



## **THE DESCENT OF WOMEN TO THE POWER OF DOMESTICITY: FROM MARGARET CAVENDISH TO LAURA INGALLS WILDER**

### **A DESCIDA DAS MULHERES AO PODER DA DOMESTICIDADE: DE MARGARET CAVENDISH A LAURA INGALLS WILDER**

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Is the virtue of domesticity a way for women to access civic power or is it a slippery slope to dependence and female subservience? Here I look at a number of philosophical responses to domesticity and trace a historical path from Aristotle to the 19th century Cult of Domesticity. Central to the Cult was the idea that women's power was better used in the home, keeping everybody safe, alive, and virtuous. While this attitude seems to us very conservative, I want to argue that it has its roots in the republican thought of eighteenth-century France. I will show how the status of women before the French Revolutions did not allow even for power exercised in the home, and how the advent of republican ideals in France offered women non-negligible power despite their not having a right to vote.

**Keywords:** Domesticity; Republicanism; French Revolution; Cult of Domesticity; History of Philosophy.

É a virtude da domesticidade uma forma de as mulheres acederem ao poder cívico, ou é uma 'encosta escorregadia' que conduz à dependência e subserviência femininas? Neste artigo examino diversas respostas filosóficas à domesticidade e traço um percurso histórico desde Aristóteles ao Culto da Domesticidade do século XIX. Central para o Culto da Domesticidade foi a ideia de que o poder das mulheres era muito mais bem aproveitado em casa, mantendo todos os membros da família seguros, vivos e virtuosos. Esta é uma atitude que nos parece muito conservadora, mas quero defender a hipótese segundo a qual ela tem as suas raízes no pensamento republicano da França do século XVIII. Pretendo mostrar como o estatuto das mulheres antes das Revoluções Francesas não permitia sequer que elas exercessem o seu poder em casa, e como o advento dos ideais republicanos em França ofereceu às mulheres um poder que não é insignificante, apesar de não gozarem do direito de voto.

**Palavras-chave:** Domesticidade; Republicanismo; Revolução Francesa; Culto da Domesticidade; História da Filosofia.

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## Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, domesticity, the work of caring for the home environment, became the target of feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, who saw it as a sort of bourgeois fetish, destined to keep middle class women from interfering in public life.

Why be so down on domesticity? Women around the world perform domestic duties while holding down full-time jobs. There is a clear injustice there—women work more than men for fewer privileges—as they are not compensated for their domestic work. And the argument that leaves all domestic work to women is based on a highly dubious form of essentialism drawing on tidbits from evolutionary biology and neuroscience, and patched together in books like *Men are from Mars Women are from Venus* (1992). Despite all this, many women (and some men) are still drawn to the idea that making the home a comfortable and safe place is an activity that is not only necessary, but also in some ways pleasant and rewarding. One example of that is the recent craze in tidying: the Japanese author Marie Kondo promises that if you fold your socks in the right way, your life will be generally calmer and you will develop the character traits and time needed to pursue your real goals and happiness.

There is something deeply appealing about this—if one looks past the environmental effect of everyone deciding to 'declutter' their homes at the same time. But the question of whether domesticity is worth pursuing never comes by itself. First, there is the ever-present thought that it is women who should be domestic, that men don't need to develop these skills and virtues, that folding socks will interfere with, rather than aid fulfill their larger goals. Secondly, there is the worrying thought that as a consequence of domesticity, women end up being kept out of politics. Linking domesticity to gender does lead to the attribution of separate domains for men and women. And given that politics typically takes place out of the home (meetings, voting, debates) then those whose domain is the home, tend to be left out of it.

In this paper, I want to outline a plan for investigating the evolution of the concept of domesticity by looking at how women philosophers of the past have negotiated it in their discussions of women's moral and political status. Although this brief *aperçu* will start in antiquity and end in the twentieth century, my main focus is on one particular moment in the history of philosophy: the early modern period, and particularly the late eighteenth century, as I believe that this is where we can find the arguments that influenced later positions, about domesticity as a power for women.

I will begin my (brief) survey in the late nineteenth century, when the ‘cult of domesticity’ was going strong and interfering with women’s effort to access political rights. I will then, in section 2, move back to antiquity, to expose the origins of the divide between domestic and political roles. I will highlight two distinct takes on this: the earlier one, propounded by Aristotle, that the domestic requires inferior virtues and capacities and therefore that women are not fit to take part in politics; and a later one, arguing that domesticity itself is a form of power, which is just as worth having as the power to participate in politics. In section 3, I will discuss how and why seventeenth-century philosopher Margaret Cavendish rejected domesticity in favor of a writing career. In section 4, I will look at the relationship between femininity and domesticity as it is presented in the works of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft. In section 5 I will show how two French contemporaries of Wollstonecraft, Manon Roland and Louise Kéralio, attempted to reconcile Rousseau-style domesticity with their belief that women’s participation in a republic was crucial and not in any way inferior to men’s. I will identify as a point of departure between their position and the later one I attributed to the Cult of Domesticity the rejection of Aristotelian essentialism about women’s capacities.

### **1. Women’s Ambivalence to Political Power and Claim for the Power of Domesticity and the Attempt to Reconcile the Two**

By the end of the nineteenth century, in England and the United States, women (and men) who wanted to prevent women getting the vote appealed to the idea that domesticity was a power and a mark of virtue, and that it held greater value for women than any political rights might bring. And yet, when a few decades later, women did get the vote, the women who had objected availed themselves of the opportunity, seeing it as a duty, rather than a right: they had to make sure that the wiser rule they exercised from home was not compromised by the vote of the ‘rougher’ women voters. Laura Ingalls Wilder, the famous children author, was one of these women:

It is easy to forecast the effect of woman suffrage on politics if the home-loving, home-keeping women should refuse to use their voting privilege, for the *rougher class of women* will have no hesitancy in going to the polling places and casting their ballots. (Wilder, 2007, p. 182)

The domestic woman was still a more qualified voter than the woman who had rejected her role in the home in favor of politics. Other women who opposed suffrage in the US claimed that to give women the vote would not only harm the public sphere by unleashing a large

number of unqualified voters (especially, some said, if black women were given the vote too), but it would harm the actual position of women at home and in society. Women, they argued, were in a unique position of having power in the home, and political influence gained by their social work outside—the funding of schools and early child care, prison reform, etc. Giving women the vote, some argued, would take this power of doing good from them, and this would mean that families, children, and the poor in general would suffer.<sup>2</sup>

One thing that is evident from looking at texts on domesticity from that period, is the presence of a genuine belief that there is power to be had in domesticity, a political power even. This leads to a contradiction. Women are kept from the political life because they are held to be unqualified for it, and they are persuaded to stay away from polling stations by having political power in the home dangled in front of them.

What transpires from the many contradictions inherent in the ‘antis’ position is that there are at least two distinct but related claims behind their efforts to keep women in the home. The first is that women are not qualified to do politics, that they are naturally bad at it, but also worse if they are poor or black. The second is that women are powerful in their homes, that to manage a household effectively has as much effect on the progress of humanity as participating in the running of the state has. If the second claim is true, then the first one is easier to accept—keeping away from politics is a trade-off, not a mark of inferiority.

## **2. The Historical Exclusion of Domesticity from Political Power—Aristotle.**

The claim that there is power to be had in domesticity is a marked improvement from an older position, namely that domestic occupations devolved onto women because they are devoid of any real import: citizens must be fed, and those who are least capable of doing real work should take care of it. This is a natural consequence of Aristotle’s moral and political philosophy. From his claim that women are not naturally suited for political participation (*Pol.*, 1260a25–1260a30), and his belief that to be human is to be political (*Pol.*, 1253a1), it follows that whatever women do is therefore not intrinsically valuable.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance (Wiggin, 1913, p. 6). It is difficult to disentangle the genuine concerns for preserving women’s perceived domestic power from the racist and sexist motivations behind the ‘antis’ arguments (see McConnaughy, 2013). The nineteenth century Cult of Domesticity has been interpreted in two ways: as a claim that ‘True Women’ had to be passive homemakers, and as a claim that ‘Real women’ were homemakers but also independent and active in public *fora*. (Cogan, 2010; Rupp, 2002).

Although Aristotle does not explicitly reach this conclusion, it is manifest in that his account of the political excludes any domestic consideration—all political work takes place in the public place, the Agora, and it involves men meeting, debating, and voting. As Soran Reader noted, Aristotle trivialized the sort of things that women were occupied with: “Although Aristotle allowed that some necessities might have dignity and worth, as ‘proper parts’ of excellent human life, human needs for nourishment, craft, trade and labor are explicitly denied ethical significance” (Reader, 2007, p. 146). So, for Aristotle, the place of the woman in the home is both one of exclusion—she does not have what it takes to stand alongside men in the public forum—and at the same time of enforced necessary but undignified labor—in order to be free to play their political role, men must be clothed and fed, their children brought up.

### 3. The Rejection of Domesticity—Margaret Cavendish.

Before I move on to my main focus, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, I would like to pause, briefly, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in order to show that it was still possible then to depart from the accepted wisdom that domesticity was women’s only and meager power in the human community. Although many early women philosophers either failed to discuss domestic duties or somehow tried to justify them, a few did reject the idea that they had such duties outright. Among them Margaret Cavendish, who proposed that domesticity was an obstacle to intellectual or creative power.

In *Sociable Letters* 150—which, for the sake of this argument, we will read as autobiographical—the letter writer is criticized by her neighbors for not giving her maid domestic work to do. While she is alone in her room writing, her maids are idle, giving a bad example to young women everywhere. Moved by the gossip, the author decides to do her duty as the mistress of the house, and to take up spinning together with her maids. When she asks her governess to help her set up the spinning wheels, the woman laughs and tells her that she will only waste flax if she spins. She will also waste everyone’s time, and no one will be happier as a result. It will be much better, the governess says, if the author sticks to writing—as she has a natural gift for it—and if her maids stick to reading books, which they enjoy and which will improve them, not spoil them as the neighbors claim. Neighbors be damned.

I sent for the Governess of my House, and bid her give order to have Flax and Wheels Bought, for I, with my Maids, would sit and Spin. The Governess hearing me say so, Smiled, I ask’d her the Reason, she said, she Smil’d to think what Uneven Threads I would Spin, for, said she, though Nature hath made you a

Spinster in Poetry, yet Education hath not made you a Spinster in Huswifry, and you will Spoil more Flax, than Get Cloth by your Spinning, as being an Art that requires Practice to Learn it; [...] And after I had Mused some time, I told her, how I heard my Neighbours Condemn'd me, for letting my Servants be Idle without Employment, and that my Maids said it was my Fault, for they were willing to be Employed in Huswifry; she said, my Neighbours would find Fault, where no Fault was, and my Maids would Complain more if they were kept to Work, than when they had liberty to Play. (Cavendish, 1664/2012, p. 161)

Cavendish's first choice of an industrious activity to perform with her maids is spinning. This suggests that she was directly criticizing an influential view that domesticity was an important womanly virtue. Spinning was not a common pastime amongst aristocratic English women in the seventeenth century—it was a job that poor women did to earn money. The story told in Letter 150 is almost certainly chosen to bring to mind the story of Lucretia, surprised by her husband and his friends spinning with her maids, while the other wives in the story used their husband's absence to party. This story was a common trope in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one that Cavendish and her contemporaries would have been familiar with by reading Shakespeare, Ovid, and Plutarch's *Morals*. Plutarch held Lucretia up as a model for feminine virtue: superior to the wives of her husband's friends because she worked at her spinning wheel while her husband was away.<sup>3</sup> But Lucretia was raped for her effort—the other wives, as far as we know, were not. So why should any woman see in Lucretia something to aspire to? In a sense, Lucretia was powerful. After she committed suicide, we are told the rapist and his father were chased out of Rome and Rome became a republic. Christine de Pizan adds to the story, somewhat more relevantly, that after the rape of Lucretia, Roman rapists were given the death sentence. But Lucretia's power, if any, is posthumous. It seems that Cavendish, by rejecting Lucretia's model of virtue, is questioning whether domesticity brings anything worth having.

#### 4. Feminine Power and Domestic Virtues: Rousseau and Wollstonecraft

An argument that was common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (and indeed earlier) was that women had power *qua* women, i.e. that their femininity, that which made them different from men, gave them power over men. If that power went unchecked, it would be dangerous, and hence it was only right to attempt to curb it by keeping women in the home. This is the essence of Rousseau's argument in the *Emile* when he says that “Female animals are without this sense of shame (...) [But] their seasons of complaisance are short and soon over. Impulse and restraint

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<sup>3</sup> Some accounts talk about Lucretia weaving, rather than spinning, some simply mention that she was working at a loom for her husband, and some specify that she was carding wool as well as spinning.

are alike the work of nature. But what would take the place of this negative instinct in women if you rob them of their modesty?” (1762/1993, p. 386)

Women must therefore be trained to be chaste, and as a result of this imposition on their natural urges ‘the life of a good woman is a perpetual struggle against self’ (1762/1993, p. 398). Rousseau also believed that when women are properly trained, i.e. trained out of their ‘natural viciousness’, they may develop domestic virtues, and that those virtues are crucial for the shaping of a nation’s character. A good wife and mother, provided she is not poor and does not live in the city, will serve as moral educator not just for her children, but for the peasants who live on her land. In particular, she will teach them that they are better off toiling the land, and living simple lives, than moving to the city where they would live a life of servitude, mendacity, or even crime.

This view of domestic virtue is developed in Rousseau’s *New Heloise*, where his heroine, Julie, goes from being a highly educated young woman in love with her tutor, to the virtuous wife of an older man she respects but does not love, dedicated mother, and moral mentor of a rural community. Julie is too busy even to read for her own pleasure, and although she still loves her tutor, she has given up any desire of a sexual relationship with him. This dual view of womanhood goes somewhat, perhaps towards explaining Rousseau’s popularity with female readers: he sees women as having both sexual power, harmful, but very effective, and when they relinquish that, domestic power, which plays an important role in his vision of the rural republic because it keeps citizens at their work, and stops them running off to the big city.

Mary Wollstonecraft, in particular, in her *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1792/2014) spends a great deal of time and effort countering Rousseau’s flawed and harmful arguments that women have ‘feminine powers’. There are no essential differences between men and women, she says, simply whatever mis-education put there. And neither reason nor virtue can be gendered. If God created us in his image, then he cannot have created women as weak and vicious as Rousseau makes them out to be. All are perfectible, so all have reason and the capacity for virtue and knowledge. In order to develop knowledge and virtue, women, like men, and in the same way, must be educated. An educated woman is a useful citizen, one that will participate intelligently in political debates, rather than interfere and cause harm from a position of ignorance (as she is wont to because, like men, women are political animals).

But despite her denial of a special ‘feminine’ power, Wollstonecraft seems to be in partial agreement with Rousseau in that she believes that a woman’s civic virtue is also partly domestic

virtue: “It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men; nay, it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and mothers” (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2014, p. 171).

Being in charge of the home, and the well-being of the people in it, is not only a duty, but a ‘grand’ one, which all citizens of a republic, men and women, should in some way fulfill. She does agree with Rousseau that virtue, and in particular civic virtue, is born and nurtured in the home, and that those who are responsible for the upbringing of children are also responsible for shaping the future of the republic. She does not, however, think that performance of domestic duties should come at the cost of civic rights or personal development:

And did they pursue a plan of conduct, and not waste their times in following the fashionable vagaries of dress, the management of their household and children need not shut them out from literature, nor prevent their attaching themselves to a science, with that steady eye which strengthens the mind, or practicing one of the fine arts that cultivate the taste. (1792/2014, p. 221)

Domesticity is a virtue, according to Wollstonecraft, but if it is not supported by rights, and if it is attributed to sexual difference instead, it does not grant women powers.

## **5. The Redistribution of Power: The Republic and Women’s Place during the Revolution**

French 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Manon Roland and Louise Kéralio, both disciples of Rousseau, also argued that domesticity was essential to civic virtue, and that it was crucial to the growth and stability of the new republic born out of the French Revolution. Roland’s view of women’s virtues was first detailed in her 1777 essay on the question whether the education of women could improve men. A woman, she wrote, should be sweet and compassionate so as to inspire love and virtue; patient and hardworking so as to keep the household running smoothly (Faugères, 1864, pp. 332, 334, 344). This picture of domesticity is presented in a republican context: she makes it clear early on in the text that the ideal societies are the Roman or Spartan republics. Women in such societies, she tells us, are confined to their home, and their virtuous presence there maintains the general happiness of the republic.

More sedentary, more enclosed ordinarily in republican governments, left to domestic tasks, nourished by this patriotism that elevates the soul and sentiments, they labored toward the citizen’s happiness and that of the state, through the peace and order reigning inside their



homes, and the care they take to cultivate in their children the germs of courage and virtues that must be perpetuated as well as liberty. Focused on their families, they could not set any other ends for themselves than that of being cherished for the qualities that are needed in the home and that they would be recommended for. The love of little things, seeking vain distinctions, is a feature only of superficial societies, where each brings pretensions devoid of real merit to sustain them (Faugères, 1864, p. 344).

Roland does not claim that domesticity is a natural attribute of women. It is work, and it requires virtues that need to be developed. This attitude is born out in a later text: a good woman has to become an expert at domesticity, and should be able to keep the home going without having to recourse too much outside help—she should be able to cook for her family, if needed, and should certainly not send her babies to wet-nurses: “I expect a woman to keep her family’s linen and clothing in good order, to feed her children, order, or herself cook dinner, this without talking about it, keeping her mind free and ordering her time so that she is able to talk of something else” (Berville & Barrière, 1827, vol. 1, p. 198)

Louise Kéralio a historian, political philosopher, and printer, contemporary of Roland, also argued that women must learn to prefer domestic work to politics, and that this distribution of roles was essential to the well-being of the nation. In a letter to the journalist Jacques-Pierre Brissot she wrote:

Mademoiselle de Kéralio is very satisfied by what [Monsieur Brissot de Warville] said today about the influence of women. It is very much part of Melle de Keralio’s principles that women should not make a great spectacle of themselves. [...] A love of publicity is bad for modesty, from the loss of that comes distaste for domestic work, and from idleness, principles are forgotten and from lack of morals arise all of public disorders.

We should be forced [when we need their political input] to pursue women inside their homes, their presence should be hard to obtain, and rare, offered as a favor. (Kéralio, 1789, 446AP/7 Dossier 2, G a Ma, 31, my translation).

At the same time, Kéralio did not believe that women’s power or influence was any less than men’s. In her newspaper, the *Mercure National*, she said as much the Abbé Sieyès who suggested, when he drafted the first French constitution, that women could only be ‘passive’ citizens who could not participate directly in the building and running of the republic but would benefit from its reforms:

We don’t understand what [Sieyès] means when he says that not all citizens can take an active part in the

formation of the active powers of the government, that women and children have no active influence on the polity. Certainly, women and children are not employed. But is this the only way of actively influencing the polity? The discourses, the sentiments, the principles engraved on the souls of children from their earliest youth, which it is women's lot to take care of, the influence which they transmit, in society, among their servants, their retainers, are these indifferent to the fatherland?... Oh! At such a time, let us avoid reducing anyone, no matter who they are, to a humiliating uselessness. (*Le Mercure National*, 20 August 1789, my translation).

Kéralio was clearly angered by Sieyès' formulation: "in what sense are women not active?", she asks. What is there of passivity in the work they conduct from the home, nurturing republican values and giving birth to new citizens? Like Roland, she was a reader of Rousseau, and was convinced that there was a place for women in a Republic that was central to the flourishing of the nation, even though that place was in the home rather than in the Assembly. So, she does not disagree with Sieyès that women should stay home, rather than participate in debates taking place in public *fora*, but she believes that the home is just as important a place for the making and cultivating of the republic as the Assembly is.

So, how do Roland and Kéralio's view of domesticity relate to the one we identified earlier as (more or less) representative of some nineteenth century anti-suffragists?

The cult of domesticity accepted the Aristotelian view that women are not capable of taking part in politics, because they are too fragile, and intellectually less agile than men. At the same time, their capacity for empathy, religiosity and their nurturing character means that they can achieve much towards the general good from within their home. It means that they do not really need to do politics in order to be a powerful influence in the world.

In one sense, this sounds like what Roland and especially Kéralio were saying: women are active—just not in the same way as men, i.e. they do not go to the assembly, they do not debate in clubs, they stay home with their children. And through the work they do at home, they shape citizens, not only their children, but all those they come into contact with in the course of their domestic life, neighbors, employees, guests and other family members. But what is missing from the account of republican women philosophers, Wollstonecraft, Roland, Kéralio (and others) is the claim that women are inherently *incapable* of doing politics. This claim would have been seriously at odds with the role they themselves played in the revolution, as writers, printers, and advisors. It is reported as a fact that women typically do not take part in the political life, and that bringing up children typically falls to them. It is not attributed to their innate abilities—simply that this is how the regime they are currently working with, the new

French republic, that is, functions and that changing it would be too much work for the time being (and perhaps even interfere with the other changes that are happening in the transition between monarchy and republic). Some women philosophers of the revolution demanded that this gendered division of labor, just like the monarchy, should be abolished to the extent of letting women participate in politics—Olympe de Gouges, for instance. And Wollstonecraft, whose vision is less contained by current events also extend to a future in which men and women would share domestic and political work. So what remains is the claim that women exercise their political power from within, both because this too needs doing—the home being the heart of the republic as much as the assembly is—but because for the time being, i.e. in late 18<sup>th</sup> century France, that is the place where they can most easily exert their influence.

So it seems that the nineteenth century position we identified earlier is one of regress. Progress would have taken women out of the home, and men into it, much as Wollstonecraft hoped. What it did instead was keep women in the home, and reinstated a justification for it that belongs with Aristotle: women are in the home because that is all they are good for.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

It seems as though there is a gap between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the mid-nineteenth century, one that was brought on by something happening mostly in the United States, despite the influence of women such as Frances Wright, or Nancy Kingsbury, who defended Wollstonecraft's vision of political womanhood and declared domesticity to be a harmful harness on women's capacities for development.

But could progress have come from the rejection of domesticity? What the French revolutionary women who followed Rousseau argued was that looking after home and family had real civic values, that it could help a republic and keep it from destroying itself after an initial revolution. The home, they argued, was the locus of civic values, the place where citizens are formed. And in order for this to be the case, there must be some stability, and some care devolved on keeping the place clean and welcoming. But, unless one accepts the flawed essentialism that they appeared to reject, this work need not be women's domain, and it need not be linked to specifically womanly virtues or character traits. This seems to be something Manon Roland understood, as she took care, in later writings, to emphasize that domestic and public work could and should be shared between a husband and wife, depending on their

characters as well as their socially appointed roles.

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