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### Women as Wives and Mothers in *Wealth of Nations*

In an initial read of Adam Smith's landmark work *Wealth of Nations* for the young economics student, concepts known from our daily observations of economics are ingrained into our culture thanks to his contributions: self-interest motivates the economy, the division of labor increases production where necessary, and international trade is advantageous for all nations, to name a few. What may slip the mind of readers is the exclusion of women from *Wealth of Nations*, especially as the word is only given considerable time at three points throughout the series. It is a lost cause to expect economic writers of Smith's time to be bleeding heart feminists, as thankfully the role of women in the economy has certainly evolved in passing centuries. This essay identifies Smith's limiting narrative of women as wives, child-bearers, prostitutes, and self-sufficient individuals as their role in the wealth of nations.

For contemporary women studying economic philosophy, nearly every introduction to a foundational thinker invites a defense of their participation in the economy in an equal faculty to men. It is exhausting, but surprisingly the father of capitalism, Smith, has very little to say concerning gender roles in the economy. Smith does not explicitly condemn women into the private sphere and does not take a personal stance throughout *Wealth of Nations* on the merits of allowing women into the workforce. Such a stance would be unrealistic even for his time in Scotland, where

women could pursue employment outside of the home, yet in limited capacities. But in the descriptions of occupations Smith employs, such as nailmaker, butcher, baker, they are inherently masculine and posit identities as heads of households. Smith does not clearly exclude women from these occupations or being active in markets, but the reader would not imagine their inclusion from Smith's narrative alone.

Respectable occupations are assigned to lower class men in *Wealth of Nations*. Smith's allegory for explaining the economic advancement of the division of labor addresses the nailmakers as "boys", which provides the reader a masculine image of the nailmaker for the remainder of this reference. Smith states,

"I have seen several boys under twenty years of age who had never exercised any other trade but that of making nails, and who, when they exerted themselves, could make, each of them, upwards of two thousand three hundred nails in a day."<sup>1</sup>

Here, Smith accounts that young men who have solely focused their efforts on nailmaking and devoting themselves to an individual task within nailmaking have an improved dexterity to that task. The improved dexterity of the nailmaker enables the young men to produce greater quantities of nails<sup>2</sup>. The young men make more nails with the division of labor from their improved performance than a young man who takes on all of the nailmaking tasks himself. While the nailmaking allegory is widely used to

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 15

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 15

explain the economic benefits of the division of labor, the deliberate use of young men paints a historically inaccurate picture of who nailmakers in the eighteenth century were.

Women were also nailmakers in Smith's Scotland and could hold a medley of manufacturing occupations<sup>3</sup>. Robert Dimand in *Retrospectives: Gender in Classical Economics* confirms this misnomer of Smith's nailmaking allegory, stating that women in eighteenth century Europe could be paid laborers and worked alongside men in the similar low-wage occupations, especially nailmaking<sup>4</sup>. Discussing whether Smith is historically accurate in gendering certain occupations may seem like an unnecessary qualm of semantics, but the exclusion of women from these narratives and most other narratives of occupations extends throughout the *Wealth of Nations*' two volume series. Readers of Smith's arguments and sociological observations are inaccurately left with a reductive image of women's contributions to the economy.

Women in *Wealth of Nations* are rarely depicted in paid employment and, if so, are portrayed in demeaning occupations. Smith's mention of women's paid labor comes in an unexpected passage of *Wealth of Nations*, in which Smith explains his preference for potatoes over wheat for nourishment and improving the health of a nation. He expounds on Great Britain's potato reliance by listing lower class individuals who may consume the tuber, stating:

The chairman, porters, and coalheavers in London, and those unfortunate women who live by prostitution, the strongest men and the most beautiful women

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<sup>3</sup> Dimand, Robert, *Retrospectives: Gender in Classical Economics*, The Journal of Economic Perspectives, 2004, p. 234

<sup>4</sup> Dimand, Robert, *Retrospectives: Gender in Classical Economics*, p. 230

perhaps in the British dominions, are said to be, the greater part of them, from the lowest rank of people in Ireland, who are generally fed by this root.<sup>5</sup>

The list contains a clear gender divide in the lowest ranks of employment in Great Britain: men become chairmen, porters, and coalheavers and the unfortunate women turn to prostitution. Though no matter their lowly ranks in society, potatoes are a fine source of sustenance, Smith urges.

Smith's contrast of men and women's employment in the most impoverished class provides readers with a historically inaccurate depiction of women's contribution to the economy. As women's paid employment is never mentioned beyond the above glorification of potatoes, Smith's sudden mention of women's work allows readers to anchor prostitution as the only occupation a woman of the lowest ranks in society could obtain. Prostitution also carries a dishonorable connotation, as even Smith condemns the work of prostitutes as "unfortunate". Low-wage men are depicted in Smith's potato allegory employing their strength in numerous occupations that are considered more respectable, relative to prostitution.

The reader's consequential imagery of lower income women's paid work is not Smith's intention, but *Wealth of Nations* does not properly construct healthy and factual narratives of women's paid work for the reader to imagine otherwise. In Smith's time, low-income women were essential to the textile industry, served as the majority of the Highland's agricultural workers, and could exclusively become wet-nurses and midwives

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 177

<sup>6</sup>. Smith was likely aware of these facts, but neglected to include women-dominated professions in *Wealth of Nations* to create an authentic account of women's professions.

In advocacy of public institutions, which would educate all people so they may become better laborers and conveniently learn relevant occupations, Smith discusses women's education in the home. Women's education was not yet public in Smith's age, but women received a tailored education by their guardians concerning the presentation oneself in the private sphere<sup>7</sup>. Smith acknowledges this form of education as efficient, because women must learn these qualities if they're expected to become mothers and wives<sup>8</sup>. Relative to men's education, Smith says, women are privileged to receive teachings which prepare them for their adult lives<sup>9</sup>.

While merely a paragraph of a larger discussion on public education, Smith reveals what values are pertinent to young women in *Wealth of Nations*. Young women are privileged to receive education most applicable to their personal lives, like learning moral restraint: "Every part of their education tends evidently to some useful purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, (...)." <sup>10</sup> Women's chastity expressed as both an economic and

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchison, R., *Lordship to Patronage, Scotland 1603–1745*, Edinburgh University Press, 1983, p. 86

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 781

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 781

<sup>9</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 781

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 781

societal need. Smith mentions in the first book that a married couple must be mutually self-sufficient in order to increase their chances of raising their children to adulthood<sup>11</sup>. Self-sufficiency surely cannot be attainable for a young couple, so Smith discourages men and women to marry young<sup>12</sup>.

A societal need is fulfilled by Smith's description of women's education, because women and men were considered mentally and morally different in the eighteenth century. Men were thought to be innately rational and morally responsible, allowing them to participate in public life<sup>13</sup>. Women were deduced to being morally corrupt and having the mental capacity of children, damning them to the private sphere<sup>14</sup>. Young women, then, must be taught reserve, modesty, and chastity, because they do not naturally possess strong moral restraint. In contrast, young men in *Wealth of Nations* receive substandard education because they must learn through labor what is essential to being a successful laborer or head of household<sup>15</sup>. This leads Smith to conclude that access to relevant education should not be determinant on gender and that the educational needs of men and women are not the same.

*Wealth of Nations* depicts women as mothers in an analysis of labor as a means of regulating population growth. Poverty, Smith claims, has little impact on the likelihood

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

<sup>12</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

<sup>13</sup> Dimand, Robert, *Retrospectives: Gender in Classical Economics*, p. 230

<sup>14</sup> Dimand, Robert, *Retrospectives: Gender in Classical Economics*, p. 230

<sup>15</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 781

of marriage and childbearing, because lower-income women tend to have more children than wealthier women:

A half-starved Highland woman frequently bears more than twenty children, while a pampered fine lady is often incapable of bearing any, and is generally exhausted by two of three. Barrenness, so frequent among women of fashion, is very rare among those of inferior station.<sup>16</sup>

As fruitful as the marriages are amongst the lower classes, women of these ranks have less resources to nurture their children into adulthood<sup>17</sup>. Smith is sympathetic to the plight of impoverished women, as he continues that these impoverished women lose a greater portion of their children perish due to the ills of living below subsistence, while the children of the upper class typically live to maturity<sup>18</sup>. These observations from Smith are certainly true today, as the likelihood of child mortality is higher amongst those in poverty in the U.S., according to 2014 findings from UNICEF.<sup>19</sup> Through sociological observation, Smith accurately connects poverty's impact on the lives of children and their mothers.

After explaining the devastation of child mortality amongst a nation's poor, Smith prescribes the expansion of labor as an ability to ensure healthy families and a regulation of labor<sup>20</sup>. If the demand for labor increases, so will the wealth of families and

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 97

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 97

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 97

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF Innocenti. "Children of the Recession: The Impact of the Economic Crisis on Child Well-Being in Rich Countries." *UNICEF-IRC*, [www.unicef-irc.org/publications/733](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/733).

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 97

the success of raising children to adulthood due to the availability of resources<sup>21</sup>. If the demand for labor decreases, so too will the wealth of families and their success of child rearing<sup>22</sup>. Women are very involved in this rationale, though not explicitly. Employment and greater wealth within a marriage, improves the health of women. Healthy mothers who have financial access to doctors and food, even in the lowest rank of society, have a fighting chance of bringing a fetus to full term. That baby will be saved from the consequences of malnourishment during pregnancy and have access to enough necessary resources to reach adulthood. Women and their health, in the *Wealth of Nations*, respond to the demand for labor in their generation of future-laborers.

Smith implies that women must be financially self-sufficient, even in marriage. Wives must be financially self-sufficient to produce a healthy family with their husband, according to Smith. He explains that the only way in which a man can afford a family if he makes more than what is sufficient to maintain himself<sup>23</sup>. The wife must be at least sufficient herself, but Smith understands that the opportunities for women to find work outside of the home or to make an equal wage to men are limited<sup>24</sup>. Women are also restricted in their labor capabilities because they must participate in child rearing. Pregnancy would remove the wife from the already limited available work of eighteenth

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 98

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 98

<sup>23</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

<sup>24</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85



century Europe. Still, Smith urges, a wife must be at least financially stable to provide for herself in a marriage<sup>25</sup>. This assertion guarantees that the combined wages of husband and wife in the lowest species of labor, in addition to “something more”, is the bare minimum wage necessary to successfully raise a family.

Smith makes a gendered assertion when he continues the discussion on the adequate wage within a marriage to raise a family. He claims that men must live by their work and their wages be at least sufficient to sustain themselves<sup>26</sup>. Men are able to live by their work in *Wealth of Nations*, because their wage is considered the only necessary contribution a man can make in raising a family. Women, however, are not asked to live by their work in *Wealth of Nations*, because of Smith’s implication that women’s labor can be paid or unpaid. A wife is expected to contribute a larger portion of her unpaid time to child raising and household management. Yet, women must also be financially self-sufficient in a marriage.

Smith fails to discuss the sexual division of labor, which divides men and women in occupations deemed suitable for their physical capabilities. Book I Chapter I raves of the great innovations to production processes created by the division of labor, in which individuals are assigned to a specific step of the production process<sup>27</sup>. The improvement to production brought by the division of labor is greater skill, dexterity, and judgment of the laborer<sup>28</sup>. Due to Smith’s masculine descriptions of occupations, these

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

<sup>26</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

<sup>27</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 15

<sup>28</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 15

improvements are envisioned by readers to be facilitated by men. With the in-depth sociological observations and reasoning Smith expounds on the advancement in production from division of labor, little consideration is given to the impact sexual division labor has on production processes.

Production processes are improved from the ability of men to be innovative after exercising his portion of the production process overtime<sup>29</sup>. Before the invention of the spinning jenny and other textile weaving machinery, male and female textile workers of eighteenth century Great Britain were assigned specific portions of the production processes<sup>30</sup>. Women, because of their perceived ability to be nimble, were assigned the task of diligently spinning yarn with a spinning wheel<sup>31</sup>. Men were assigned weaving and operating large machinery, because of their relative strength<sup>32</sup>.

The invention of the spinning jenny, water frame, and mule spinner, amongst other weaving machines, consolidated the production processes for textile products and relieved the need for exceptional strength in operating weaving machinery<sup>33</sup>. Smith analysis is inclusive of the development of innovative capital in the production of textile products being attributed to the division of labor. Overlooked by Smith was the gender equity created from innovative capital. As men and women biologically possess different

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 15

<sup>30</sup> Burnette, Joyce. "Women Workers in the British Industrial Revolution". EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. March 26, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Burnette, Joyce. "Women Workers in the British Industrial Revolution".

<sup>32</sup> Burnette, Joyce. "Women Workers in the British Industrial Revolution".

<sup>33</sup> Burnette, Joyce. "Women Workers in the British Industrial Revolution".

abilities from their physicality, these differences are constant and more apparent with primitive capital. Primitive capital employed in production of a good necessitates dividing processes based on nimbleness or strength. Development of innovative capital narrows the divide in production of processes that demand specific physical attributes, which narrows the gender divide in occupations. Gender equity in professions could garner greater earnings for women and improve their ability to be self-sufficient and contribute resources for their family's stability. Smith, as thorough and nuanced of an economist as he was, largely disregards the benefits women incur from the division of labor.

*Wealth of Nations* describes women's contributions to the economy as wives and mothers, but neglects to use factual representations of women in paid labor. As wives and mothers, women are expected to earn a self-sufficient wage and rear children into adulthood. The success of women's ability to be mothers is reinforced by home education, in which they are taught the moral restraints necessary to marry at an appropriate age<sup>34</sup> and regulate the family size in accordance to available resources to sustain a family<sup>35</sup>. Labor demand determines the availability of resources, because greater demand for labor would enable a greater portion of the population to earn a wage<sup>36</sup>.

Smith is reductive to women's paid employment in the overt masculinization of occupations and inability to mention the work of women in the European manufacturing

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 781

<sup>35</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

<sup>36</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 85

and agricultural sectors. If a reader was asked to conclude what they derived as women's role in Smith's understanding of the economy, they would either shrug or respond, "as a mother", because of the lack of imagery demonstrating women working presented in *Wealth of Nations*. Analyzing Smith's assignment of women in the economy allows readers to understand the historical flaws present in deducing women's work to motherhood and prostitution.

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