

Afterwords

“*Opinio copiae inter maximas causas inopiae est*”:
On Mistranslating a Latin Quotation in Mill’s
*The Subjection of Women*¹

David J. Riesbeck
Tempe Preparatory Academy

John Stuart Mill had an unusually intensive classical education that enabled him to read Greek and Latin as a young man with a fluency that few people today manage in a lifetime.² His achievement was extraordinary even in his own day, but in nineteenth-century England a basic working knowledge of Latin was still part of virtually every ordinary educated person’s repertoire. Accordingly, Mill, like many other authors, sometimes used Latin phrases and quotations in his works without translating or citing them, expecting that his readers would understand the Latin and perhaps recognize its source. For better or worse, ordinary educated readers today no longer know basic Latin as a matter of course, and so more recent editions of older works like Mill’s tend to add helpful footnotes when Latin appears. Such footnotes can only be helpful, however, when they get the Latin right. Usually they do. Occasionally they do not.

It turns out that there is a common tendency to get the Latin wrong in an important passage of Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*.³

¹ This article is a slightly revised version of a blog post at *Policy of Truth*, June 5, 2017, accessed online at: <https://irfankhawajaphilosopher.com/2017/06/05/opinio-copiae-inter-maximas-causas-inopiae-est-on-mistranslating-mills-latin-quotations/>.

² Mill recounts this education in some detail in his autobiography. See John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. John M. Robson (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

³ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869).

This passage comes in the first chapter, in the midst of an argument that men are not in a position to suppose that they understand even the particular women they know, let alone women's "true nature," if there be such a thing. Given the conditions of enforced dependence and servility that women live under, men cannot reasonably infer that the attitudes and behaviors of most women reflect their "true nature" rather than the peculiar dispositions that their standing in society has encouraged them to cultivate. Men cannot even presume to know the minds of their own wives so well as they might come to know the minds of other men with whom they interact on a basis of equality. This will be so, Mill writes, "as long as social institutions do not admit the same free development of originality in women which is possible to men. When that time comes, and not before, we shall see, and not merely hear, as much as it is necessary to know of the nature of women, and the adaptation of other things to it."⁴ He then continues, and here we get the Latin quotation in question:

I have dwelt so much on the difficulties which at present obstruct any real knowledge by men of the true nature of women, because in this as in so many other things 'opinio copiae inter maximas causas inopiae est'; and there is little chance of reasonable thinking on the matter, while people flatter themselves that they perfectly understand a subject of which most men know absolutely nothing, and of which it is at present impossible that any man, or all taken together, should have knowledge which can qualify them to lay down the law to women as to what is, or is not, their vocation.⁵

The Penguin Classics edition, edited by Alan Ryan, gives a footnote on the Latin expression: "*opinio . . . inopiae est*: Latin, 'popular opinion is deficient in most matters,' Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620)."⁶ Anyone with even a rusty knowledge of Latin will

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume XXI, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 280.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 246.

recognize that this is most definitely *not* what the Latin says, nor is it an acceptable paraphrase. But Ryan's edition is, surprisingly, not unusual in rendering it this way. Susan Moller Okin's Hackett edition translates the sentence as "popular opinion is deficient on most matters."⁷ Michael Morgan's *Classics of Moral and Political Theory* reprints the note from Okin's edition verbatim.⁸ The widely read Dover Thrift Edition offers "general opinion is inadequate on most matters," and we find the same rendering in the recent edition published by Cosimo Classics.⁹ *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought* gives "popular opinion is deficient on many matters."¹⁰ There's some disagreement about whether Mill is talking about *general* opinion or *popular* opinion, though those may amount to the same thing. There's some slightly more significant disagreement about whether such opinion is inadequate or deficient on *most* matters or merely on *many*. Aside from these minor details, the editions all agree. The footnote in Okin's and Morgan's editions goes one step further, offering a nuanced observation to help us appreciate how sly Mill is: "By using the present *est* instead of the subjunctive *sit*, Mill misquotes Bacon, thereby making a *more* pejorative judgment of the views of the many."¹¹ This part of the note is bizarre, because it shows

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, ed. Susan M. Okin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988), p. 27.

⁸ John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women," in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, 5th ed., ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2011), p. 1116.

⁹ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum and Susan L. Rattiner (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997), p. 25; John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2008), p. 25. Though the editorial work in the Cosimo Classics volume is unattributed, it seems to be identical to that of the Dover Thrift Edition.

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women," in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrew Bailey, Samantha Brennan, Will Kymlicka, Jacob Levy, Alex Sager, and Clark Wolf (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 680.

¹¹ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, ed. Okin, p. 27; Mill, "The Subjection of Women," in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, 5th ed., ed. Morgan, p. 1116.

that whoever is responsible for this bit of editorial sophistication knows at least enough Latin to distinguish the indicative and subjunctive forms of the present tense of *esse*, ‘to be,’ but not enough to spot the mistaken translation. But the trouble here is not just that the translation is wrong; it’s that the Latin is not making any kind of point about popular opinion at all, except rather indirectly.

A literal translation of the Latin might read: “opinion of plenty is among the greatest causes of poverty.” Like many literal translations, this one is not good English; for the awkward and ambiguous “opinion of plenty” we might instead opt for something like “believing that you’re rich.” Some editors get the translation right. The Modern Library Classics edition, with notes by Dale Miller, gives a somewhat old-fashioned rendering: “opinion of store is one of the chief causes of want.”¹² We find more idiomatic contemporary translations in the Oxford World Classics editions. The earlier edition by John Gray offers “thinking that one is wealthy is one of the main causes of poverty.”¹³ The more recent edition by Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen gives a slight variation: “thinking that one is wealthy is one of the greatest causes of poverty.”¹⁴ These are the only English editions I have been able to find that do not mistranslate the Latin. Notably, the French translation by Françoise Orazi gets it right with “l’idée qu’on a de la richesse est l’une des plus grandes causes du besoin.”¹⁵

This isn’t just a pedantic Latinist’s point. The mistake affects how we understand what Mill is saying in the passage. On the prominent mistranslation, he’s simply saying that most people’s opinions aren’t worth much, and saying it in a snooty elitist way by putting it in Latin. But while Mill clearly believes that popular opinion is deficient in most or many matters, that’s not the point he’s making

¹² John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. B. Schneewind and Dale E. Miller (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 318.

¹³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 592.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 534.

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, “L’asservissement des femmes,” in *John Stuart Mill et Harriet Taylor: Écrits sur l’égalité des sexes*, ed. and trans. Françoise Orazi, accessed online at: <http://books.openedition.org/enseditions/5570>.

here. He is instead making the far more important point that we are especially liable to go wrong in our thinking if we simply assume that we *of course* are in a perfectly good condition to know what's what. Unlike the hackneyed dismissal of popular opinion, this is not a point that highly educated and snobbish readers can afford to ignore as not possibly applying to them on the grounds that they are, after all, not among "the many." Even we enlightened Victorian gentlemen might be blind to the poverty of our own opinions because we do not appreciate how abysmal our epistemic position is; if we think we already have perfectly adequate evidence and that we are in a perfectly good position to interpret and assess it, then we are bound to reject Mill's arguments out of hand and thereby, he thinks, persist in holding severely mistaken views about women, views that contribute to sustaining their unjust subordination. This is a thought that many of us men would do well to keep in mind even today when thinking about women and what we think we know about them. By contrast, the mistranslations make it seem as though Mill's point is simply that most people are idiots. Hardly a trivial difference!

The footnote in Okin's and Morgan's editions is doubly bizarre, because it adds the faux erudition of letting us in on a purported subtlety that demands a special knowledge of Latin. In fact, however, the difference between Mill's indicative *est* and Bacon's subjunctive *sit* does not have the force that the footnote attributes to it. Bacon used the subjunctive for a simple reason: the verb in the preface to the *Great Instauration* appears in a subordinate clause introduced by the conjunction *cum*, which can be causal or explanatory ('because' or 'since') only if its verb is in the subjunctive mood, and will otherwise be temporal ('when,' 'while,' etc.). Mill, however, has inserted Bacon's Latin maxim into an English causal clause ("because in this as in so many other things . . .") and omitted the *cum*, and so uses the indicative to avoid the suggestion of other possible meanings of the subjunctive used without *cum*. This is only somewhat less straightforward than changing the tense of a quoted verb from past to present because the present fits the context better; if you want to quote *A Tale of Two Cities* to describe urban life *today*, you'll say "it is the best of times, it is the worst of times" instead of using Dickens's past tense. The difference between Mill's *est* and Bacon's *sit* therefore has nothing to do with making the point more pejorative. Presumably, the author of the note has remembered that subjunctives are used in Latin to express potential facts or states of affairs, as English does with modal auxiliary verbs like 'could,' 'would,' or 'may,' but has either

forgotten that this is only one of many uses of the subjunctive or simply has not bothered to go look at the passage in Bacon to see how he uses it there. In short, the footnote adds an unnecessary interpretive gloss that is not only mistaken, but linguistically incompetent.

How does this sort of thing happen? How do editors selected for their special expertise persist in printing a mistaken footnote that cannot fail to mislead the readers who need to consult it? One obvious cause is that fewer people today with reputations for expertise in the history of political philosophy know any Latin. But that is neither surprising nor especially problematic. What is surprising and problematic is that someone who could not pass a second semester Latin course *thought* that he or she was perfectly competent in Latin, and then various editors simply copied and pasted the mistake with a bit of variation and without bothering to ask anyone who *does* know Latin whether the note was right. So part of the story is sheer editorial sloth, but that is not the whole story. What we have here is the spectacle of ignorant people presuming that they know perfectly well how to understand something that they are quite evidently not in a position to understand.

The great irony of this tale is, of course, that this mistake is precisely what Mill's Baconian Latin maxim warns us against. "*Opinio copiae inter maximas causas inopiae est*": not "Oh, look at how stupid *hoi polloi* are, they won't even understand this Latin!" but rather, "Be careful not to suppose that you are in a position to know what you are in no position to know." Would that more of Mill's editors had taken this advice!¹⁶

¹⁶ I am grateful to Dhananjay Jagannathan, Irfan Khawaja, and John Ryan for their suggestions in response to an earlier draft of this article.

