

THERESAH TAWIAH

TAKEAWAY 1

HIST 298: WOMEN IN BRITAIN SINCE 1750

List of Words, Sites, People, and Concepts

1. **Sanford and Merton** — A reference to The History of Sandford and Merton, as an exception to the literature that primarily addressed women as “ladies.”
2. **Seraglio** — A term used historically for the women’s quarters of a household, particularly in reference to an Ottoman ruler or wealthy household; Wollstonecraft uses it critically when discussing women who are educated primarily for beauty and pleasure.
3. **Femme sole**— the legal status of an unmarried woman who had an independent legal identity and could own property, make contracts, and sue.
4. **Coverture** — the legal principle under which a married woman’s separate legal identity was largely absorbed into her husband’s.
5. **Criminal conversation (“crimcon”)** — a legal action connected to adultery in which a husband could seek damages from the man involved with his wife.
6. **Clandestine marriage** — a marriage performed without the formal legal requirements later established by Hardwicke’s Marriage Act.
7. **Langham Place Circle** — a group of women who campaigned for changes in women’s legal and economic position.

Takeaway

Before engaging with this week’s readings, I did not know much about the history of feminism or women’s experiences during these periods, and I had not previously encountered the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Fiona Montgomery, or Nicola Phillips. My general understanding was that women historically faced some form of inequality in certain areas such as education, employment, property ownership, and political rights. After reading these works, I realized that

women's inequality was not only about being denied certain rights. It was also connected to other larger and complex factors such as marriage and the law.

To begin, one thing I learned across the readings, and an idea that I think connects all three authors, is how women were shaped and restricted by society in ways that made them dependent on men. What stood out to me is that this dependence was not simply natural. Instead, it was created and supported through the way women were educated, the roles society expected them to follow, marriage, and even the law. Wollstonecraft made me think about how this dependence could begin long before marriage. She argues that women were educated to focus on beauty, sensitivity, pleasing men, and eventually securing a husband rather than developing their reason and independence (Wollstonecraft, p.24). What stood out to me is her argument that society could create certain characteristics in women and then use those same characteristics as evidence that women were naturally weaker or less rational. Montgomery's discussion on the other hand about coverture also shows how this social expectation of dependence could become legal dependence through marriage. Under coverture, a married woman's legal identity was incorporated into her husband's, limiting her ability to control property, earnings, contracts, and other aspects of her life (Montgomery, p.8). Phillips similarly shows that coverture was based on the legal fiction that husband and wife became one person in law (Phillips, p.18). Together, these readings made me see that women's dependence was not created by one institution alone. Education could teach dependence, marriage could make it socially expected, and the law could reinforce it.

Furthermore, one thing I found especially important was the difference between what the law said and what women actually experienced in their everyday lives. After learning about coverture, I initially assumed that married women had very little independence and could not really take part in business on their own. However, Phillips challenged this assumption. She does not deny that coverture placed serious limits on married women, but she shows that the reality was more complicated. Through *feme sole* trading customs, equity, legal exceptions, and

different interpretations of the law, some married women were still able to run businesses and take part in trade, even though they did not have the same legal rights as men(Phillips, p.24).This changed the way I thought about inequality in the past. I learned that just because a law placed limits on a group of people does not mean that we should assume everyone experienced those limits in exactly the same way. Women could still find ways to work within, around, and sometimes challenge the restrictions placed on them. At the same time, their ability to do this should not make us overlook the fact that the law itself was still unequal.

Overall, I am persuaded by the arguments because I personally think these three readings complement and challenge one another. Wollstonecraft helps explain the ideas and education that produced female dependence; Montgomery demonstrates how inequality was reinforced through marriage and law; and Phillips reminds us that formal legal restrictions do not tell us everything about women's lived experiences. What I appreciate most is that the readings have made my understanding of feminism less straightforward. I no longer see women's history simply as a story of women having no power and eventually receiving rights. I now see the importance of asking what the law said, what society expected women to be, what opportunities were available to them, and what women actually did within those limitations. For someone who came into the course knowing relatively little about feminism and women's history, this has helped me begin thinking about women not only in terms of oppression, but also in terms of how they navigated, negotiated, and sometimes challenged the systems that restricted them.