



Bridgewater State University

## Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

---

Honors Program Theses and Projects

Undergraduate Honors Program

---

12-6-2018

### Marriage in Victorian England

Cheryl Ann McDonnell  
*Bridgewater State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors\\_proj](https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

McDonnell, Cheryl Ann. (2018). Marriage in Victorian England. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 420. Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors\\_proj/420](https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/420)  
Copyright © 2018 Cheryl Ann McDonnell

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Marriage in Victorian England

Cheryl Ann McDonnell

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in History

Bridgewater State University

December 6, 2018

Dr. Sarah Wiggins, Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Meghan Healy-Clancy, Committee Member  
Dr. Brian Payne, Committee Member

When most people consider the lives of women in the Victorian age in Great Britain, a period which covers the years of Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, they have a pretty rigid idea of what women were like in that era. Most see Victorian women as stifled and restricted, happy in their domestic role, both before and after their marriage. This stereotype is not accurate in reality to the women of the Victorian era. In this essay, I plan to explore what the reality of daily life was for Victorian women. More specifically I plan to examine what rights and sense of independence middle and upper-class women have during and after marriage. I am examining middle- and upper-class women because they have fairly similar marital situations as they were of a similar economic level, which factored into questions of dowries and inheritance when entering into marriage. Both upper- and middle-class women usually did not work, whereas lower-class families had less money and oftentimes worked to support their families. This essay will examine this issue by looking at the rights women had over their body in this era, as well as the rights they had over their children and property. This essay will also explore how divorce, which was becoming increasingly accessible in the Victorian era, impacted a woman's freedoms and rights. Marriage was at the center of everyday lives for the Victorians and its influence extended to all corners of life and was the basis on which Victorian society was established. Because marriage was so important, its effects rippled throughout Victorian society, influencing women's rights and roles in every way. The effects Victorian ideas of marriage had on women was felt by them in both the public and private spheres and influenced women's roles for decades.

For this essay, I will draw on a variety of sources, both primary and secondary. Historians of these sources discuss a wide-ranging variety of topics related to marriage, from a history of marriages to laws concerning Victorian marriages to ideals about marriages in the era.

These sources cover not only specific topics concerning the topic of marriages in the Victorian era, such as women's property rights in marriage, how women and men were expected to act in marriage, and what divorce was like in the Victorian age. Some, such as *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* by Phyllis Rose, cover specific examples of Victorian marriages which will be used as evidence to support the information I provide in the essay about Victorian marriages. Historian Joan Perkin discusses the evolution of marriages throughout the Victorian period, as well as the ever-changing laws concerning the institution. The topic of the private lives of married couples in this time period is detailed by several historians, including John Tosh, Steven Mintz, and Anthony S. Wohl. Historians Diane Atkinson and Allen Horstman discuss divorce and the societal implications it had on women. Each of these historians covers a different aspect of the topic of marriage in this time period and their books helped to give me a well-rounded view of the topic.

The primary sources I will draw on for this essay will be a combination of novels, diaries, and other books written at the time. These books provide opinions on marriage from the time period, what those in the Victorian period believed about marriage, and how the men and women from the time period would portray marriage both in fiction and in scholarly texts. For fictional texts, I will examine the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, which was published in 1847 towards the beginning of the Victorian era, and the novel *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot, which was published in 1876 almost forty years into the Victorian era. Both of these novels examine the topic of marriage and both were written by women from the era, giving a perspective on women's thoughts of marriage at the time, what they thought of the topic, what they looked for an expected in a marriage, and what the reality of marriage was like for them. I will also examine several diaries, including the diaries of famous economist and social reformer

Beatrice Potter Webb, Queen Victoria's diaries, and a collection of diary entries from the period entitled *Victorian Diaries: The Daily Lives of Victorian Men and Women* edited by Mitchell Beazley. I will also examine several collections of accounts from the era. All these sources will help me to get a firsthand account of what marriages were like in the Victorian era, from both men and women of the time period.

## **Background**

Despite being an ancient institution, the process of getting married was in constant flux in England in the centuries leading up to the Victorian age. For a long time, there were little to no rules about marriage, let alone how a proper marriage was supposed to be instituted. Lawrence Stone describes the state of marriage in medieval England by saying, "In the Early Modern period, marriage was an engagement which could be undertaken in a bewildering variety of ways, and the mere definition of it is fraught with difficulties."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to describe how in this period, polygyny was fairly common because of "easy divorce and much concubinage."<sup>2</sup> Despite being commonplace, this was heavily discouraged by Catholic priests in England. The practice was not, however, discouraged by Anglo-Saxon pagans who had more lax views of marriage. In this period, marriage was for the most part a business transaction "between two families concerning property exchange"<sup>3</sup> for those with property and a "private contract"<sup>4</sup> for those without it. A Church ceremony was a luxury, viewed as being too expensive for most in a period where divorce and remarriage "was still widely practiced."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York City, New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 31.

It was only in the thirteenth century when the Church was finally able “to take control of marriage law”<sup>6</sup> that polygyny was outlawed. The process for getting married was still quite complicated, though, even by the sixteenth century, as there was no one specified way to get married. One way was to have a legal contract, as was previously stated, between the parents of the bride and groom that would involve an exchange of goods or money. After this there would be several other steps, including reading vows in front of witnesses, a public reading “of banns in church, three times,” a church ceremony, and finally “the sexual consummation.” In actuality, though, none of the steps after the formal contract were strictly necessary to be considered legally binding. If the contract was signed then the marriage was considered legal in the eyes of the law. Many did not even need to sign a contract. In most places, if there was an “exchange of promises before witnesses which was followed by cohabitation” then this would be a legally binding marriage. It was only in the later sixteenth century after the Reformation that the Catholic Church required a priest to marry a couple to make a marriage legal. Many still chose to elope or have a private ceremony as a church wedding was expensive, which caused many in the Church to condemn elopements. One person to do so was a monk named Gratian, who attempted to clarify and enforce certain laws for the Church surrounding marriage in 1150. Several of these clarifications attempt to dissuade people from eloping, writing “clandestine marriages should not be made” and “no one shall marry a wife without a public ceremony.”<sup>7</sup>

The Anglican Church did not, as the Catholic Church did, clarify their laws to make the marriage process more streamlined. The matter was largely controlled by the ecclesiastical courts rather than the Anglican Church and there were a variety of ways that men and women

---

<sup>6</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Gratian, “Canon Law on Marriage (1150),” in *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women's History*, ed. Lisa DiCaprio and Merry E. Weisner (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 109.

were allowed to marry in this period, including an oral contract of marriage followed by consummation. This exchange of vows was more important than any church ceremony performed. New laws in 1604 which required a church wedding and put severe limitations on when weddings could take place in a church, while also requiring that “the banns had been read for three weeks running”<sup>8</sup> before couples could be married. These new laws also required that anyone under the age of twenty-one needed a parent’s permission before marrying. All of this was done to try to restrict elopements, especially marriages of young people running away when parents disapproved, although some clergymen still agreed to perform marriages that went against these new laws. Finally, in 1753 laws were streamlined which helped to clarify the process. With these laws, the church wedding was now the only legal means of getting married, rather than a contract or oral exchange of vows, and no one under the age of twenty-one could get married without the permission of their parents. Again, these laws were made to ensure that “the sons and daughters of the greatest families in England”<sup>9</sup> were not ruined by eloping with those their family deemed unsuitable. These laws established marriage as a “contract like any other” meaning it could be regulated by the government.

As England entered the nineteenth century, great changes were made to the institution of marriage. Many of these changes helped to make the lives of married women better by giving them new freedoms and rights within marriage. These new developments in women’s rights in marriage in the Victorian era had a ripple effect throughout society in the nineteenth century. These advancements affected both public and private life, and eventually led to women’s suffrage in the early twentieth century. Marriage became more important as a cultural institution

---

<sup>8</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 35-36.

for Victorians than it was for previous generations and changes to this institution influenced the course of the Victorian era.

### **Ideals of Marriage**

The Victorian era began in 1837. This period brought about new ideas about marriage, ideas that had started at the end of the eighteenth century but did not truly come into play until the Victorian age. The Victorian era was named after Queen Victoria who came into power in this period at the young age of eighteen in 1837 and Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha came to represent to people in this time period the ideal of a Victorian marriage. Victoria and Albert married in 1840 when both were twenty years old and they went on to have nine children together over the course of their twenty-one year marriage until his untimely death at the age of forty-two in 1861. Their marriage had an incredibly important impact on the ideals of marriage in the period. More often than not, the greatest impact Victoria and the rest of the royal family had on marriages was the examples they set with their own. The way Victoria and other royals acted showed those who were not royals how they should behave in marriage, whether that behavior was a good example to follow or not. Joan Perkin explores this idea, saying, "If the Prince of Wales (the Prince Regent, later George IV) could treat his wife so badly, what hope was there for other cast off wives? If Queen Victoria never knew such happiness existed as was hers and Albert's might there not be hope for all eager young brides? And if a later Princess of Wales (Alexandra) could get much of her own way and escape excessive childbearing by accepting her husband's mistresses, wasn't that a royal example of civilized behavior for aristocratic ladies in the know?"<sup>10</sup> The public viewed the acts

---

<sup>10</sup> Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago, Illinois: Lyceum Books, Inc. 1989), 5.

of royalty as showing them how they should behave in marriage (properly or improperly by other standards), even if the royals did not always intend this.

Queen Victoria's marriage impacted not only the ideals of marriage but also how weddings themselves should be conducted. Victoria had a very public, very lavish ceremony, something many women getting married after this major event strove to emulate with their own ceremonies. Most importantly, though, Queen Victoria wore white on her wedding day and set the trend of wearing white for weddings, a tradition we still have to this day. Stephanie Coontz discusses Queen Victoria's impact on the traditions of the festivities and ceremonies of the wedding day; "When Queen Victoria broke with convention and walked down the aisle to musical accompaniment, wearing pure white instead of the traditional silver and white gown and colored cape, she created an overnight 'tradition.'"<sup>11</sup> Almost overnight, these traditions became incredibly popular and people wanted to copy Victoria's elaborate wedding, wanting to have their own "celebration of their entry into respectable domesticity."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Queen Victoria came to largely represent the ideals for familial domesticity at the time. Despite the fact that Queen Victoria largely disliked childbearing and childrearing, she became associated with the middle-class feminine ideal for women, happily married and surrounded by children. In his discussion of the Queen's status of a symbol of blissful domesticity, John Tosh states, "The popular image of Victorian domesticity is almost entirely focused on women and children, suggesting that their needs were its governing rationale...Perhaps the most powerful symbol of all was the blameless and bourgeois home of

---

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York City, New York: The Penguin Group, 2005), 167.

<sup>12</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 167.

the Queen herself, in stark contrast to the irregular lives of her predecessors.”<sup>13</sup> Victoria helped to reinforce the importance of domesticity and marriage in Victorian society, a belief that Queen Victoria herself retained. In a letter to her daughter, Princess Victoria, she wrote, “Now to reply to your observation that you find a married woman has much more liberty than an unmarried one; in one sense of the word she had...Without that—certainly it is unbounded happiness—if one has a husband one worships! It is a foretaste of heaven.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, Victoria and Albert’s ideal marriage helped to make the monarchy popular again after years of disfavor, despite the fact that many in the government had worried that the marriage would be unpopular due to Albert being German. In John A. Wagner’s introduction to his collection of accounts of Victorian life, he describes the new appeal the royal family had under Queen Victoria. “The happily married couple also rescued the monarchy from the unpopularity it had suffered through the irresponsibly rakish behavior of Victoria’s paternal uncles, who had refused to marry, had fought with their wives when they did marry, and had fathered many illegitimate children, but almost none in wedlock.”<sup>15</sup> Victoria and Albert’s seemingly blissful marriage and nine happy, healthy legitimate children contrasted sharply with the marriages and children of Queen Victoria’s predecessors, George IV and William IV, and helped to put her in her people’s favor, while also helping to make her both relatable to the people and someone they should try to emulate in their day to day life. Queen Victoria, despite being a powerful woman and ruler, represented to women in this era this pillar of domesticity which reinforced to women at the time

---

<sup>13</sup> John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Bath, England: Bath Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>14</sup> Queen Victoria, “On Childbearing and Motherhood (1858-1859) [March 24, 1858],” in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 142-144.

<sup>15</sup> John A. Wagner, *Voices of Victorian England: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood: An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), xvii.

that that was the role they were supposed to play, of happy wife and mother, content in their role in the domestic sphere.

This image of a perfectly domestic life factored greatly into what men and women in the Victorian era looked for in a spouse. Men and women looked for a true companion, though some suggest that men and women were a less than equal partnership. There were suggestions at the time that women really wanted a man who would be her “master.”<sup>16</sup> A woman provided her husband with “emotional support” while men would give their wives a “window on the wider world” of education and culture while also providing them with protection.<sup>17</sup> Men in this period looked for a wife with whom they could share “their anxieties, their doubts and their aspirations” and this became an incredibly important part of a wife’s duties and part of the “healing power of home.”<sup>18</sup> It was so important that advice literature of the day, magazines or periodicals made to give advice to women, gave guidance to wives of how to best provide this comfort and advice to their husbands. Author Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote in 1843 how important it was for a wife to be a source of comfort for her husband, saying, “To be permitted to dwell within the influence of such a man, must be a privilege of the highest order; to listen to his conversation, must be a perpetual feast; but to be permitted into his heart—to share his counsels, and to be the chosen companion of his joys and sorrows!—it is difficult to say whether humility or gratitude should preponderate in the feelings of the woman thus distinguished and thus blest.”<sup>19</sup> Another important trait men looked for in a wife was someone who would uphold moral virtue within their house and with their kids. “Outside the ranks of the frivolous and hedonistic, middle-class

---

<sup>16</sup> Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, “Characteristic of Husbands (1843),” in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 125.

Victorian men expected their homes to stand for a moral vision of life which would affect their own sensibilities for the better.”<sup>20</sup> Women’s main duty in the household was to help instill moral values in their children, as well as helping maintain the moral integrity of everyone else in the household.

This idea that women were meant to be the moral heart of the house all tied into men’s ultimate ideal of women in this time as the Angel in the House. The title of Angel in the House was based on the poem by Coventry Patmore, released initially in 1854. As the Angel in the House, women were supposed to maintain the “moral purity” of the household and because of this she was regarded by her husband with a sense of “religious reverence.” This ideal came to light as a result of the Industrial Revolution, a wave of manufacturing and business improvements, which was reaching its height during the Victorian era. People feared that the social progress that came along with the Industrial Revolution was corrupting people and leading to vice and sin. Because of this, people were trying harder than ever to try to maintain the moral integrity within the sanctity of the family home. Women in their roles as the wives and mothers of the household were tasked with doing this as they were viewed as being the member of the household who was “near to God.”<sup>21</sup>

The Angel’s role also tied into the aforementioned need of Victorian men for their wives to comfort and care for them and the general wellbeing of the household. Because society viewed the Angel in the House as an ultra-pious, domestic figure, she was also largely viewed as an asexual and innocent figure, showing a “helplessness in matters outside the domestic

---

<sup>20</sup> Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Jeanne M. Peterson, “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women,” *American Historical Review* 15 (1984): 677-708.

sphere.”<sup>22</sup> Women were not only supposed to fulfill these roles, but be happy and grateful to do so. Coventry Patmore sums this up best in his poem on the subject of the Angel in the House in a section entitled “The Friends.”

Displeasures and resentments pass  
 Athwart her charitable eyes  
 More fleetingly than breath from glass,  
 Or truth from foolish memories;  
 Her heart’s so touch’d with others’ woes  
 She has no need of chastisement;  
 Her gentle life’s conditions close,  
 Like God’s commandments, with content,  
 And make an aspect calm and gay,  
 Where sweet affections come and go,  
 Till all who see her, smile and say,  
 How fair, and happy that she’s so!<sup>23</sup>

This poem, and other works of the time argue that women thought only of the wellbeing of others and never of themselves and that this made them contented and happy with their lives as nothing else in life could.

Historians actively debate this assumed ideal of women. Some, like Jeanne M. Peterson, argue that this ideal was the reality for many women and that “she populated most genteel Victorian households”, an argument that is presented as evidence that the “‘golden age’ of family life”<sup>24</sup> really existed; others said that this ideal was a “symbol of oppressed women trapped in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Peterson, “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women,” 677.

<sup>23</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co. 1863), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Peterson, “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women,” 678.

gilded cage of Victorian male domination.”<sup>25</sup> Whatever this ideal represented, it is clear that this idea of how wives in the Victorian era were supposed to behave greatly influenced how women believed they should behave in marriage as well as what men looked for in a potential wife.

Many in the Victorian age believed that love came from this exchange of needs, while others believed that love was essential before marriage could occur. This idea of marrying for romance rather than marrying and possibly finding romance after first developed in the late eighteenth century through the Enlightenment, and largely replaced arranged marriages by the time the Victorian era began. Because of this, the definition and characteristics of a successful marriage also changed. Historian Stephanie Coontz states, “The measure of a successful marriage was no longer how big a financial settlement was involved, how many useful in-laws were acquired, or how many children were produced, but how well a family met the emotional needs of its individual members.”<sup>26</sup> Marriages were no longer critical to political unions or alliances and instead were a “refuge from work, politics, and community obligations.”<sup>27</sup> These changes were made both because of increased wages, which made men less reliant on their parents, meaning a man did not have to wait until he got his title and land before he could marry, and the Enlightenment’s championing of “individual rights.”<sup>28</sup>

Romance came to be incredibly important to ideas of marriage in this era, with many believing it to be “immoral”<sup>29</sup> to marry for any other reason. Because of this new need for romance in love, many young women became increasingly worried about marrying the wrong

---

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women,” 678.

<sup>26</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 146.

<sup>27</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 146.

<sup>29</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 180.

man and thus not having the romance they desired in marriage and because of this they became increasingly hesitant to get married. In fact, many women decided not to marry rather than having to endure a loveless marriage. Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* discusses this notion when its protagonist Jane says, "It is not saying too much: I know what I feel, and how averse are my inclinations to the bare thought of marriage. No one would take me for love; and I will not be regarded in the light of a mere money speculation. And I do not want a stranger—unsympathizing, alien, different from me; I want my kindred; those with whom I have full fellow-feeling."<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on romance even helped to make divorce more accessible, as opinions of the time changed to believe that men and women should not be forced to stay in a marriage that was far less than the romantic ideal (be it adulterous, abusive, or what have you).

Many, however, still feared the increasing amount of love matches. Coontz notes growing fear that people, mainly women, would choose to marry "unwisely"<sup>31</sup> and that it would lead to the breakdown of more marriages. Critics also feared that these matches would lead to women demanding equal rights in society after experiencing a marriage where she was viewed as an equal, while also fearing that the perceived selfishness of a love match would lead society to stray more towards other selfish acts of vice and sin. While many of these claims were unfounded, the greater desire of women for equal rights after an equal partnership in marriage was mostly true. "It was harder to dismiss calls to extend equal rights to women when people no longer believed that every relationship had to have a ruler and a subject."<sup>32</sup> These new ideas of romance forced people into reexamining relationships and the power dynamic between men and women. What ultimately came of this were specific gender roles and ideals. Neither sex was

---

<sup>30</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London, England: Smith, Elder & Co. 1847), 838.

<sup>31</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 149.

<sup>32</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 153.

now inferior to the other in theory but were, as Coontz notes, to “be appreciated on their own, completely dissimilar terms.”<sup>33</sup> It became the popular understanding that men and women operated in separate but equally important spheres, each with their own unique abilities.

These separate spheres, as they came to be identified by historians, established the areas of daily life that husbands and wives were supposed to have their control over, each with their own individual sphere of influence. The woman’s sphere was supposed to be primarily the private sphere of household and domestic life, a notion that tied into the idea of the virtuous, domestic goddess of the Angel in the House. As written by Isabella Beeton, the wife of publisher Samuel O. Beeton, in her 1861 guide to a wife’s household duties, a woman should be in command of the household and lead the members of the household to prosperity and spirituality. Beeton noted;

As with the Commander of an Army, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the establishment...Of all those acquirements, which more particularly belong to the feminine character, there are none which take a higher rank in our estimation, than such as enter into a knowledge of household duties; for on these are perpetually dependent the happiness, comfort, and well-being of a family.<sup>34</sup>

The man’s sphere was supposed to be the public sphere of business and politics. These roles became increasingly set in place over the course of the Victorian era. Historians Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen write of this, “In both practice and prescription the male and female spheres became increasingly separated, and the roles of men and women became ever more frozen.”<sup>35</sup> As these roles became increasingly prevalent and

---

<sup>33</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> Isabella Beeton, “Duties of the Mistress of the House (1861),” in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 84.

<sup>35</sup> Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, Karen M. Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1981), 123.

permanent, they severely narrowed women's already limited opportunities. For starters, women were effectively barred from many careers as those now fell outside of women's sphere of influence. Hellerstein, Hume, and Offen note, "Men in the professions of law and medicine banded together and adopted codes that governed admission to their ranks and regulated the behavior of their members; these codes, like protective labor legislation, had the effect of barring women from public activities in which they had formerly engaged."<sup>36</sup> Not only were these separate spheres keeping women from many careers and public activities, but they were also used by many anti-suffragists as support for why women should not gain the right to vote. Brian Harrison discusses these anti-suffragist tactics, writing, "But what unites most of these anti-suffragist gestures towards women's emancipation is their compatibility with the Antis' central belief that a separation of spheres between the sexes has been ordained by God and/or by Nature."<sup>37</sup> Anti-suffragists believed that women had no need of joining the public sphere, as that was a man's realm and if a woman was married she did not need to represent herself in this sphere as her husband already could do that. Women were relegated strictly to the home life as the idea "that the only appropriate working activities for women were domestic tasks"<sup>38</sup> became increasingly popular.

Men and women built Victorian marriages on these ideals and popular images of marriages. Men and women when looking for a future spouse kept these ideals in mind, with men seeking a loving, domestic, demure, and pious woman whose only concerns were for her husband's happiness and the emotional and religious wellbeing of their happy household.

---

<sup>36</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (New York City, New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. 1978), 56.

<sup>38</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 273.

Women looking sought a reliable provider whom they would be madly in love with. Victorians also looked to find a spouse with whom they could have a similar marriage to the seemingly perfect marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. It is with all of these ideals of marriage and women's roles in mind that Victorians looked to enter into the increasingly important institution of marriage.

### **Pre-Marriage**

Women's level of independence prior to getting married was a moving target during the Victorian era and often depended on the specific woman and her family and situation. One of the areas that was most up for debate for unmarried women was their rights to property. For the most part, though, women had more control over their property and inheritance when they were single than once they married. Unmarried women could receive a trust, could have the authority to "act as agent for another person, and as an agent, execute delegated authority,"<sup>39</sup> could act as executor of a will, and could inherit property that she could act as administrator to. Because of this, many single women experienced more freedom before they got married than after. The novel *Jane Eyre* showcases this idea when its protagonist Jane inherits a massive fortune from her uncle and is now free to live and marry as she wishes and exclaims, "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress."<sup>40</sup> Many families even ensured that their daughters would be able to independently keep this inheritance once they married, with many maintaining "a modest private income assured to her separate use"<sup>41</sup> because of their family's intervention. Wealthy families would do this to protect their daughters "from avaricious,

---

<sup>39</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 942.

<sup>41</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 50.

unlucky or unsuccessful husbands”<sup>42</sup> who might marry them for their fortunes then spend the money leaving them penniless. George Eliot discusses this issue of family wealth in her novel *Daniel Deronda* when the character Catherine Arrowpoint becomes engaged to the character Herr Klesmer. Catherine’s father objects, saying, “‘You must see, Catherine, that Klesmer is not the man for you,’ said Mr. Arrowpoint. ‘He won’t do at the head of estates. He has a deuced foreign look—is an unpractical man.’”<sup>43</sup> Victorian families feared greatly that a rakish upstart would swoop in, marry their daughters, and wreck the family fortune because of greed or lack of experience or understanding and so put preventative measures in place to ensure that this would not happen. Because of their family’s intervention, many women were able to maintain the considerable fortune they held while they were single. Not every family did this however and, as historian Joan Perkin notes, “there was a vast difference between having even a small private income, and having none at all.”<sup>44</sup>

Wealthy women’s family fortunes came increasingly into play in their prospective marriages as “schemes of inheritance often gave precedence to close female kin such as sisters or nieces over remote male cousins.”<sup>45</sup> These wealthy heiresses became so important that many men even hyphenated their last names or changed their names to include their new wife’s name because their families and social statuses were so important and influential. The heiresses’ inheritance and connection to her family became so important that in her marriage contract it was stated that her inheritance would go to her second son instead of her eldest son in order to “re-start his mother’s line all over again.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London, England: 1876), 618.

<sup>44</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 52.

Despite the fact that for many wealthy women their rights to their property and inheritance were more secure, many women (rightfully) still had many fears and trepidations about entering into marriage. One of the biggest fears was the fact that marriage signified for women a narrowing of their opportunities. This especially was a concern as women had recently started to find new opportunities “to work outside the home and sell their labor in the marketplace, or to sit home and decorate an affluent household.”<sup>47</sup> These opportunities brought women more freedom and independence; independence that relatively disappeared when a woman married as it was not socially acceptable for middle- and upper-class women to hold a job or have many duties outside of the domestic sphere. When a woman married, her “identity became increasingly linked to her future husband,”<sup>48</sup> as historian Stevn Mintz notes. The novel *Jane Eyre* discusses this idea of losing one’s individual identity upon entering into when the main character Jane expresses before her failed wedding to her love interest Mr. Rochester, “I, at least, had nothing more to do: there were my trunks, packed, locked, corded, ranged in a row along the wall of my little chamber; to-morrow, at this time, they would be far on their road to London and so should I—or rather, not I, but one Jane Rochester, a person whom as yet I knew not...Mrs. Rochester! She did not exist: she would not be born till to-mor-row, some time after eight o’clock a.m.”<sup>49</sup>

Conversely, many women felt anxious about the prospect of marriage, fearing the idea of entering into the institution while also fearing the possibility of not getting married, as it was essential to many women’s Christian faith at the time. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe expresses

---

<sup>47</sup> Steven Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture* (New York City, New York: New York University Press, 1983), 56.

<sup>48</sup> Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture*, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 594.

this best, saying, “To her brother Edward and sister Catharine, she confessed the evanescence of her deepest feelings and her sense that she was not fit for anything useful, and said that she would remain a useless sinner unless she found that divine love that ‘could supply the loss of all earthly love.’”<sup>50</sup> For Stowe, marriage was a way of strengthening her faith by entering into a holy, virtuous institution that was viewed highly by her religion. For Evangelical Christians like Harriet Beecher Stowe, though, the idea of marriage was a paradox. Christians in the Victorian age espoused the belief that marriage was holy, virtuous, and essential, while also preaching that lust and sexuality were immoral, especially for women. Because of this, many women were very confused on the topic of marriage, a confusion that was not lessened by Christian leaders’ insistence that marriage was a religious experience rather than one tied to any carnal affections. Historian Steven Mintz discusses these ideas, writing “We might better recognize it as an intellectual construct, a fiction, which served to counteract the most troubling aspects of the marital relationship and to redirect human emotions in a pure and moral direction. To be able to think of marriage as a spiritual contract and an instrument of satisfaction as a way to portray a relationship free from associations with carnality and lust, dominion and subservience.”<sup>51</sup> Victorians made love a religious necessity, a spiritual experience, so as to remove it from the things Victorian Christians looked down on and feared, including sex, lust, and passion.

Marriages were usually arranged by the mother of the family in this era where the institution of marriage for upper-class families became increasingly important, becoming, as Perkin notes, the means “by which families were consolidated, strong bonds of friendship, patronage and career advancement were forged, and the family’s reputation was made.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture*, 131.

<sup>51</sup> Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture*, 135.

<sup>52</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 64.

Upper-class marriages affected families not just in the immediate wake of the marriage but for generations to come, meaning it was especially important that mothers made good matches and ensured desirable meetings between their daughters and a potential suitor. It was not the potential grooms that were up “for sale”<sup>53</sup> but potential brides who were paraded around for good matches. This does not mean that women were entirely helpless or passive in these matters, however. Women could choose who they married and chose spouses sometimes for “noble or romantic”<sup>54</sup> reasons though often their choices were for highly practical reasons. Mothers tried to make matches that would be best for advancing the social standing and wealth of the family while also being what is in the best interest for their daughters, usually trying “to protect their daughters”<sup>55</sup> from rakes, social climbers, or others who had less than noble intentions for their daughters.

Famous economist and social reformer Beatrice Potter Webb’s courtship and engagement of her future husband Sidney Webb, who married in 1892, shows what a typical courtship and engagement in the Victorian period was like. Potter knew Webb for two years before they wed and developed a relationship that was built on friendship. Potter was reluctant to marry and only wished to do so if she could find an equal partner in life. Historians Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie discuss the Webbs’ courtship in their introduction to Potter Webbs’ diary, writing, “It was a troubled courtship, in which Sidney had both to win her reluctant affection and to satisfy her that marriage would not be ‘an act of *felo de se*’ as she put it, but rather, a working partnership which would enhance their usefulness to society quite as much as their personal happiness—the only line of argument, as their fretful correspondence shows, which had any

---

<sup>53</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 65.

prospect of success.”<sup>56</sup> Their friendship eventually changed to romance, though at first Potter simply saw him “as a fellow-worker” while Webb had fallen in love. Eventually, though, she came to fall for him, with Potter giving her sister the “choice between accepting him and losing touch with her.”<sup>57</sup> Beatrice Potter wed Sidney Webb in 1892 in a small and rather secretive civil ceremony and Potter took Webb’s last name, a decision she wrote about later saying, “The only thing I regret is parting with my *name*—and I *do* resent that.”<sup>58</sup> Potter and Webb’s courtship and marriage helps to show just how important an equal partnership and friendship was in entering into Victorian marriages, that it was important for Victorians to have at least some sense of companionship and equality in marriage.

### **Married Life**

When women entered into the important institution of marriage in the Victorian era, they came face to face with many of the ideals that men compared their potential wives to, including the previously discussed ideal of the ‘Angel in the House.’ Once a woman married, she was expected to become this moralistic pillar of virtue and domestic goddess whose main duties in life included comforting her husband, having and caring for children, and maintaining a household. For some women, these duties were comfortable and they performed them admirably while trying to live up to this omnipresent Angel. Other women chafed against these confined gender roles and longed for a life outside of the domestic sphere. There was no one defining idea of a Victorian wife. She was not solely the happy homemaker, nor was she always the

---

<sup>56</sup> Beatrice Potter Webb (ed. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb Volume One 1873-1892: Glitter Around and Darkness Within* (Great Britain: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982), xii.

<sup>57</sup> Mackenzie, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb Volume One 1873-1892: Glitter Around and Darkness Within*, 367.

<sup>58</sup> Potter Webb, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb Volume One 1873-1892: Glitter Around and Darkness Within*, 371.

victim trapped in the gilded cage. Marriages in the Victorian era were a different experience for every woman.

One of the biggest issues Victorian women faced upon entering into marriage was having to come up against the strict ideas of a woman's sexuality that were prevalent at the time. Christianity and Victorian morals in the Victorian era said that women were supposed to be innocent, asexual creatures, who did not experience lust and only had sexual intercourse because it was her duty as a wife and because according to the social mores of the time she needed to produce children to complete the picture of domestic tranquility. A doctor named William Acton wrote in 1875 that the perfect woman and wife, while along with being "kind, considerate, self-sacrificing, and sensible" was also "utterly ignorant of and averse to any sensual indulgence."<sup>59</sup> Because women were supposed to be these virginal angels, they were not always fully informed about what would happen on the wedding night. "Respectable girls were often brought up in complete ignorance of the facts of life, or they knew just enough to be terrified of pregnancy. For these wives the honeymoon could be so traumatic that sexual relations were ever thereafter blighted."<sup>60</sup> Social activist Annie Besant shared in 1866 the degree of ignorance young ladies, including herself, had concerning what went on in the marital bed before marrying, saying, "My ignorance of all that marriage meant was as profound as though I had been a child of four...My darling mother meant all that was happiest for me when she shielded me from all knowledge of sorrow and sin...keeping me ignorant as a baby till I left home a wife."<sup>61</sup> These disappointing and horrifying honeymoons went directly against the high hopes that men had for their wedding

---

<sup>59</sup> Dr. William Acton, "The Perfect Ideal of An English Wife (1875)," in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 129.

<sup>60</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> Annie Besant, "Decision to Marry (1866)," in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 129.

night, a night they went into, as historian John Tosh notes, “with the keenest anticipation of the sexual delight to come.”<sup>62</sup> This was not the case to every Victorian marriage, however. One of the most famous instances of a very amorous marriage was that of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who would have nine children over the course of seventeen years despite the fact that Queen Victoria on the whole despised pregnancy and childbirth.

Newlywed upper-class women’s discovery of the physical intimacy that accompanied marriage was made all the more difficult by the high standards placed upon them a social class that relied upon “female chastity”<sup>63</sup> and a society that espoused the necessity of a women’s innocence. This idea of female chastity or a woman’s innocence and ignorance in sexual matters is discussed by historian Martha Vicinus, who writes, “According to respectable theory all women had ‘mercifully’ bestowed upon them ‘a remnant of the innocence of Paradise.’ Paradisiacal innocence of the knowledge of good and evil disposed young women to preserve their chastity.”<sup>64</sup> Sexual attraction in general was not denied by Victorian writers; it was that they thought “women had no interest in sex.”<sup>65</sup> Dr. William Acton wrote in 1875 of this, saying, “I am ready to maintain that there are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever. Others, again, immediately after each period, do become to a limited degree, capable of experiencing it; but this capacity is temporary... Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel.”<sup>66</sup> Victorians believed that women were entirely “passionless”<sup>67</sup> and had no desire for sex outside of a desire to produce children. While this was

---

<sup>62</sup> Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972), 156.

<sup>64</sup> Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, 157.

<sup>65</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 276.

<sup>66</sup> Dr. William Acton, “The Perfect Ideal of An English Wife (1875),” in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 127-128.

<sup>67</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 276.

obviously not true and Victorian women's writings of the time confirm this, Victorians did everything they could to bury the truth of the matter. Historian Joan Perkin explains the efforts went to keep sexual matters hidden and secretive, writing, "Sex was civilized by ignoring it; features of the strategy were to ban sex from conversation, to hide it in dark bedrooms, to conceal the shape of women's bodies, to censor sex in books."<sup>68</sup> Because of this burying of any conversation related to sex, many young women, as previously stated, were ignorant of what went on in the marital bedroom before entering into marriage. There are instances of marriages having failed because of this, with some women being horrified to discover after entering into marriage what would be expected of her.

This is not to say that there were no happily married couples who embraced their sexuality. One such couple is the previously mentioned Beatrice Potter Webb and Sidney Webb. Though according to Potter Webb's diary she and her husband spent their honeymoon primarily researching for their 1894 book *The History of Trade Unionism*, it is clear that they did devote time for romance and sex both during and after the honeymoon. Potter Webb describes this in her diary, stating,

But mostly we spend our evenings alone. Dinner-parties we have resolutely eschewed, I finding that I cannot keep a clear brain for work with talk exciting the evening...Perhaps also the calm of married happiness deadens, in the first instance, one's intellectual energies. Why work when one is happy; and when he is working it is a silent excuse for physical torpor.<sup>69</sup>

This level of intimacy is not just limited to their newlywed phase, however. Potter Webb describes similar amorous feelings years after their wedding, writing that she found herself

---

<sup>68</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 276.

<sup>69</sup> Beatrice Potter Webb (ed. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb Volume Two 1892-1905: All the Good Things of Life* (Great Britain: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983), 23.

experiencing “exaggerated sentiment” that “knocks me to pieces.”<sup>70</sup> Potter Webb and Webb’s marriage helps to show that women were not the asexual angels that society thought they were, while also showing a marriage that was not caught up in horrific bedroom experiences.

Sex was not the only topic considered taboo by Victorians to discuss openly. Another topic equally regarded as being unacceptable to speak about in public was pregnancy and childbirth. This topic was made distasteful despite the fact that having children was revered by Victorians. Women in the Victorian era were highly encouraged to have children right away in a marriage and as such women increasingly had large families. Despite the fact that childbirth was so prevalent in society and was in many ways “a communal event” that was usually attended by many “friends and relatives,”<sup>71</sup> many in Victorian society wished to erase the evidence of actual childbirth and keep the topic carefully hidden away. Historian Anthony S. Wohl discusses how even the Queen of England felt the need to hide any evidence of childbirth, writing, “Feeling that the subject was indelicate, many women, including the Queen, disposed of written notes about their confinements and much other information on the subject was never written down but communicated orally and hence lost.”<sup>72</sup>

In the case of childbirth, as with many other institutions or ideas at the time, women often followed the lead of Queen Victoria. As previously mentioned, Queen Victoria had nine children during seventeen-year marriage to Prince Albert. This, however, did not mean that Queen Victoria was in any way particularly inclined to babies or childbirth. In fact, Victoria wrote in a letter to her daughter that childbirth made her feel like an animal such as a “cow or a

---

<sup>70</sup> Potter Webb, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb Volume Two 1892-1905: All the Good Things of Life*, 189; 203.

<sup>71</sup> Anthony S. Wohl, *The Victorian Family* (New York City, New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc. 1978), 24.

<sup>72</sup> Wohl, *The Victorian Family*, 24.

dog”<sup>73</sup> and that she felt that the process was akin to giving into one’s baser instincts and nature. Victoria wrote later that babies were “froglike” and a “very nasty object” if the baby was ugly, “frightful when undressed”<sup>74</sup> if the baby was not. Despite these objections to children, Queen Victoria was placed as the ideal of motherhood. She was the mother that all women had to strive to become, which women did in a variety of ways. The first of these ways was having large families, despite the “specter of death in childbirth”<sup>75</sup> which loomed over the prospect of adding more children to a family as mortality rates in childbirth remained high, which aimed to mirror Victoria’s seemingly perfect family of eleven. The Queen also paved the way for using anesthesia during childbirth with the birth of her eighth child, Prince Leopold. During this birth, Queen Victoria used chloroform as an anesthetic, which was a relatively new method at the time. Queen Victoria’s use of chloroform helped to end questions of the morality of the practice at the time, as many felt that either this went against the will of God (who had punished women with birthing pains) or it was sinful as, in many people’s opinions, it left a women drunk or drugged. Wohl writes of this influence Queen Victoria had on the use of anesthetics during childbirth, noting, “This debate was largely resolved by the women themselves—including the Queen, a lady not known for irreligion or drunkenness. It was the Queen, as head of the Church, who effectively silenced the objections of religious leaders...It has even been claimed by Elizabeth Longford that her ‘greatest gift to her people was a refusal to accept pain in childbirth as woman’s divinely appointed destiny.’”<sup>76</sup> By using chloroform as an anesthetic during her eighth and ninth pregnancies, Queen Victoria paved the way for her subjects to do so as well, with

---

<sup>73</sup> Wohl, *The Victorian Family*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Queen Victoria, “On Childbearing and Motherhood (1858-1859) [May 1, 1859],” in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 145.

<sup>75</sup> Wohl, *The Victorian Family*, 24.

<sup>76</sup> Wohl, *The Victorian Family*, 25.

many more choosing to do so after the Queen's use of the drug and her statements of approval and praise for its effects.

It was not just the Queen's methods of having children that people copied, but also her general demeanor around the whole affair. Queen Victoria was very private with her pregnancies and, unlike her husband Prince Albert, did not like to discuss it publicly. Queen Victoria believed that the topic of pregnancy in general was an affront "to feminine modesty" and that it made up the "'shadow-side' of marriage" while also believing that it was a nuisance or a hindrance that got in the way of her rule and public life.<sup>77</sup> These views on the subject led the Queen to keep the topic of her pregnancies a private matter that would go largely undiscussed or ignored for her own part, though that did not stop members of the press and the general public from discussing them. This attitude of keeping pregnancies as private matters that were improper to talk about outside the home extended to her people, ultimately leading Victorians to make the topics of childbirth and pregnancies taboo to talk about in the public sphere.

These spheres of influence, as previously discussed, were Victorian ideals that weighed heavily on the minds of men and women as they entered into marriage. Just because these spheres of influence and other ideals on how women should behave in marriage were kept in mind while men and women were getting married, it does not mean that women settled easily into these roles. Women were considered subordinate to their husbands in the eyes of the law and men did not seem to have any inclination to expand women's roles in the family, fearing that women would soon seek legal equality with men. Many times, when women in marriages tried to find roles outside of their domestic sphere, their husbands responded with spousal abuse, with

---

<sup>77</sup> Wohl, *The Victorian Family*, 32; 31.

many men feeling that their wives trying to expand their roles meant they had, as Coontz notes, “lost his manhood.”<sup>78</sup> This idea of being a man was incredibly important to husbands as the supposed head of household as men were supposed to “inspire rather than to extort submission”<sup>79</sup> from their wives. This meant that men were supposed to be so impressive and be such good providers for the family that women would gladly be submissive to their husbands and have no desires to leave the domestic sphere. In fact, it was assumed that if men did their duty in getting women to be subordinate, that the majority of women would stay within their given sphere. This is discussed in the 1896 conservative, anti-suffrage article “Women’s Battle in Great Britain” by W. Garden Blaikie, who writes, “A select few with eminent gifts will share important positions with the other sex, but the rank and file will find their place in the old spheres.”<sup>80</sup>

These spheres also help to reinforce separation between husbands and wives, getting in the way of true intimacy between couples. Coontz writes of this, “The rigid separation between men’s and women’s spheres made it hard for couples to share their innermost dreams, no matter how in love they were. The ideal of intimacy was continually undermined in practice by the reality of the different constraints on men and women, leading to a ‘sense of estrangement’ between many husbands and wives.”<sup>81</sup> Victorian spouses also grew to feel resentment for each other as they were increasingly separated due to the gender roles placed on them, with women “weeping with loneliness after yet another day alone in the house” and men beginning to “chafe against the burdens of marriage.”<sup>82</sup> Because of these marital disappointments, many women

---

<sup>78</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 188.

<sup>79</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 188.

<sup>80</sup> W. Garden Blaikie, "Woman's Battle in Great Britain," *The North American Review* 163, no. 478 (1896): 282-95.

<sup>81</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 188.

<sup>82</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 188; 189.

were forced to lower their expectations on marriage from the lofty, romantic ideals they had envisioned before entering into marriage.

Another area of marriage that in which women were considered subordinate to their husbands was the matter of property, both real (possession of land) and personal (non-land possessions). Historian Lee Holcombe introduces this topic by noting, “‘In law husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person.’ This popular saying, generally ascribed to the great eighteenth-century jurist Sir William Blackstone, aptly summed up the common law relating to marriage.”<sup>83</sup> In the eyes of the law in the Victorian age, a woman’s property was legally considered her husband’s upon their entering into marriage, whether that property was acquired before or after the wedding. According to famous social reformer Caroline Norton in her letter to Queen Victoria, “A married woman in England has *no legal existence*: her being is absorbed in that of her husband.”<sup>84</sup> A woman could not even get rid of her property after an engagement before entering into marriage (so as to keep the property from her future husband) without it being considered “legal fraud.”<sup>85</sup> Many historians believe that these property laws originate with the Medieval Catholic Church’s views on marriage, believing that it was a sacrament that “made two persons one flesh, and gave the husband dominion over the wife, meaning control of her person and property,”<sup>86</sup> as noted by Holcombe. Other historians believe this originated with the idea that a husband was the guardian and protector of his wife, meaning

---

<sup>83</sup> Lee Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 25.

<sup>84</sup> Caroline Norton, “A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill [1855]” in *Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), 170.

<sup>85</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 19.

that a husband's guardianship of his wife's property simply "reflected the economic and social realities of the position of women in the middle ages."<sup>87</sup>

The amount of control a wife had over her property was very different for real property than for personal property. As previously stated, real property meant property of land. Many men would marry a woman with the idea that he would get to completely control the land she inherited, an idea expressed in George Eliot's 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda* when the eponymous Deronda expresses his opinion on the match of Grandcourt and Gwendolen Harleth. "I suppose pedigree and land belong to a fine match."<sup>88</sup> In this quote, Deronda is expressing the belief, which he does not himself believe in, that an ideal woman to marry would come from a good family and have land which the husband could then control. Legally, this was not entirely the case however. While it was true that because women were considered unable to properly care for and cultivate the land on their own their husbands were "responsible in her stead for meeting the obligations imposed by landholding,"<sup>89</sup> it is also true that women still retained many rights concerning how her land was run. Most notably, wives had control over whether or not the land was sold or otherwise disposed of. This was because in the eyes of the law the husband, as noted by Holcombe, "was merely the guardian of this property and not the legal owner."<sup>90</sup> Prior to the Victorian era, in order for the land to be sold or disposed of, spouses must first go through the costly process of "levying a fine"<sup>91</sup> wherein spouses were questioned by a court separately to determine that a wife agreed to get rid of the land of her own volition and not because she was coerced to do so by her spouse. During the Victorian era, this process was simplified with the

---

<sup>87</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 408.

<sup>89</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 20.

<sup>91</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 20.

Fines and Recoveries Act of 1833 wherein the process of fines was replaced with “simple deeds,”<sup>92</sup> though wives still had to formally state on her own that she consented to this act. This acknowledgement that a woman’s property was her own and not legally her husband’s, even if it was under his guardianship, would also factor into how a woman’s property was written into wills and deeded to others as inheritance. A man could not put his wife’s property in his will in order be left to others after his death. It had to be a wife’s decision and will of who would inherit the property, again illustrating about men, as noted by Holcombe, “the fact that they were legally only the custodians and not the owners of this property.”<sup>93</sup>

While the laws concerning real property gave women some sense of authority of property that they had inherited, the laws concerning personal property did not favor women in the same way. Personal property, meaning any possessions a woman had that was not land, became the property of a woman’s husband as soon as they married. Historian Lee Holcombe describes a woman’s rights to personal property, saying, “While the common law relating to real property granted married women substantial protection, the law relating to personal property held that all such property that belonged to a woman at the time of marriage and all that she acquired after marriage were her husband’s absolutely.”<sup>94</sup> Because personal property was solely a man’s property and not just in his guardianship, this meant that, unlike with real property, a husband could do with this property what he wished without needing permission from his wife, including destroying or disposing of this property against his wife’s wishes. Also unlike the laws concerning real property, it was only the husband who had the ability to will the property away

---

<sup>92</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 21.

<sup>93</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 21.

<sup>94</sup> Holcombe, *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*, 23.

when he died; a wife could only leave the property in her will if her husband expressly allowed it.

### **Post-Marriage**

Marriages in Victorian England were not a black and white matter. Many women found happiness in these marriages and had no qualms about any constraints that may be put on their personal freedoms and liberties, or perhaps they did not feel that such laws were constraints. Others, though, chafed at the bonds of marriage, often leading to divorce. Whatever a woman's thoughts on the topic, marriages all come to an end, be it in death or divorce. Divorce rates increased during the Victorian era and the ideas and practices of widowhood became increasingly popular and scrutinized in this era. Though their situations were inherently different, widows and divorcées faced many of the same issues and stigmas in the Victorian period.

One would think that the end of a Victorian marriage would mean more freedoms for the woman, but more often than not this was not the case. After the end of a marriage, many women found themselves facing derision and economic instability without their husband's aid and financial support. Though both faced great difficulties in life after marriage, the difficulties faced by widows and divorcées differed in many specific ways.

Widows, though usually not facing quite the same level of scorn as women who were divorced, still faced great difficulties in trying to keep themselves and their families afloat after the death of their husbands. Widowhood took a woman outside the comfort of the domestic realm and thrust her into a world where she had limited means of providing for their families. Historian Janet Murray discusses the limited opportunities women had in widowhood; "These

demands were aggravated by the extreme powerlessness of women. They had very limited rights to support, to property, even to their own children. Widowhood, bankruptcy, or simply the displeasure of father or husband could strip a woman of the home ties upon which her economic and emotional security rested.”<sup>95</sup> A woman went from the relative security of home to an unwelcoming world that left her very few opportunities by which to survive.

One of the biggest problems that widows faced was the improbability of financial security without their husband for financial support. Women had very limited job opportunities in the Victorian era normally and it was even harder for widows, who sometimes entered the workforce for the first time in the wake of their husbands’ deaths. Husbands knew about these limited opportunities and often “expressed concern” about “leaving young wives alone to economic hardship,”<sup>96</sup> as noted by historians Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen. It was often older widows who felt this economic hardship most keenly. While “a widower, young or old, was expected to remarry,”<sup>97</sup> older widows who attempted to remarry were often met with public scorn. It was thought that “a widow of doubtful age will marry almost any sort of white man”<sup>98</sup> in an attempt to avoid financial ruin and public embarrassment, which often led to older widows being met with criticism for their hasty, avaricious marriages. Because of this cultural disdain for older women marrying, older widows were often left with no choice but to avoid marriage, leaving them in even more dire financial straits than their younger counterparts, who were fully expected by society to marry again and would not face as much

---

<sup>95</sup> Janet Murray, *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England* (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 77.

<sup>96</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 132.

<sup>97</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 454.

<sup>98</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 454.

criticism for doing so. In the article “The Stepney Paupers,” Charles Booth details the dire straits that many older widows faced in London, saying of one widow named Mrs. Marston, “Mrs. Marston, born in 1816 and a widow since 1867, earned her living by washing, but had become helpless, and had been supported for some time by her daughter, the wife of a dock laborer with two children. The daughter applied for her mother’s admission in 1885. She could not manage to keep her mother any longer.”<sup>99</sup>

A widow’s circumstances were often directly linked to the inheritance she received upon her husband’s death. The inheritance a woman received upon her husband’s death was often not directly linked to a woman’s social class, the length of marriage, or the amount needed for a woman to maintain her household or children. Often the amount a woman inherited after becoming a widow was decided simply by her husband’s will, meaning if a husband chose they could leave their wife mere pennies of their fortune. Such a situation is shown in George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda* when the main character Gwendolen is left with a miniscule inheritance after the death of her husband, Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt:

...And meanwhile my beauty the young widow, is to put up with a poor two thousand a year and the house at Gadsmerre—a nice kind of banishment for her if she chose to shut herself up here, which I don’t think she will...I say nothing against his leaving the land to the lad...but since he had married this girl he ought to have given her a handsome provision, such as she could live on in a style fitted to the rank he had raised her to.<sup>100</sup>

Gwendolen is not the only character within *Daniel Deronda* who is left with such little inheritance to live on, as her own mother had to do so as well, a situation that reflected the many real-life widows who dealt with this issue of inheritance.

---

<sup>99</sup> Charles Booth, “The Stepney Paupers [1895],” in *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, ed. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1981), 495.

<sup>100</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 1810-1811.

Because of these poor financial situations, many Victorian women found themselves looking for other sources of financial support. As previously stated, many women tried to find new means of support by remarrying, though this was more of an option for younger widows than older widows because of stigmas at the time concerning older women, particularly related to an older woman's sexuality. Historians Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen discuss this stigma in *Victorian Women* when they write, "*The Female Aegis*, an anonymous work that admonished older women to remember that 'the spring and summer of life are past; autumn is far advanced; the frown of winter is already felt,' and that they should forgo the 'active pleasures' and 'gay amusements of youth.'"<sup>101</sup> Because of these ideas about older women, meaning in the Victorian era generally women older than the age of forty, these women had less opportunities to remarry and provide for themselves and their children that way.

Another way women tried to support themselves was by finding jobs, which was not an easy task for a woman in the nineteenth century, even though a woman entering the workforce was often thought to be demeaning. Often, even when these women found a job the job still barely paid enough for a woman to survive, something that is also discussed by Olafson Hellerstein, Parker Hume, and Offen. "But because of women's limited job opportunities and low wages, the widow's struggle could be (as the widower's almost never was) a struggle for survival."<sup>102</sup>

A Victorian widow faced all these criticisms and hardships despite the fact that Queen Victoria herself very publicly became a widow in 1861 upon the death of her husband Prince Albert, who died from what was diagnosed at the time to be typhoid fever but might instead have

---

<sup>101</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 454.

<sup>102</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 132.

been either cancer or Crohn's disease. Because of Victoria's great love for Albert, she deeply mourned Albert after his death. Queen Victoria wrote in a letter to her and Albert's uncle Leopold, King of the Belgians:

The poor fatherless baby of eight months is now the utterly broken-hearted and crushed widow of forty-two! My *life* as a *happy* one is *ended!* the world is gone for *me!* If I *must live* on (and I will do nothing to make me worse than I am), it is henceforth for our poor fatherless children—for my unhappy country, which has lost *all* in losing him—and in *only* doing what I know and *feel* he would wish, for he *is* near me—his spirit will guide and inspire me!<sup>103</sup>

Queen Victoria's public mourning did not last the typical length of a few years, but instead lasted the rest of her life, as Victoria wore black in mourning and largely withdrew from public life. Because of this, Queen Victoria became the public face of widowhood and mourning in England. Though Queen Victoria faced criticism as a widow, namely facing some "unfeeling criticisms" for her lack of public appearances as she dealt with "her ever abiding desolation" that came to replace the domestic bliss she had experienced with Albert, Victoria in no way faced the financial insecurity and public scorn that other Victorian widows faced.<sup>104</sup>

Widows were not the only group of Victorian women whose lives became harder after the end of a marriage. The other group was divorcées. Attitudes about divorce and the popularity of it changed greatly throughout the Victorian era, as did the laws concerning divorce. Divorce became more popular as love matches likewise gained in popularity (as discussed previously) and as people began to live longer than they had in previous eras. Historians Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen discuss this, saying, "With death

---

<sup>103</sup> Queen Victoria, "Letter from Queen Victoria to Leopold, King of the Belgians (December 20, 1861)," in *Voices of Victorian England: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life*, ed. John A. Wagner (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), 190.

<sup>104</sup> M. Jeune, "Victoria and Her Reign," *The North American Review* 172, no. 531 (1901): 322-36.

parting fewer couples, the possibility of legal dissolution became a pressing issue.”<sup>105</sup> Because of this, divorce became increasingly common, though the laws and views concerning it changed greatly throughout the Victorian age. There are two major periods of divorce in Victorian England: before and after the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857.

In the period before the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (an act of parliament which made marriage a matter of state rather than the Church and made divorce more accessible), divorce was essentially “only for husbands,”<sup>106</sup> as noted by historian Allen Horstman. In the majority of cases, the only reasons accepted for divorce were if the woman was at fault (i.e. if she committed adultery or fraud.) While divorce was still not easy, a husband had to prove much less than a wife in order to be granted a divorce, a subject discussed by Joan Perkin. “A Divorce Bill could be obtained as a matter of right by an innocent husband against a wife found guilty of adultery uncondoned by him; a wife who wanted a divorce had to prove not only adultery by the husband by aggravating enormities such as physical cruelty, bigamy or incest.”<sup>107</sup> Because of this, few women were granted divorce, even if they could prove adultery or cruelty, though some were granted “divorce *a mensa et thoro*” which was a legal separation that meant a wife could live separately from her husband. Divorce was even more difficult for women because legally they “belonged” to their husband, meaning he could control where they went and where she lived, and usually all their possessions (including their own body and their children) belonged to him, meaning they had few options of leaving. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon wrote of this in her 1854 essay “Married Women and the Law,” when she penned,

---

<sup>105</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 132.

<sup>106</sup> Allen Horstman, *Victorian Divorce* (New York City, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 20.

<sup>107</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 23.

A man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband...A woman's body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by writ of *habeas corpus*. What was her personal property before marriage...becomes absolutely her husband's, and he may dispose of them at his pleasure whether he and his wife live together or not.<sup>108</sup>

This was not the only trouble women had in getting a divorce, though. Divorces were extremely expensive, to the point where only the wealthiest were able to afford to petition for divorce in the first place.

These situations for divorce changed with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and divorce became at least slightly more accessible. One of the biggest ways that divorce was made at least partially more accessible is that the reasons a woman could file for divorce expanded, now allowing divorce on the grounds of “incest, bigamy, and adultery with cruelty or four years’ desertion.”<sup>109</sup> Divorce was also now less expensive so more people could afford divorces, meaning divorces could expand more into the lower classes. These new divorce laws also provided some protections for women’s property/income in the case of divorce, meaning divorced women were better able to support themselves.

The biggest champion for divorce reform and women’s rights in these matters was Caroline Norton, an English woman who turned to social reform after experiencing the harshness of the Victorian divorce laws firsthand. After Norton left her husband, he sued her for divorce on the grounds that she had an affair with her friend Lord Melbourne. He was not able to prove these claims and thus the case was thrown out of court, though he still was able to hurt Norton in the process. Norton was unable to get a divorce and, though she attempted to make a living off

---

<sup>108</sup> Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, “Married Women and the Law (1854),” in *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 119.

<sup>109</sup> Allen Horstman, *Victorian Divorce*, 78.

of her writings, her husband managed to take these earnings for himself. Norton was also barred from seeing her children, despite the fact that she was found in court to have done nothing wrong and that her husband still had access to them, something she wrote about in her letters to Lord Melbourne. “I’m vexed & frightened about my children—the Grantleys are capable of any treatment towards them. I am exhausted *bodily*, by sleeplessness & crying... There is not tenderness enough in the father of my children to make their presence anything but a *triumph* to him—to other men it would be a memory; —I am to be a childless mother & a disgraced wife for my *supposed power to charm* strangers.”<sup>110</sup> The severity and struggles Norton faced during and after her divorce lit a fire under her that led to her participation in social activism and championing of reform of divorce laws. Historian Diane Atkinson discusses this, saying, “Estranged and living apart from her husband, Caroline had no automatic right to see her children, and he was immovable on the point. Caroline would not be able to change his mind, so she set about changing the law.”<sup>111</sup> Norton championed for reform to women’s rights in divorce and child custody and it was her work that helped the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 succeed and made divorce easier to obtain.

Life was very hard for divorced women. One of the biggest concerns for them was a stable income, which was hard to find for any woman in the Victorian era, let alone a divorcée who faced the public’s scorn and derision. This derision originated from the fact that to the public, these divorcées were upsetting “the domestic ideal and the cult of motherhood,”<sup>112</sup> both

---

<sup>110</sup> Caroline Norton, “Grosvenor Square [late April 1836],” in *The Letters of Caroline Norton to Lord Melbourne*, ed. James O. Hoge and Clarke Olney (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1974), 73.

<sup>111</sup> Diane Atkinson, *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs. Norton: Victorian England’s “Scandal of the Century” and the Fallen Socialite Who Changed Women’s Lives Forever* (Falkirk, Scotland: Preface Publishing, 2013), 23.

<sup>112</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 132.

of which were “heavily promoted by both religious institutions and the state.”<sup>113</sup> Even women who were able to find work sometimes had their incomes taken, as Caroline Norton’s was. This is discussed by Joan Perkin, who wrote of the subject, “Others were like Caroline Norton’s husband, who subpoenaed her publishers under Common Law to hand her earnings over to him.”<sup>114</sup> This was not always the case as some women, namely aristocratic women, were able to live off of a steady income or inheritance, but more often than not divorced women faced issues of an income, leading many “anxious to see a change in the law to give them control over their own earnings.”<sup>115</sup> Divorced women were also faced with separation from their own children and isolation from society and family.

Life in Victorian England was incredibly difficult for many women after the end of their marriage, whether that marriage ended in divorce or in death. Women often struggled to survive and earn a living in a society built to benefit men no matter the social class they were in. These women also all faced scorn and ostracism from a culture that relied on a happy, male-dominated family. Widows and divorcées both expose the faults of the Victorian age, an era dominated by the image of the perfect domestic family, which ignores those who do not strictly fit into that image.

## **Conclusion**

The austere, perfectly domestic marriage is one the most popular historical images of the Victorian era and one that is very complicated when viewing it from a historical lens. Victorian marriages were not universally one thing or another and the happiness or domesticity of ones

---

<sup>113</sup> Hellerstein, Hume, Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, 132.

<sup>114</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 109.

<sup>115</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 109.

marriage in that time period depended on a number of things, including social class, ideals of marriage, and more. Just as Victorian marriages were not only one thing, the roles women played in these marriages constantly shifted to accommodate the ever-changing ideals for Victorian wives and mothers. The roles women held became even more complicated as the Victorian era progressed and not all women lived up to the Angel in the House, especially women whose lives fell outside of the cultural norm (like widows and divorcées). Women's roles were influenced by ideals such as the 'Angel in the House,' Queen Victoria, and the idea of the domestic sphere, while women's perceptions of marriage, relationships, and children were influenced by romantic ideals of marriage that became important at the time and the Church of England's notions on these matters. Women's roles in this era influenced and foreshadowed the roles women would play in the years after the Victorian era. The first of these roles was that of a suffragette in the women's suffrage movement, a movement founded in the Victorian era in order to get women the right to vote so they were not purely relegated to the position as perfectly domestic wife and mother that became prominent in the Victorian era and succeeded shortly after its end. The second of these roles was the doting wife and mother of the Cult of Domesticity in the 1950's, an ideal for women in this time period which corresponded very similar to the role women played in the Victorian era and which consisted of a woman being the picture-perfect housewife while her husband went out to provide for the family.

Marriage was not a black and white issue for Victorian women and a large number of factors went into determining what marriage would entail for women. These factors included the involvement of a woman's family in helping her independently retain her inheritance, the role her husband wished to play, her own expectations of what marriage entailed (mainly in relations to the role of sex in marriage), and the relationship between husband and wife (did their

relationship meet the high romantic standards of the time). Victorian marriages did not always (or even often) live up to the ideals set during the time and women often did not fit squarely inside the idealization of their roles; leading to a wide variance in how marriages operated in the era. The one thing that mostly did not vary was how important marriage remained throughout the Victorian era.

Marriage itself became increasingly important during the Victorian era. To the Victorians, marriage and the domestic sphere were a very important reprieve from the stress of public life, especially for men as the ones thought of being most often in the public sphere. Marriage also was the foundation of the happy domestic life that Victorians held dear. Women were often thought to be at the center of this perfect domestic life as they were in charge of the domestic sphere, including the managing of children, the household, and the family's spirituality. Despite the fact that women were often sidelined in this time period in matters concerning politics or business, they were still incredibly important to life in Victorian England. Though women and marriage were relegated to the private, domestic sphere within the Victorian era, ideas about these topics were extremely influential in all parts of daily life in the era and influenced society as a whole at the time.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Acton, William. "The Perfect Ideal of An English Wife (1875)." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 127-129. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Beeton, Isabella. "Duties of the Mistress of the House (1861)." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19th Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 84-87. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Besant, Annie. "Decision to Marry (1866)." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19th Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 129-131. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Blaikie, W. Garden. "Woman's Battle in Great Britain." *The North American Review* 163, no. 478 (1896): 282-95.

Booth, Charles. "The Stepney Paupers [1895]." In *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*, ed. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen, 494-496. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1981.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London, England: Smith, Elder, and Co. 1847.

Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. London, England: 1876.

Galatian. "Canon Law on Marriage." In *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women's History*, ed. Lisa DiCaprio and Merry E. Weisner, 108-110. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Jeune, M. "Victoria and Her Reign." *The North American Review* 172, no. 531 (1901): 322-36.

Norton, Caroline. "A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill [1855]." In *Voices of Victorian England: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life*, ed. John Wagner, 170-171. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014.

Norton, Caroline. "Grosvenor Square [late April 1836]." In *The Letters of Caroline Norton to Lord Melbourne*, ed. James O. Hoge and Clarke Olney, 72-73. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1974.

Patmore, Coventry. *The Angel in the House*. London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co. 1863.

Queen Victoria. "Letter from Queen Victoria to Leopold, King of the Belgians (December 20, 1861)." In *Voices of Victorian England: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life*, ed. John A. Wagner, 190-191. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014.

Queen Victoria. "On Childbearing and Motherhood (1858-1859) [March 24, 1858]." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19th Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 142-145. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Queen Victoria. "On Childbearing and Motherhood (1858-1859) [May 1, 1859]." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19th Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 142-145. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Smith Bodichon, Barbara Leigh. "Married Women and the Law (1854)." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19th Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 119-121. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Stickney Ellis, Sarah. "Characteristic of Husbands (1843)." In *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19th Century England*, ed. Janet Murray, 123-126. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Webb, Beatrice Potter., and Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, eds. *Glitter Around and Darkness Within, 1873-1892*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982.

Webb, Beatrice Potter., and Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, eds. *All the Good Things of Life, 1892-1905*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983.

#### Secondary Sources-

Atkinson, Diane. *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs. Norton: Victorian England's "Scandal of the Century" and the Fallen Socialite Who Changed Women's Lives Forever*. Falkirk, Scotland: Preface Publishing, 2013.

Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York City, New York: Viking Press, 2005.

Harrison, Brian. *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain*. New York City, New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. 1978.

Holcombe, Lee. *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth Century England*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1983.

- Horstman, Allen. *Victorian Divorce*. New York City, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.
- Mintz, Steven. *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture*. New York City, New York: New York University Press, 1983.
- Murray, Janet. *Strong Minded Women & Other Lost Voices from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England*. New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- Olafson Hellerstein, Erna., Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen. *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1981.
- Perkin, Joan. *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*. Chicago, Illinois: Lyceum Books, Inc. 1989.
- Peterson, Jeanne M. "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *American Historical Review* 15 (1984): 677-708.
- Rose, Phyllis. *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages*. New York City, New York: Vintage Books, 1983.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. New York City, New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Tosh, John. *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Vicinus, Martha. *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1977.
- Vicinus, Martha. *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972.
- Wagner, John A. *Voices of Victorian England: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life*. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood: An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014.
- Wohl, Anthony S. *The Victorian Family*. New York City, New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. 1978.