobiography*, which was published after they had both died.)

Taylor Mill's role in Mill's life, and work, was recognised by some contemporaries, with obituaries including reference to the fact that Mill had, '[d]uring

³⁷ Mill, *Grote's Plato*, 375–440. ³⁸ Mill, *Two Publications on Plato*, 239–43.

³⁹ See Collini, 'Introduction', xxxii.

⁴⁰ Mill, Letter 213, to Taylor Mill, 15 January 1855, *CW XIV*, 294.

⁴¹ Mill, *Autobiography*, 257–9. ⁴² Mill, *On Liberty*, 216.

more than twenty years . . . been aided by her talents and encouraged by her sympathy in all the work he had undertaken'; that, after their marriage, 'never did a philosopher find a more devoted or absorbing companion'; and that 'she must have been gifted with the rarest powers of moral and intellectual sympathy, for she awoke in Mill an admiration as passionate as it was pure'.⁴³

Over the years, however, her own contributions to political thought have tended to be forgotten (as is so often the case with female writers), and her contributions to 'Mill's' work have been denied, denigrated or downplayed. She has variously been cast as a vain self-aggrandiser, a self-appointed 'goddess' demanding worship and fealty, and a neurotic woman obsessed with violence.⁴⁴ The consensus (by, generally, but by no means exclusively, male writers) seems to have been that both she and Mill had a greatly exaggerated view of her abilities and her contribution, and she could safely be consigned to the dustbin of history – a rather embarrassing aberration on Mill's part, his otherwise clear sight being at least partially blinded by love.⁴⁵

In more recent years, there has been an effort to re-evaluate Taylor Mill as a thinker in her own right, and as a co-author with her more famous second husband.⁴⁶ This was begun by Friedrich Hayek, in 1951, with his *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Friendship and Subsequent Marriage*, added to by Alice Rossi's bringing together of Mill and Taylor Mill's *Essays on Sex Equality* in 1970, and greatly extended by Jo-Ellen Jacobs' production of *Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill* in 1998. Taylor Mill was included in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* in 2002,⁴⁷ and as one of the *Philosopher Queens* in the book of that name in 2020.⁴⁸ In the rest of this Element I will explore some of the key themes of her work.

2 Liberty, Individuality and Toleration

Questions around freedom were central to Harriet Taylor Mill's work from her earliest writings through literally to her death – according to John Stuart Mill, the manuscript of *On Liberty* was with them when she died. *On Liberty* is perhaps Mill's most famous book, featuring not only on thousands of student reading lists but are also cited in much public discourse around free speech and freedom of thought, conscience and action. The dedication (read by many every year, but not generally taken too seriously) is '[t]o the beloved and

⁴³ See Jacobs, 'The Lot of Gifted Ladies Is Hard', 132–62.

⁴⁴ See McCabe, *John Stuart Mill, Socialist*, 249–55.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Crisp, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism*, 5.

⁴⁶ On this, see Phillips, 'The "Beloved and Deplored" Memory of Harriet Taylor Mill', 626–42.

⁴⁷ See Miller, 'Harriet Taylor'. ⁴⁸ See McCabe, 'Harriet Taylor' in *The Philosopher Queens*.