Gender Ideology and Separate Spheres Jan Marsh

THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

GENDER AND POWER

The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of ‘Woman’s Rights’, with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety . . . It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different—then let them remain each in their own position. (Queen Victoria, letter 29 May 1870)

In terms of gender ideology, the accession of Queen Victoria of Britain, for whom the *Victorian Era* is named, was something of a paradox. Traditionally, women were defined physically and intellectually as the 'weaker' sex, in all ways subordinate to male authority. In private life women were subject to fathers, husbands, brothers even adult sons. Publicly, men dominated all decision-making in political, legal and economic affairs. But as monarch, Victoria—who in 1837 was only 18 years old—was socially and symbolically superior to every other citizen in Britain, all men being constitutionally considered her subjects.

Early Victorian gender prescriptions featured men as industrious breadwinners and women as their loyal helpers. Reinforced by social philosophers like Auguste Cornte, Arthur Schopenhauer, Herbert Spencer, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and John Ruskin, this developed into a mid-century doctrine of 'separate spheres', whereby men were figured as competitors in the economic realm while women were positioned either as decorative trophies or spiritual guardians of men's immortal souls. From the 1860s, to this social construct the Darwinian theory of 'survival of the fittest' added a pseudo-scientific dimension that placed men higher on the evolutionary ladder.

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest . . . But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision . . . She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she many never fail from his side . . . (John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 1865, part II)

Throughout the era, 'masculine' values of courage and endeavor supported military campaigns and commercial expansion. Women were allotted a subsidiary role, with patience and self-sacrifice the prime feminine virtues. Motherhood was idealized, alongside virginal innocence, but women were subject to pervasive denigration. To the end of the century, strident misogyny was still strong in both popular and intellectual writing--but as loudly as female inferiority was declared immutable, women everywhere were demonstrating otherwise.

From infancy onwards, gender inequity permeated all aspects of life. 'Think what it is to be a boy, to grow up to manhood in the belief that without any merit or exertion of his own ... by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all and every one of an entire half of the human race,' wrote John Stuart Mill in his 1867 polemic against *The Subjection of Women*, continuing: how early the youth thinks himself superior to his mother, owing her forbearance perhaps but no real respect; and how sublime and sultan-like a sense of superiority he feels, above all, over the woman whom he honors by admitting her to a partnership of his life. Is it imagined that all this does not pervert the whole manner of existence of the man, both as an individual and as a social being?

Whereas in 1800 the majority of Europeans had a predominantly practical education, acquired at home and at work, by 1901 formal learning at primary level was universal, with higher instruction available to the better off. It is worth noting that girls were beginning to move on to university study by the 1860s. This was gradually provided, in segregated colleges at Cambridge and Oxford, somewhat more liberally at the Scottish universities and from 1878 at London University and elsewhere. Subjects studied acquired gender aspects, English literature and geography being for example regarded as appropriate for women, with Latin and geology for men. Overall, however, boys progressed to higher levels, producing an imbalance in qualifications that persisted until recently. One exceptional example was the classicist Jane Harrison (1850-1928), who trenchantly observed how scholarship was dominated by 'that most dire and deadly of all tyrannies, an oligarchy of old men'.

Throughout the Victorian period, employment patterns evolved in response to industrial and urban factors, but occupational structures remained gendered and indeed in some ways became more distinct. Thus, whereas in the 1830s wives often assisted husbands in a small business or professional practice, by the 1890s work and home were commonly separated; exceptions included shopkeeping and upland farming. Nationally (which in this period included the whole of Ireland as well as Scotland, England and Wales), male employment shifted from agriculture to heavy industry, manufacturing and transport, with an accompanying increase in clerical and professional occupations. Men also left domestic service, which remained the largest category of female employment throughout the period (employing 10 percent of the female population in 1851, for example, and over 11 percent in 1891). Women also worked in textile mills, potteries, agriculture and garment-making, as well as in seasonal or unrecorded employment, especially laundering.

Compared to the twentieth century, there was indeed some contraction in the work open to women, as protective legislation barred their employment underground or overnight. In the Lancashire coalfields, the 'pit-brow lasses' struggled to retain their jobs. Generally, male workers strove to secure wages that enabled wives to be full-time mothers--an aspiration in tune with bourgeois notions of orderly domestic bliss. The organized labor movement was overwhelmingly male, with a few trade union activists such as bookbinder Emma Paterson (1848-86), leader of the Women's Protection and Provident League, who in 1875 persuaded the Trades Union Congress to accept female delegates and successfully campaigned for female factory inspectors.

It is calculated that while most men worked, only one-third of all women were in employment at any time in the nineteenth century (as against two-thirds in 1978, for comparison.) There were only men in the army and navy, in shipbuilding, construction, printing, railways—to list some major occupations—-and only male scientists, engineers, priests, City financiers and Members of Parliament.

From the mid-century, educated women began to pry open certain professional and clerical occupations, partly in response to the powerful Victorian 'gospel of work' that castigated idleness, partly to provide for the perceived 'surplus' of single women, and partly for the sake of self-fulfilment. As a result of these struggles, by 1901 here were 212 female physicians, 140 dentists, 6 architects and 3 vets. Over a quarter of professional painters (total 14,000) and over a half of musicians (total 43,230) and actors (12,500) were female.

In the aristocracy, neither men nor women normally worked for wages. But men managed their estates and took part in government, while 'society women' supported these activities through household management and political entertaining. At the top of the tree, so to speak, lords and ladies attended court for a variety of official functions.

However, the majority of upper- and middle-class women never worked outside the home. Nevertheless, although leisure time undoubtedly increased for many, the notion of idle, unoccupied Victorian ladies is something of a myth. Women ran the house, undertaking domestic work and child care themselves, as well as supervising the servants employed to cook, clean, carry coal and run errands. Moreover, almost from time immemorial, with a 'work-basket' to denote her tasks, each girl and woman was a needleworker, responsible for making and mending clothes and household linen. One major change in the period was the invention in the 1850s of the domestic sewing machine; which greatly assisted both private and commercial dressmaking. By 1900 ready-made garments were increasingly available in shops.

Thinking Point

Can you describe what was mean by the Victorian doctrine of "separate spheres" for men and women? In what ways did they overlap professionally?