

# Public Sphere and Domestic Circle: Gender and Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland

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There was an orchestrated attempt in the nineteenth century to assimilate Ireland to England by, in effect, changing the perceived national character of the Irish to a robust, hard-headed, progressive, modern, in a word, masculine mode. The conductor of the orchestra was Archbishop Richard Whately of Dublin and his chosen instrument was a particularly swashbuckling macho version of the 'science' of political economy. In the nineteenth century, political economy was undoubtedly the sovereign discourse of the public sphere, the quintessentially male space, in the modern industrial Great Britain. It was perceived as a natural science, its laws the laws of nature, which were not only seen as given and unchanging, but as virtually unchangeable. Like the laws of nature, they were seen as stern and unbending and utterly ruthless in their application. In the harsh climate of the competitive public sphere in modern industrial society, only the fittest survived. The rational, egotistic economic agent, the *homo economicus*, prudently fingering his felicity calculus, was stereotypically a white, male, heterosexual, Protestant Englishman.

Women, by nature sensitive, altruistic, self-giving, in the words of Charles Kingsley, 'born for others', virtually Christlike in their self-abnegation, were unfitted to the outdoor rigours of the public sphere and so needed the 'protection' afforded by the enclosing domestic circle, though this fortress was increasingly seen by many women as a prison. Women were the keepers of tradition, the exemplars of morality as traditionally defined, the disinfecting element in a morally dissolute society. The Irish national character was represented as feminine and as such unsuited to modern life and Whately's project was no less than a regendering of Ireland. In the economic arena, in the high-noon of *laissez-faire* ideology, one of the few concessions made to the uncompetitive was the doctrine of the 'infant industry'. Protectionism was sometimes allowed to operate in the specific, strategic context of enabling 'backward', agricultural countries to modernise. Clearly this exception was allowed by appealing to an Athenian rather than to a Spartan theory of child-rearing, where God, in his mercy, tempered the wind to the shorn lamb. Operating with the same stereotypes of national character, Irish nationalists argued that the lady was not for turning, that Ireland, in effect, was a 'local' exception to universalist economic laws, was by nature more domestic and feminine, and being both 'young' and female was in double need of protection from the harsh winds of free trade and *laissez-faire*. The politically unacceptable face of this approach was the inevitable corollary that Ireland was, in her antipathy

to cold modernity, low in the evolutionary scale. The opportunity cost of an identity based on the domestic, local, and rural, which valorised the warm, affective, co-operative, and generally selfless feminine virtues, was the devaluing of the competitive, masculine 'virtue' of selfishness, the supposed *sine qua non* of economic progress. National character had to be sacrificed on the altar of modernity, for many, and not only Whately, a sacrifice worth the making. Or Ireland could retain her national character, but the price to be paid was historical peripherality, often characterised by the image of time as either standing still or moving endlessly in circles. Whately's effort to regender Ireland in the interests of modernity, though it ultimately failed, was certainly progressive in rescuing the Irish from the ontological inferiority often previously ascribed to them and making them available for the category of mere historical backwardness to which the new evolutionary theory would consign them.

Arnold's Celticism celebrated Ireland's femininity, but in the interest not of autonomy but of union, the ideal marriage partner for the solid, rational, if prosaic, John Bull. In the Arnoldian scenario, hegemony was to be achieved through the cultural and aesthetic rather than rational discourse; a rhetoric of interests was replaced by one of affections. Political economy gave way to poetry, rational discourse to the language of seduction, the masculine to the feminine. But by figuring Ireland as female, by virtue of the dominant ideologies of gender of the day, Arnold inevitably presented Ireland as unequal to England. This 'feminisation' of ideology could be said to have begun in the traumatic experience of the Great Famine and in the crucial encounter between gender and political economy which was staged in Ireland in the early years of the 1860s. Both of these events, in their different, if complementary, ways, challenged the universalist claims and pretensions to ideological neutrality of political economy as had frequently been done in the name of class. But, to adapt the words of Robert Lowe, it could be argued that the Great Famine starkly demonstrated that political economy had a nation;<sup>1</sup> in like manner the challenge of gender in the form of a sharply-focused debate on the employment of women, revealed that political economy also had a gender. This feminisation manifested itself in many ways apart from Arnold's Celticism: in the moral critique of political economy, representing a trespassing of the 'feminine' into this quintessentially male discourse, and in the emphasis on the family as against the individual as the basic unit of society, thus changing the focus from the public arena to the household, from the site of production to that of consumption, coinciding, in Britain, with a radical paradigmatic shift from economic analysis based on a labour or cost-of-production theory of value to one based on individual utility. But Ireland, young and feminine, was unsuited to free competition, and Whately's modernising objective that she should grow up and become a man no longer seemed feasible. Arnold decided to accept and indeed celebrate Irish national character rather than change it after the fashion

1 See Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, "'A Nation Perishing of Political Economy'?" in Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (eds.), *'Fearful Realities': New Perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 138–50.

of the archbishop. In like manner, the debate about the employment of women in the 1860s saw a modernising *laissez-faire* ideology, advocating the radical throwing-open of the labour market to women, accused of flying in the face of the 'nature' of woman. But, seen in class terms, by this time *laissez-faire* was frequently condemned as injurious to the interests of workers and the lower classes in general, including, of course, the women members of these classes. So, the 'progressive' case for the emancipation of women from enforced domesticity, and their integration into the labour market, was made in terms of an ideology that stood accused, especially after the Great Famine, of grinding the faces of the poor. Indeed, one of the central figures in the debate, Arthur Houston, advocating a free labour market for women, condemned what he called the 'tyranny of trades' unions.<sup>2</sup> Their opponents valued women so highly that they invoked the very doctrines of morality to keep women, forcibly if necessary, in the home for their own good, to protect their sensitive natures against the predacity of the marketplace. It was, ironically, the hard, masculinist version of political economy which allowed women to enter the labour market; the morally sensitive, feminised version confined them to the home.

Central to Victorian ideologies concerning gender difference were essentialist notions of male and female natures, biologically or, occasionally, mystically determined. One of the few tasks retained by the Almighty, after Darwin, was the allocation of stations on the basis of class and of spheres on the basis of gender. The divine ordination of the doctrine of spheres decreed that men occupied the public sphere of power and women the domestic sphere (or circle, as it was often called). Women, lacking power of a vulgarly palpable kind, were held to wield 'secret influence' by their moral and religious pre-eminence and other more-or-less occult powers. This 'consoling fantasy of power', as it has been called,<sup>3</sup> like the 'greater delicacy and spirituality' which Arnold found in the 'feminine' Celts,<sup>4</sup> served to distance and disqualify them from political power. Rocking the cradle and ruling the world were two profoundly unconnected activities. The medicalisation of sexual discourse, though apparently modernising, served mainly to confirm traditional moral views that a woman's place was in the home.<sup>5</sup> People were located in the different spheres and stations according to the 'natures' which God, or his secular equivalents, had been so good as to give them. They behaved according to the sphere or station they found themselves in and it was a serious transgression to act above or below one's station, or to move into another sphere. In 1855, Patrick J. Keenan, one of the great Irish schools' inspectors, writing on the 'exceedingly small' number of married women teachers, maintained that

after marriage, *home* is the abiding place of woman, the natural centre and seat of all her occupations, the cause of all her anxieties, the object of all her

2 Arthur Houston, *The Emancipation of Woman from Existing Industrial Disabilities: Considered in Its Economic Aspect* (London and Dublin, 1862), p. 7. 3 Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (Sussex and New Jersey, 1982), p. 21. 4 Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature and Other Essays* (London and Toronto, 1910), pp. 5, 85. 5 Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 14.

solicitude, and it is a deranged state of society that encourages her to seek employment beyond its precincts.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed it was appropriate that women, naturally caring and benevolent, should be allowed to enter the public sphere mainly for the performance of charitable works. Home was seen as an oasis of selflessness, self-denial, community, indeed of virtue as traditionally understood. Women, as guardians and transmitters of tradition and morality, were held to be naturally moral and self-sacrificing, whereas men had to struggle (sometimes without success) to be virtuous. Women were vital to the moral health of society, like Barbara Frietchie who 'raised up the flag the men hauled down'.<sup>7</sup> According to the Catholic periodical, the *Dublin Review*, 'The very soul and secret of a nation's strength is its sound morality; without it all greatness is hollow and all progression unsatisfactory; and national morality must originate in, and radiate from the homes of the poor'.<sup>8</sup> Women were the repositories of a traditional morality of sympathy and benevolence which it was no longer possible to practice in the competitive arena of bourgeois society. Men had their interests; women had their duties. Women were agents of sociability in this society, as against the cold civility of the public arena, what Kant called its 'unsocial sociability'. But there were fears that the 'morality' of the market-place might trespass into the sphere of personal relations, as in, for instance, Shaw's notion of marriage as legalised prostitution or George Moore's concept of the 'marriage mart'. But there was anxiety also concerning moral migration in the opposite direction. Archbishop Richard Whately of Dublin felt that an excess of the 'feminine', of altruism and sympathy, in the public domain, was economically and politically disabling, even subversive. It was, he claimed, 'a mistake to suppose that religion or morals alone would be sufficient to save a people from revolution. No; they would not be sufficient, if a proper idea of Political Economy was not cultivated by that people'.<sup>9</sup>

Political economy operated with the central notion of the *homo economicus*, the rational, self-interested individual actor, in true utilitarian fashion, maximising his utilities and minimising his disutilities. However, in classical political economy the concept of class operated as a counterbalance to the excesses of individualism and radically problematised it. Neo-classical theory neatly solved the problem by evicting the notion of class entirely from the discipline. It was, according to Houston, the 'glory of Political Economy to have shown that the true and ultimate interest of the community is inseparably bound up with that of the individual'.<sup>10</sup> But for many people in Ireland the Great Famine seemed to prove

6 Patrick J. Keenan, *Appendix to Twenty-Second Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland* (1855), Appendix G, p. 97. 7 John Greenleaf Whittier, 'Barbara Frietchie' in *The Poetical Works*, edited by W. Garrett Horder (London, 1898), p. 374. 8 'The Employment of Women' in *Dublin Review*, 52 (1862-3), p. 17. 9 Richard Whately, 'Report of the Address on the Conclusion of the First Session of the Dublin Statistical Society' in *Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society*, 1 (1847-9), p. 5. 10 Houston, *Emancipation of Woman*, p. 6.

definitively that there was no easy coincidence of interests between individuals and the community at large. In any case individualism was held to have been unnatural for the Irish: the manly independence of the English character produced the *homo economicus* and the industrial revolution, while its Irish counterpart was more feminine and associative and seen to be more suited to agricultural pursuits. The post-famine moral critique of political economy was centrally a critique of individualism and utilitarianism and it was conducted overwhelmingly in the name of the family.

In 1859 William Neilson Hancock, once the most powerful advocate of unbridled individualism, read a paper to the Dublin Statistical Society entitled, 'The Family and not the Individual the True Unit to Be Considered in Social Questions; With Some Applications of this Theory to Poor Laws, the Employment of Women, and the Enlistment of Soldiers'.<sup>11</sup> In fact, beginning in 1855, Hancock published several papers, on a wide range of issues, defending the 'family system'. However, it was the issue of the employment of women which played the central role in Irish opposition to individualism. This debate had obvious repercussions for what was then usually called the 'woman question', but it had also profound consequences for the very discourse of political economy itself.

In August 1861 the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, usually called the Social Science Congress, met in Dublin, and several important papers on the employment of women were presented to it. The topic had first been broached, in 1857, in the pages of the *English Woman's Journal* and it was brought before the Association in November 1859. Around this time discussion of the question had also begun in France. The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, later to be re-titled 'Educated Women', was founded in this period and affiliated to the Association. At the Dublin meeting no fewer than ten papers on the topic were read to the Social Economy Department of the Congress.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this meeting an Irish branch of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Educated Women was founded. Consciousness of gender was raised to such an extent that women (or, at least, 'ladies') were allowed to become

<sup>11</sup> Proceedings in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 2 (1857-60), p. 396. This paper was not published. <sup>12</sup> Two papers were printed in full in the *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*: Bessie R. Parkes, 'The Condition of Working Women in England and France' in George W. Hastings (ed.), *Transactions 1861* (London, 1862), pp. 632-40 and Anne Jellicoe, 'The Condition of Young Women Employed in Manufactories in Dublin' in *Transactions 1861*, pp. 640-5. The following papers were also given but only brief summaries of most of them were published, together with a short account of the discussion (pp. 685-7): Mrs Catherine Brougham, 'Women's Work among the Female Peasantry of Ireland'; Jane Crowe, 'Report of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women'; Emily Faithfull, 'Female Compositors'; Jessie Boucherett, 'Local Societies for Promoting the Employment of Women'; A. Overend, 'Remunerative Employment for Educated Women'; Maria S. Rye, 'The Emigration of Educated Women: Its Necessity, Practicability, and Advantage'; Mrs Bayley, 'On the Employment of Women'; Daniel Sheriff, 'The Advantages Derived from Embroidery by the Employment of Women in the North of Ireland'. These contributions are listed in *Transactions 1861*, p. 680.

associate members of the Statistical Society. Not unconnected events were the extension of the objects of the Society to 'all questions of Social Science', the change of name to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, and increased discussion on co-operation, all seen as 'feminine' alternatives to the 'masculine' discipline of political economy and the manly strife of competition.

It was perfectly predictable that when Hancock began to relate morality to political economy, early in 1855, he should immediately turn his attention to the role of women in society. It was also inevitable that he should sternly defend traditional teaching on the question, the 'spontaneous and universal recognition of the principle that women ought naturally to be supported by men'.<sup>13</sup> The 'natural way of rearing children' was as 'members of a family, with a mother to cherish and a father to control'.<sup>14</sup> Five years later Hancock wrote that 'women are, and must in general be, supported by men, their employment being absorbed in the domestic work, on which so much of the health, comfort, and moral well being of society depends', and argued that the 'domestic employment of women is a necessary consequence of the great fundamental law of our nature – the division of mankind into families'.<sup>15</sup>

On 24 December 1861 Edward Gibson read a paper to the Statistical Society entitled, 'Employment of Women in Ireland'.<sup>16</sup> He began by assuming the 'advisability of not limiting educated women to obtaining subsistence by the one overstocked profession of governess; and also that the sex of a woman, though it may be a misfortune, is not a crime'.<sup>17</sup> A main object of Gibson's paper, in which he advocated that the 'labour market should be thrown open to all comers',<sup>18</sup> was to give an account of what the new branch of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Educated Women was doing. It had just issued its first quarterly report, and it was in 'good working order'. Gibson reminded his audience

that the movement had been hitherto altogether confined to England; that it was little known, and less liked in Ireland; and that in Ireland, probably more than in any other country, sympathetic associations and prejudices regard with greater favour and compassion a starving than a struggling woman. We worship those we martyr; those who decline the privilege we ridicule.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to the title of the Society, Gibson remarked that

[i]t might have been well if the word 'educated' had been left out of the title, as it apparently narrows too much the sphere of its usefulness; but a ready excuse

<sup>13</sup> William Neilson Hancock, 'The Workhouse as a Mode of Relief for Widows and Orphans' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 1 (1855–6), p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86. <sup>15</sup> William Neilson Hancock, 'The Effects of Employment of Women' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 2 (1857–60), p. 439. <sup>16</sup> Edward Gibson, 'Employment of Women in Ireland' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 3 (1861–3), pp. 138–43. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138–9.

for the assumption of this special character may be found in the peculiarly wretched condition of that class.<sup>20</sup>

In 1862 Arthur Houston, the Whately Professor of Political Economy at Trinity College Dublin, published what was certainly the most important document in this whole controversy, *The Emancipation of Woman from Existing Industrial Disabilities: Considered in Its Economic Aspect*. This was a (presumably expanded) Whately lecture, in which it was intended to apply abstract principles to 'questions of immediate practical interest'. According to Houston, the 'principle which I chiefly seek to illustrate today is that of Unrestricted Competition – the problem to the solution of which I mean to summon its aid, is that of the employment of Women'.<sup>21</sup> An unintended consequence of Houston's theorising was that for many commentators, far from the abstract principle solving the practical problem, the practical problem dissolved the abstract principle.

According to Houston, the doctrine of the harmony of interests was now firmly established in international trade, but not so fully in the case of individual producers:

We still, partly by the influence of positive law, but much more by the tyranny of trades unions and the force of public opinion, countenance a distribution of employments founded on the obsolete principle of protecting the interests of one class of producers at the expense of those of all other classes of society, consumers and producers alike.<sup>22</sup>

Many instances could be adduced, but

by far the most striking is that of the arbitrary exclusion of one sex from certain species of employments, for which it cannot be denied that they are naturally qualified, more or less; since, if not qualified, there could be no necessity to exclude, by force of law or opinion, those who would be sufficiently excluded already by the insurmountable barrier of incapacity.<sup>23</sup>

Houston was clearly aware of how daring his project was:

I trust no one will be deterred from giving the subject a calm consideration, on account of the novelty of such a proposal as that of placing both sexes on a level as to the right of entrance into professions and trades. It is always difficult to estimate how much of the repugnance felt towards a change arises from the fact that we have been all our lives accustomed to see an opposite state of things prevail, and so have come to look upon that state as in some way natural and normal. We see every day how much our opinions are the creatures of custom.<sup>24</sup>

20 Ibid., p. 140. 21 Houston, *Emancipation of Woman*, p. 5. 22 Ibid., pp. 6–7. 23 Ibid., pp. 7–8. 24 Ibid., p. 8.

Sometime later he again felt the need to apologise: 'Trusting I have now said enough to calm the alarm which a hypothesis so novel is calculated to excite, I will offer no further apology for bringing this question under your notice'.<sup>25</sup>

Houston stated that the most common objection to the 'unfettered choice of occupations' was that it would take women out of their 'proper sphere', which some people, such as Charles Kingsley, would define as the 'southern and western hemispheres'. Houston then asked the question: what *was* a woman's proper sphere, and went on to argue in favour of its cultural relativity: 'it has been defined in different modes at different times, and in different places'. It was a 'perpetual state of pupilage in the Roman social system and it is not much better under our own'.<sup>26</sup> He then quoted from a work, written by a woman to instruct her sisters, called *My Life and What I Should Do with It*. Here a woman's mission was defined as follows:

A true womanly life is lived for others. Not for things, as a man's may be, who is engaged in any productive labour or trading; not for mind, as a studious man's may be; not for the increase of knowledge, for the discovery of truth, nor for art; not for the human race in their collective masses – nations, churches, colleges – but for others as individuals.<sup>27</sup>

Houston added lyrically:

If true, this is a melancholy fact. No desire of independence, no patriotism, no devotion to art, to the sacred cause of truth, or to the ennobling pursuit of knowledge must enter into the hearts of over one-half of the species! Every particle of individuality the ultimate crystal from which every regular form of civilization must be developed – is to be sunk in the pursuit of the advantage of 'others as individuals'.<sup>28</sup>

He claimed that though this was dismal,

it is plausible, and is tinged with a certain awe of religious romance, that commends itself with peculiar force to a certain order of minds. It is nothing but a gratuitous assumption, however, and all the more dangerous on account of the garb of pious self-denial with which it is clothed.<sup>29</sup>

Houston then proceeded to deliver a scathing attack on what he called the 'self-immolation' which society had imposed on women in a passage which deserves to be quoted in full:

It is no doubt true that we should all be prepared, when necessary, to make great sacrifices of our feelings and our interests, in order to promote the welfare

of our fellow-creatures. But that any one portion of humanity should be called on more particularly than another to perform this self-immolation, is, it seems to me, a most absurd and abominable doctrine. It is one of which those who are summoned to make the sacrifice must feel the injustice, and at which they must repine, unless where the vanity of martyrdom – not so uncommon a species of vanity as might be supposed – buoys them up under the trial. It is a doctrine, also, which can have no other effect on the remainder of humanity than to feel their arrogance, and minister to their selfishness. Self-sacrifice, to be beneficial, must be a mutual duty. Like a compromise, when the concession is confined to one party, where, as a countryman of ours is reported to have said, 'the reciprocity is all on one side', it can never be extorted except by force from fear, or from ignorance by fraud. It is precisely the same fallacy that underlay the doctrine of absolute monarchy ... and that underlies that of sacerdotal supremacy, in the east and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

The question of a woman's proper sphere had, according to Houston, been answered by a woman, the wife of John Stuart Mill.<sup>31</sup> The proper sphere of any rational being was 'the highest which that being is capable of filling'.<sup>32</sup>

Houston, however, tempered his daring with caution, for he did not undertake to recommend that 'all barriers to the employment of women should be broken down. I merely take this as the simplest hypothesis on which to argue'.<sup>33</sup> He justified his ultimate failure of nerve on the basis that he was dealing merely with the economic aspects of the problem. All women would not, he felt, immediately thrust themselves into jobs now undertaken by men:

My own opinion is, that there are certain branches of almost every calling for which, by physical strength and natural inclination, each sex is peculiarly qualified. Into these, if competition were free, each would naturally fall. To take the learned professions, for instance; it can, I think, scarcely be doubted that there are certain branches of the medical profession which might, with propriety and advantage, be confided to females.<sup>34</sup>

He referred to the success of the all-female printinghouse, the Victoria Press, which had been established and conducted by one of the main speakers at the Dublin meeting of the Social Science Congress, Emily Faithfull. But, he added, it was not in the least likely that women 'would be at all satisfied to sacrifice their own natural tastes and feelings so far as to become barristers or surgeons'.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, Houston did not challenge the ruling ideology of gender which, in strict binary fashion, distinguished, mainly on the basis of biology, innately differing male and female natures. His study, he tells us, concerns

30 Ibid., p. 11. 31 Ibid. 32 Ibid., p. 12. 33 Ibid., p. 13. 34 Ibid, p. 14. 35 Ibid.

the destinies of those who are, by their physical inferiority, incapable of asserting their own rights – whose sufferings, though providentially lightened by an habitual resignation, are doubtless aggravated by their constitutional sensibility. It concerns the destinies of a class which needs all the safeguards that consciousness of independence can supply, to protect them from moral dangers. Lastly, it concerns the destinies of a class whose *actual* condition, in certain ranks, is very far from what any one having the interests of our common humanity at heart can contemplate without compassion.<sup>36</sup>

When Houston periodically became aware of the more radical and deconstructionist possibilities of his argument, he reiterated the merely economic nature of his analysis. Political economy modestly treated of the production and distribution of wealth, explaining what agencies tended to 'increase or diminish production', and to 'cause equality or disparity among the shares into which the produce is distributed'.<sup>37</sup> From the standpoint of economic efficiency, Houston advocated a policy of free trade in labour, though almost universally

the free circulation of labour from employment to employment was rigidly restrained by the regulations of guilds and other trading corporations in Europe, for the benefit of the productive classes, and regardless of the interest of consumers.<sup>38</sup>

The best system, he claimed, was that all should be free to choose, for there were no means by which the capacity of an individual could, as a rule, be estimated *a priori*. Success in any occupation was the 'true touchstone of merit'. To achieve the maximum 'public welfare', he argued, '[p]erfect freedom of competition, unrestrained by customary or legal limitations' was 'the *régime* best calculated to effect this object'.<sup>39</sup>

In Houston's opinion, it was generally admitted that in society as it was then constituted, there was 'something anomalous in the position of the female section of the community'. Even the charges of frivolity frequently brought against those born in 'the more favoured ranks', if they were true, could be 'sufficiently accounted for by the fact that almost every avenue to distinction or influence is sedulously closed against them'.<sup>40</sup> An indication of the anomalous social position of women was the very existence of associations established for the purpose of providing employment for educated women, when this was unnecessary in the case of educated men. The following were the usual explanations given:

One is the fact that, partly owing to the proportion of females born being greater than that of males, partly owing to their greater longevity, and partly to their greater disinclination to emigrate, the female population in these islands now exceeds the male by more than half a million.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–5. <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24. <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7. <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

On the widely discussed question of the alleged 'superabundance' of women, Houston asked if the 'sole cause of the deficiency of employment be the redundancy of women, why does it not affect all classes alike'? If the pressure of employment could 'arise exclusively from the superabundance of female labour', why, he asked, was this pressure not felt in the lowest ranks? Clearly, he replied, 'because in them nearly all employments are open equally to both sexes'. Discrimination took place in the higher classes, where it was 'true that, certain occupations being closed by the laws and usages of society against female competition, the remainder are overstocked'. This was the 'true cause of the surplus female labour, though aggravated by the disproportion between the female and the male population'.<sup>42</sup>

Houston went on to consider, and swiftly reject, the commonplace that over-educated women would scorn existing employment. The reason why we did not hear any complaints of the male sex being over-educated, was because it made men more valuable members of society. The error was, 'not in educating too much, but in refusing the means of turning this knowledge to account'. But what, then, was to be done with 'these intelligent but superfluous females'? The answer of the Reverend Charles Kingsley was simple: "Emigrate". Westward ho! is the motto inscribed on his banner'.<sup>43</sup> Houston rejected the solution of female emigration, for redundant females were in the middle and upper classes and the colonies needed women for agriculture. The only answer was 'to break down the barriers which impede the entrance into suitable employments at home'.<sup>44</sup> This would also increase the proportion of employed to unemployed, so the unemployed would be less of a burden:

Many women who are now supported at the expense of others, or on private property of their own, would, if a pleasant, profitable, or honourable career were opened to them, embark in it joyfully, instead of passing their lives, as at present they do, in a process as nearly allied as possible to vegetation.<sup>45</sup>

Houston proceeded to consider the effect of his daring policy on population. The progress of a nation depended on the proportion between wealth and population and the advance of population in civilised countries was chiefly controlled by the 'prudential check': when it was strong, the standard of living was high and vice versa. Houston argued 'that the removal of the industrial disabilities under which women now labour would call the prudential check into more active operation, and thus conduce still more to the material well-being of the nation'.<sup>46</sup> In nineteenth-century Ireland, as elsewhere, marriage was almost the only desirable, if not always available, vocation for women. According to Houston,

It will, I suppose, be readily admitted that, as society is at present constituted, marriage, in most instances, improves the position of the woman. If not the

child of parents rich enough to give her a fortune, finding herself debarred from almost every means of obtaining, by her own exertions, anything but a precarious competence, she naturally looks to matrimony as the means to escape from the difficulties of the future. Again, even if happily born in a higher rank, she finds all the avenues which lead to social eminence closed against her, and sees, in a union with some person of her own class, but of a more favoured sex, the sole chance of being enabled to exercise her legitimate influence in society.<sup>47</sup>

In most instances the time when a woman married was dependent on the inclination of a man. It was a matter of prudence for a man to abstain from contracting a marriage, but a matter of prudence for a woman to 'hasten' to contract it. So it was the prudence of the male, and not of the female population, which formed the prudential check to marriage, and on which the material well-being of all 'old' countries so much depended. But

if the revolution we are considering were accomplished, all this would be altered. The road to affluence or to eminence would no longer lie through matrimony alone. A woman would then have to consult her inclinations merely, since she could secure her independence and her position irrespective of her union with a husband. So far as the female is concerned, therefore, the operation of the prudential check would be strengthened. But, on the other hand, there would be no longer the same necessity for forethought on the part of the other sex. When, by marriage, he would unite himself with one capable of contributing a considerable quota to the support of the household, there would be less to deter him from embarking in the partnership, through fear of sacrificing his material comforts, and compromising his position in society.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike her lowly sisters, the woman of a higher class would not neglect home and family. She might, in some cases, be able to 'devote a portion of her time to industrial occupation; but in a majority of instances she would find the management of her household sufficient to employ it all'.<sup>49</sup>

How would the application of *laissez-faire* to the labour market effect the distribution of produce? Would the increase in women's income be at the expense of the already employed? According to Houston, in the present market, with restricted entry, wages were kept up artificially 'to the permanent injury of other classes'. There would be a fall in wages for a time, but increased profits would bring in more capital and wages would eventually go up again.<sup>50</sup>

At a meeting of the Statistical Society in June 1866, Houston again returned to the subject of the employment of women. The purpose of his paper was 'to submit to the test of experience the conclusions at which we have arrived by the path of abstract reasoning'. He again addressed the central topic of a woman's proper sphere and concluded that unless the

domestic circle affords the highest occupation of which women are capable, which in a great many cases is little more elevated than that laid out for them by the cynical Iago, the domestic circle is not the proper sphere for women. But, furthermore, even granting it to be so, a difficulty arises from the fact that a great many women never get into that sphere at all, and a still larger number are twenty, thirty, or even forty years excluded from it.<sup>51</sup>

What, he asked, was to be done with these women? Because they were not in their proper sphere were they to be excluded from all spheres? This, he said, was the 'absurd' position taken up by Hancock, who advised, in the words of Houston,

that after a certain age ladies who had failed to effect an entrance into the domestic circle through the gate of matrimony, should be provided for at the public expense, in asylums presided over by matrons of mature years and approved experience.<sup>52</sup>

This, Houston claimed, was a logical solution to the problem, but permitting women to compete in the labour market was more consonant with 'common sense'. A general approval for his conclusion should not prevent one from noting weaknesses in Houston's argumentation. He held that political economy, and the policy doctrine of *laissez-faire*, had unimpeachable scientific credentials and that, despite manifest differences, they shared one crucial area of agreement with 'common sense': both forms of knowledge were outside ideology. But, of course, the doctrine of the spheres was an intrinsic part of the dominant Victorian concept of common sense. Houston, however, did point out a serious contradiction in the reasoning of Hancock and his kind. While it protested against women entering the professions of law, medicine, and divinity, society had not forbidden them to become novelists, poets, painters, musicians, or teachers. In thus 'admitting necessary exceptions to its favourite theory', society had 'sacrificed its logic at the shrine of expediency'. The theory, he concluded, 'of a proper sphere for women cannot be maintained in principle, and is not maintained in practice'.<sup>53</sup>

Houston then considered briefly the objection to women working based on the necessity 'of preserving that delicacy and refinement which constitute so great a charm in the sex'. If this risk existed, it was worth taking, as the possibility of a life of penury was too great a price to pay for such adornments.<sup>54</sup> But even those women 'blessed with means', were often scarcely less unhappy, for useful occupation was 'absolutely essential to health of body and mind'.<sup>55</sup>

Faced with this intractable dilemma, Hancock relented on *laissez-faire* in order to defend the doctrine of the gender-based separation of public and private

51 [Arthur] Houston, 'The Extension of the Field for the Employment of Women' in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 4 (1864-8), p. 345. A discussion followed Houston's lecture to which Hancock, among others, contributed and to which Houston then replied. A report of this item, entitled 'Discussion', was appended to Houston's published paper. 52 *Ibid.*, p. 346. 53 *Ibid.* 54 *Ibid.* 55 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

spheres. He accused Houston of ignoring the 'family system' and the 'proper and natural division of labour'.<sup>56</sup> Domestic economy was a woman's proper study, political economy that of a man. Houston closed the debate which followed his paper by repudiating any intention of ignoring the 'family relation' but significantly hedged his bets by 'neither admitting nor denying that the family system should be made the basis of society'. He thought that any woman 'of right feeling' would refuse to become 'a burthen either on the public or her male relatives, so long as she felt she had the ability to earn an honourable independence'.<sup>57</sup> This was in reply to Hancock's statement that he feared that 'the existing agitation for a more extended employment of women's labour arose from a selfish desire on the part of men to be relieved from the duty of supporting their female relatives'.<sup>58</sup>

In its review of Houston's book, *The Emancipation of Woman*, the London-based *Dublin Review*, was shocked to find

the professor of political economy in one of the universities of this kingdom, indorsing to the full the pernicious and anti-Christian craze of Mr J. S. Mill, for which that very eminent thinker was indebted to his wife, who was doubtless a most amiable lady, but not a very deep philosopher. Professor Houston of Trinity College, Dublin ... startles us with gravely advancing theories which we never expected to see emanating from a learned and Christian university. 'Emancipation of Women,' – startling heading! What is the slavery in which our fair friends are?<sup>59</sup>

Instead, the review continued, of opening up 'useful occupations and charitable callings to engage them in becoming industry', professors and social science meetings 'at once fall a talking about emancipation and college degrees, people at present being, of course, wiser than the old-fashioned teaching of religion'. Did the professor propose that women should,

like the Amazons of old, take up arms in their countries' cause, and stand in the ridges of grim war? Will he organize a female police force who will patrol and keep in order our streets by night? Will he send our fair friends on the stormy ocean, and have young sailor girls rocked to sleep on the high and giddy mast? And does he suppose that if men do all the hard stern work, they will have women directing and ruling their toil?<sup>60</sup>

The writer consigned Houston to the company of 'shallow philosophers' of 'this wonderful nineteenth century' who were 'forgetting the nature of the men and women for whom they are devising wise things'. They might 'improve the human race; they will never radically change it'.<sup>61</sup> Men were needed to help 'ladies', especially to provide them with business acumen. Indeed, it was 'a poor way to

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.    <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.    <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.    <sup>59</sup> 'The Employment of Women', in *Dublin Review*, 52 (1862-3), p. 38.    <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.    <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

discharge our duties to the female dependent portion of our population, to leave remedies to their own efforts, and then, if a mistake be made, to laugh at the incompetence of ladies'.<sup>62</sup>

The whole debate about the employment of women was fraught with contradictions. The progressive case for freeing the labour market was made in terms of what was increasingly seen as the reactionary doctrine of *laissez-faire*, a policy seen to militate structurally against the interests of the lower classes, including, of course, the women members of those classes. But this is not surprising as the debate almost exclusively concerned itself with the condition of women of the middle and upper orders. At one level, it was a very unsisterly victory for ladies over women; at another, by attempting to establish, in however qualified a fashion, the principle of equal access to employment, a definitive discursive battle was won for all women. It would be a century before the seeds planted by Houston and others would begin to bear full fruit. Houston, in the end, did not confront the notion of separate spheres; he sought only to liberalise it, for he operated within the problematic of given male and female 'natures' which underpinned the moral principle of the double standard and indeed the doctrine of the spheres itself. On the other hand, the progressive moral critique of political economy, which was to lead, in Ireland and elsewhere, to a historicisation of the discipline, did not result in any critique of gender-based spheres of action, and continued to keep women virtually under house-arrest. However, for the efficient working, reproduction, and growth of capitalism, for the servicing of labour and the investment in human capital, the unpaid labour of women in the home was vital. The values of individual greed and selfishness were crucial to success in the market-place, but a traditional morality of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice was demanded of women in the home. The future of capitalism depended on the unselfishness of parents, especially of mothers, in relation to their children, an investment in human capital for which there was little or no economic return. Women needed no economic inducement to acting morally, for it was 'natural' and virtue was, quite literally, its own reward. They acted for love, men principally for money.

The moral double standard and the doctrine of the spheres were central tenets of political economy, bourgeois society's official self-knowledge. The relentless feminist attack on both of these concepts in the latter part of the nineteenth century was also, knowingly or unknowingly, a searing critique of political economy itself. The apparently simple question of the employment of women forced William Neilson Hancock to abandon his cherished doctrine of *laissez-faire*. It could be argued that bourgeois society was so ordered that it was structurally unable to provide full emancipation for women, and that a critique of its 'science' was a necessary condition for the achievement of that goal.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 40. <sup>63</sup> For a contextualisation of the material dealt with in this essay, see "'Next to Godliness": Political Economy, Ireland, and Ideology', in Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, *Political Economy and Colonial Ireland: The Propagation and Ideological Function of Economic Discourse in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 116–60.