



Feminist Utilitarianism in Anna Doyle Wheeler (1785–1848)

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Irish philosopher Anna Doyle Wheeler's feminist calls for women's equal political rights, equal education, and equal property rights are located in her well-known 1829 Finsbury Square lecture. Wheeler also discussed these issues in other publications, writing under the pen name "Vlasta."

The philosophical foundation for Wheeler's arguments for women's equality is her Benthamite utilitarian philosophy. And in 1825 she co-authored with William Thompson (1775–1833) a feminist utilitarian argument for the equal rights of women: *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, To Retain Them in Political and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery; In Reply to a Paragraph of Mr. Mill's Celebrated "Article On Government."* The *Appeal* was the first sustained argument for women's suffrage.

In the *Appeal*, Wheeler and Thompson argue that in the private sphere husbands deprive their wives of pleasures. Even if a husband is not a domestic tyrant, his wife remains deprived of the pleasures of freedom. Husbands deprive their wives of the pleasures of knowledge in order to keep them obedient. Wives require their husband's permission to socialize outside of the home; indeed, Wheeler and Thompson see this last restriction not simply as a limitation of women's pleasure but as something akin to mental pain.

Wheeler and Thompson's utilitarian analysis of the private sphere underpins their call for women's political and social equality in the public sphere. According to Mill, women need not be eligible for the vote as their interests are "covered" (coverture) by those of their husbands (or fathers). However, Wheeler and Thompson make it clear that Mill's claim is far from true, and thus, following Mill's own line of reasoning, women should have the vote.

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