

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf(stonecraft)?

Lavinia Liang

Excerpt

Former African-American slave Frederick Douglass wrote his memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, sixty-three years after Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft released her *Vindication on the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and fourteen years before Englishman John Stuart Mill would publish his treatise *The Subjection of Women*. In Douglass's work, he describes the horrors endured by African slaves on the American plantations and invites modern readers to consider the ways chattel slavery might still exist in societies today. For example, could subordination on the basis of gender be analogous to chattel slavery? If so, to what extent? Furthermore, what is so objectionable about marriage being legally similar to slavery? By looking at the institution of marriage in the aforementioned works, it is possible to interpret subordination on the basis of gender as analogous to slavery insofar as a woman is to be bound to her husband, such that she cannot hold property and that she herself is technically property when she becomes legally one with him. The comparison of these two institutions then provides an understanding of marriage as something inherently wrong because it limits the development of individual female potential.

To further define the development of an individual's potential, this paper will focus on several component aspects as derived from Frederick Douglass's descriptions of slavery. Of particular interest are the cases in which he describes the subjugation of female slaves—persons who were oppressed not only on the basis of race but also on the basis of gender.¹ These women lacked physical autonomy, emotional development, intellectual engagement, and personal aspirations. The latter three categories, while distinct, can be discussed together under the idea of internal desires or functions. These four categories, as applied to married women in general,

¹ See, for example, the case of Esther, on page 71 of Douglass.

rather than solely to female slaves, will be explored in this paper using American chattel slavery as a lens. While none of these concepts are quantifiable, they are still measurable by way of causal mechanisms. How does the patriarchy assert slave-master like control over women's physical autonomy or emotional development? How does the legal binding of marriage stultify intellectual engagement and the personal aspirations of women? The causal mechanism for physical autonomy is force, while the causal mechanism for the three internal desires is education, albeit different types of education.

Physical freedom, or lack thereof, in addition to concern for physical well-being, is a characteristic of both slaves and of married women. In chattel slavery, the slave is relegated to a piece of property, akin to an object. As such, he or she can be treated however the master wishes. Furthermore, chattel slavery, as seen in the American South, opened up nebulous spaces between the master and the servant which could be filled with the master's whim. Since the slave was an object in the master's household, he or she could be subject to punishments without justification. For example, in one case, a woman named Nelly was accused of "one of the commonest and most indefinite in the whole catalogue of offenses usually laid to the charge of slaves, viz: 'impudence.' This may mean almost anything, or nothing at all..." (Douglass, 75). Nelly was given a whipping, and in front of her children, nonetheless, on unclear terms of offense.

While the harsh punishments of slaves and the usage of flogging in American slavery are not directly reflective of the treatment of most women in marriages, the system of thought behind them are similar. Under a legal binding to their husbands, wives, too, become property. A wife is one with her husband; she is a part of him, legally and socially speaking. As property, a wife is subject to arbitrary physical treatment by her husband. While the causal mechanism in this physical relationship is not *necessarily* "force," it is on the primal level in that just as a slave-master or overseer utilizes the lash to control the slave, a man has traditionally been able to use physical strength to assert his will over a wife who is considered "property." Mill mocks

his opponents who claim that “the rule of men over women differs from all these others [forms of slavery] in not being a rule of force; it is accepted voluntarily” (Mill, 146). Even when patriarchal rule is seemingly voluntary, the use of physical force may strengthen a marriage’s ties and can discourage a woman from extricating herself from a damaging union. Mill also recognizes that, “In the first place, a great number of women do not accept it” (146), and furthermore that “wives, even in the most extreme and protracted cases of bodily ill usage, hardly ever dare avail themselves of the laws made for their protection: and if...they are induced to do so, their whole effort afterwards is to disclose as little as they can” (Mill, 147-148). Fear energizes the tightening bonds of physical force which hold a marriage together. Expectations are set up for women in the physical realm for them to be frail and domestic, to which leading feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft responds, “I do not comprehend his [Milton, who wrote of frail mothers] meaning, unless...he meant to deprive us [women] of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed...to gratify the sense of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation” (Wollstonecraft, 18). She refuses to accept the idea that women are physically weaker than their male counterparts, believing that “the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart” (Wollstonecraft, 20).

Works Cited

- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States :, 1994. Print.
- Mill, John Stuart, and Alan Ryan. *On Liberty; And, the Subjection of Women*. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1989. Print.

Author Commentary

Lavinia Liang

More so than putting forth an original or creative argument, this paper relies on synthesis of relevant background materials, as well as the inevitable comparative aspect of theoretical politics. When given the choice to choose between the topics of “subordination on the basis of social class” and “subordination on the basis of gender,” I chose gender for several reasons. First, as a woman, I already had personal experience and interest in gendered social subordination—I now wanted to look at it through a purely political-philosophical view. Secondly, I had already had some experience with the topic when I wrote a long paper on second-wave feminism. This prompt allowed me to explore first-wave feminism as an equally important academic subject.

A firm believer in the necessity of finding unique angles when approaching essays, I narrowed down the vast subject of “subordination on the basis of gender” to just discussing the practice of marriage. This was a logical choice because marriage, like chattel slavery, was an entrenched and institutionalized practice. This allowed for the most direct points of comparison.

One thing that was difficult about this prompt was how general it was, and thus how much freedom it allowed. With “Political Theory” being a very theoretical course in the first place, it was not completely surprising when I realized how wide an allowance this question created; all the same it forced me to personally narrow down the exact points I wanted to hit. This was made vastly easier by focusing just on comparing marriage with chattel slavery. This essay works mainly with Frederick Douglass’s memoir (for the chattel slavery part of this project), and Mary Wollstonecraft’s political treatises (for the women’s rights part of this project.) Synthesizing the two major sources in a balanced way was very important, to help audiences understand that this essay is really about *negative spaces*; that is, what has been *missing* for slaves and women for so long. For example, one of the essay’s concerns (can be found on pg. 4) includes the *lack* of emotional development experienced by so many women prior to feminism movements.

Editor Commentary

Aparna Raghu

In this political theory paper, Lavinia argues that the treatment of women in marriage is analogous to chattel slavery, a system in which slaves are considered property of their masters. Structurally, Lavinia first outlines the framework of her argument in her introduction. Then, within each specific body paragraph, she uses signposting to help place each bit of analysis within this larger framework. This structure is particularly effective in a comparative paper like Lavinia’s, for it ensures that she can balance analyzing each of her sources in depth and relating these smaller claims to the thesis as a whole.

In the first paragraph, Lavinia concisely introduces Wollstonecraft and Douglass, the authors she plans to compare. Then, in the second paragraph, she clearly outlines the four categories of analysis she will use to compare chattel slavery and marriage, namely “physical autonomy, emotional development, intellectual engagement, and personal aspirations.” Lavinia further divides these categories into two distinct groups, putting the latter three terms under the umbrella of “internal desires or functions,” which shows the reader how she will structure her essay around two large categories: “internal desires and functions” and “physical autonomy.” Overall, this structural outline provides the reader with a framework of Lavinia’s argument that we can then fill with details from the analysis in the body paragraphs.

Yet she does not end her development of structure with this outlining paragraph. In her first body paragraph about physical freedom, she uses signposting to remind the reader how this specific argument helps support her thesis, and how it fits into the framework set up earlier in the essay. For example, she transitions from a discussion of chattel slavery to a discussion of marriage by saying that “while the harsh punishments of slaves and the usage of flogging in American slavery are not directly reflective of the treatment of most women in marriages, the system of thought behind them are similar,” bringing together her sources without simplistically saying that they are similar. She continues to assert that “as a slave-master or overseer utilizes the lash to control the slave, a man has traditionally been able to use physical strength to assert his will over a wife who is considered ‘property,’” once again synthesizing her sources and reminding us of the purpose of this example of physical freedom. These periodic reminders help us build on the framework that Lavinia gives us in her introduction.

Overall, by laying out the skeleton of the essay at the beginning, and then reminding us throughout the essay about how each bit of analysis fits into this larger framework, Lavinia helps the reader to clearly visualize the trajectory of the argument, allowing the reader to fully understand and appreciate the nuances of this comparative argument.