

## ABSTRACT

### An Ideal Woman: Literary, Parliamentary, And Sexual Representations of Model Femininity In Mid-Victorian England

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The manner in which middle-class women of the Victorian era were excluded from various aspects of the outside world, in favor of the “woman’s sphere,” was due to the masculine desire to protect the virtues of domesticity. This ideal of femininity is revealed in selections of Victorian literature, decisions of Parliament, and sexual attitudes of the nineteenth-century. In opposition to feminist historical theories, this thesis attempts to reevaluate concepts of ideology regarding Victorian femininity which indicate female suppression and male dominance. Rather, this thesis asserts that protection was the driving force behind attitudes of separate “spheres” for men and women, feminine economic dependence, and even the concept of chaste sexuality. Finally, the purpose of this reevaluation of femininity is to assert a new interpretation of gender roles during the nineteenth-century. This study asserts that women were an integral cog within the Empire; the protection levied over them was designed to promote domestic stability that influenced home, family, and Empire.

An Ideal Woman: Literary, Parliamentary, And Sexual Representations  
Of Model Femininity In Mid-Victorian England

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *The Early Nineteenth Century and the Emergence of A New Type of Society*

Middle-class women of the Victorian era experienced isolation from various aspects of society, in favor of removal to the “woman’s sphere” of hearth and home. The popularity of the “woman’s sphere” served to heighten the growing differences between the expected roles for women and men during the Industrial Revolution. Middle-class women, defined as the pillar of English society, were expected to maintain a sense of domestic tranquility within their assigned “sphere.” This ideal form of domesticity was highly prized and became a valuable asset of British society. Consequently, the “male sphere” expressed an overwhelming desire to protect this asset on account of the morality, virtues, and stability it represented.

Middle-class women illustrated the epitome of Victorian femininity. Women who were ideally feminine were those who were wives and mothers, created a domestic haven in their “woman’s sphere,” served as a helpmate for their husband, demonstrated sexual passivity, and were both moral and virtuous.<sup>1</sup> These characteristics can be deduced from the variety of didactic material authored by Victorians which indicate social and masculine expectations of womanhood and femininity. Subsequently, in order to protect these values, Victorian women found nearly every aspect of their lives closely monitored

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” *Fortnightly Review* 15, no. 88 (April 1874), 472. William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1865), 133-134.

and protected. This manner of protection is visible in many facets of nineteenth-century life, from conservative modes of fashion that detracted attention from a woman's true figure, to rhetoric which claimed women should be kept from higher education because the use of their mental faculties could damage the reproductive organs.<sup>2</sup>

This study reveals a complex ideology concerning Victorian femininity, one which conveys that protection was an important driving force behind Victorian attitudes regarding the "woman's sphere" and feminine dependence. Considering the manner in which Victorian women were separated from the outside world of economics and legal enfranchisement, coupled with the sexual double standards of the era, protection might be an unusual point of view to assert. A thorough examination of Victorian literature, including parliamentary bills, acts, and legal treatises, as well as literary and didactic material, reveals an interesting male mentality regarding women. The failure of male society to provide consistent protection to women illustrates numerous flaws in society while also highlighting the optimistic ideals expressed by Victorian men. The masculine intention of protecting women, and the feminine ideals of domesticity, could only succeed if Victorian men consistently behaved with ideal, protective chivalry.

Not surprisingly, this situation seldom occurred.

In the first half of the nineteenth century change occurred on many fronts, including those of an industrial, political, and social nature. One important social change regarding feminine protection relates to the evolution of separate social spheres for both men and women. The exclusion of middle-class women from commercialism, where many had formerly participated alongside their husbands and fathers, necessitated their

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Maudsley, "Sex in Mind and in Education." And: Pat Jalland and John Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain, 1830-1914* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1985), 55-56.

assumption of new domestic roles and a new type of home environment.<sup>3</sup> However, the middle-class woman of Victorian Britain shortly became involved in an unusual business of her own: she participated in the commercialism of domestic tranquility.

Domestic tranquility would have been viewed as a precious commodity, especially following the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), which had entailed years of fighting abroad to protect English safety. The close of an era spent protecting British interests overseas ushered in a time of peace, national pride, and an inward turn towards protection. British subjects living in the mid-nineteenth century witnessed peace with the French, moral reforms, and a flourishing Empire, circumstances which enabled more attention to be paid to women and their domestic roles. In contrast, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britons had witnessed civil wars, religious upheavals, and international confrontations. Not surprisingly, masculinity was viewed as the salvation for these tenuous situations.<sup>4</sup> By Victoria's reign, images of femininity, protection, and virtue had emerged as representative ideals of domesticity, enabling the family and the Empire to proliferate and prosper.

Concurrently, England's eventual victory over Napoleon also initiated the romanticizing of past triumphs over the French, extending as far back as the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). Literature, art, and architecture from the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries reflect the rising popularity of medieval themes, as they related to ancient hostilities between France and England. In 1800, George III (1760–1820)

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<sup>3</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See, 'Our Family is a Little World': Family Structure and Relationships, 321-356.

<sup>4</sup> See, J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

appointed James Wyatt (1746–1813) as his personal architect and directed him to Gothicize the state apartments at Windsor, an undertaking which required fourteen years and the sum of £150,000 to complete.<sup>5</sup> In 1820, Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) penned his classic medieval romance novel *Ivanhoe* and encouraged the revitalization of chivalry by way of his aptly titled “Essay on Chivalry.” The widespread integration of chivalry and medievalism are important to note because they demonstrate the mindset of English society at the dawn of Queen Victoria’s reign. The Empire was immersed in ancient symbols of nobility, such as Gothic turrets and jousting matches.<sup>6</sup> The time period represented by these symbols was an era when knights accomplished feats of valor for their lady love, while ladies served as moral compasses for their respective knights.<sup>7</sup> The notion of chivalry in the nineteenth century impacted the manner in which women’s roles were interpreted. It further contributed to the ideology that women needed protection for the sake of their virtue.

When Queen Victoria (1837–1901) inherited the English throne, she became the embodiment of feminine protection for the Empire. Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) depicts the accession of the teenager in a religious and anticipatory vein in her poem, “The Young Queen.” Of Victoria’s divinely-ordained inheritance, Browning writes:

Perhaps our youthful Queen  
Remembers what has been –

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1981), 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> See, Ian Anstruther, *The Knight and the Umbrella: An Account of the Eglinton Tournament, 1839* (London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama* (1818; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 29-32.



Her childhood's rest by loving heart, and sport on grassy sod –  
Alas! Can others wear  
A mother's heart for her?  
But calm she lifts her trusting face, and calleth upon God.

And so the grateful isles  
Shall give thee back their smiles,  
And as thy mother joys in thee, in them shalt *thou* rejoice;  
Rejoice to meekly bow  
A somewhat paler brow,  
While the King of kings shall bless thee by the British people's voice!<sup>8</sup>

In Victoria, the people of England found a physical representation of their desire to protect home, hearth, and the progeny of their Empire. Queen Victoria came to the throne an innocent, morally-conscious, and English-born young lady. Upon seeing the queen at her coronation, writer Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) wrote to his sister, “the poor little Queen seemed to have been *greeting* [weeping]...one could not but wish the poor little lassie well: she is small, sonsy and modest.”<sup>9</sup> The nineteenth-century term *sonsy* refers to one who “brings luck or good fortune,” which summarizes the importance of Queen Victoria’s virtuous characteristics to her British subjects. Carlyle’s words assist in demonstrating the importance Victoria’s subjects attached to her personal traits, as they would shortly become representative of the British Empire.

Stanley Weintraub examines the complex social patterns which the young queen was forced to navigate. The queen had become an ideal image of femininity for Englishwomen, yet her own lifestyle was (forcibly) fraught with contradictions against socially accepted behaviors. One such example is the fact that Queen Victoria had to

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “The Young Queen” (1838), in *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, intro. by Ruth M. Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 55, stanzas VIII – IX.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Carlyle to Jean Carlyle Aitken, July 6, 1838, The Carlyle Letters Online, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

arrange her own marriage to Prince Albert.<sup>10</sup> Any young Englishwoman who dared to broach the subject of marriage with her suitor, let alone propose, would be have been committing gross social misconduct. During an era when women under the age of thirty were not permitted outside without a chaperone,<sup>11</sup> the blatant dichotomy of a virtuous young woman participating in the “man’s sphere” no doubt fascinated British subjects. Diplomatic peace, the sexual division of business and home life, the increasing popularity of chivalric themes, and a morally-conscious monarch all contributed to the cult of feminine protection. These factors are inter-related to one another and each contributes to the ideal of Victorian femininity and its protection. There is no singular factor that created the Victorian ideal of femininity and domesticity. Rather, femininity and its perceived need for protection emerged as something that was multi-dimensional in scope and influence.

Historians have adopted the interpretation that Victorian women were subjected to isolation because of misogyny or domineering economic control. Pat Jalland’s study of upper-class political families in *Women, Marriage, and Politics* examines the “woman’s sphere” of privileged and aristocratic women, including their education (or lack thereof), their marital expectations, and their social responsibilities. However, Jalland accepts the historical status quo that women remained at home, embodied self-sacrifice, and endured various forms of male dependence because it was enforced (and expected) by the Empire’s patriarchal society. Similarly, Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall expand their

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Weintraub, *Victoria: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Truman Talley Books, 1987), 77, 129. Also, *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. Christopher Hibbert (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985), 57. Journal entry regarding her proposal to Albert, dated October 15, 1839.

<sup>11</sup> Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics: 1860–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 24.

interdisciplinary study, *Sexuality and Subordination*, not only to address double standards and prudery, but also to assert that controlled, restrained feminine sexuality represented an ordered world to Victorian society. Martha Vicinus examines the differences between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminine ideals from an economic stance, defining Victorian women as, “the greatest enforcers of standards of moral [sexual] behavior.”<sup>12</sup> Vicinus identifies the Victorian woman as the center of her family, whose behavior and lifestyle is closely guarded by rules and precedents. The evaluation of masculine impact on feminine society is somewhat lacking, intimating the status quo that men were dominant and expected women to exist in the tightly monitored “woman’s sphere.” Given Vicinus’s title, *Suffer and Be Still*, this should not come as too much of a surprise.

These historical examinations of femininity all assume the position that a woman’s domestic occupation was forced, either by circumstance, social standards, or marriage. The interdisciplinary research of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall shows that the domestic seclusion of women was religiously, socially, and even sexually motivated. Their examination of the middle-class Victorian family reveals pivotal economic relations between public and private spheres, which evolved during the early part of the nineteenth century on account of industrialization and subsequent separation of spheres. They assert that, not only were women the central figure of family life, but homelife itself was “seen as providing a bedrock of morality in an unstable and dangerous world.”<sup>13</sup> *Family Fortunes* provides research and deductions concerning what domesticity meant to the public sphere.

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<sup>12</sup> Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), ix.

<sup>13</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 90, xiv.

This thesis sets out to reveal the mentality of feminine protection as it was embraced by Victorian society, as well as examine its origins. Rather than assert the merits of femininity or attempt to redefine a Victorian woman's place within the home, this study examines the influence of the outside, masculine sphere on the ideals of the middle-class home. Whereas femininity has largely been defined from within the home, this study reevaluates Victorian society's perceptions regarding women, protection, and life within the domestic sphere.

This has been accomplished through the examination of a broad array of literature, commencing with a selection of Victorian-era literature and nineteenth-century didactic writings. The poetry and prose of authors such as Scott, Coventry Patmore (1832–1896), William Gladstone (1809–1898), and John Ruskin (1819–1900), reveal many insightful observations made by well-read Victorians about concepts of femininity and the cult of feminine protection. The aforementioned *Ivanhoe* intertwines popular themes of medieval imagery and chivalry, with examples of feminine protection, while Patmore's *The Angel in the House* represents the creative culmination of Victorian feminine protection. Additionally, a brief case study concerning the idealism of art critic and author, Ruskin, reveals one specific incident of over-protection of feminine virtue. This is revealed by personal letters, journals, and biographical accounts of Ruskin and his wife, Euphemia Gray; their six-year marriage ended in an annulment and charges of impotence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> William James, ed., *The Order of Release: The Story of John Ruskin, Effie Gray and John Everett Millais, Told for the First Time in Their Unpublished Letters* (New York: Charles Scribener's Sons, 1947). Also, Phyllis Rose, *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 51–94.

The widely-popular educational writings of Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799–1872), collectively referred to as the *Women of England* series, reveals insights regarding both the masculine and feminine side of the protective spectrum. Ellis’s work and personal life are both interesting studies in the multi-dimensional aspects of domestic protection. She spent years writing manuals on feminine manners, modes of conduct, dress, education, and conversation, publishing these books for *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843), and *The Mothers of England* (1844). Interestingly, Ellis married at thirty-seven and, while her husband brought stepchildren into the union, the author never had children of her own. Both the dualities in Ellis’s personality and the pertinent social information her writings provide indicate that the *Women of England* series is a rich resource for the study of popular concepts regarding femininity and protection across a broad spectrum.

One particular detail specified by Ellis, which is particularly relevant to this project, is the class of women to which she addresses herself, and why. It is women of the middle-class to whom Ellis directs her social advice, designating these women as, “the pillar of our nation’s strength,”<sup>15</sup> and therefore the characters to whom England must look for morality and guidance.

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1839), 14.

Middle-class women are identified by Ellis as the backbone of England's moral essence, whom she describes as including, "so vast a portion of the intelligence and moral power of the country at large."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, it is demonstrated by Ellis's work that the women of England have a responsibility to reciprocate the protection they receive at home, with the protection of their loved ones' morality and spiritual well-being.

The perfect lady, and therefore ideal character in need of protection, would have belonged to either the middle- or upper middle-classes. Martha Vicinus points out that concepts surrounding the role of a perfect lady were most developed within the upper middle-classes, whereby a woman's role was defined by marriage and motherhood. These developments "gave way to an ideal which had little connection with any functional and responsible role in society."<sup>17</sup> The middle-class of the nineteenth century became representative of order, propriety and the adoption of gentility. In contrast with rougher manners of an earlier age, these qualities came to be associated with the civilizing and moralizing influence of women.<sup>18</sup> The importance of middle-class feminine morality on imagery of the Empire is only one reason why feminine protection is pivotal to a deeper understanding of Victorian gender relations.

The protection of women is interestingly, and debatably, defined within various pieces of Victorian law. Well-known items concerning Victorian women, such as the Marriage Act of 1857 and the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s, illuminate pertinent masculine opinions about femininity, sexual innocence, and marital rights. An

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still*, ix-x.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, eds., *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1, 5.

examination of different treatises, including William Blackstone's *Commentaries* (1803), P. Anichini's *A Few Remarks on the Present Laws of Marriage, Adultery, and Seduction, in England* (1836), "A Review of the Bill to Provide for the Access of Parents to Their Children" (1838), and Caroline Norton's *The Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of "Custody of Infants" Considered* (1838), convey varying opinions regarding a woman's protection under the law. The broad selection of legal treatises, authored by both sexes, address different legal problems plaguing different classes of women, and reveal an interesting system of conditional legal protection.

Reading about the abuse endured by Caroline Norton at her husband's hands, as detailed in Norton's *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*, illustrates a blatant failure of the English law. However, Parliament oftentimes created laws as a moral guidepost for the average life of middle-class Victorians, and there is nothing average about the case of Caroline Norton. Although not all of Victorian legislature was protective, a great deal of it was written to provide multiple venues of protection for women, evidenced in the Breach of Promise Bill (1840). This law was created to protect women who been promised marriage in exchange for the commencement of a sexual relationship, something which was integrated into Charles Dickens' (1812–1870) nineteenth-century novel, *Little Dorrit* (1857). The Breach of Promise law asserted several points about legal protection, proving that a woman's virtue was important enough to Parliament that they were not above passing laws to protect it and make responsible those who had violated it.

However, the conditional protection of women and their virtue is also illuminated by Victorian law. Judith Walkowitz examines the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts and

their subsequent enforcement of the sexual double standard. Originally designed to help stop venereal disease among military men, the CD Acts enabled authorities to subject suspected prostitutes to invasive medical examinations to ensure they were disease-free and not liable to infect any customers, who might be soldiers. These Acts relate indirectly to middle-class women, because Parliament intended to not only protect male customers from disease, but their unsuspecting wives in the “woman’s sphere.” Therefore, the CD Acts reveal the sacrifice of personal and civil rights of one class of women, in order to protect the health and domesticity of another class. In Walkowitz’s *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, situations are examined wherein women were forced to prove themselves innocent of prostitution to become exempt from forcible examinations. Victorian attitudes towards women who were viewed as fallen are conveyed by William Tait’s *Magdalenism* (1842) and James Beard Talbot’s *The Miseries of Prostitution* (1844).

Restrained sexuality in a woman of the middle-class was the ideal promoted during the Victorian era. The preservation of a woman’s virginity until marriage not only epitomized a perfect lady, but represented the most important feminine virtue that Great Britain desired to protect. In fact, it can be remarked that all other aspects of protection eventually revert back to the importance of virginity, and the desire to maintain in women various forms of purity. The perfect lady not only adhered to the ideology of sexual innocence, but also practiced strict control over her passions, even in relation to assorted bodily functions. Victorian doctors, for example, expressed beliefs that beginning menstruation before age fourteen was “potentially dangerous” and an indicator that the



young lady was easily excitable, taken with “excessive dancing” and novel-reading. Cold baths and complete supervision were suggested antidotes.<sup>19</sup>

These instances can easily be construed as a type of sexual control over women, as similar moralist propaganda and sexual purity were not advocated for Victorian males. In considering the middle-class association between order and propriety, as Mendus and Rendall reveal in *Sexuality and Subordination*, the Victorian mentality of sexual protection, which could otherwise be interpreted as control or suppression, is highlighted.<sup>20</sup> This is further supported by the work of Lawrence Stone, whose research examines the anti-sexual nature of medical advice during the nineteenth century. Control over sexuality was so important to Victorian ideology and morality that until 1870, there was an ecclesiastical prohibition against sex on a Sunday.<sup>21</sup> The protection of feminine sexuality relates directly to the proliferation of the Empire, the preservation of domesticity, and the morality of the family. The sexual shortcomings of a Victorian woman could send her into social exile and possibly separate her from her loved ones. Considering the empirical importance of British femininity, something which Philippa Levine examines in *Gender and Empire*, any woman who failed to meet the pre-determined social standard not only shamed her family, but shamed her Empire.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 55-56. See also, Eliza Duffey, *What Women Should Know: A Woman's Book About Women* (1873; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1974), 28-49. Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*.

<sup>20</sup> Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family: Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 497-500.

<sup>22</sup> Philippa Levine, *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7-8.

In examining the literature, legislation, and sexuality surrounding the lives of middle-class women of the Victorian era, a pattern of protective behavior emerges to indicate a new interpretation of gender relations. One important aspect which makes this study different from the work of the aforementioned historians is the sense of neutrality it observes in regard to Victorian men. While not all Victorian males depicted are shown to be acting in the best interests of women, the majority of them reveal a moral desire to do right by their feminine counterparts, viewpoints which are not always directly expressed by a member of Parliament or Victorian husband. Yet, as the following research indicates, actions often speak much louder than words.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Protective Themes of the Mid-Victorian Literary World

#### *Pre-Victorian Romanticism and Its Impact on Feminine Protection*

The stance of feminine protection is evident throughout mid-Victorian literary prose, poetry, and even in didactic publications. In order to convey the manner in which such literature impacted social perceptions of feminine protection, a select number of literary volumes have been examined. These volumes have been chosen for their popularity, hence the broad impact they had on society, as well as personal qualities of the authors. In order to prove the protective mentality of Victorian society as revealed through the medium of literature, only male authors have been highlighted. There is no better way to determine the widespread belief in Victorian feminine protection than by revealing its presence in the romantic, dramatic, and religious words penned by various Victorian men.

As has already been briefly mentioned, the prose of Sir Walter Scott evinces chivalric themes of the medieval era. In his “Essay on Chivalry,” Scott literally acknowledges the importance of feminine protection, as related to chivalric practices. He writes, “Amid the various duties of knighthood, that of protecting the female sex, respecting their persons, and redressing their wrongs, becoming the champion of their cause, and the chastiser of those by whom they were injured.”<sup>1</sup> While Scott is obviously referring to such protective behavior in the past tense, he nevertheless intertwines such themes into his novel *Ivanhoe* whereby he succeeded in popularizing “a type of character

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, 28.

which could reasonably be called chivalrous, but was acceptable as a model both by himself and his contemporaries.”<sup>2</sup> The romanticizing of chivalric themes and virtues is also evidenced by the fact that Scott chose to take some historical liberties in *Ivanhoe*. In re-creating the scenery of medieval England, Scott blurs the edge between truth and fiction, evidenced by the historically inaccurate portrayal of hostilities between Normans and Saxons existing centuries beyond the Conquest of 1066. Historian Henry Beers muses that romanticists, some of whom can be defined as transporting their readers into a “world of wonders,”<sup>3</sup> are also resurrectionists. That is, improvisation and creativity are applied in the recreation of reality, which influenced the molding of popular perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1805 and 1830, Scott successfully carved out a spot in popular literary culture for the ancient traditions of feudalism and medievalism.<sup>5</sup> But, Mark Girouard writes of Scott being initially critical of knightly chivalry in his 1818 entry for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in which he chastised the institution for its failures regarding fidelity and honor. However, he lauded the theory upon which chivalry was grounded, whereby women had an honorable and protected place in society, and a young man’s education was steeped in bravery and courtesy. The popularity of such medieval imagery, reminiscent of days when everyone knew his or her place, reflect what has been observed as Scott “coloring” his stories with “modern sentiment.”<sup>6</sup> While medieval

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<sup>2</sup> Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*, 33-34.

<sup>3</sup> Madame Sophie Cottin, “Amelie Mansfield,” *Quarterly Review* 1, no. 2 (May 1809): 305.

<sup>4</sup> Henry A. Beers, *A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth-Century* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1918), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

chivalry no longer existed, it appears that Scott desired to introduce a more genteel form of chivalry that was more adaptable to life in the nineteenth century. This is demonstrated in a variety of ways in his best-selling novel *Ivanhoe*, wherein feminine protection, devotion, and honor resonate as important themes throughout.

Contradictory representations of feminine protection are evidenced in the characters of the protagonist, Sir Ivanhoe, and the antagonistic Templar, Brian de Bois-Guilbert, and their actions regarding the novel's heroines. The relationship between Sir Ivanhoe and the Saxon noblewoman, Lady Rowena, is closely monitored by her guardian, Cedric the Saxon, who also happens to be Ivanhoe's father. In discovering the closeness between Ivanhoe and Rowena, Cedric immediately separates them. While hoping that Rowena will marry a Saxon of similar birth station to herself, such as the moral Athelstane, Cedric's removal of his son from his household reveals an instance of feminine protection. Rowena's reputation, virtue, and preserved morality were more important to Cedric than the presence of his own son.

When Ivanhoe finally reappears in the life of Lady Rowena, it is not to pursue their romance, but rather to defend his own honor and self-respect. Knight Templar de Bois-Guilbert, a former tournament opponent of Ivanhoe's during the Crusades, challenged the young knight to prove himself on the tournament fields once again.<sup>7</sup> Ivanhoe answers the challenge, successfully proves his valor, and surprises Rowena. His honor for his father's wishes, who had enforced the separation of the lovers, superseded Ivanhoe's desire to contact Rowena prior to his arrival at the tournament. This shows Ivanhoe's obvious regard for the judgment of his elders, regardless of his own sentiment.

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<sup>7</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1820; repr., New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1941), 72-74. Brian de Bois-Guilbert's offers his challenge to Sir Ivanhoe *in abstentia*.

It would have been conceivable for Ivanhoe to attempt to elope with Rowena, but his regard for her reputation, his respect for his father, and his honorable obligations to his king, far outweighed his more selfish desires.

The character of de Bois-Guilbert reveals a personality devoid of genuine chivalry and honor, which displays a marked contrast against the virtuous valor of Sir Ivanhoe. De Bois-Guilbert's first meeting with Lady Rowena reveals a lack of regard for feminine protection from insolent stares or inappropriate attention. In fact, the knight stares at her with such "an ardour" that she draws her veil around her face "as an intimation that the determined freedom of his glance was disagreeable."<sup>8</sup> The blatant gawking of de Bois-Guilbert is prefaced by Scott's description that the Templar was "accustomed only to act upon the immediate impulse of his own wishes,"<sup>9</sup> a trait which is wholly missing from Ivanhoe. If Ivanhoe followed his own desires, he would have returned to Rowena, rather than obey his father's commands. Leaving Rowena, though difficult to do, was the appropriate and honorable action for Ivanhoe to follow. Refusing to leave would have caused more family strife but, most importantly, would have jeopardized Rowena's reputation.

De Bois-Guilbert's blatant stares and open admiration for the Saxon lady suggest something about the knight's intentions and motivations. It is more important to de Bois-Guilbert to look at Rowena for the pleasure it affords him because of her beauty and fine figure. He seems unaffected by her state of discomfort at his untoward attentions,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 64.

something which is only brought to his notice by Rowena's guardian, Cedric.<sup>10</sup> If he had not been chided for his behavior, perhaps de Bois-Guilbert would never have acknowledged his error. His actions reflect the lack of respect de Bois-Guilbert had for feminine honor or protection. Scott writes that chivalrous men should show women "reverent awe" and "courtesy," something which the renowned Templar, de Bois-Guilbert, failed to demonstrate in Rowena's presence.<sup>11</sup> The lack of chivalry or regard for feminine protection is further revealed by de Bois-Guilbert's interactions with the more exotic heroine of *Ivanhoe*: the Jewess, Rebecca.

The many virtues of Rebecca attract both Ivanhoe and de Bois-Guilbert, but for very different reasons. Although Ivanhoe has pined for Rowena during his time spent far from England, he is subconsciously attracted to Rebecca's foreign beauty and godly virtue. Following his injuries at the initial jousting tournament, it is Rebecca and her father, Isaac, who tend Ivanhoe's wounds and bring him to their home in York.<sup>12</sup> Rebecca's beauty, coupled with the tender care she shows her patient, not only distract, but confuse Ivanhoe. Although he is in love with Rowena, Ivanhoe initially looks upon Rebecca in such a manner that Scott reflects "whether the fair Rowena would have been altogether satisfied with the species of emotion with which her devoted knight... gazed on the beautiful features... of the lovely Rebecca."<sup>13</sup> Ivanhoe's passion cools a bit upon learning of the intrinsic differences between himself and Rebecca in relation to their different religions. However, the relationship between Ivanhoe and Rebecca blossoms

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 128-134.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 299.

throughout the course of the novel, varying from that of a patient and his nurse, to a knight and his virtuous damsel in distress.

The latter situation arises from the lust of de Bois-Guilbert who abducts Rebecca and sneaks her into the preceptory of the Knights Templar at Templestowe. After her presence is discovered, the grand master of the preceptory charges her for being a “Jewish temptress and sorceress,” sentencing her to prove her innocence by proxy of a champion in combat.<sup>14</sup> Ivanhoe makes his appearance at a tournament at the eleventh hour, during which he foils de Bois-Guilbert and rescues Rebecca. The attachment between the two characters and the drama which constantly surrounds their interaction makes the reader anticipate that Ivanhoe will marry Rebecca, rather than Rowena. Scott himself was aware of the popularity his Jewish heroine had found with his readers, and actually addressed Rebecca’s fate in a later introduction to the novel, dated 1830. In order to further explain his decision not to conclude *Ivanhoe* with a declaration of love from either Ivanhoe or Rebecca, Scott writes:

He (the author) thinks a character of a highly virtuous and lofty stamp is degraded rather than exalted by an attempt to reward virtue with temporal prosperity... It is a dangerous and fatal doctrine to teach young persons...that rectitude of conduct and of principle are either naturally allied with...the gratification of our passions, or attainment of our wishes. In a word, if a virtuous and self-denied character is dismissed with temporal wealth, greatness, rank, or the indulgence of such a rashly formed or ill assorted passion as that of Rebecca for Ivanhoe, the reader will be apt to say, verily virtue has had its reward.<sup>15</sup>

Scott’s belief that virtue should not necessarily be rewarded simply for virtue’s sake is in direct congruence with the morality espoused by Victorian authors, especially

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 14. The novel was originally published in 1820, while the referenced introduction was added ten years later.



those writing books of an instructive nature. The work of Sarah Stickney Ellis reveals a near-identical opinion regarding virtuous behavior. She addresses the morality of virtue being its own reward in 1839's *The Women of England*, wherein she chides modern female educators for not focusing the bulk of their attentions on correcting the "evil of selfishness in the hearts of their pupils," and failing to instill in young Victorian women that "virtue ought to be its own reward."<sup>16</sup>

This ideology is repeated throughout *Ivanhoe* as the heroines find themselves either rescued or vindicated on account of their virtue. Rowena escapes burning in the castle of Torquilstone after she refuses the advances of a lustful Norman, while Rebecca is set free from her imprisonment at the preceptory because of her pure faith in Ivanhoe, perhaps more so than her genuine innocence.

De Bois-Guilbert's treatment of Rebecca is far from chivalric or protective. He resorts to kidnapping, imprisonment, and threats in order to possess Rebecca, rather than honor or protect her. In kidnapping her from the fire at Torquilstone, he then makes her a prisoner at the preceptory, an act which puts her in eventual danger. Instead of considering how his actions might affect Rebecca's safety or well-being, de Bois-Guilbert is merely thinking of himself and his wants. When his standing with the Knights Templar is threatened because of his careless behavior with Rebecca, he easily enough rejects her to save his reputation. His fellow knights easily sway him, causing de Bois-Guilbert to muse, "she hath not merited at my hand that I should expose rank and honor for her sake. I will cast her off..."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 397.

Scott characterizes the “defense of the female sex” as an important value of knighthood.<sup>18</sup> Yet, de Bois-Guilbert fails not only to defend Rebecca on charges of sorcery, but fights against her champion in the battle to determine her fate. Conversely, Ivanhoe risks his honor to save Rebecca from death and is rewarded with victory. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that while de Bois-Guilbert is motivated by his lust and desire, Ivanhoe is driven by his honor and virtue.<sup>19</sup> Thus, by detailing the behavior of two knights with such varying morals, Scott clearly outlines the idealistic manners befitting a nineteenth-century model of a medieval hero and protector of feminine values.

A more wholesome approach to masculine behavior was slowly being adopted in Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century, due largely to the founding of the YMCA in 1844, which desired to “bring Christianity down to the level of the average Victorian by showing him that religion was not really about what was perceived as ‘feminine’ piety.”<sup>20</sup> The widespread practice of such male virtue is not embraced with the same popularity of feminine protection. John Springhall’s study examines and relates the societal strides being taken to create a more wholesome male population, something which Sir Walter Scott depicted in his novel.

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<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 254. De Bois-Guilbert to Rebecca, at the castle of Torquilstone, “Thy ransom must be paid by love and beauty, and in no other coin will I accept it.”

<sup>20</sup> John Springhall, “Building Character in the British Boy: The Attempt to Extend Christian Manliness to Work-Class Adolescents, 1880-1914” in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, eds. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 53. A widespread practice of masculine Christianity did not fully emerge until the 1880s.

*Feminine Piety and Protection: The Writings of William Gladstone*

The concept of Victorian women exuding a sense of feminine piety is revealed in the literary work, and personal diaries, of William Gladstone. The statesman was impacted at an early age by the idea of feminine morality and protection, as portrayed by his mother and eldest sister, Anne. The two ladies were devoutly evangelical and in delicate health. Gladstone intertwined these two qualities in regard to his opinion of a woman's station in life. He saw all women as potentially noble, like his pious mother and sister, further believing that women who were not pious merely needed to be rescued.<sup>21</sup> That is, women needed protection from themselves and the temptation of immorality.

This attitude of feminine protection and piety is reflected by Gladstone's writing. In his diaries, he records the childbirth labors of his wife, Catherine, in a poetic and romantic fashion that exaggerates Gladstone's idealism about femininity. On October 18, 1842, Gladstone records, "Catherine bore the last pains with perfect fortitude & I could not but observe how exceedingly beautiful she looked while this suffering so severe but without bitterness was upon her... Surely she has the higher gift of elevating this anguish, the burden of her womanhood, into a discipline of assimilation to her Lord."<sup>22</sup> This quote illustrates the pious opinion Gladstone had developed in regards to, not only his wife, but the status of women in general.

In *Gladstone and Women*, Anne Isba examines the manner in which Gladstone's religiosity and idealism affected his quest for a wife during the 1830s. He is noted to

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<sup>21</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone: 1809-1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5-9.

<sup>22</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 3: 231-232.

have written an “eight-page letter of excruciating tedium” to the mother of his first intended fiancée, Lady Farquhar, wherein he outlined “his moral and religious principles and their importance in married life.”<sup>23</sup> Gladstone’s serious nature, evidenced by the heavy-handed topics upon which he wrote, including *The Rock of Impregnable Scripture* and *The Church in Its Relations to the State*, his suit was rejected by Caroline Farquhar. Shortly after learning of her refusal, Gladstone admitted that “my wish for marriage was chiefly on religious grounds. For what is the wife of a baptized man, but the gift and the instrument of God our Redeemer?”<sup>24</sup> Gladstone’s divine interpretation of love and marriage suggests that he believed religion would prove as protection for women. His choice of words concerning the “wife of a baptized man” could infer that Gladstone believed his salvation would redeem his wife.

During the solemn courtship of his future wife, Catherine Glynne (1812–1900), while on the Continent, it would appear that the state of her faith held a greater interest for Gladstone than the woman herself. His personal reflections about Catherine in 1838 are few, as religion and the forthcoming publication of *The State in Its Relation to the Church* were his chief concerns. In reading through Gladstone’s entries between late 1838 and mid-1839, there is little that indicates a man falling in love. What he did write about Catherine was laced with religious symbolism and theology. Since Gladstone was motivated by religion in nearly everything that he did, as will shortly be evidenced by his stance on the Marriage Act of 1857, this cannot be altogether surprising. He was religiously inspired in his pursuit of Catherine, writing that he fell in love with her when

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Women* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 23. Gladstone-Glynne Manuscripts, 707. Letter dated August 31, 1835.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Gladstone-Glynne Manuscripts, no. 1385.

she revealed her religious insight by asking, “do you think we can be justified in indulging ourselves in all those luxuries?”<sup>25</sup> Nothing is written by Gladstone about Catherine’s physical appearance, but rather her spiritual character and her desire to read his religious tracts. Whereas Gladstone had witnessed rigorous female piety in the forms of his sister and mother, he found the same such spiritual devotion in Catherine Glynne. The spirituality of his new fiancée matched Gladstone’s own devotion, as reflected by an entry in his diary following Catherine’s acceptance of his proposal. “She asked for the earliest Communion, that we might go together to the altar of Christ. Blessed creature!”<sup>26</sup> Understandably, Gladstone came to expect a certain type of behavior from women, assigning the responsibility of protector and supporter to their male counterparts.

This symbiotic relationship is one that is described by Scott in his “Essay on Chivalry,” wherein a citation from a sixteenth-century French manuscript on chivalry summarizes the honorable relationship between a knight and his lady. Regarding the selection of a “lady and a love” to honor with his feats in training, a young knight is summarily instructed, “You ought to choose a lady of high and noble blood, who has the talent and means to counsel and aid you at your need, and her you ought to serve so truly, and love so loyally, that she must be compelled to acknowledge the true and honorable affection which you bear her.”<sup>27</sup> This quotation reveals a symbiotic relation between chivalry and honor, to which both sexes made equally important contributions. Men contributed more in the physical sense of strength and battlefield experience, but women

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<sup>25</sup>*The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. M. R. D. Foot (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 2: 577. Dated February 6, 1839.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 605. Dated June 8, 1839.

<sup>27</sup> *L’Histoire et Plaisant Chronique du Petit Jehan de Saintrre, et de la Jeune Dame des Belles Cousines, sans autre nom nommer* (Paris, np: 1517). As cited in: Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, 30.

maintained the responsibility of raising and sustaining the morale, strength, and pride of the men. This egalitarian system of chivalric contribution helped perpetuate the strength of families, kingdoms, and, during the nineteenth century, the British Empire.

Gladstone's religiosity and classical education, which exposed him to the Greek poets, world history, and theology familiarized him with such concepts of chivalry. He read widely from Scott, regarding the Scottish author's works as rewarding "treat[s]," which were "not written about or analysed, but absorbed."<sup>28</sup> The combination of the "impossibly demanding standards" established by his eldest sister, Anne, and Scott's creative influence, caused Gladstone to create a lofty, idealistic view of women.<sup>29</sup>

This is expressed most vividly in *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age*. Herein, Gladstone blends his religious and classical education to formulate the ideal concept of femininity and virtuous protection. However, a brief examination of Gladstone's other work, *The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture*, enables a better understanding behind the statesman's fascinations with, and preference for, the Greek culture and system of morals. He refers openly to his favored culture as "above all the extraordinarily gifted race of the ancient Greeks..." in reference to their architectural, philosophical, and artistic accomplishments.<sup>30</sup> He cites a Greek translation of the Genesis' Creation Story as rivaling the authoritative Hebrew Creation interpretation.<sup>31</sup> Gladstone unabashedly gives more credence to Greek-based Scriptural translations, undermining the Hebrew text of the Old Testament by claiming it dates to the "tenth

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> William E. Gladstone, *The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia: John D. Wattles, 1891), 103.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

century of our era,” while writing the Greek version is thousands of years older.<sup>32</sup> While this brief background does not literally have anything to do with protective femininity, it instead conveys the important role that Greek heritage played in Gladstone’s life and his social, moral, and religious interpretations. Gladstone viewed in the Greek culture an idealized concept of gentility and virtue, something which he anticipated being realized in Victorian culture, especially in regards to domestic and social relations.

*Juventus Mundi* was written in 1869, twelve years after Gladstone failed to prevent the passage of the Marriage Act. Perhaps this is why Gladstone begins a chapter section on “Position Held by Women” by drawing similarities (or lack thereof) between divorce in ancient Greece, as compared to Victorian England. He uses the situation of Penelope and her missing husband, Odysseus, in Homer’s *Odyssey* to demonstrate the honorable behavior of a woman waiting for her husband and refusing to be swayed by popular belief that she should remarry. Gladstone writes, “The Suitors always urge Penelope to remarry, on the grounds that Odysseus must be dead... A shorter period of absence, than that assigned to him (Odysseus), is recognized by the law of England as making re-marriage legal.”<sup>33</sup> This reflects Gladstone’s disdain for the idea of divorce and remarriage.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> William E. Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1869), 410. In regard to Penelope and her suitors, see also, Homer *The Odyssey* 2.

He precedes his remarks on divorce by stating, “It is in the interest of the woman that the law of marriage should be strict...”<sup>34</sup> This remark, however, assumes that all husbands are as honorable as Odysseus, and all wives as virtuous as Penelope. Gladstone honestly believed all women were as piously-inspired as Penelope and his own Catherine.

In writing about Menelaus, the wronged husband of Helen of Troy, Gladstone reveals his own idealistic opinions regarding the state of matrimony. He asserts that Menelaus was always honorable in his desire to be reunited with his wife, as he did not view “what had occurred as setting him free from his obligations to Helen.”<sup>35</sup> This portrayal of Menelaus is clearly one inspired by Gladstone’s own religiously-inspired view of matrimony, as he eliminates any mention of Menelaus’ fury at discovering his wife’s elopement with Paris, or his alliance with the Greek King Agamemnon in order to make war on the Trojans. Perhaps it is Gladstone’s inability to relate a husband chasing down an errant wife for any reason other than a reconciliation, that prevents him from comprehending Menelaus’ ulterior motives as intimated in Homer’s *The Iliad*.

The manner in which Helen is portrayed in *The Iliad* and Gladstone’s classical education illuminates the reasoning behind the statesman’s idealistic and slightly-romanticized view of marriage and feminine protection. Repeatedly, it is Paris and the gods themselves who are charged with the responsibility of bringing about the Trojan Wars. King Priam, father of Paris, assures Helen that he does not blame her for the wars in Troy, explaining, “I hold the gods to blame.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, it is Paris who is called “outlaw” and “adulterer” by Menelaus and charged by his own brother, Hector, with

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>36</sup> Homer *The Iliad* 3.199.



luring women “all to ruin!”<sup>37</sup> Noticeably absent is any blame cast upon Helen. The rampant interference of the gods in the lives of Helen, Paris, Menelaus, and the entire book of *The Iliad*, do make this a unique circumstance of misguided femininity. It had an impact on Gladstone’s belief that women were genuinely virtuous unless led astray, as evidenced by the circumstance of Helen, and further upheld by Penelope’s stalwart efforts to keep her suitors at bay.

Gladstone placed a great deal of importance on the roles he believed women should assume in society. He admired the pious women in his life, going so far as to annually commemorate the birthday of his late sister, Anne, recording in his diary, “Never let me forget that on this day dearest Anne saw first the light”<sup>38</sup> more than a decade after her death. He married a woman who closely resembled his sister’s ethereal spirituality, and endeavored to save the women who did not fit his mold of feminine piety. Among such women were the prostitutes whom Gladstone hoped to reform through his House of Mercy, established in Windsor in 1846. These efforts were unfortunately misguided, as one former inhabitant of the House wrote to her former benefactor in 1854. “I have no doubt you wished to do me some service, but I do not fancy being shut up in such a place as that... I should rather have committed suicide.”<sup>39</sup> Gladstone’s work with the salvation of prostitutes was also slightly tainted with the sexual arousal it afforded the statesman. Isba writes that Gladstone’s mission to help fallen women was truly genuine, but his “association with young and pretty ones meant

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 3.31, 3.45.

<sup>38</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: December 24, 1842.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 91.

he was playing with fire...”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that Catherine Gladstone was also involved in her husband’s work of saving fallen women can attest to a somewhat genuine nature of his desire to rescue women from the streets.<sup>41</sup>

Gladstone’s writing furthermore reveals his deference towards femininity and its protection. He lauds the Greeks for the absence of “rude manners to a woman” in the Homeric Poems, pointing out that Homeric women exhibit virtues that “are truly and profoundly feminine.”<sup>42</sup> This femininity is to be protected, as Gladstone declares by pointing out the importance of marriage and the evils of divorce, writing that, “even the violent bodily abstraction of the wife, as in the case of Helen, does no more than destroy the marriage *for the time*.”<sup>43</sup> This attitude concerning the literal infallibility of marriage and the innate goodness of women inspired Gladstone in his quest to return to Lord Lincoln his errant wife, Lady “Susie” Lincoln. As Lady Lincoln had left her husband and five children for the Continent, where it was rumored she was having an affair with Lord Walpole, Gladstone volunteered to seek her out and convince her to return home. So optimistic was his belief that he would redeem Lady Lincoln that Gladstone’s biographer, John Morley, records “it was like him to regard the affair with an optimistic simplicity that made him hopeful of success, where to ninety-nine men of a hundred the thought of success would have seemed absurd.”<sup>44</sup> For all his optimism, Gladstone was not

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<sup>40</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 116-117. Author discusses more about Catherine Gladstone’s efforts in redeeming fallen women.

<sup>42</sup> Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi*, 414.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>44</sup> John M. Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (New York; London: MacMillan, 1903), 2: 364-365.

successful in reuniting Lord Lincoln with his wife. Divorce proceedings were filed in 1850, as Susie Lincoln had conceived an illegitimate child by her lover while abroad in Italy. Of his failure, and the status of Lady Lincoln, Gladstone wrote the following in his diary in late 1849. “Oh that poor miserable Lady Lincoln – once the dream of dreams... What is she now! But may that Spotless sacrifice... today avail for her, to the washing away of sin and to the renewal of the image of God.”<sup>45</sup>

In examining the personality, behavior, literary contributions, and diary entries of William Gladstone, it would appear that the statesman reflected his belief that all women were the living embodiment of virtue. Those women who were not already embracing a pious lifestyle were, in Gladstone’s opinion, in obvious need of salvation. This belief in the value of feminine virtue and its need for protection are reflected throughout many aspects of Gladstone’s life, both personal and political. Gladstone’s desire to protect and maintain an ideal of femininity in his personal relationships had varying consequences. One specific woman who suffered from Gladstone’s idealistic femininity was his younger sister, Helen Gladstone (1814–1880), whose religious shortcomings and mental troubles caused her elder brother to look upon her as a “poor dear soul.”<sup>46</sup> Helen’s erratic behavior and lifestyle provided a constant source of frustration for her brother, who could not rescue her from a laudanum addiction nor an unhappiness that appeared to result from misdirected intellect, loneliness, and Catholic inclinations.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, H. C. G.

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<sup>45</sup>*The Gladstone Diaries*, ed. M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 4: August 5, 1849. As cited in: Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 86.

<sup>46</sup>*The Gladstone Diaries*, 2: December 17, 1838.

<sup>47</sup> For more on Helen Gladstone, see, Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 49-69. *Gladstone Diaries*, 3: June 11, 1842; October 1845-November 1845. Joyce Marlow, *Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone: An Intimate Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 41-43, 54-55.

Matthew notes the fairly uncharacteristic behavior exhibited by Gladstone when dealing with his younger sister, stating, “Helen brought out an otherwise nonexistent trait in her brother: he bullied her.”<sup>48</sup> This emerged perhaps from Gladstone’s frustration that his own sister could not, or would not, conform to the ideal model of femininity so perfectly exemplified by his wife, late mother, and late sister, Anne.

Gladstone’s approach to the protection of femininity may have bordered on the strict and legalistic. However, the statesman was not alone in his lofty regard for the role of women in society. As a whole, Victorian women were not only idealized as keepers of hearth and home, but also lauded as moral guideposts upon which their husbands could lean. The popular culture of middle-class society, as well as the logistics of female disenfranchisement in the Reform Act of 1832, not only discouraged women from occupying anything outside the domestic realm, but deprived women who did seek employment of their social status. This is evidenced in the character of the Victorian governess. Employed by a wealthy middle-, or even upper-, class family to instill Victorian values of femininity and morality, a governess was a living contradiction. The domestic values of feminine protection which a governess was hired to teach, she was forced (by circumstance) to violate. A gentlewoman by birth, financial obligations forced many governesses to leave their social status behind in favor of gainful employment. Their refined background, while it provided a governess a means of making a living,

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<sup>48</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 328.

created an anomalous status for these women: they were not a guest, nor a family member, yet they outranked the household servants.<sup>49</sup>

Victorian women were inundated with materials detailing the ideal characteristics of a proper lady, imagery which was developed concurrently alongside a dominant male sphere. Authors of *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* argued that a woman forfeited various legal and financial rights “in exchange for a determinate station; for protection, for support...”<sup>50</sup> an assertion with which Gladstone would have agreed. Women were further encouraged by popular reading materials that, “it was wrong for women to seek to be active in men’s sphere and... [they] should not complain about the legal disabilities associated with marriage.”<sup>51</sup> Gladstone does discuss female employment in *Juventus Mundi*, referencing the authoritative role Penelope occupied during the absence of Odysseus and the numerous Athenian priestesses.<sup>52</sup> Gladstone could have made such an allusion to satisfy the feminine authority of Queen Victoria, thereby comparing her status to that of a Grecian aristocrat.

The attainment of increased male suffrage with the Reform Act of 1832 also held powerful sway over the evolving feminine sphere. As described in E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, the twenty-five years after 1795 can be seen as the years of the “long counter-revolution,” eventually culminating in the “Reform Bill crisis

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<sup>49</sup> See, M. Jeanne Peterson, “The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society,” in Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), 3-19.

<sup>50</sup> *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* 7 (1841-42), 271. As quoted in: Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 187-188.

<sup>51</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 187.

<sup>52</sup> Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi*, 415.

of 1832 – or, to be more accurate, the successive crises from early in 1831 until...1832.”<sup>53</sup> This industrial and civil unrest had a great impact on the social structure of Great Britain, initiating “the formation of a middle-class ‘class consciousness.’”<sup>54</sup> This distinct characterization of a middle-class created a specific definition of what men could expect in the commercial, economic, and even social realm. For the men who attained it, suffrage was a heady accomplishment which would serve to impact the role middle-class men occupied in their social relations. Men had successfully reasserted their place in the British Empire following the many diplomatic and political uncertainties during the Napoleonic Wars. While men already felt protective of Great Britain’s domesticity with the induction of peacetime at home, their economic achievements during the short reign of William IV served to reinforce their desire to not only protect the virtue of Englishwomen, but affirm the feminine place within the newly defined “woman’s sphere.”

These separate spheres and specific idealistic qualities of either sex were further reinforced by the literature of the age. The chivalry of Sir Walter Scott set a romantic precedent that was not only maintained by many of his successors, but reinforced in favor of more protection for women. The idealism of William Gladstone in relation to feminine piety further contributed to concepts lauded by Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. Overall, Scott and Gladstone both contributed to the creation of a unique social climate that set the stage for a metamorphosis from romantic chivalry to overzealous protection, as evidenced in one work that epitomizes Victorian feminine protection.

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<sup>53</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 807-808.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 820.

*An Angel in the Household: Varying Opinions Regarding The Ideal  
Victorian Woman*

Janet Murray Horowitz indicates that the popularity of the cult of the domestic angel reached a peak during the first twenty years of Victoria's reign (1837–1857),<sup>55</sup> which aligns with the initial publication of Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* in 1854. Patmore's iconic poem serves as an ideal representative of romantic and protective Victorian imagery "which support[s] a view of women as docile, dependent, and self-sacrificing, was employed consciously or unconsciously by writers all across the political spectrum." This literature summarily "formed a kind of common vocabulary by which people identified the parts of women's lives."<sup>56</sup>

This is exactly the type of literature that provides beneficial details regarding creative interpretations surrounding feminine protection, especially creative literature written by men. This reveals insight concerning how forces outside the woman's sphere interpreted appropriate femininity and conveyed it to the public.

There are many assertions and interpretations regarding femininity as it is presented in *The Angel in the House*. Editor John Maynard introduces the poem by writing, "[It]... has become mere shorthand for oppressive patriarchy... and a mere name for sequestered, oppressed, abused, imprisoned angels in their houses..."<sup>57</sup> Modern-day

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<sup>55</sup> Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong-Minded Women: And Other Lost Voices From Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House: Books I & II*, ed. by Ian Anstruther (1854; repr., Edinburgh: Haggerton Press with Boston College, 1998), xvii. Contributor Maynard is author of: *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

critics who derive attitudes of feminine repression from Patmore's poem cite as evidence, lines such as the following:

The maiden so, from love's free sky  
In chaste and prudent counsels caged,  
But longing to be loosen'd by  
Her suitor's faith declared and gaged,  
When blest with that released desired,  
First doubts if truly she is free,  
Then pauses, restlessly retired,  
Alarm'd at too much liberty.<sup>58</sup>

The selection of certain vocabulary, including "caged," can imply a sequestered, imprisoned woman who waits for the day when she shall be freed by "her suitor's faith." Additionally, describing a woman who "pauses" and becomes "alarm'd at too much liberty" draws obvious parallels between such a feminine character and a formerly caged bird. By Victorian standards, both were caged in one sense or another: the former by societal boundaries, and the latter by a physical cage. Patmore goes further in his depiction of popularized Victorian feminine themes of male dependence, evidenced herewith:

Her will's indomitably bent  
On mere submission unto him:  
To him she'll cleave, for him forsake  
Father's and mother's fond command.  
He is her lord, for he can take  
Hold of her faint heart with his hand.<sup>59</sup>

The words of Patmore reflect the popular ideology of femininity during the mid-nineteenth century. Upon the initial publication of *Book I* in 1854, followed by *Book II* in 1856, the majority of the author's references to the role of a fiancée, wife, and eventual

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<sup>58</sup> Patmore, *Angel in the House*, Book II, Canto II: 9-16.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, Canto II: 97-100.



mother, were in keeping with popular practice and societal standards. In looking at the reference to a woman being caged in “chaste and prudent counsels,” there is an implication of protection, albeit far from contemporary standards. Kept away from the corruptions of the world, a virtuous young woman could anticipate becoming the kind of upstanding wife and mother expressly lauded in the educational literature she would have read. This wholesome virtue was important to the Victorian philosophy behind empirical success, morality, and the proliferation of English citizenry. Patmore charges Englishwomen with upholding the morality of their husbands when he writes:

I never would sully my faith  
By the least selfishness or sin;  
Whatever in her sight I'd seem  
I'd really be...<sup>60</sup>

Herein, we see the subtle demonstration of a symbiotic relationship between the moral expectations of husbands and wives. Patmore implies that the wife's virtue will encourage the husband to maintain a higher moral standard, which is done for the wife's love and happiness. Patmore's Victorian contemporary, Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904), expresses a similar system of shared expectations between husbands and wives in “Celibacy v. Marriage.” Cobbe charges wives with placing “too high a value to outward polish” and “seek[ing] social intercourse above her own natural circle.”<sup>61</sup> This leads her to assert, “*if the wife were what wife should be*, the husband would not need to grow more mercenary and more worldly to supply her wants, but would rather find her pure and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Book I, Canto IV: 135-138.

<sup>61</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, “Celibacy v. Marriage,” *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 65 (February 1862): 230.

religious influence raise him to higher modes of thinking.”<sup>62</sup> Cobbe places a great deal of pressure on Victorian women, expecting them to not only provide moral support for their husbands, but even blaming their social expectations for any worldly immorality brought into the family circle.

In comparison with Scott, Gladstone, and Patmore, Cobbe appears rather severe upon her own sex. Most likely, Cobbe was both an idealist and pragmatist because of her own single status, something which had provided her no literal experience pertaining to marital relations and the challenges of domesticity. Additionally, she was devoid of the Romanticism expressed by Scott and his contemporaries in paying tribute to feminine beauty and virtue, having devoted her life to religious and intellectual pursuits. In “Celibacy v. Marriage,” Cobbe indicates an indirect acceptance of self-sacrifice and domestic morality as the ideal roles for women to fulfill, as promoted by Sarah Stickney Ellis in her *Women of England* series.

Cobbe accuses women of being ignorant of “real life,” citing this as a reason for some wives failing to perform “their proper part of inspiring feelings of devotion to noble causes.”<sup>63</sup> In contrast, a woman’s ignorance of the real world appears to be the very reason that authors, like Patmore, praise women for their ability to inspire value and morality in the home. Patmore writes that it is woman’s domestic “privilege, not impotence... [that] exempts her from the work of man...”<sup>64</sup> and therefore the outside world. The concept of sequestering women from the “masculine sphere,” lest their

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>64</sup> Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Book I, Canto V: 57-58.

wholesome virtue become tainted, is highlighted by Mendus and Rendall as a form of protective innocence. They relate the definition of feminine innocence to the nineteenth-century debate concerning the “duality of the term ‘to know,’”<sup>65</sup> which is interpreted to mean both intellectual and sexual knowledge. Mendus and Rendall illustrate this by quoting various Scriptural references, including, “You will be like Gods, knowing good and evil,” and “Adam knew Eve.”<sup>66</sup> Victorians believed that too much familiarity with the outside world translated to extensive sexual knowledge. Likewise, they also believed this could upset the status quo of feminine virtue, morality, and the proliferation of the Empire.

Hence, the overwhelming masculine expression of feminine protection. The varying sentiments of female authors, who often found themselves the object of such protection, appear to alternate between the strict pragmatism of Cobbe and idealist Romanticism. Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858) expresses frustrations with the status of femininity that bear many similarities to those revealed by Cobbe. She refers to Victorian women as members of an “inferior caste” and criticizes the protective mentality of Victorian masculinity, writing that such protective inclinations simultaneously forced women to remain helpless and disenfranchised.<sup>67</sup> Any effort of a woman to help herself in a matter concerning her personal honor, Mill points out, would summarily result in a woman being labeled “unfeminine.”<sup>68</sup> Mill’s criticisms of her own sex, as formerly seen

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<sup>65</sup> Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 6-7.

<sup>66</sup> Genesis 3:5, 4:1 (New International Version).

<sup>67</sup> Harriet Taylor Mill, “The New York Tribune for Europe: The Enfranchisement of Women,” *Westminster Review* 55, no. 2 (July 1851), 309. Also cited in: Murray, *Strong-Minded Women*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

with Cobbe, are equally severe. She complains that women “should be a mere appendage to a man,” and censures female authors for lauding “their complete satisfaction with the place which society assigns to them,” and depending on “men’s opinion for their literary as well as for their feminine successes.”<sup>69</sup>

This attitude indicates that Mill assigns too much authority to Victorian males. She contradicts the role of masculine power when she first charges men with forcing women to constantly appeal to their personal wishes, then insinuates greater feminine intelligence by complaining that wives are often their husband’s “superior in understanding,” but still they are obliged to consult him.<sup>70</sup> It can be interpreted that Mill is more frustrated with her fellow Victorian women, who would rather enjoy “the comfort of her individual life and her social consideration,”<sup>71</sup> in favor of fighting for enfranchisement. Her cutting remarks may be intended to incite women to recognize their need for equality, while also condemning those who prefer to maintain the social status quo and manipulate their social standing through indirect means. It is also interesting to note that Mill consistently demeans the intelligence of women, stating that “high mental powers in women will be but an exceptional accident,” until they receive enfranchisement.<sup>72</sup> She also refers to members of her sex as “servile-minded.”<sup>73</sup> This could indicate Mill’s explanation for the feminine state of disenfranchisement and the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 301, 310.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 301, 306.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 309.

complacency of many women. Mill suggests that if her fellow women were not so “servile-minded,” equal opportunities would already exist for Victorian women.

It is through the didactic writings of Ellis that a better understanding of the feminine regard for sexual politics is conveyed, one that is neither hostile nor laudatory towards men. The motivation behind Ellis’ work appears to be the dissemination of social guidelines, housekeeping ideas, and educational information for young ladies, rather than the desire to rearrange the relationship between the sexes. Instead of harshly reprimanding both sexes, in the fashion of Mill, Ellis successfully maneuvers through the dynamics of domesticity in a way that is both insightful and protective. She tells women to beware of the tyrannical behavior of some husbands and cautions women in their practice of self-sacrifice, adeptly warning them against, “...withholding what they ought to give up, nor giving up what they cannot afford to lose.”<sup>74</sup> Ellis represents the ideal view of womanhood: one that is utterly feminine, domestic, and appreciative of the protection afforded them by masculinity. Mill accuses women of manipulating their households for selfish reasons, something which was much discussed amongst both feminine and *feminist* circles, as Ellis similarly discourages women against becoming, “a monopolizer of good things...”<sup>75</sup>

Mill blatantly rejects society’s assertion that the “*proper sphere* of women is not politics of publicity, but private and domestic life,”<sup>76</sup> whereas Ellis concedes that

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<sup>74</sup>Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, & Social Obligations* (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1843), 94.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Mill, “The Enfranchisement of Women,” 295.

woman's "world is her home."<sup>77</sup> "The Enfranchisement of Women" reveals little in relation to ideas of feminine protection, save for the author's desire to shrug off the masculine concept that placing women within a "domestic sphere" is a form of protection. She acknowledges that the "seclusion" of women is related to "the notion of guarding women from the hardening influence of the world," but also points out that such removal from the outside world has the possibility to create "weak minds in weak bodies" which "ere long cease to be... either attractive or amiable."<sup>78</sup> In addition to being resentful at the complacency of her own sex, Mill also demonstrates a genuine concern that men will come to resent the feminine idealism that they have come to admire and laud.

In terms of feminine protection, the contributions of Ellis are multi-dimensional and subject to an array of interpretations. Ellis expects a great deal from the women of England because she places upon their shoulders the important responsibility of morality and domestic stability. She charges them with the practice of self-sacrifice, describing housewives as being, "kept alive to the necessity of making their own personal exertions conducive to the great end of promoting the happiness of those around them."<sup>79</sup> The criticisms of Mill towards a dependent feminine attitude can be understood by looking at a passage wherein Ellis describes behavior which is "much more congenial to the highest attributes of woman's character."<sup>80</sup> Among these attributes are the attention to such inquiries, including, "Did I fail in what was kind or considerate to any of the

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<sup>77</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Mill, "The Enfranchisement of Women," 300.

<sup>79</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

family yesterday; I will meet them this morning with a cordial welcome, and show, in the most delicate way I can, that I am anxious to atone for the past.”<sup>81</sup>

As self-depreciating as this may appear, Ellis nevertheless admits to manipulating the masculine regard for a woman’s domestic importance. “It may surely be deemed pardonable for a woman to solicit... serious attention... [because] she endeavors to prove that it is the minor morals of domestic life which give the tone to English character.”<sup>82</sup> Considering Ellis’ observation that woman is expected to lay aside “her very *self*” and “to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs,”<sup>83</sup> her request for recognition appears modest. She expects a lot from British women, but likewise holds them in high regard, varying widely from the critical opinion that Harriet Taylor Mill harbored towards her fellow women.

Additionally, Ellis describes the manner in which a wife should behave towards her husband in a near-religious tone. She promotes that wives should “esteem and reverence” their husbands inwardly, while also showing their “proper deference and regard” for their spouse by their actions.<sup>84</sup> The showing of inward and outward regard bears some similarities with the deference one would show either a Sovereign or the Almighty. Ellis also explains that it is a married woman’s privilege to show, through actions and deference, “how much she feels her husband’s superiority to herself.”<sup>85</sup> Such

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>84</sup> Ellis, *The Wives of England*, 91.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

reverential treatment of the husband does not demonstrate any type of feminine protection. It does, however, illustrate the sense of religiosity attached to the ideal domestic setting. The intertwining of spirituality and the domestic sphere creates a protective lining within the gilded cage described by Patmore. If the Victorian husband is interpreted as acting the part of God in the home, then he is automatically a *de facto* protector. Furthermore, in her first book on feminine morals and decorum, *The Women of England*, Ellis points out that it is God himself who has placed women in the home. She writes of God's relationship to the wives of England in the following divine approach. "The only Being who is capable of knowing what is ultimately best, [and]...has seen meet to place her exactly where...the purposes of her life may be made most conducive to His merciful and wise designs."<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, there are religious implications within *Angel in the House*, but Patmore's reference to similar spirituality is in relation to femininity, instead of the masculine concepts of divinity previously represented by Ellis and Cobbe. This is illustrated by Patmore intimations that woman possesses greater moral standards and virtues than her male counterpart. The male protagonist of *Books I and II*, Felix Vaughan, refers to his beloved Honoria as "the best half of creation's best,"<sup>87</sup> in praise of her virtuous merits, beauty, and "subtle sweetness."<sup>88</sup> Descriptions of Honoria's loveliness are revealed through religious cantos, one of which is entitled "Going to Church."

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<sup>86</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 108-109.

<sup>87</sup> Patmore, *Angel in the House*, Book I, Canto II: 37.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, Canto II: 43.



I loved her in the name of God,  
And for the ray she was of Him;  
... Her beauty was a godly grace,  
The mystery of loveliness  
Which made an altar of her face.<sup>89</sup>

This blend of religion and romance would have not only appealed to virtuous ladies of the domestic sphere, but also to religiously-minded males. One such character to whom Patmore's writing would have appealed is Gladstone, whose personal diaries during his courtship with future wife, Catherine, reflect less a romantic suitor and more of a religiously-minded scholar. Gladstone could have easily related to the inspiration that protagonist, Vaughan, finds in Honoria during their time together at church. The day following his marriage to Catherine, Gladstone writes less of sentiment and more of religion in his diaries, recording that he "read Bible *with* my Catherine," and that he hoped "[to] raise the heart to a high tone accordant with the spirit of the great mystery of Christian marriage."<sup>90</sup> Coming from a man as devout as Gladstone, who had once believed his career path lay with the Church of England, the blending of religion and romance appears a natural resolution.<sup>91</sup> The merging of these two qualities reflects a mentality similar to that of Patmore. Additionally, just as Gladstone preached, and practiced, the ideals of feminine protection, so too did Patmore. Inasmuch as Patmore refers to a woman being "caged" from the world's moral shortcomings, he also charges her male counterpart with the responsibility of protection and genuine care for his

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., Book I, Canto X: 127-128, 129-131.

<sup>90</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 2: July 26, 1839.

<sup>91</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 28. This was around 1830. Gladstone wrote his father, from Oxford, for permission to change his career path. John Gladstone declined his son's request.

feminine spouse. He writes that Vaughan will “...always seek the best for her, with unofficial tenderness.”<sup>92</sup>

Historian Tricia Lootens examines the religious implications of charging British women with such highly-revered purity in her book, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization*. In relation to women being referred to as “angels,” Lootens writes that this caused society to interpret such angelic domestics as possessing both the “unearthly purity of the Virgin’s body,” and “spiritual freedom from any need for internal moral struggle.”<sup>93</sup>

From the viewpoint of Victorian men, the assignment of these religious attributes served as protection for the middle-class Englishwoman who had become a symbol of moral and empirical ambition. By depicting their feminine counterparts as divinely moral, not only did women thereby inherit the expectation of moral and religious guidance towards all in her household, she was further removed from any earthly “moral struggle,” a characterization which isolated her within her woman’s sphere.<sup>94</sup> This sphere was a domestic sanctuary against the outside world, without which such chaste attributes had the capability of being tainted. However, as Victorian husbands were part of a more worldly realm, it would stand to reason that the portrayal of their wives as something divine and angelic would create an ever-broadening rift between the sexual boundaries encountered during the era, rather than promote any form of simplistic co-existence.

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<sup>92</sup> Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Book I, Canto IV: 143-144.

<sup>93</sup> Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville, NC: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 53.

<sup>94</sup> Murray, *Strong-Minded Women*, 19. Among attributes of an “angel in the house,” Murray includes sexual passivity.

Furthermore, earlier drafts of *Angel in the House* reveal a compatible and egalitarian relationship between leading characters, Felix and Honoria Vaughan. While Vaughan holds his beloved to high moral standards, he does so without attempting to dominate her, but rather strives to prove himself worthy of her. Linda Hughes discusses varying themes of sexual equality in the subsequent books and edited versions of Patmore's poem in her article, *Entombing the Angel: Patmore's Revisions of Angel in the House*. She writes that Patmore's work originally espoused a far greater sense of marital corroboration between the subjects of *Angel in the House*, Vaughan and Honoria. This is seen in the first edition of *Book I* in 1854, where Vaughan and Honoria are depicted "arguing high artistic laws" concerning the former's completion of "Book the First," to which Honoria has acted as "kind critic."<sup>95</sup> Throughout subsequent versions of the poem, Patmore alters the participation of Honoria, removing numerous passages where her dialogue had appeared in the 1854 and 1856 publications. The final revised edition of Patmore's poem appeared in full in 1886, its heroine more diminutive and less pro-active than once described, in order to conform with popular Victorian culture of submissive femininity.<sup>96</sup>

Lastly, it is the stanza entitled, "The Vestal Fire," which epitomizes the impact Victorian literature had on the cult of domesticity and feminine protection, and vice

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<sup>95</sup> Coventry Patmore, *Angel in the House: The Betrothal* (London: J.W. Parker & Son, 1854), 7. As quoted in, Linda K. Hughes, "Entombing the Angel: Patmore's Revisions of *Angel in the House*," in ed. Judith Kennedy, *Victorian Authors and their Works: Revision Motivations and Modes* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1991), 143.

<sup>96</sup> Hughes, "Entombing the Angel," 141, 145-146, 155-157. The 1860 version of Book III, "Rachel" included a lengthy letter of Honoria's referring to Felix's flirtations, "her assumption that Felix agrees with her on political principles, rather than the reverse, and their arguing which culminates, according to Honoria, in her besting her husband." This letter appalled Patmore's male readers and was removed in later editions.

versa. The protectively sequestered manner in which Victorian wives were already treated, coupled with religiously-inspired, virginity-lauding literature doubtlessly caused some confusion amongst Victorian couples regarding their intimate behavior. Given the following verses included in *Book II*, the grounds for a degree of uncertainty becomes more evident:

Virgins are they, before the Lord,  
Whose hearts are pure. "The vestal fire  
"Is not" (so runs the Poet's word),  
"By marriage quench'd, but flame the higher."  
Warm, living is the praise thereof,  
And wedded lives, which ne'er belie  
The honourable heart of love,  
Are fountains of virginity.<sup>97</sup>

Patmore refers to virgins as those with pure hearts, yet there are obvious ulterior implications for a far more physical and sexual meaning. This stanza praises the purity of marital love, while also convoluting the physicality of marital intimacy. Patmore accomplishes this by reiterating the presence of virginity at the same time he illustrates passions which "flame the higher." The virginal state of a prospective bride during the nineteenth-century was not only morally imperative, but of commercial value. Virginity in women was a priceless commodity "for the security it gave to the dynastic transmission of property."<sup>98</sup> Still, if there is any contradiction in the phrasing of Patmore's "The Vestal Fire," it is after the same fashion of societal standards of the era. Women were educated to become wives and mothers, while at the same time, they were "expected to have little sexual feeling at all."<sup>99</sup> Such rhetoric was manipulated for the

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<sup>97</sup> Patmore, *Angel in the House*, Book II, Canto IX: 39-46.

<sup>98</sup> Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 7.

<sup>99</sup> Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still*, ix.

extreme purpose of protecting all aspects of feminine womanhood, even their sexuality. Overall, it created an inconsistency concerning what was expected of the perfect lady, especially where duties in the bedroom were involved.

*John Ruskin: The Intellectual Genius and Farcical Husband*

Victorian misconceptions about femininity, virtue, and sexuality culminate in the person of John Ruskin. The only child of over-protective parents, Ruskin emerged as an insightful intellectual at a young age, publishing his first poem at the age of fifteen and winning the Newdigate prize for poetry during his studies at Oxford. He was an integral member and supporter of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the nineteenth-century artistic movement which Henry Beers credits Ruskin with rescuing in 1851.<sup>100</sup> Ruskin achieved notoriety for the publication of *Modern Painters* in 1843, which earned him the impressive recognition as an art critic. Ruskin continued to privately pursue his own personal success as an artist, writer, geologist, and natural scientist.<sup>101</sup> Yet for all his intellectual pursuits, Ruskin remained socially immature, a characteristic which is revealed by his close relationship with his mother and his highly emotional behavior. This socially awkward mentality, coupled with Ruskin's religious and intellectual inclinations, caused the young writer to develop an unhealthy (and incorrect) idea regarding femininity and protection, which contributed to the ultimate failure of his six year marriage to Euphemia Gray (1828–1897).

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<sup>100</sup> Beers, *A History of English Romanticism*, 293.

<sup>101</sup> Dinah Birch, introduction to *Selected Writings* by John Ruskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xiv.

During the time Ruskin was in residence at Oxford, beginning in 1836, his mother took up lodgings nearby to watch over eighteen-year-old Ruskin, as she did for each consecutive term.<sup>102</sup> This points out an obvious attachment between mother and son. The fact that Margaret Ruskin did not marry until the age of thirty-eight and bore her only child at thirty-nine perhaps sheds some light onto her over-involvement in her son's life.<sup>103</sup> She had waited a long time for maternity and once it had been achieved, she was not willing to forfeit her parental rights merely because her son had attained adulthood.

Fortunately for Ruskin, his mother was present when he became terribly ill and suffered a brain hemorrhage after experiencing his first heartbreak.<sup>104</sup> However, it is difficult to determine whether Ruskin was genuinely thrown into such a state over the engagement of a lady he admired,<sup>105</sup> or if he over-played his broken heart to garner parental attention and sympathy. Ruskin's future wife would record such attention-seeking ploys by her husband, especially in relation to ill health. During their first year of marriage, Euphemia (Effie) writes that she believes her husband's cold "would go away with care if Mr. and Mrs. Ruskin would only let him alone...they talk constantly to him about what he ought to do...it makes John notwithstanding quite nervous... they are most kind but I think all this does him harm."<sup>106</sup> These insightful observations by Effie not only foreshadow the parental influence that would become a constant in her marriage,

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<sup>102</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Mary Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays* (London: John Murray, 1972), 8.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 14. See also: James, *The Order of Release*, 17.

<sup>105</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 16. The young lady in question was Adele Domecq, daughter of John James Ruskin's business partner, with whom Ruskin fell in love when he was seventeen. She did not return the sentiment and was married to Baron Duquesne in 1840. Also, Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 117 – 188. Dated July 20, 1848. Also, Rose, *Parallel Lives*, 62.

but indicate that Margaret Ruskin may have over-dramatized her son's first experience with heartache in 1840. Regardless of what truly incited Ruskin's sudden downward spiral, his condition was such that he went abroad for nearly two years to recover.<sup>107</sup>

The solicitous and over-protective nature of Ruskin's parents instilled in their son a similar desire to protect his concept of beauty and femininity, ideals which had been heightened by his studies as an art critic. Additionally, such parental over-involvement in his social relationships may have made it impossible for their son to mature, either emotionally or sexually. John James Ruskin exhibits such behavior when, believing his son already engaged to another, he writes to Effie's father concerning his daughter's influence on the younger Ruskin. "You and I are placing our young people in danger and...we should at least adopt every measure of caution and safety in our power..."<sup>108</sup> The senior John Ruskin closes by admitting his desire to save his "son from many a pang,"<sup>109</sup> revealing an unusual involvement in the personal affairs of his full-grown, twenty-six-year-old son.

The senior Ruskins permitted their own protective natures to shelter their own son in a fashion that affected his personal relationships indefinitely. The protection lavished on Ruskin by his parents, who were overly concerned for his emotional outbursts, displays a feminine approach on their behalf.<sup>110</sup> Manuals concerning female puberty and

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<sup>107</sup> Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 17-18.

<sup>108</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 21-22. Dated April 28, 1847. Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 27-28.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 22. Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 28.

<sup>110</sup> For more on Ruskin's childhood, see: Ann C. Colley, "Bodies and Mirrors: The Childhood Interiors of Ruskin, Pater and Stevenson," in Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd, eds., *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999).

passions suggested “wholesome subjection of every minute to rule and discipline,”<sup>111</sup> advise which reveals striking similarities to the type of protection Ruskin received from his parents, most notably including his close supervision by his mother at Oxford. The annual Continental tour of that Ruskin took with his parents also impacted his intellectual development,<sup>112</sup> although perhaps at the cost of his emotional maturity. Ruskin was exposed to religious and classical art, architecture, and history during these trips, the inspiration and aesthetics of which served to impact his concepts of femininity.

For all that he traveled abroad, studied at Oxford, and achieved renown as a poet and critic, Ruskin knew practically nothing about marital relations. He was certainly a virgin at the age of twenty-nine, as was nineteen-year-old Effie at the time of their marriage in April of 1848. Just as Victorian women were to assume sexual ignorance, so too did John Ruskin. Yet the occasional display of sensuality in the love letters exchanged between the affianced couple in 1847 reveal genuine affection and the obvious intimation of an anticipated physical relationship. On November 30, 1847, Ruskin wrote to Effie, “Your letter of last night shook all the philosopher out of me. That little undress bit! Ah – my sweet Lady – What naughty thoughts had I. – Dare I say? – I was thinking – thinking, naughty – happy thought, that you would soon have – some one’s arms to keep you from being cold!”<sup>113</sup> Prior to their marriage, Ruskin displays every intention of consummating his relationship with Effie. In fact, correspondence written by Ruskin to

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<sup>111</sup> Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 55.

<sup>112</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 14-15.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



Effie on November 11, 1847, illustrates the manner in which the future bridegroom had reconciled his forthcoming marriage and his close parental relationships.

The newlywed couple would be joined on their honeymoon by the senior Ruskins.

Ruskin also shows his admiration of Effie's beauty in a near-surreal way. He details how she should dress while abroad. "Your beauty is conspicuous without the slightest adornment – and the least *over* dress would appear as if you *wished* to draw all eyes to you... while yet the dress – when it *was* observed – should be perfect of its kind – becoming – graceful – perhaps even – now and then – a little piquant – but never conspicuous."<sup>114</sup> There is a sensuality about Ruskin's description of his wife's appearance and clothing, yet a desire to protect her from unwarranted stares and attention. Ruskin wants to keep Effie's beauty for himself, which he explains, "I have a great fancy that I shall ask you sometimes to put on your finest dresses when we are alone – and always your simplest when we are going into public."<sup>115</sup> Romantic as his letters appeared to Effie, Ruskin's sheltered background, affinity for religious and classical art, and his closeness with his parents would coalesce to create an uneventful wedding night and a marriage "in name only."

Ruskin's desire to protect Effie's beauty extended far past her fashion selections. His unrealistic ideas concerning femininity and aesthetics are revealed in his work, "Of Queens' Gardens," wherein he describes an ideal wife as "incapable of error," and "enduringly, incorruptibly good."<sup>116</sup> This is a high standard for any woman to meet.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> John Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens" (1865), in *Selected Writings*, ed., Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 159.

Nevertheless, in his personal life Ruskin interpreted that this could be maintained through a chaste marriage, whereby his wife's beauty would be kept pure. However, it is not evident that Ruskin intended all along to maintain a sex-less marriage, as seen by his love letters to Effie.

Rather, Lutyens believes Ruskin was repulsed by the naked body of his wife, as it differed from the classical paintings and sculpture to which he had been exposed. She explains, "He had never seen a naked woman before he married; he had never been to an art school, and at that time no picture exhibited in public showed a female nude with hair anywhere on her body."<sup>117</sup>

Researchers and historians have surmised other causes for Ruskin declining to consummate his marriage. It has been suggested that he feared pregnancy would ruin Effie's beauty, and that the prospect of children would hinder his work and travels abroad. Lutyens cites the following letter as evidence concerning Ruskin's desire to avoid pregnancy in order that they might travel to pursue his work, "I think Effie, that it would be wise in us to lose no time in petting each other among those Cumberland fishponds, but to dash straight at the Alps. It may be 10 years before we can cross the sea again."<sup>118</sup> Given the outbreak of civil unrest in France the same year of their marriage, Lutyens deduces Ruskin is referring to ten years of prospective child-bearing, and that he therefore had every intention of consummating his marriage.<sup>119</sup> It seems unlikely that a twenty-nine-year-old man who intends to initiate conjugal relations with his virginal wife

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<sup>117</sup> Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 108.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

would elect to cut his honeymoon short to resume work and take up rooms with his parents. The fact that John Ruskin and his parents left for the Continent in January of 1849, while Effie returned to her parents' home in Scotland to recover from ill health, further indicates the writer's unusual detachment from his marriage, his unhealthy relationship with his parents, and a disinterest in ever consummating his vows.

It is noteworthy to mention that Ruskin spends his first wedding anniversary in France and in the company of his parents, rather than his wife, and also fails to mention the milestone in his diaries. Instead, Ruskin's diaries are filled with geological and landscape descriptions of the French and Swiss countryside, while little to nothing is mentioned of his new wife.<sup>120</sup> When Ruskin writes of his work and travels in France, he reveals, perhaps subconsciously, the awkward social status he has assigned his wife. "May it please him [God] to permit me to be here again with my Father and Mother; and Wife."<sup>121</sup> This demonstrates Ruskin's inability to detach himself from being under the constant care of his parents, adding Effie to his diary entry nearly as an afterthought. Ruskin's behavior reveal that he desired to have a wife whom he could admire, mold, and who would inspire him in his artistic endeavors. This is pointed out by Lutyens, who asserts that Ruskin viewed Effie as his pupil through whom he could accomplish great things and also create a mirror-image of himself: she would be a reflection of him.<sup>122</sup> It becomes obvious from his actions that Ruskin did not desire any type of physical

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<sup>120</sup> *The Diaries of John Ruskin, 1848 – 1873*, eds. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 388. The first reference Ruskin makes to Effie is June 16, 1849, after a near-six month absence from England. Although the couple exchanged letters, his diaries include a broad assortment of minute details about his daily life. Regarding his wife, he merely writes: "...have a pleasant letter from my wife..."

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 408. Dated July 10, 1849.

<sup>122</sup> Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 90.

relationship with Effie, the most probable explanation being Ruskin's repugnance for the sexually mature female body and a social immaturity that had stunted his sexual development.

After nearly a year of sexually chaste marriage, Ruskin nevertheless writes his wife suggestive letters from abroad, "I look forward... to your *next* bridal night; and to the time when I shall again draw your dress from your snowy shoulders: and lean my cheek upon them, as if you were still my betrothed only; and I had never held you in my arms."<sup>123</sup> This demonstrates Ruskin's ideal attachment to maintaining Effie's purity as though she were still his betrothed and that her husband had "never held" her in a sexual manner. This type of feminine protection is an unusually rare circumstance, as little is recorded of Victorian husbands refusing to consummate marital vows in order to protect the beauty or purity of their wives. Rather, Victorians lauded the beauty of marriage and motherhood, both of which society desired to protect. Surprisingly, Ruskin himself praises motherhood, "this is wonderful to me...to see the tender and delicate woman among you, with her child at her breast, and a power...over its father, purer than the air of heaven..."<sup>124</sup>

Perhaps these lines reveal Ruskin's fear of the "power" Effie would hold over him and his work, should she conceive a child. Nevertheless, Ruskin's treatment of Effie and his obsessive protection of her virginity, bordered on the perverse and deceitful. His referral to their "*next* bridal night" could have been an indication of his intention of eventually consummating the marriage, which Effie explains to her father after leaving

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<sup>123</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 138. Dated April 24, 1849.

<sup>124</sup> Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens," 172.

her marriage. She asserts that Ruskin originally “avowed no intention of making me his Wife... then he said after 6 years, he would marry me when I was 25.”<sup>125</sup> This misrepresentation in the Ruskin marriage reveals a skewed belief regarding feminine protection, and reveals behavior that metamorphosed from strangely protective into coldly inhuman.

Looking at Ruskin’s writings, his sentiments regarding the opposite sex and feminine protection are revealed in extremely idealistic and religious tones. This further illuminates some issues the young savant may have had in separating artistic, classical idealism from reality. “Of Queens’ Gardens” expressed Ruskin’s belief that women, “are called to a true queenly power, - not in their households merely, but over all within their sphere.”<sup>126</sup> In a tone similar to that of Patmore, Ruskin lauds the household as “as sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods...”<sup>127</sup> This blending of religiosity and domesticity rivals the sentiments of Gladstone, but whereas the statesman was able to remove himself from such idealized divinity and pursue a conjugal relationship with his wife, Ruskin was not. Instead, it appears that Ruskin permitted his intellectual idealism to overwhelm his ability to pursue a realistic, physical relationship with his wife. It is Effie who pointed out Ruskin’s inability to

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<sup>125</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 220. Dated March 7, 1854.

<sup>126</sup> Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens,” 155. For more on Ruskin’s feminine idealism as expressed in literature, see, Kate Millett, “The Debate Over Women: Ruskin vs. Mill,” in Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), 121-139.

<sup>127</sup> Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens,” 159.

pursue personal relationships, stating, “I don’t think, poor creature, he knows anything about human creatures – but he is so gifted otherwise and so cold at the same time...”<sup>128</sup>

After putting on a façade of marital bliss for six years, John Ruskin and Effie Gray parted ways. Scandal followed the separation, but an annulment was soon granted on grounds that the marriage was never consummated and Effie was still a virgin.<sup>129</sup> Rose succinctly summarizes this strange case of feminine protection taken to extremes. The farcical marriage “offers proof of the radical innocence of the Victorians, a state of mind so unfamiliar as to be positively quaint...”<sup>130</sup> It can be asserted that Ruskin’s misconception of feminine virtue and protection, based on his own protective upbringing, created within him the fear of polluting anything so pure and beautiful as a chaste virgin.

Overall, there is very little about the strange case of John Ruskin that represents the average concept of Victorian feminine protection. It is important to examine such an extreme case, however, in order to better understand the extent to which some individuals would go to integrate ideals of feminine protection into their personal lives. The protection described by Scott adhered to a more romantic, medieval concept of virtue and chivalry, whereas Gladstone’s ideas of feminine protection were inspired by his religious and classical background. Patmore’s romantic ode to femininity was conceptualized by both him and his wife, and demonstrated the belief that men were morally inferior to woman’s virtue and purity. Somewhere in the middle, John Ruskin permitted the over-protection of his parents and his intellectual approach towards art affect his concept of

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<sup>128</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 221. Written from the Ruskin home at Herne Hill, March 7, 1854.

<sup>129</sup> Rose, *Parallel Lives*, 90-94. In 1855, nearly one year after her annulment, Effie married the artist, John Everett Millais, with whom she had eight children. For more on Millais’ relationship with the Ruskins during their marriage, see: James, *The Order of Release*, 171 – 177, 198 – 228, 239 – 250.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 56.

appropriate feminine protection. All of the aforementioned men espouse various forms of idealism in relation to feminine protection, which do not include all opinions of Victorian men concerning protection. Their ideas, however, represent a concept of feminine protection which they desired to uphold and disseminate amongst society. Unfortunately for Ruskin, his inability to shed his idealism to look at his wife through the eyes of a man, rather than a sheltered intellectual, created one of the most excessive cases of feminine protection representative of the Victorian era.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Parliament and Feminine Protection: The Idealism of Morality in Victorian Law

#### *The Precedent of Moral Protection in British Law*

The utilization of the law as a means of feminine protection existed long before the Victorians, but its implementation evolved and wavered over time, leaving nineteenth-century Parliament with an assortment of laws steeped in both misplaced protection and potential oppression. Not every bill passed by Parliament was done with the intention of protecting the interests of women, but neither was every bill passed in order to dominate the feminine population. The philosophy of feminine protection at the parliamentary level varies in its ideology and execution, something that is demonstrated by the vocabulary and opinions of the members of Parliament. It is through various legal documents that a deeper understanding regarding feminine protection is conveyed, something which can be illustrated by dissecting the ideal purpose of a bill.

The examination of legal proceedings and the emphasis placed on morality reveals the parliamentary attitude of protection. While it may be asserted that such protection was not always geared towards the best interests of women, these morally motivated bills were always directed towards the protection of the Empire.<sup>1</sup> Along with the protection of the Empire's interests, the protection of women is subsequently intertwined. This has already been asserted by the work of Davidoff and Hall, Jalland,

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the arguments concerning the legal involvement in women's protection, see, Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism: 1850-1900* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994). Sheila R. Herstein, *A Mid-Victorian Feminist, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850 – 1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).



Mendus and Rendall, as well as the nineteenth-century writings of Ellis.<sup>2</sup> It is also illustrated by an impassioned treatise on the Custody of Infants' Bill, whereby the authors charge that any bill discussing child custody rights would indirectly condone legal separations, which would affect the overall morality of society. They cite, "No one can deny that the well-being, the health and strength, and happiness and honour of society depend, and must depend, upon the mutual faith of its members...if the chief bond of the faith of families be weakened, the faith of society at large is weakened in the same degree."<sup>3</sup> Without directly stating the important role women play in the formation of social stability, the authors nevertheless intimate it.

The extent to which Parliament related morality to the strength of its society is briefly discussed by Susan Staves in *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1830*. She points out that by the middle of the eighteenth-century legislators reinforced "deeper patriarchal structures" whereby women acted as "procreators and as transmitters of inheritance from male to male."<sup>4</sup> This indicates the important role of wives, both domestically and economically, as recognized by British law. This importance, and sense of value, determined the level of protection that British wives experienced. Staves also reveals that marriage was not viewed as private, but rather was "subject to public definition and public control," both of which controlled human

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<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 10. "It is the domestic character of England – the home comforts, and fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated." See also, 11-14, 59.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Hill Handley and John Mitchell Kemple, "Article VIII: A Review of a Bill to Provide for the Access of Parents, Living Apart from Each Other, to Their Children of Tender Age and Brought in By Mr. Serjeant Talfourd and Mr. Leader. Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed December 21, 1837," *British and Foreign Review; or, European Quarterly Journal* 7, no. 13 (July 1838): 276-277.

<sup>4</sup> Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England*, 4-5.

sexuality and reproduction.<sup>5</sup> The connection between social relationships and public policy illustrates a further reason behind the parliamentary control of marital relationships. By maintaining authority over marriage laws, society would become more stable because divorce would be strictly limited, wives would be obligated to remain with their husbands, and their procreation would increase the size of the Empire. Additionally, Philippa Levine's study on *Gender and Empire* examines the importance placed upon proper decorum and virtue in women, as they were representative of British morals to the Empire.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates that women were valued by Parliament for their representation of domestic stability.

Women were also in need of protection because of the role they played in the maintenance of morality. The authors of the treatise on the Custody of Infants' Bill reflect a combined concern over public morality and England's reputation, albeit they exaggerate for dramatic purposes, when they write, "There are many English women, ay, and some who were once English peeresses, now living abroad, whose conduct is a *scandalum gentibus*, an European scandal."<sup>7</sup> While the authors may be referring to a few incidents of inappropriate behavior, they nevertheless espouse their belief, "that it is the highest interest and duty of a state to uphold and guard the purity and honour of the marriage union... as a matter of *state-policy*."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6-7. For more on feminine sexuality and Empire, see, Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 29. Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Levine, *Gender and Empire*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Handley and Kemple, "A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children," 280.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 277.

The “state-policy” of protective femininity did apply to all women, including those who were not married. This is revealed by acts passed in the 1840s, giving protection to single women by way of the Breach of Promise Act and further proposed legal rights under a Putative Fathers Bill.<sup>9</sup> Coupled with the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, these various laws indicate an attitude of conditional protection towards women who were unmarried or belonged to a lower social strata (than the middle-class). Although conditional protection is not quite so obvious towards women of the more respectable social classes, it still exists. It is especially evident in situations that deviate from the ideal circumstances under which Parliament believes the British legal system will successfully function.

In order for Parliament to maintain a certain moral standard in society, they came to expect certain behavior from British women. The standard of moral expectation was higher for women of the middle-class. The wealthier classes could pay for an act of Parliament to sue for divorce or legal separation. The women belonging to these wealthier classes often times had the financial means to live independently of their spouse if the marriage was an unhappy one. The poorer classes, while they did not have the ability to buy a divorce or financial freedom, were not governed by the strict system of virtues and behaviors of the middle-classes. In the case of a middle-class woman, the lack of either a good reputation or moral respectability would cause her to lose her standing in society.

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<sup>9</sup> House of Commons, “Bill to Give Summary Power to Justices of Peace in Special Sessions in Cases of Seduction and Breach of Promise,” *Sessional Papers, 1840*, April 9, 1840, 3 Vict. 473. House of Commons, “A Bill to Give Summary Power to Justices of the Peace, in Special Sessions Assembled, In Certain Cases of Loss of Service, or Breach of Promise of Marriage, to Impose and Enforce Penalties Against Putative Fathers,” *Sessional Papers, 1841*, March 10, 1841, 4 Vict. 125.

One example of the moral behavior expected from middle-class women relates to the infidelity of a spouse. Keith Thomas points out that Parliament believed, “the wife should forgive the guilty husband,”<sup>10</sup> as intimated in many divorce rulings, which are all summarily denied. Victorians held that, for a wife to forgive an adulterous husband, she was not simply absolving him of his infidelity, but she was also maintaining the family structure and keeping “a temple of the hearth.”<sup>11</sup>

This mentality is further illustrated in the work of Ellis, wherein she dictates the expectations of women’s roles in society. She reminds women that they have “bound themselves by a sacred and enduring bond, to be to one fellow-traveler along the path of light, a companion on his journey, and, as far as ability might be granted them, a guide and a help in the doubts and difficulties of his way.”<sup>12</sup> As a moral guide for their male counterparts, it is somewhat more understandable that women found themselves held to higher standards of behavior. Considering this point of view, it may seem unusual that men, who were less virtuous than women, dominated the law, politics, and economics. It can be construed, though, that British men recognized the various moral shortcomings of their sex, and constructed a type of virtuous checks and balances within society and Parliament.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Thomas, “The Double Standard,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20, no. 2 (April 1959): 201.

<sup>11</sup> Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens,” 159.

<sup>12</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> For more on definitions of Victorian masculinity, see, Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 107-114. Mangan and Walvin, *Manliness and Morality*. Brian Heeney, *A Different Kind of Gentleman: Parish Clergy as Professional Men in Early and Mid-Victorian England* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976). Thomas, “The Double Standard.” Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Book I, Canto II: 37, 54-56; IV: 10; IX: 9-16.

The distinctive separation of spheres, whereby men were absent from the home on a regular basis, made a great many Victorian men believe that they were entitled to demand high standards of morality. The Victorian masculine role of financially providing for the family was equally matched by the female responsibility of ensuring domestic tranquility, morality, and an orderly household. If men believed that their female counterparts were not demonstrating a satisfactory standard within the domestic sphere, they utilized the law to ensure that these standards were maintained.

Ellis clearly defines the manner in which women were expected to behave, encourage, and inspire.

How often has man returned to his home with a mind confused by the many voices... [that] have addressed themselves to his inborn selfishness, or his worldly pride; and while his integrity was shaken, and his resolution gave way beneath the pressure of apparent necessity... he has stood corrected before the clear eye of woman... And when the snares of the world were around him, and temptations from within and without have bribed over the witness in his own bosom, he has thought of the humble monitress who sat alone, guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home; and the remembrance of her character, clothed in moral beauty, has scattered the clouds before his mental vision, and sent him back to that beloved home, a wiser and better man.<sup>14</sup>

This reflects the popular attitude that women served as moral inspiration for their husbands, who were required to operate in the outside world to provide for their families. Both society and Parliament believed that a woman's detachment from the outside world made her the ideal keeper of familial virtue and harmony. As previously mentioned, Ruskin and Cobbe both disagree with the belief that a woman's isolation gave her a greater sense of virtue, whereas Davidoff and Hall point out this was the overall, ideal

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<sup>14</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 53.

Victorian attitude.<sup>15</sup> Victorian women upheld these convictions, as shown by the motto of the *Magazine of Domestic Economy*. It read, “We are born at home, we live at home, and we must die at home, so that the comfort and economy of home are of more deep, heartfelt, and personal interest to us, than the public affairs of all the nations in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, to establish the mentality of parliamentary decisions that came to be disputed by the middle of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to review legal attitudes concerning women prior to the accession of Queen Victoria. Looking at the early part of the nineteenth century, conservative integrity in Parliament is evidenced in the form of Lord Chancellor Eldon (1751–1838), whose parliamentary tenure extended from 1801 until 1827. Staves argues that the Chancellor operated a “court of conscience,”<sup>17</sup> something which is particularly revealed by Eldon’s judicial decisions. The atmosphere in Parliament and ideologies of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries contributed to the mentality of protection during the Victorian era, culminating in the execution of judicial decisions which occasionally proved to be more oppressive than protective. The heightening protection of morality represented in Parliament and the courts were not wholly created by Victorians.

Rather, Victorian judges and politicians became responsible for extending the protective hold over women, morality, and society, and eventually integrating a legal system of conditional protection.

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<sup>15</sup> Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens,” 162. Cobbe, “Celibacy v. Marriage,” 231. Cobbe writes, “And further, a woman’s ignorance of real life leads her to attach to outward show a value which it actually only bears in the opinion of other women as foolish as herself...” Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 182-183.

<sup>16</sup> As cited in: Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Staves, *Married Women’s Separate Property in England*, 21.

The enforcement of the law for the sake of morality and virtue is represented in the 1805 decision by Lord Eldon in relation to a divorce petition. The woman, Mrs. Teusch, desired a divorce on the grounds that her husband had treated her brutally and was living openly with his mistress. Eldon noted, “he had never recollected a more favorable representation given of any woman; but yet, on general grounds of public morality, he felt it his painful duty to give a negative to the original motion.”<sup>18</sup> The outright reference to morality illustrates the chief concern of Eldon: the maintenance of domestic stability. This attitude was maintained without regard for the validity of the wife’s claims. Concerning the same petition, the Bishop of St. Asaph admitted, “that however hard the rule might press upon a few individuals, it would, on the whole, be better if no bill of this kind passed.”<sup>19</sup> While it might appear unreasonable to assert that the marital status of one woman could have an impact on “public morality,” it should be noted that Parliament feared the precedent even one divorce would make in the entire judicial system. In other words, if one such divorce was granted, it would pave the way for other such divorce suits to be granted.

One such case that affected the legal precedent concerning marital separation, infant custody, and “the father’s right,” is the situation of Margaret Compton de Manneville. Prior to her marriage to Lenard de Manneville in 1800, Margaret was an heiress whose property and finances had been placed in trust. A marriage settlement was drawn up, containing terms relating to Margaret’s finances, as well as a covenant that de Manneville would never force his wife to emigrate to his native France. After the

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<sup>18</sup> J. Macqueen, *A Practical Treatise on the Appellate Jurisdiction of the House of Lords and Privy Council* (London: np, 1842), 603-604. As quoted in: Keith Thomas, “The Double Standard,” 201.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

marriage, de Manneville contested the terms of the settlement and later, after the birth of the couple's daughter in 1804, "threatened to carry the child away,"<sup>20</sup> and out of England. Fearing the abduction of her child, Margaret twice fled her home. The second occasion, de Manneville forced his way inside, "seized the child, *then at the breast*, and carried it away almost naked in an open carriage in inclement weather."<sup>21</sup> Margaret de Manneville applied to the courts for the return of her daughter, but Lord Ellenborough contested the child's return on the grounds that the father held the technical legal custody of the infant. Ellenborough admitted that "the father had obtained possession of it [the child] by force and fraud... [but] there was no pretence that the child had been injured for want of nurture."<sup>22</sup>

The only solace received by Margaret de Manneville was the concession made by the courts to prevent her husband from taking the child out of England. Caroline Norton, who includes the case in the appendix to her treatise on the Custody of Infants' Act, notes that Ellenborough's decision makes "no reference to the mother's claim." The case of Margaret and Lenard de Manneville set the legal precedent for "'the father's right' extend[ing] to the hour of a child's birth, and that he may tear it from the breast of its mother..."<sup>23</sup>

The precedent of establishing the rights of the father is integral to the Victorian concept of feminine and domestic protection. The separation of male and female spheres,

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<sup>20</sup> Caroline Sheridan Norton, *The Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of "Custody of Infants," Considered* (London: Roake and Varty, 1838), 34.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



created and then exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution, reinforced the vastly different roles occupied by the sexes. These newly defined roles, developed on the heels of peace after the Napoleonic Wars, caused society to sentimentalize family life.<sup>24</sup> Characteristics lauded by Ellis succinctly intertwine English patriotism with feminine morals and domestic bliss. Ellis writes, “The national characteristics of England are the perpetual boast of her patriotic sons; and there is one especially, which it behooves all British subjects not only to exult in, but to cherish and maintain...It is the domestic character of England – the home comforts, and fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated...”<sup>25</sup> In a bid to protect these virtuous characteristics, Parliament took steps to legally fuse together the building blocks of social peace. They turned towards the woman’s sphere to implement such legal fusion, where it might best impact the morals, religious beliefs, and future generations of Britons.

As abhorrent as the circumstances surrounding Margaret de Manneville’s loss of child custody might appear, the ruling of Lord Ellenborough demonstrates the near paternal advice and discretion exercised by the courts. It might appear ridiculous to assume that an infant, in the act of being nursed by its mother, had not “been injured by want of nurture.”<sup>26</sup> This nevertheless illustrates the strict patriarchal domination asserted in all matters regarding the law and economics. Ellenborough’s decision that courts must acknowledge “the father’s rights” demonstrates the official consideration of fathers in the legal process, while informally excluding mothers. The case of Margaret de Manneville sets the parliamentary precedent for these attitudes, whereby women are forced to remain

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<sup>24</sup> Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Norton, *The Separation of Mother and Child*, 37.

in a troubled marriage for the sake of overall social stability. In 1838, this concept is reflected with ease. “Knowing that [the child’s] natural home is their father’s house, if the mother still wishes to have their society, she must stay there.”<sup>27</sup> This illustrates the overly-ideal, simplified manner in which many members of Parliament viewed the circumstances of unhappy marriages, a misconception which began to evolve by the middle part of the nineteenth century.

Regardless of the legal exclusion women encountered, they were taught it was wrong to complain about the legal disabilities associated with marriage and their inability to participate in the masculine sphere.<sup>28</sup> Davidoff and Hall examine the mentality imparted to middle-class Victorian women, stating that women were taught to accept separate spheres, as it simply was the way society functioned. Ellis even chides women who pursue higher education, lamenting that some women allow the cultivation of their “mental faculties” to take precedence over their moral duties.<sup>29</sup> This Victorian mentality also promoted the belief that every angel in the house either needed, or wanted, a male protector. The chivalry of feminine protection and rescue was romanticized in Scott’s novel, *Ivanhoe*, when Rebecca sought a champion in the form of Sir Ivanhoe. This may have imparted a widespread ideology among women during the Regency and then the Victorian era. Furthermore, women who were viewed as too independent were seen as

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<sup>27</sup> Handley and Kemple, “A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children,” 282.

<sup>28</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 187.

<sup>29</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 11.

“unwomanly” or “unsexed,” so the acceptance of legal and economic dependence would have been one of few options available to avoid being deemed unfeminine.<sup>30</sup>

Masculine expectations may have created an attitude of legal admonishment towards women, as though their feminine counterparts were perpetually in want of instruction.<sup>31</sup> The manner in which Ellenborough handled the case of Margaret de Manneville is a prime example, as he makes a judicial decision based on what he believes is best for the de Mannevilles, rather than what the deprived mother wants. Ellenborough’s decision also indicates that he might be expressing his displeasure with a wife unable to maintain domestic bliss. Even though Sarah Stickney Ellis published her first *Women of England* manual more than thirty years following the litigation between the de Mannevilles, the idealism espoused in her volumes may have played a relevant role in this circumstance. She charges English wives with the responsibility of “family comfort and social enjoyment...” and points out that “they are kept alive to the necessity of making their own personal exertions conducive to the great end of promoting the happiness of those around them.”<sup>32</sup> If a wife failed to promote tranquility in her home, regardless of the circumstances, she could have been judged by her peers and viewed inadequate within the domestic sphere.

Imagery of the nineteenth century created a widespread idealism of how wives and mothers should behave, concepts which were promoted by Patmore’s *Angel in the*

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<sup>30</sup> Murray, *Strong-Minded Women*, 19. Richard Carlile, *Every Woman’s Book or What is Love?* (London: np, 1838), 11. As cited in: Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 256.

<sup>31</sup> Penelope Holland, “Our Offence, Our Defence, and Our Petition,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 19 no. 112 (February 1869): 326. Holland warns against the treatment of women in “middle life as if still a child, with no more liberty or independence than at sixteen...”

<sup>32</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 22.

*House* and Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens." Ruskin's reference to the feminine sphere as "a vestal temple" and his definition that a woman's role is assistance "in the ordering, in the comforting, and in the beautiful adornment of the state," illuminates the concept that society supported the opinion of Parliament regarding its domestic expectations from women.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, is it plausible that Ellenborough was of the same mentality when he refused Margaret de Manneville full custody of her infant daughter? Parliamentary concern with the preservation of the family unit was a form of indirect protection. The fusion of the law, morality, and designated gender roles created complex legal expectations within Parliament. Authors of the treatise on the Custody of Infants' Bill refer to a wife's "natural and proper sphere of duty," to be within "the home of her husband" where she is expected to "cheerfully perform her conjugal obligations."<sup>34</sup> Any behavior which would impact the performance of these "cheerful" duties, such as marital separation, is similarly referred to as "immoral."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, for the protective mentality of Parliament to be successful, it would need to exist within narrow boundaries of a moral system of checks and balances. The success of this legal system was based on the assumption that all men were "honorable" and all women were "cheerful" housewives. The stringent laws concerning marriage, divorce, and child custody at the start of the nineteenth century were upheld with the dual intention of protecting family stability while holding women to high standards of domestic peace-keeping.

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<sup>33</sup> Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," 159, 169.

<sup>34</sup> Handley and Kemple, "A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children," 283.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

### *Flawed Ideology and The Evolution of the Victorian Status Quo*

The trouble with Victorian parliamentary decisions rests with its flawed ideology. Concerning the legal system as it relates to women, Parliament bears the responsibility of placing an idealized trust in the entire male population. Judge and legal advisor, Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780), considered a married woman's legal status (or lack thereof) beneficial, stating in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, "that even the disabilities, which the wife lies under, are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit."<sup>36</sup> Joan Perkin writes that Blackstone's ideals were intended "to stress the patriarchal family order that was an...immutable part of British society's fabric..."<sup>37</sup> Although Blackstone was writing during the eighteenth century, his *Commentaries* were accepted as accurate by Parliament well into the nineteenth century.

The ideal that honorable masculinity is a constant in the fabric of society is clearly revealed by the authors of the treatise regarding the Custody of Infants' Bill. They stress that, "To every man of honour there can be nothing nearer or dearer than the preservation of the just rights and privileges of women, especially wives and mothers – the two most honourable estates of womanhood."<sup>38</sup> This quote illustrates two important aspects of Victorian Parliament. First, it points out that nineteenth-century law operates on the assumption that all men are honorable, which indicates the ideals that prevailed in the legal system. Additionally, this quote reveals that women have no need of individual

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<sup>36</sup> *Blackstone's Commentaries: With Notes of Reference, To The Constitution and Laws, Of The Federal Government Of The United States; And Of The Commonwealth of Virginia*, ed. St. George Tucker (Philadelphia: Published by William Young Birch and Abraham Small, 1803), 2:445.

<sup>37</sup> Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc., 1989), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Handley and Kemple, "A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children," 274.

legal rights if they have a husband who, ideally, is honorable and takes it upon himself to preserve their rights and privileges.

Not all Victorian males were honorable and not all of them believed their wives were entitled to equal representation under the law. The vocabulary used by Blackstone to describe the legal status of married women further illuminates the protection Parliament believed they were providing. Blackstone declares that, “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law...the very...legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage...”<sup>39</sup> He continues to define a married woman’s legal rights as being, “consolidated into that of her husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover* she performs every thing... and her condition during her marriage is called her *coverture*.”<sup>40</sup> Blackstone’s language demonstrates the protective ideology and paternal attitude that men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adopted towards their feminine counterparts. The *Commentaries* reflect ideals that were matched by Victorians and most probably supported by Blackstone’s legal writings. He interpreted the legal standing of women in a positive light, as demonstrated by his assertion that “[a] husband is bound to provide his wife with necessities by law.”<sup>41</sup> Blackstone believed this judicial stance would protect the interests of all married women, but Perkin points out that there was no legitimate way to force a husband to do so.<sup>42</sup>

The assumption that all husbands would willingly, and honorably, perform the role of protector is a misconception and error of judgment by both Blackstone and

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<sup>39</sup> Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, 2:441.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2:442.

<sup>42</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 19.

Parliament. The marital and legal problems of Caroline Norton (1808–1877) highlight the faults behind a legal system based on ideals of honor. Her situation also reveals the various conditions set forth by Parliament in order for a woman to receive legal protection during her marriage.<sup>43</sup> In 1827, Caroline Sheridan married George Norton; she was nineteen, he was twenty-six. Trouble between the couple erupted shortly after their honeymoon. Two months into the marriage, Norton had kicked his new bride in the side because of a minor disagreement. Several months later, following a personal quarrel, Caroline recalls that her husband, “suddenly sprang from the bed, seized me by the nape of the neck, and dashed me down on the floor.”<sup>44</sup> Fortunately, the sound alerted Caroline’s sister and brother-in-law who were staying in the same home. Although Norton locked the door against his wife’s relatives, Caroline’s brother-in-law broke in and removed her.

One year later, the Nortons and the Sheridan siblings were touring the Continent when more trouble developed between Caroline and her husband. Norton took “ill with a lameness which made him unwilling to travel,” so Caroline remained behind in France to look after her husband as the others went ahead. Caroline’s writing about the Continental tour reflects a combination of resentment that her literary career was paying for the trip and personal frustration that their marriage was in turmoil. She writes, “I defy any wife to have shown more unselfish or devoted attention to a husband... I combined... in my own person, by his desire, the functions of sick-nurse, valet, and chambermaid.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, 2:441. Husband and wife are considered “one person in law.”

<sup>44</sup> *Caroline Norton’s Defense: English Laws for Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1982), 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Shortly thereafter, an incident of violence arose after Caroline objected to her husband smoking a hookah pipe in their enclosed carriage. She admits to impatiently throwing the pipe's mouth-piece out the window (after asking her husband to wait until they reached their hotel), but Norton's reaction to his wife's frustration was to choke her into near-unconsciousness. Jumping from the carriage, Caroline chased down the nearby carriages of her family and sought their help.<sup>46</sup>

After three children, countless acts of violence, and nearly ten years of marriage, Caroline made the decision to separate from her husband. Norton responded by having the children taken from the house and their mother denied access to them. He took possession of all her property, denied her admittance to their home, and soon after charged her with adultery in a public trial. This is a prime example of a nineteenth-century husband taking advantage of strict, patriarchal legal precedents established to maintain public morality and family stability. George Norton used the same laws intended to protect families for his own purposes: further dividing his family and prosecuting his wife.

There is little to suggest that William Lamb, Lord Melbourne (1779–1848), was having an affair with Caroline Norton. Lord Melbourne had been instrumental in finding Norton a position as magistrate after he lost his seat in the House of Commons in 1830, which Melbourne had done at Caroline's request.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, George Norton took additional steps to use the same laws designed to protect family stability and marriage, and exploited them by publicly suing his wife for divorce. The sensational trial included

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Huddleston, introduction to *Caroline Norton's Defense*, vi-vii.



scandalous testimony by many household staff of the estranged Nortons, including a drunken coachman who claimed to have seen Caroline lying on the floor with Melbourne, her dress up around her thighs.<sup>48</sup> The trial resulted in a verdict in favor of Lord Melbourne and Caroline, but her reputation suffered a great deal. After the trial, Caroline sought a divorce “by reason of cruelty,” which she was denied on the grounds that she had forgiven, and thus condoned, her husband’s abusive behavior.<sup>49</sup> This attitude of conditional legal restitution is also expressed in a proposed amendment to the Marriage Act in 1857, whereby a petitioning spouse can be refused a divorce on the grounds of adultery if it is determined that they have been an accessory to their spouse’s infidelity.<sup>50</sup>

This mentality represents an overall protection of the marriage itself, rather than the interests of either spouse. The treatment of Caroline Norton in respect to her own marriage, however, reveals a startling exclusion of women from the law, unless they are under the protection (or *coverture*) of their husbands. The marriage of the Nortons deviates widely from the Victorian ideal, while the behavior of George Norton towards his estranged wife was far from honorable. Parliament assumed that situations as dramatic as the Norton marriage were not representative of all Britons, and that most marital relationships would benefit from such morally protective laws. This mentality reveals the actual conditional protection offered by Parliament to British women. If a

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<sup>48</sup> *Norton v. Viscount Melbourne for Crim. Con: Damages Laid at 10,000!!!: A Full and Accurate Report of This Remarkable Trial Taken in Short Hand by An Eminent Reporter Expressly for this Edition; Embellished with a Portrait and Memoir of the Hon. Mrs. Norton* (London: W. Marshall, 1836), 23.

<sup>49</sup> *Caroline Norton’s Defense*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> House of Commons, “Divorce and Matrimonial Causes: A Bill Intituled An Act to Amend the Law Relating to Divorce and Matrimonial Causes in England,” *Sessional Papers, 1857-Session 2*, June 25, 1857, 20&21 Vict. 86, p. 7.

woman was married to an honorable man, or the ward of a virtuous guardian, then she would be protected to the full extent of the law.

After being repeatedly refused any interaction with her children, Caroline began using her social and parliamentary contacts to assert the rights of mothers to continue interacting with their young children, regardless of their marital status. She highlights the manner in which many husbands have abused their absolute rights, to the point of dividing the family which their paternal rights are intended to protect. “The law has no power to order that a woman shall even have occasional access to her children, though she could prove that she was driven by violence from her husband’s house... The Father’s right is absolute and paramount, and can no more be affected by the mother’s claim, than if she had no existence.”<sup>51</sup> Norton’s impassioned pleas resulted in the creation of the Custody of Infants’ Bill of 1838, which was successfully passed by both Houses in 1839. It provided a modicum of support for women in difficult situations, like Norton, giving mothers access to their infant children and custody to those under seven-years-old.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, Norton continued to refuse his wife access to the children, even failing to alert her when their youngest son was near-death after a riding accident. Subsequently, Caroline’s eight-year-old son died before she reached him.<sup>53</sup>

According to the English Common Law, George Norton had not done anything illegal by keeping his estranged wife from their children, due in part to Ellenborough’s 1804 decision regarding “the father’s rights” of Lenard de Manneville. Authors of the

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<sup>51</sup> Norton, *The Separation of Mother and Child*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> *Caroline Norton’s Defense*, 51.

treatise condemning the Custody of Infants' Bill condone this lack of maternal rights. They write, "one of the strongest hindrances...to prevent wives from lightly separating from their husbands, is the knowledge that they will hereby lose their maternal rights. This at all times has been...a safeguard to preserve the institution of marriage, most important and indispensable..."<sup>54</sup> This remark eradicates any concern the authors of this treatise may have with genuine feminine protection. They appear more concerned with the fusion of the family as a unit, the dissolution of which they believe is in "the direct interest of the state to prevent."<sup>55</sup> They are detached from individuals involved in marital separations or child custody issues, although they make many ungrounded assumptions about wives who seek legal separations. They refer to the act of a wife leaving her husband's home as "a deed of infamy" and anticipate her life after separation to be nothing but an "abyss of guilt and misery."<sup>56</sup> They mock the charge of moral torture as a legitimate reason for legal separation, writing that "very likely it may be an atrocious falsehood..."<sup>57</sup> These authors reveal a misogynistic attitude towards wives who leave their husbands and also reveal an overly-idealistic opinion of separated husbands. They convey that the current lack of maternal rights is a type of moral power that is used by the state to prevent marital separations.

In discussing the full rights of husbands over their wives and children, the authors indicate that any man who resigns his parental rights "for the sake of a sum of money, or

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<sup>54</sup> Handley and Kemple, "A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children," 277-278.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 285.

any such vile consideration,” that such a man should morally forfeit his rights as a parent.<sup>58</sup> Correspondence between Caroline and her husband reveals a very similar situation. Norton presents multiple conditions to his wife, which he requires her to obey, in order that she may have some interaction with her children. While he is not literally selling his children away, he uses them as a bargaining tool and a means by which he hopes to gain financially. He demands to be “legally secured against all debts and claims” on Caroline’s account, a complete breach of the nineteenth-century law relating to husbands and wives.<sup>59</sup> Married couples were considered one person in the eyes of the law, so George Norton was still liable for his wife’s expenses. He manipulated his absolute rights as husband and father to turn Caroline out of the house and keep her from their children. George Norton’s behavior reveals an attitude of selective legal obligation. He wanted all of his rights, none of his obligations, and expected the law to support him, solely on the grounds that he was the husband.

The conditional protection and limited legal obligation demonstrated by George Norton was influenced by Parliament, but the efforts of his wife and feminist activists soon influenced changes in British law. The fact that Caroline had to prove herself worthy of legal protection and maternal custody reveals a major flaw of a legal system based on ideals. Her case also indicates the problem of feminine exclusion, in favor of honorable representation.

An additional reality that emerges from the situation of Caroline Norton is the existence of a parliamentary desire to protect dependent femininity. The ideals of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>59</sup> Caroline Sheridan Norton, *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill by Pearce Stevenson: Fourth Correspondence* (London: J. Ridgway, 1839), 5. Letter dated March 19, 1840.

womanhood during the Victorian era centered on the models of domestic peace lauded by Ellis and romanticized by Patmore and Scott. Judith Horowitz Murray writes that the cult of the domestic angel peaked between 1837 and 1857.<sup>60</sup> This was the approximate time when Caroline Norton was enduring physical abuse, marital separation, and charges of adultery in a much-publicized divorce trial. Considering the popular writings of Ellis, who was writing at the same time, there was great social responsibility heaped on the shoulders of middle-class women to represent the “pillar of our nation’s strength.”<sup>61</sup> Ellis’s ideals of British femininity, which praised the isolation of women in the home, may have contributed to the parliamentary attitudes concerning feminine dependency and conditional protection.

One case of a Victorian husband behaving in an unusually dishonorable way, as far as his marital obligations were concerned: the marriage of John Ruskin and Effie Gray. Fifteen years after Effie’s marriage to John Everett Millais (1829–1896), she wrote a frank accounting of her six-year marriage to Ruskin. She writes, “His conduct to me was impure in the highest degree, discreditable, and so dishonourable that I submitted to it for years not knowing what else to do...”<sup>62</sup> Additional deductions made by Rose and Lutyens assert that Ruskin contrived of ways to end the marriage, albeit by manipulative means. During a visit to the Highlands, Millais was invited to join Ruskin and Effie in Glenfinlas, a situation which enlightened Millais to the strange relationship between the Ruskins. It also presented many opportunities when Effie and Millais were thrown into

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<sup>60</sup> Murray, *Strong-Minded Women*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 255. Letter dated approximately October 1870. Written by Effie Millais to Mrs. La Touche, mother of a young lady whom Ruskin was pursuing. The lady of his affection, Rose La Touche, was barely twenty-one, while Ruskin was in his early fifties.

each other's company. Millais became aware that Ruskin was trying to compromise his wife's reputation to legitimately sue for divorce, something which Effie's brother had already deduced. George Gray writes, "I never doubted the taking of John Millais to the Highlands was a regular deep laid scheme..."<sup>63</sup> Millais realized as much when it was suggested that he act as chaperone for Effie during a day trip outside Glenfinlas. This prospective impropriety of the situation shocked Millais into refusing and summarily moving out of the Ruskin cottage and into more expensive lodgings elsewhere.<sup>64</sup>

Collectively, it appears that the Ruskins devised to leave Effie alone in order that she might compromise herself. It could be asserted that Ruskin's attitude towards his wife represents a gross violation of English Common Law, whereby a husband was forbidden from "lending" out his wife, on the grounds that it went "against public decency."<sup>65</sup> Though Ruskin was not technically lending out his wife, his encouragement of inappropriate chaperones could be construed as denying her the "wing [of] protection" due from a husband.<sup>66</sup> This was a large concern of Millais, who feared that Effie's return to London would end with her eventually "succumbing" to one of her admirers, which would give Ruskin the opportunity to both divorce and disgrace her.<sup>67</sup>

The honorable character in the Ruskin-Gray scenario is John Everett Millais. Upon becoming aware of her precarious domestic situation, he not only refrains from exploiting it for his own devices, but appeals to Effie's mother for help. He enlightens

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>64</sup> Rose, *Parallel Lives*, 81.

<sup>65</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> *Blackstone's Commentaries*, 2:441.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, *Parallel Lives*, 82.

her of the behavior of Ruskin, the “scheming fellow” whom he believed guilty of taking “notes secretly to bring against his wife.”<sup>68</sup> Millais promises not only to help the Grays in the preservation of their daughter’s reputation, but even tells them he will selflessly refrain from writing to Effie, lest it be used against her. All of these characteristics, demonstrated by Millais, reveal the idealistic male qualities of honor and chivalry, as depicted in Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. These are the type of characteristics upon which Victorian Parliament depends for the ideology of feminine and domestic protection to operate smoothly.

Ideal male behavior is also exhibited in the protection of single women. One such man was James Beard Talbot, whose treatise on prostitution and its prevention relates insightful revelations, condemnations, and suggestions about Victorian vice. Talbot illuminates the various contributions made to the downfall of young women, and also perfectly intertwines the concept of morality and legality. He writes that, “two great antagonist principles...virtue and vice, holiness and sin have pervaded the whole family of man...”<sup>69</sup> Talbot’s advocacy for the protection of women and public morality is shared by his contemporary, William Tait (1793-1864), whose treatise on *Magdalenism* asserts that “fearful desolation” accompanies the practice of “vice in families once virtuous and happy.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, while both men advocate the protection of feminine virtue, they indirectly reveal their practice of conditional protection.

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<sup>68</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 207.

<sup>69</sup> James Beard Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: J. Madden, 1844), 1.

<sup>70</sup> William Tait, *Magdalenism: An Inquiry Into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: P. Rickard; Glasgow: G. Gallie and J. M’Leod; London: S. Highly, 1842), xix.

The Society for the Protection of Young Females, of which Talbot was secretary, was primarily involved in rescuing young ladies before they had fallen into prostitution, rather than convincing prostitutes to reform from their lifestyle. This fact reveals itself through closer examination of Talbot's treatise on the *Miseries of Prostitution*. He cites a case prosecuted by the Society, whereby a brothel-keeper was accused of paying someone a salary, "for supplying her house with young females...[which] he did chiefly by going into the country and hiring them...under pretence of procuring for them some respectable service or occupation in London."<sup>71</sup> The great importance attached to the preservation of a woman's virtue is conveyed by Talbot remarking that, after the girls were delivered to the brothel, "their ruin was effected."<sup>72</sup> It is unclear whether or not the Society believed such a girl was no longer deserving of protection. It is quite evident, however, that they believed these girls beyond redemption of a respectable lifestyle.

The mentality of protection exhibited by Talbot, intimated not only by his treatise but by the name of his Society, is also displayed in the treatise of the authors condemning the Custody of Infants' Bill. Although they are not imploring Parliament to literally rescue women from the streets, they do argue that the proposed bill will facilitate needless separations which will encourage seductions and adultery. Their reasoning includes the assertion that:

Every woman, by nature, needs a protector... Retiring modesty, and the delicacy of innocence, are the peculiar and most attractive virtues of her sex... God therefore who so endowed woman with these virtues, appointed her husband to be her natural protector. A woman then, separated from her husband, being without

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<sup>71</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



marital protection, holds out... a flag of invitation to every other man to take her husband's place.<sup>73</sup>

The severe critique of the will-power of women conveys the Victorian belief that all women were in constant need of protection. Feminine protection was not just a matter of one specific woman being protected from one particular seducer, or brothel. It was a matter of public concern and social morality. This is conveyed by numerous nineteenth-century treatises on the subject, one which laments the fallen woman by writing, "Her soul, which God designed to be the habitation of purity and peace, is the seat of every thing vile and hateful."<sup>74</sup> These morally, religiously, and socially inspired treatises all illustrate the Victorian attitude of protective femininity.

Fortunately, Parliament began recognizing the problem of directly excluding British women from legal action. The reliance of indirect representation did not work in every circumstance, as revealed by the aforementioned cases. Women who were not married could seek some legal rights under the Breach of Promise Act, an aspect which frustrated Caroline Norton in her demand for maternal custodial rights. "By a curious anomaly of the law, the mother of a *bastard child* has *this right*, while the mothers of legitimate children are excluded from it."<sup>75</sup> Women who had become pregnant through seduction not only retained custody of their illegitimate child, but could seek some retribution from the law. This could even include receipt of "a penalty not exceeding

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<sup>73</sup> Handley and Kemple, "A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children," 292.

<sup>74</sup> Lover of His Country, *An Appeal to Britain on a Subject of Vast Importance* (Newcastle: G. Atkinson, 1832), 4. See also, Elizabeth Blackwell, *Wrong and Right Methods of Dealing with Social Evil: As Shown by English Parliamentary Evidence* (New York: A. Brentano, 1883). P. Anichini, *A Few Remarks on the Present Laws of Marriage, Adultery, and Seduction, in England, to Lord Brougham and Vaux, Member of the Institute of France*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: E. Wilson, 1836).

<sup>75</sup> Norton, *The Separation of Mother and Child*, 1.

*Thirty Pounds... for the use of any offspring the fruit of the illicit connexion.”*<sup>76</sup> The overall moral expectations differed between classes, as Keith Thomas indicates by referring to middle-class morality as something which the “poor cannot afford.”<sup>77</sup> This indicates that Parliament was evolving to extend their protection to more classes of women, even those without husbands. Technically, a woman’s protection against a breach of promise already existed as part of the English Common Law, but this formal introduction by Parliament reflects the evolving expectations of society towards the status quo of the ideal woman.<sup>78</sup>

This did not mean Parliament’s expectations regarding feminine virtue and ideals altered.

The bill presented to Parliament in 1841 regarding putative fathers included a conditional clause, whereby the granting of financial remuneration was not guaranteed to a woman who should happen to bear an illegitimate child. The Justices of the Peace would make their ruling after “due regard” was given “to the previous character of the woman.”<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, women who had “either been married or have had a child

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<sup>76</sup> House of Commons, “A Bill to Give Summary Power to Justices of the Peace in Special Sessions Assembled, in Certain Cases of Seduction or Breach of Promise of Marriage,” *Sessional Papers, 1840*, April 9, 1840, 3 Vict. 217, p.2.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas, “The Double Standard,” 204. Also, Handley and Kemple, “A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children,” 275. Writing in 1838, the authors refer to the inability of poor, married couples to separate as “the blessed consistency of our present marriage-law.”

<sup>78</sup> Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 13.

<sup>79</sup> House of Commons, “A Bill to Give Summary Power to Justices of the Peace, In Special Sessions Assembled, In Certain Cases of Loss of Service, or Breach of Promise of Marriage, to Impose and Enforce Penalties Against Putative Fathers,” *Sessional Papers, 1841- Session 1*, March 10, 1841, 4 Vict. 125, p. 2.

previous to the cause of complaint...<sup>80</sup> were excluded from seeking restitution under the preliminary terms of the bill. These conditions reveal Parliament's moral expectations of the women whom they were willing to protect. In granting legal rights to women who had conceived out of wedlock, Parliament was attempting to discourage men from making empty promises of marriage, as they could be held legally responsible should their behavior result in a child. These women, Parliament asserted, had been taken advantage of by their alleged fiancé. Women who had been married, separated, or had already borne a child did not have the excuse of naivete.

Talbot conveys a similar attitude of moral expectation intertwined with reformation in his description of a young lady who had been deceived into prostitution, "whom the committee, being aware of the fact too late, were unable to save."<sup>81</sup> This indicates adherence to customary Victorian belief that, once a young lady lost her virginity by prostitution or seduction, she was a lost cause. Talbot states as "fact" that a fallen woman is "prepared to perpetrate every crime... exercis[ing] a deleterious influence upon that portion of the community by which she is surrounded, becom[ing] a moral pest, and a seducer of innocence."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "A Bill to Give Summary Power to Justices of the Peace... to Impose and Enforce Penalties Against Putative Fathers," 4 Vict. 125, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 15-16.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

In other words, if a woman desired to be reformed, she would first be required to prove herself worthy, either to Parliament or society. There was no such equivalent for men.<sup>83</sup>

### *The Protection of Women and Marriage*

As previously indicated, divorce in Victorian England was rare. Statistics regarding the years 1840-1844 record only 160 divorce suits being filed in England, with only twenty-one of that entire number brought to a hearing.<sup>84</sup> The remainder were either dismissed or still involved in litigation at the time Parliament ordered an abstract to be printed. Prior to the Marriage Act of 1857, a divorce was only obtained through an act of Parliament which was not only rare, but very expensive. Blackstone lists only three legitimate purposes for seeking a divorce. Among them are included “consanguinity, or relation of blood; and affinity, or relation by marriage; and some particular corporal infirmities.”<sup>85</sup>

Returning to the strange circumstances of the Ruskin-Gray marriage, should Effie have sought a divorce, she would have done so on the grounds of “corporal infirmities.” Her husband’s refusal (or inability) to consummate the marriage would have entitled her to a divorce on the moral grounds that Blackstone asserts, that “it therefore being sinful in

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas, “The Double Standard,” 202. Also, House of Commons, “A Bill Intituled An Act to Amend the Law Relating to Divorce and Matrimonial Causes in England,” *Sessional Papers, 1857-Session 2*, June 25, 1857, 20 & 21 Vict. 86. After the passing of the Marriage Act in 1857, women still had to prove adultery and one other injury in order to be granted a divorce. This double standard existed in English law until 1923.

<sup>84</sup> House of Commons, “Abstract of Returns of Matrimonial Suits in 1840, 1841, 1842, and 1843,” *Sessional Papers, 1844*, June 5, 1844, 354, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, 2: 433.

the persons who labour under them, to attempt to contract matrimony together.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, Ruskin’s refusal to consummate his marriage should have legally, and morally, deprived him of matrimony altogether. As unusual as the circumstances surrounding the Ruskin-Gray marriage may appear, the grounds for the couple’s separation represent an example of a wife’s protection under the law. Through a private lawsuit and eventual annulment, Effie was protected from her unnatural union with Ruskin which would have prevented her from ever truly becoming a wife and mother, both of which Victorians deemed “the two most honourable estates of womanhood.”<sup>87</sup>

The parliamentary changes made in regards to marriage laws during the middle of the nineteenth-century indicate a variety of things. The evolution of the legal state of matrimony indicates an overall desire to not only increase the frequency of marriage, but also provide more protection for these unions. Prior to the passage of the Marriage Act, countless bills and treatises reveal a growing desire to protect the interests of wives within the bounds of matrimony, as well as declare formerly voidable marriages legal.

One type of marital protection offered by Parliament was the right of underage women to be entitled to some form of legal restitution if forced to marry against their will. This is evidenced in an act brought forth on behalf of Ellen Turner, whose legal status as infant indicated she had not yet reached a majority of sixteen-years-old. It was asserted that Ellen, “was lately, by Fraud, Contrivance, and Forgery, illegally taken and carried away... was afterwards... by Fraud, Imposition, Fear and Intimidation, made and

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Handley and Kemple, “A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children,” 274.

induced, at *Gretna Green*... to marry the said *Edward Gibbon Wakefield*.”<sup>88</sup> The actual kidnapping of Ellen by Wakefield conveys the masculine viewpoint of female domination and legal control, as defined by Blackstone. Wakefield believed he would assume control of his infant wife’s property, given that she would be subject to the condition of *coverture* which placed her under the influence of her husband. Staves examines the arguments relating to a minor bestowing her property, or waiving her right to an appropriate jointure or dower, something which was a greater problem during the eighteenth-century.<sup>89</sup> Lord Chancellor Eldon ruled in 1811 that a female infant was not required by any agreement to settle her equitable estate on marriage “without an option to refuse at twenty-one.”<sup>90</sup> Ideally, this would protect prospective brides from being kidnapped by men in want of their estate.<sup>91</sup>

The abduction of a virtuous woman, the maintenance of her legal rights, and her return to respectable society coincide with the honor and protection espoused by Scott, Patmore, Ruskin, and Gladstone. In *Ivanhoe*, although Rebecca is abducted against her will by the Templar Knight, she is not held liable by Scott for the actions of her abductors. In Gladstone’s *Juventus Mundi*, he does not hold classical heroine, Penelope, responsible for the attentions of suitors, who try to distract her in the absence of her

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<sup>88</sup> House of Commons, “A Bill, Intituled An Act to Declare Void an Alleged Marriage Between Ellen Turner, an Infant, and Edward Gibbon Wakefield,” *Sessional Papers, 1826-27*, June 6, 1827, 7-8 Geo. IV. 429, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> Staves, *Married Women’s Separate Property in England*, 95-127.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 125. Citation relates to *Milner v. Lord Harewood* (1811).

<sup>91</sup> For more on infant marriage and financial stipulations, see: House of Commons, “A Bill [as amended by the Lords] Intituled an Act to Enable Infants, with the Approbation of the Court of Chancery, to Make Binding Settlements of Their Real and Personal Estate on Marriage,” *Sessional Papers, 1854-55*, June 25, 1855, 18&19 Vict. 197.

husband, Odysseus. Likewise, this mentality is expressed in Parliament in relation to an unwilling bride.

Changes in marriage laws not only indicate Parliament's growing awareness to remedy the exclusion of woman from the legal system, but reveal its desire to ensure that a greater number of Britons are living within the bounds of matrimony. This is evidenced in the parliamentary bills relating to certain forms of marital unions that had formerly been forbidden. Among these was the Bill to Amend the Law as to Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister or a Deceased Wife's Niece, a relationship specifically forbidden in Blackstone's *Commentaries* and the English Common Law. In 1869, Gladstone was prime minister when he gave a speech on the importance of legalizing this type of marriage. His main argument in favor of the change to the current marriage laws relates to the desire "to legalize the marriage contracts in questions, and legitimize their issue."<sup>92</sup> The year 1869 also marked the publication of Gladstone's *Juventus Mundi*, wherein he lauds the Homeric tradition of matrimony as the "very pivot of life."<sup>93</sup>

A closer examination of *Juventus Mundi* also reveals Gladstone's condemnation of the dissolution of marriage. He romanticizes about the Homeric epic, where "there is no such thing as a formal and final dissolution of a marriage, except by death."<sup>94</sup> It therefore comes as little surprise that Gladstone passionately opposed the Marriage Act.<sup>95</sup> Blackstone points out that, with the dissolution of a marriage by divorce, "the marriage is

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<sup>92</sup> *The Liberal Party and the Bill for Legalizing Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister: Facts Addressed to the Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone, M.P., Her Majesty's Prime Minister* (London: B. Calbourn, 1883), 37. Speech dated July 21, 1869.

<sup>93</sup> Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi*, 412.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>95</sup> Matthews, *Gladstone*, 339.

declared null, as having been absolutely unlawful...The issue of such marriage as is thus entirely dissolved, are bastards.”<sup>96</sup> The pressure that Victorian society and Parliament placed on couples to maintain their marriage reflects the desire to protect legitimacy within the family. The evolution of legitimate heirs into bastards, all on account of divorce, would dismantle the Empire’s strict patriarchal legal system. Mendus and Rendall concede the relationship between virginity and progeny, asserting that this was, “valued and continued to be valued for the security it gave to the dynastic transmission of property.”<sup>97</sup> This indicates that the first priority of English Common Law was to protect the security of society and the family unit. This attitude is also conveyed by Gladstone’s opinion that marriage between a man and his late wife’s sister should become legal, therefore legitimizing any children from such a union. A change in the law would not only solve the moral concern of sanctifying certain marriages, it would also solve the economic question of legitimate heirs.

Gladstone’s acute ideal of feminine protection, coupled with his devout religiosity, motivated him to vote against the Marriage Act in 1857. His remark in *Juventus Mundi* intimating that marriage laws should be strict out of concern for the woman indicate, albeit rather authoritatively, his belief that women were in constant need of protection. Blackstone’s belief in the protection of English laws towards women is so strong, he closes his chapter, “Of Husband and Wife,” with the following tribute to British womanhood. “These are the chief legal effects of marriage... for the most part

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<sup>96</sup> Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, 2: 440.

<sup>97</sup> Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 7.



intended for her protection... So great a favourite is the female sex of the laws of England.”<sup>98</sup>

The Marriage Act did not cause any children to be deemed illegitimate in the event of their parents’ divorce, as asserted in Blackstone’s *Commentaries*. It did provide a means of economic protection for wives who had been deserted and forced to support themselves financially. These women were given legal protection, “restraining the Husband or Creditor from interfering or attempting to interfere with the Wife’s Earnings or Property...”<sup>99</sup> This protection only lasted in six months increments, after which time the wife could renew the protective order. Wives could apply for a decree of judicial separation, after proving that her husband had deserted her “without reasonable Excuse for One Year or upwards.”<sup>100</sup> These conditions again reveal the parliamentary expectation that wives had to prove themselves to the courts. While Parliament was definitely willing to give women more protection by the law, wives were required to demonstrate their value to the legal system. This is conveyed by the fact that wives had to re-apply for protective orders to keep away the creditors of their absentee husband. The insertion of the clause “without reasonable Excuse” in relation to a husband’s desertion could indicate the court’s desire to determine if a spouse is absent on account of military duties or a sea voyage. It could also indicate the suspicion of a wife’s claims that she had been deserted, possibly so she might gain something financially.

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<sup>98</sup> Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, 2: 445.

<sup>99</sup> House of Commons, “Divorce and Matrimonial Causes: A Bill Intituled An Act to Amend the Law Relating to Divorce and Matrimonial Causes in England,” *Sessional Papers, 1857-Session 2*, June 25, 1857, 20&21 Vict. 86, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Women do receive economic and legal protection by way of the Marriage Act, including alimony and the right to be considered a *Femme Sole* in the case of judicial separation. This enabled a separated wife to act independently in relation to her property and civil proceedings. This not only protected wives and their own personal interests, but their husbands; if a legally separated wife was sued, “her Husband shall not be liable in respect of any Engagement or Contract she may have entered into...”<sup>101</sup> This illustrates one of the few egalitarian measures of the Act. The sexual double standard concerning adultery, however, remained. Husbands had only to prove their wife guilty of adultery, while a wife needed to prove her husband guilty of something more potent. This included, “incestuous Adultery...Bigamy... Adultery coupled with such Cruelty as without Adultery...or of Adultery coupled with Desertion, without reasonable Excuse, for Two Years or upwards...”<sup>102</sup> Given such extreme examples and the long-term desertion time of two years, it appears that Parliament intended to make it very difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce. Furthermore, Parliament included various conditions regarding the circumstances of divorce by adultery, stating the suit would be dismissed if it was determined that the petitioning spouse had been an accessory to, or condoned, the adultery.<sup>103</sup>

The terms of the Marriage Act do not offer complete protection to the interests of all women. Although feminist pressures on Parliament had played a role in the presentation of the Matrimonial Causes Bill in the form of a 3000-strong petition, the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Marriage Act further cemented the practice of Victorian wives receiving only conditional protection.<sup>104</sup> In an attempt to protect the strength of society, morality, and the family unit, Parliament charged wives and mothers with the responsibility of proving that they were worthy of legal protection.

In 1866, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) proposed the concept of women’s suffrage to the House of Commons. In “The Ladies’ Petition,” Mill indirectly asserts that the ideals related to feminine protection and dependency are problematic for women who are influenced “by a domestic despotism which only allows one person to express openly what many think.”<sup>105</sup> This somewhat demonstrates Parliament’s selective protection mentality. In discussing the need for “Universal Suffrage,” Mill argues that the English political system requires men to prove they “require protection for something more precious... before it admits him to any share in protecting himself” by way of a political voice.<sup>106</sup> English men had to prove their financial worth in the political system, much like English women were forced to prove their moral value in order to gain legal protection.

Further visibility of conditional legal protection toward women is revealed by way of the controversial Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. During the 1860s, Parliament took legal steps to monitor the frequency of venereal disease in the British military by requiring the medical examination of “any common

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<sup>104</sup> Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, 134-136.

<sup>105</sup> John Stuart Mill, “The Ladies’ Petition,” *Westminster Review* 31, no. 1 (January 1867): 65.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 68.

Prostitute” believed to have a contagious disease.<sup>107</sup> The examination of the women consorting with soldiers, yet not the soldiers themselves, epitomizes the gross sexual double standard of the time. The Contagious Diseases Commission asserted that Parliament’s reasons for voting the CD Acts into law was for purposes of public morality. “The Committee would have more hesitation in so earnestly recommending a periodical examination of the public prostitutes...did they not confidently feel that in so doing they are acting... in the interests of the community.”<sup>108</sup> Levine writes that feminist activists who were protesting the blatant double standard of the CD Acts viewed Parliament’s moral reasoning for the law as hypocritical, stating that it sanctioned the means of “providing healthy women for profligate men.”<sup>109</sup> Likewise, Judith Walkowitz writes that the CD Acts fused practical medical goals with moral and ideological assumptions.<sup>110</sup>

These statements illuminate the state of conditional protection available to some women. The personal rights of prostitutes were obliterated in favor of the protection of the general public from venereal disease. In considering the value that the virtuous, middle-class woman represented to society and the Empire, it can be deduced that it was this class of woman who was being indirectly protected by the CD Acts. Parliament

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<sup>107</sup> House of Commons, “Contagious Diseases Bill: A Bill for the Prevention of Contagious Diseases at Certain Naval and Military Stations,” *Sessional Papers, 1864*, June 20, 1864, 11&12 Vict. 163, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> House of Commons, “Report of the Royal Commission upon the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts,” *Sessional Papers, 1867-1868* [4031] vol. xxxvii, p. xxx. As cited in: Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, 147.

<sup>109</sup> *The Storm-Bell* (January 1898), 2. As cited in: Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, 147.

<sup>110</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3.

believed themselves to be protecting the middle-class Victorian woman from a husband who, himself potentially infected by a prostitute, could likewise infect his wife.

The CD Acts enabled police inspectors to stop any woman they believed guilty of prostitution and had the right to demand she submit to a medical examination. If the woman refused, she could be arrested; if she was examined and found diseased, she could be forcibly admitted to the lock ward of a military prison. There were many flaws with such a system, largely resting with the unregulated method of determining a prostitute. William Harris, assistant commissioner of London's metropolitan police, defined a clandestine prostitute as, "any woman who goes to places of public resort, and is known to go with different men, although not a common streetwalker, should be served with a notice to register [as a prostitute]." <sup>111</sup> Harris's indiscriminate opinion of women who fell between the categories of angel in the house and prostitute reveals a startling point of view about Victorian women, sexuality, and morality. Harris indirectly labels any woman who is not chaste, who is not discreet in her pursuits or who enjoys an active social life outside the modesty of the middle-class, as a prostitute.

Working-class women who happened to live in garrison towns also found themselves accosted under the CD Acts and forced to prove their innocence, because they belonged to the wrong social strata. Failure to submit to an examination or register as a prostitute could result in a woman being black-listed from employment or lodging. <sup>112</sup> This conveys the distinct Victorian perception of what was feminine, modest, and

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<sup>111</sup> William Acton, *Prostitution*, ed., Peter Fryer, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: 1870; repr. London: 1968), 153. As cited in: Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 80.

<sup>112</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 99-100.

deserving of protection; a woman exhibiting any of the aforementioned qualities would be required to prove her innocence before she could expect to enjoy protection.

Talbot and Tait, contemporaries of Commissioner Harris, identified a total of twenty-one reasons for a woman falling into prostitution. Divided into two categories, “natural causes” for prostitution included “licentiousness of inclination,” “irritability of temper,” and even “love of dress.” “Accidental causes” included “seduction,” “poverty,” “harsh and unkind treatment by parents and other relations,” and even “the publication of improper works, and obscene prints.”<sup>113</sup> The various natural causes indicate that moralists assumed the worst about the character of a woman who turned to prostitution. Tait condemns the type of woman “who openly delivers herself up to a life of impurity and licentiousness,”<sup>114</sup> while Talbot describes prostitutes of “natural causes” as having a “predisposition to sexual intercourse, [and] love of dress...”<sup>115</sup>

The majority of accidental causes listed by Tait place the blame of a woman’s fall into prostitution on outside parties. This is evidenced by the inclusion of seduction and unkind treatment, but Tait also includes “ignorance or defective education and religious instruction,” as well as “bad example of parents... [and] attendance on evening dancing schools, and dancing parties.”<sup>116</sup> All of these represent the failure of family, friends, and society to protect their young women against prostitution. Talbot is in agreement, referring critically to the “morbid state of public sentiment,” which “sanctions the male, who is by far the most guilty... while the unfortunate victim of his brutal lust is banished

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<sup>113</sup> Tait, *Magdalenism*, 109, 140, 141. Also, Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 31.

<sup>114</sup> Tait, *Magdalenism*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 33.

<sup>116</sup> Tait, *Magdalenism*, 141.

from the pale of virtuous society.”<sup>117</sup> The CD Acts did include provisions for medical treatment and intended moral reformation of prostitutes who were found to be infected and forcibly hospitalized, pro-active ideals which were similar to those of Tait and Talbot.

In 1870, William Acton (1813–1875) describes prostitutes in his book, *Prostitution*, as a perversion of respectable femininity who corrupt and infect the rest of society.<sup>118</sup> The representation of debased femininity, as opined by men like Acton, Tait, and Talbot, influenced the manner in which Parliament viewed prostitutes. Some further descriptions rendered by these men labeled a prostitute “a person who openly delivers herself up to a life of impurity and licentiousness, who is indiscriminate in the selection of her lovers.”<sup>119</sup> This type of caustic label highlights the natural causes of prostitution, of which Tait only lists five. Nevertheless, Parliament and moral reformers were more intent on focusing on these natural causes, rather than the fact that many women fell into prostitution as a means of supplementing their meager incomes.<sup>120</sup>

Controlling venereal disease by monitoring prostitutes was easier, and more desirable for the male population, than ending the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard. George Drysdale was one proponent of the state regulation of prostitution, although not the conditions set forth by the CD Acts, and viewed prostitutes as “unhappy

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<sup>117</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 42.

<sup>118</sup> Acton, *Prostitution*, 166. As discussed in: Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), 101.

<sup>119</sup> Tait, *Magdalenism*, 2.

<sup>120</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 111.

victims of our natural sexual difficulties” who performed a valuable service.<sup>121</sup> Historian W. E. H. Lecky describes the misalignment of “extra-matrimonial purity” and “irregular passions” within marriage giving way to the proliferation of prostitution.<sup>122</sup> He writes that, even though the prostitute is, “the supreme type of vice, she is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her, the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted.”<sup>123</sup> While this is an interesting argument for the continuation of prostitution, it fails to treat prostitutes as women with any type of personal rights. Although Drysdale and Lecky do not speak about prostitution as a morally-degrading occupation, they do refer to it as a detached social institution. Attitudes like this contributed to the widespread proliferation of the virtuous vice whereby men exploited it for themselves and enacted the CD Acts to protect their innocent wives from contamination.

The literary and didactic material of the era, coupled with a desire for public morality, further impacted the way prostitutes were treated by way of the CD Acts regulations. The fallen woman was the farthest thing from Patmore’s description of an ideal image of feminine modesty, as he praises the “innocence” of ladies for making “England, the land of courtly homes.”<sup>124</sup> This influenced the unbending decisions endorsed by Parliament throughout the three separate CD Acts during the 1860s, including the approval of internal examination by speculum. Dr. William Acton had

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<sup>121</sup> George Drysdale, *Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* (London: np, 1855), 270. As cited in: Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 81.

<sup>122</sup> William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (London: 1869; repr., New York: George Braziller, 1955), 282.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>124</sup> Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Book 1, Canto X: 86-87.



been chided by his colleagues for desiring to introduce the speculum in the science of gynecology. The argument consisted of the fact that, “the speculum emanated from the syphilitic wards of the hospitals at Paris, and it would have been better for the women of England had its use been confined to those prostitutes institutionalized.”<sup>125</sup> Walkowitz points out the unusual class-discrimination revealed by the determination that prostitutes were the only appropriate subjects for an invasive speculum examination.

The use of the speculum on virtuous wives and mothers was considered immoral and not only because it was considered voyeuristic and degrading by some doctors.<sup>126</sup> It also represented a literal violation of a virtuous woman. Walkowitz’s description of the immorality of these examinations reflects the attitude of Victorian society regarding laws concerning the protection of the ideal woman. Authors of the treatise on the Custody of Infants’ Bill reveal this mentality of protection, although specifically towards the family unit, by referring to any dissolution of marital relations as “immoral separations,” while regarding the bill itself as “immoral.”<sup>127</sup>

Fear against the violation of moral womanhood and domestic tranquility is also evident in Ellis’s comments on feminine and social protection. She writes, “And who would not rather that English women should be guarded by a wall of scruples, than allowed to degenerate into less worthy and less efficient supporters of their country’s

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<sup>125</sup> William Acton, *A Practical Treatise on Diseases of the Urinary and Generative Organs* (London: np, 1851), 298-300. As quoted in: Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 56.

<sup>126</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 57. Speculum examinations were depicted as often inflicting “mental and physical pain on the female sufferer.”

<sup>127</sup> Handley and Kemple, “A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children,” 282- 283.

moral worth?”<sup>128</sup> The use of the word “degenerate” might have been specifically chosen by Ellis to elude to the extreme need to protect the moral superiority of the middle classes. *The Women of England* was published in 1839, one year prior to Tait’s *Magdalenism* and five years before the publication of Talbot’s treatise on *The Miseries of Prostitution*. Ellis would have been socially aware of the widespread prostitution in England (and the rest of the Empire), and desired to encourage the women of England to maintain their virtues, in order to better promote the integrity of the Empire and the morals of their family. Ellis also advocated strict order and rules in her works of fiction and career as lecturer, something which is evident in her instructions to the women of England for the promotion of domestic morality and tranquility.<sup>129</sup>

The widespread demand for a repeal of the CD Acts reveals Parliament’s misplaced attempts at selective and conditional feminine protection. In 1869, public objection to the CD Acts took shape as The National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, while a separate female sector emerged as the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (LNA).<sup>130</sup> Led by Josephine Butler (1828–1906),<sup>131</sup> the LNA and other repeal campaigners objected to the Acts’ sexual discrimination and punishment of the women, not men, involved in vice. The class bias of parliamentary decisions directed at lower-class women, as well as state-

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<sup>128</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 35.

<sup>129</sup> Source consulted: Paul and June Schlueter, eds., *An Encyclopedia of British Women Writers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 225-226.

<sup>130</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 92-93.

<sup>131</sup> For more on Josephine Butler, see: Nancy Boyd, *Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World: Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Elizabeth Longford, *Eminent Victorian Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981). Rowbotham, Sheila, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1997).

regulation of morality, were further complaints of repeal activists.<sup>132</sup> Although the Acts were suspended in 1883, they were replaced by the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885), which merely modified the age of consent and gave police additional rights over the monitoring of working-class women.<sup>133</sup>

At first glance, Victorian law has the capacity to look more oppressive and authoritative than protective. A closer examination of many legal precedents reveals the original protective mentality that Parliament attempted to impart towards the feminine sex. This protection was buffered by numerous ideals, many of which required honorable and virtuous behavior from both men and women. A woman's virtue was guarded much more carefully by the law, than was any behavior on behalf of a male. Once married, women experienced complete legal disenfranchisement, although Parliament interpreted this as a form of marital protection. Throughout the course of the nineteenth-century, these standards slowly evolved, both out of necessity and public demand. However, in the meantime an interesting dynamic evolved between parliamentary expectations and feminine protection. Parliament ensured that the women to whom they offered legal protection were worthy of the effort. This was evidenced in the case of Caroline Norton who, prior to having the Custody of Infants' Act passed, had to prove her value as a mother and victimized wife, whereas her abusive husband had only to claim his father's rights to take away their children.

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<sup>132</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 22-23.

<sup>133</sup> See, Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 246-252. Yves Guyot, *English and French Morality from a Frenchman's Point of View* (London: np, 1885). Michael Pearson, *The Age of Consent: Victorian Prostitution and the Enemies* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972).

The case of Caroline Norton, however, represented to Parliament and Victorian society, that gross manipulation by husbands was taking place in the legal system. The role that Caroline Norton played in the Custody of Infants' Act, and the strength of the LNA in having the CD Acts eventually repealed, reveals two interesting conclusions about Parliament and women in Victorian England. The legal rights of women did evolve both because of feminist efforts, but also because there existed some serious injustices that deserved rectifying. Lastly, Parliament did possess an underlying desire to protect the British women. Unfortunately, the motives of the law became flawed as well-meaning ideals of virtue gave way to selective protection and class-discrimination.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Women's Health and Sexuality: The Protection of Victorian Ideals and Expectations

#### *The Protection of Virginal Propriety*

The protection of feminine sexuality in the nineteenth-century reveals numerous conditions of supervision by which middle-class women were expected to live. Women were monitored by social restrictions, family rules, and even etiquette manuals, to ensure that their sexual modesty was not compromised prior to marriage. Once married, wives were still subject to sexual protection by their husbands and marital medical advice, the latter which warned against “marital excess” and cautioned that intercourse should take place no more than once every ten to fourteen days.<sup>1</sup> Women who never married were also protected, but their status as a single celibate was considered unnatural by many. In 1862, William Rathbone Greg (1809-1881) suggested to solve by deporting vast numbers of redundant women to colonies overseas, where they could find husbands among the disproportionate, colonizing males.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the protection of feminine sexuality is a topic of vast importance to many Victorians, as revealed by the numerous restrictions placed upon women in order to monitor their sexuality. Feminine sexuality and its relation to a stable society and broadening Empire enable a better understanding behind the Victorian mentality of sexual protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 122-124, 111.

<sup>2</sup> William Rathbone Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” *National Review* 28 (April 1862): 434-460.

Idealized womanhood in Victorian Britain was lauded as asexual and chaste, contradictory to the supreme goal of marriage and motherhood.<sup>3</sup> It has already been noted that virginity in a young lady was a necessity if she anticipated making a desirable match. This not only made possible the maintenance of a virtuous reputation before marriage, it served as a guarantee that any child she might immediately conceive in wedlock would be her husband's heir. The loss of a young woman's virginity affected her "saleability in the marriage market,"<sup>4</sup> as many Victorian males were concerned with the legitimacy of their progeny. This relates back to the sexual double standard. While Keith Thomas does not directly state that the loss of virginity in a young bride-to-be is equal to adultery, he does explain an economic reason behind the Victorian reasoning for a double standard. "Discriminating against the adultery of a married woman...[occurs because] it might well produce bastard children who then intrude into the husband's inheritance."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, to protect the stability of the Victorian family, the morality, and virginity of unmarried ladies were protected by means of chaperones, educational manuals, and supervised activities. "An unmarried woman under thirty could not go anywhere or be in a room even in her own house with an unrelated man unless accompanied by a married gentlewoman or a servant."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, sitting on the same sofa with a young man was viewed as inappropriate familiarity, while interactions with

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<sup>3</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 322. Handley and Kemple, "Review of a Bill to Provide for the Access of Parents to Their Children," 274.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, "The Double Standard," 210.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 50. As cited in: Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 24.

male acquaintances were relegated to “their proper social place, the ball room.”<sup>7</sup> In Pat Jalland’s *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, she describes the narrow confines of society’s Upper Ten Thousand, members of whom participated in London’s Season.<sup>8</sup> It was during the Season when many young ladies anticipated achieving their goal of matrimony. Socializing with young men in a supervised situation, where numerous chaperones were present and proper social etiquette was observed, was the ideal setting for a young lady to make a “match.”<sup>9</sup> It was also conducive to the protection of feminine virtue.

The protection of an eligible young lady’s virginity does not appear to have lasted a finite length of time. Most young ladies were expected to marry between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-eight.<sup>10</sup> There were always exceptions within respectable society; Caroline Sheridan Norton married at the age of nineteen and Mary Gladstone Drew married at the age of thirty-nine (her husband was thirty at the time of their marriage).<sup>11</sup>

There were two categories of single women in Victorian England: those who were unmarried and those who chose not to marry. A great deal of attention was paid to the protection of the former category, while society encountered social and religious scruples in learning how to deal with the latter group.

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<sup>7</sup> Lady Frances Balfour, *Ne Obliviscaris. Dinna Forget* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1930), 121-123, 148-149. As cited in: Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 34.

<sup>9</sup> Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 25, 29.

<sup>10</sup> E. J. Tilt, *Elements of Health and Principles of Female Hygiene* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1852), 258-261. As cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Mary Gladstone Drew, see, *Mary Gladstone (Mrs. Drew); her diaries and letters, ed. by Lucy Masterman with 39 Illustrations* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1930). *Some Hawarden Letters, 1878-1913, written to Mrs. Drew (Miss Mary Gladstone) before and after her marriage, chosen and arranged by Lisle March-Phillips and Bertram Christian* (London: Nisbet & Company, 1917).

There were two socially-acceptable reasons for a lady to refrain from marriage and still maintain a certain degree of social affluence: a dedication to “charitable uses” or a spiritual calling that would render marriage “a profanation.”<sup>12</sup> All other women were expected to marry; celibacy was deemed “unnatural” and single women represented to many an “evil and anomaly” that needed to be cured.<sup>13</sup> Medical journals stated that unmarried women could be driven mad by unspent passions, whereas women who were too passionate were condemned as licentious.<sup>14</sup> Victorian women walked a fine line in order to maintain the appearance of both femininity and admirable chastity. Once it was determined that a young lady had become an old maid, regardless of the circumstances, she was viewed with varying degrees of pity, confusion, or disdain. Her virtue, although still a thing of honor, was no longer prized in the same category alongside young social debutantes.

Unmarried young ladies were never in want of protection, guidance, or instruction. The best way to protect a young lady, in accordance with a Victorian mentality, was to control as much of their daily routine as possible. This is revealed in the various didactic materials available to young ladies, instructing them on everything from bathing to health remedies to childbirth. This was conveyed through the many volumes of Ellis’s *Women of England* series, as well as Eliza Duffey’s *What Women Should Know* (1873), and Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* (1861). Duffey takes care to describe exactly how a young lady should bathe, a routine that

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<sup>12</sup> Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” 439.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Waddington, “Masturbation in a Female Apparently without a Uterus,” *British Medical Journal* (1853): 672-3. Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 48.



should be done with cold water and should take no more than five minutes. Duffey advises against shower baths, however, believing “they produce too great a shock for a nervous or sensitive organization, and I think them especially inappropriate for a young girl just approaching womanhood.”<sup>15</sup> These strict bathing guidelines demonstrate one form of protective supervision administered to young ladies.

Supervision of a young lady’s clothing selections is also advocated by Duffey, Ellis, and even Gladstone. Duffey admonishes mothers who permit their daughters to socialize in garments that reveal “bare neck and arms,” warning that such a style has “been sufficient in many a case to send a young girl to her grave.”<sup>16</sup> The construction of clothing is even dictated, including the advice that “clothing about the body and chest must be worn loosely,” and “fastened with buttons.”<sup>17</sup> While clothing style and fastenings may not appear to promote any immediate form of protection for young ladies, Duffey intertwines clothing advice with a hearty disapproval of corsets and stays.

The disapproval of binding a young lady’s figure is also described in Jalland and Hooper’s *Women from Birth to Death*, wherein a series of medical descriptions concerning inappropriate corset trends reveal genuine health concerns. Dr. W. H. Sheehy reported the case of a young servant who, after suffering from convulsions and laborious breathing, died at the age of twenty years old. The servant, formerly chided by her employer for the “persistent folly in lacing so tightly,” was autopsied and found to be suffering from major internal organ failure. Sheehy recorded her “brain membranes

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<sup>15</sup> Eliza Duffey, *What Women Should Know: A Woman’s Book About Women* (1873; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1974), 36.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

intensely congested... heart very small, did not weigh four ounces...liver enormously enlarged, congested...gall-bladder, distended with bile.” The doctor closed his account of the servant’s untimely death by writing, “the victim of this unnatural propensity must have submitted herself to, and for a considerable period of time...a silly and wicked vanity by tight-lacing.”<sup>18</sup> The advice against the use of corsets reveals itself through the unhappy account of the young servant’s death, something which was promoted by the mid-Victorian association, the Anti-Tight-Lacing League.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Duffey’s strict disapproval of women who permit the use of such accessories. The protection of young women from the constriction of corsets relates directly to their sexuality and eventual destination for motherhood. Corsets were interpreted, by some, as preventing the “growing bust [from]...its full development...[and] laying the foundation for future troubles when the girl shall become a woman and a mother.”<sup>20</sup>

The fashion of corset-wearing is directly intertwined with the growth, health, and sexuality of women of all ages, as examined by Ronald Pearsall in *The Worm in the Bud*. Pearsall illustrates that fashionable corsets did have sexual connotations, from the way a woman’s breasts were explicitly forced upwards to induction of erotic sensations from tight-lacing.<sup>21</sup> Pearsall’s research reveals differing medical opinions concerning the use

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<sup>18</sup> W. H. Sheehy, “Death from Tight-Lacing, with Post-Mortem Results,” *The Lancet* (February 1871): 256. As cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 111-112.

<sup>19</sup> As referenced by Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 161.

<sup>20</sup> Duffey, *What Women Should Know*, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud*, 157.

of corsets, of which the ill-effects could include spinal problems, internal bleeding, and even compressions of the breast that interfered with the nursing of infants.<sup>22</sup>

Clothing also represented a young lady's reputation and virtue. Ellis succinctly indicates that a lady's attire conveys her true character, writing, "Good taste is therefore most essential to the regulation of her dress and general appearance; and wherever any striking violation of this principle appears, the beholder is immediately impressed with the idea that a very important rule of her life and conduct is wanting."<sup>23</sup> She warns against carelessness in a lady's appearance, as a "soiled hem...tattered frill, or even the coarse garment out of keeping with her external finery... carries the observer to her...private habits, and even to her inner mind, where, it is almost impossible to believe that the same want of order and purity does not prevail."<sup>24</sup> This strict supervision of clothing relates to the desire to protect not only women, but all that they represented to society and the Empire. Rather than interpreting a woman's inattention to dress or poor fashion, Ellis and Duffey both correlate a woman's clothes with her character and virtue. Ellis's opinions concerning fashion reveal her promotion of a type of fashionable tranquility. Whereas she promotes order and genteel grace in the household, so too does she present the idea of clothing selections that will further enhance domestic tranquility.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 160. Author writes, "Infants at the breast discovered frequently that the nipple had been pressed back into the teat by their mother's conforming to fashion." For more on Victorian corsets, see, Anne Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1961), 86-92.

<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 99-100. For more on women's Victorian fashions, see: Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*. Author is former 'Keeper of the Gallery of English Costume' at Platt Hall, Manchester, UK.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 96.

Similarly, Gladstone expresses a desire that the fashion sense of his younger sister, Helen, reflect her inner religiosity. Writing in 1829, he tells her:

I think you dress *not more plainly* nor more fashionably than the generality of those who are ‘out’ (in society). I think too...it is usually for those who are not ‘out’ to dress somewhat *more plainly*. Thirdly, it appears...that those who wish to be guided by the principle of doing all...to the glory of God, should decidedly keep within rather than go beyond the general rule for handsomeness of dress, and refuse compliance with any fashion...<sup>25</sup>

Gladstone and Helen had agreed to exchange moral encouragements in their youth, but the statesman’s attitude towards his younger sister’s fashion sense seems unnecessarily harsh. Like Duffey and Ellis, Gladstone reveals his personal affiliation between a woman’s dress and her morality and virtue, albeit neither Duffey nor Ellis were quite so priggish in their delivery.

Likewise, the association between a woman’s dress and her morality is revealed in the pre-marital relationship between John Ruskin and Effie Gray. Shortly before their ill-fated union in 1848, Ruskin writes to his fiancée concerning the clothes she should (or should not) bring on their Continental wedding trip. He initially relays a suggestion of his mother in a correspondence to Effie, dated November 11, 1847. “Any dresses you may be buying for next year had better be of the plainest kind – for travelling – of stuffs that will not crush...”<sup>26</sup> Ruskin adds his own opinions concerning the attire of his fiancée, some of them bearing the same cautious tone of Duffey’s warnings against scanty garments which “no exigency of dinner or evening entertainment should ever

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<sup>25</sup> As cited in: Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 9. Author consulted Gladstone-Glynn MSS 751, folios 47-48, October 11, 1829.

<sup>26</sup> James, *The Order of Release*.

sanction.”<sup>27</sup> Ruskin writes to Effie that her gowns should “close up to the throat – for fear of ice chills – *notice* this – which is *my* advice especially – and also – not to have the flounces *too* full – nor too *long* – it will not do to be exposed to chance of treading continually on your dress in going up hill – and the Swiss hills are steep.”<sup>28</sup> Ruskin’s suggestions to Effie reveal an interesting combination of protection and control, qualities which foretell the unusual marital dynamic that will shortly emerge between John and his young bride.

Appearances needed to be maintained to protect both the virtue and reputation of an unmarried lady, as experienced in the Ruskin-Gray romance prior to the engagement of the couple. Sir William James, editor of the Ruskin-Gray letters featured in *The Order of Release*, hypothesizes that, upon learning that her son wished for Effie Gray to accompany the family on their Continental tour, Mrs. Ruskin disapproved on the grounds that “being continually in her company, he [John] could win her love.”<sup>29</sup> This opinion indicates that the over-protective parent still had misgivings about a prospective marriage between her only son and Miss Gray. However, it is more probable that Mrs. Ruskin objected on the grounds of propriety, as revealed by her own hand. “I do not know that there would be any thing very improper in Effie’s going abroad with us unmarried, but neither am I satisfied that the doing so would be either proper or wise. If I were younger, or you had a sister, it would appear less marked.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Duffey, *What Women Should Know*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 45. Letter dated September 11, 1847.

The maintenance of appearances and propriety, according to various sources, was something with which Margaret Cox Ruskin had a great deal of familiarity. Originally a poor relation of John Thomas Ruskin and his wife, Margaret Cox came to reside with the Ruskins in 1804 to act as a companion for her aunt Catherine. While living with the Ruskins, Margaret fell in love with her handsome (and younger) cousin, John James, for whose affections she is believed to have abandoned propriety. A great aunt of Effie Gray's wrote a narration of the courtship between John James Ruskin and Margaret Cox, recording that during an illness of the former:

...She was almost his only attendant, and did everything that a nurse would have done for the patient, and even slept in the same room. When he became convalescent, she took him up to Dunkeld to recruit and there again she was equally economical (sharing a room). This conduct gave rise to many rumours and scandals, and some thought they were already married. When he was restored to health he returned to his business in London and there it is supposed he had no desire to continue the intimacy with his cousin. But she plied him with letters, reminding him that she had sacrificed her reputation for him and besought him to return and marry her.<sup>31</sup>

Considering the alleged lack of propriety exercised by Margaret Ruskin when she was an unmarried woman, it appears she was wary for this situation to repeat itself. This seems the most genuine cause behind her denial of her son's request that Effie Gray accompany the family before she was his wife.

### *Chaste Sexuality: Victorian Wives and Mothers*

Victorian wives and mothers are lauded throughout the nineteenth-century for their many qualities, including their morals, virtues, housekeeping skills, and child-rearing talents. In a similar tone to that of Ellis, E. J. Tilt writes, "In civilized nations matrons give the tone to society; for the rules of morality are placed under their

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<sup>31</sup> Lutyens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, 6.

safeguard...”<sup>32</sup> The amount of literature written about the expectations of British housewives and mothers reveals extremely high standards, which likely left many women feeling confused, overwhelmed, and helplessly inadequate. Ellis probably set the highest domestic standards for her sex. She instructs housewives in the emotional support of their families by writing the following:

I will meet the family with a consciousness that, being the least engaged of any member of it, I am consequently the most at liberty to devote myself to the general good of the whole, by cultivating cheerful conversation, adapting myself to the prevailing tone of feeling, and leading those who are last happy to think and speak of what will make them so. Who can believe that days, months, and years spent in a continual course of thought and action similar to this, will not produce a powerful effect upon character... [and] upon all to whom her influence extends?<sup>33</sup>

Not only does Ellis expect British housewives to support the virtue of those within their household, she further expects them to successfully impact the moral tone of the future. The nature of this advice would have been overwhelming to many young wives. Mothers and wives could provide the most refined type of domestic tranquility within their “woman’s sphere,” but the fact that they were socially removed from the “male sphere” where their husbands regularly circulated left them at a disadvantage. How could housewives hope to successfully counter immorality in the home if they had only a limited knowledge about it?

In the midst of her critique on marriage and the responsibility of wives, Frances Power Cobbe criticizes the manner in which many young women have been trained for such a virtuous task. She believes their sheltered upbringing and domestic educations have left them ill-prepared for the challenges of the real world. The result is that wives,

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<sup>32</sup> E.J. Tilt, *Elements of Health and Principles of Female Hygiene*, 258-261. As cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 124-125.

<sup>33</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 24-25.

“can exercise in no degree the influence over her husband’s soul which her genuine piety might otherwise effect.”<sup>34</sup> The moral support which British wives are expected to provide is enabled because, according to Ellis, “girls have little temptation, generally speaking, to vice. They are so hemmed in and guarded by the rules of society, that they must be destitute almost of the common feelings of human nature, to be willing, for any consideration, to sacrifice their good name.”<sup>35</sup> Conversely, young men received the extreme opposite support, as relayed by Dr. William Acton. He quotes the advice of Reverend Sydney Smith who writes, “Every young man must be exposed to temptation; he cannot learn the ways of men without being witness to their vices.”<sup>36</sup> This contradictory advice given to the sexes evolves into further problems concerning sexuality and marital expectations, as evidence reveals.

This contradictory standard of morals, whereby male promiscuity was practically encouraged and wives were taught to look the other way, exacted heavy penalties for the same behavior in women. Adulterous wives could be disgraced by divorce, lose custody of their children, and even forfeit any marriage settlement or dowry monies. Therefore, in the middle-classes, women were cautioned against their passions and taught sexual yearning in a woman was unhealthy or abnormal. This approach to feminine sexuality can be viewed through the non-manipulative (albeit impersonal and commercial) economic lens, which has already been conveyed. Additionally, it has also been suggested that, part of man’s difficulty in self-government and self-restraint was his

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<sup>34</sup> Cobbe, “Celibacy v. Marriage,” 230.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 37.



sexual eruptibility.<sup>37</sup> Considering this nineteenth-century opinion, denying a woman's sexuality to counter-balance the abundant masculine sexual prowess reveals another purpose to the contradictory attitudes regarding appropriate behavior from men and women.

The widely-published medical opinions of Dr. Acton, intimating the lack of sexual feeling in women, further impacted the relationships between Victorian husbands and wives in multiple ways. In the 1865 edition of *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, Acton nearly praises the fact that "the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind." He depicts the feminine libido as difficult to arouse, and even if it should become "roused (which in many instances it never can be) is very moderate compared with that of the male... There are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever."<sup>38</sup> The blending of social mores and medical opinion, as briefly discussed by Walkowitz, was probably a motivating factor behind some of Acton's medical research.<sup>39</sup>

It would have been a violation of Acton's integrity as a physician to falsify research or publish invalid deductions. However, Acton spent time working in London's Lock Hospital, which provided medical attention to prostitutes suffering from any variety of ailments, including venereal disease.<sup>40</sup> Bearing witness to the unfortunate

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<sup>37</sup> Ben Barker-Benfield, "The Spermatoc Economy: A 19<sup>th</sup> Century View of Sexuality," *Feminist Studies* 1 (1972): 48.

<sup>38</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 112-113. Also cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 234.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the blending of morality and medicine, see, Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 70-72.

circumstances of many women who had suffered a life of sexual exploitation, it is little surprise that Acton's medical opinions reflect disapproval towards an active female sexual response. His work with prostitutes and the negative affiliations between female sexuality and vice would have had a strong influence on Acton's overall opinions regarding appropriate sexual behavior in women. As a result, Acton tailored his medical opinions to somehow protect the virtuous wife and mother from becoming a victim to her passions, as demonstrated by the plight of the Victorian prostitute. Whether this was done deliberately or subconsciously is debatable, as this is not wholly conveyed by the available material.

Victorians took a protective, controlled view of sexuality, especially where wives and mothers were involved. In relation to this, Thomas points out the interesting interpretation of the middle-classes regarding promiscuity. He conveys that it was condemned not only because it was contrary to the emotional values expected from marriage, but also "because it was wasteful, and...took time and money which would have been better spent in the pursuit of a gainful occupation."<sup>41</sup> Historian Lawrence Stone notes that "the standard medical view of sex in the Early Modern period was based on a plumber's view of the body, the maintenance of good health being determined by a nice balance between the production and discharge of fluids in the pipes so as to maintain an equilibrium."<sup>42</sup> This view radically altered in favor of the sexual conservatism reflected by doctors and social moralists of the nineteenth century. Conservative attitudes concerning sex focused mainly on the maintenance of feminine sexual purity,

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas, "The Double Standard," 204.

<sup>42</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England*, 497.

something which has already been revealed by various laws and legal stipulations regarding marriage, divorce, and child custody.

The maintenance of feminine ideals in relation to sexuality was difficult for Victorians, a situation which was heightened by the distinct separation of spheres. The control that women exercised in the home was expected to be exercised towards the sexual mores of the middle-class. Nead writes that “woman was believed either to assist or to exacerbate male sexual control and her sexual identity determined whether or not she was seen as a respectable and responsible member of society.”<sup>43</sup> The manner in which Victorian society entrusted the morality and sexuality of marriage to the women parallels the credo of Sarah Stickney Ellis, who implores women to honor the fact that “the long-established customs of their country have placed in their hands the high and holy duty of cherishing and protecting the minor morals of life...”<sup>44</sup> Women were also encouraged in their duty to maintain social stability because of the new era of a morally-conscious, female monarch. On account of this, Ellis writes, “it is surely not a time for the female part of the community to fall away from the high standard of moral excellence, to which they have been accustomed to look, in the formation of their domestic habits.”<sup>45</sup>

Sexual responsibility appears to have been an unspoken charge that accompanied the domestic tranquility required of British wives and mothers. An article in *The Westminster Review* in 1850 reveals the importance of women in society, in to regard

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<sup>43</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 54.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

sexuality and control. “If the passions of women were ready, strong and spontaneous, in a degree even approaching the form they assume in the coarser sex, there can belittle doubt that sexual irregularities would reach a height, of which, at present, we have happily no conception.”<sup>46</sup> This reveals that not all Victorians denied the presence of sexual yearning in the middle-class woman. In addition to the moral and social duties assigned to them, women were expected to subdue their own sexual tendencies for the good of their family, society, and Empire.

Acton believed extreme measures needed to be exercised to ensure order and control over unrestrained sexuality. In order to accomplish this end, the doctor encourages strict sexual moderation, especially for married couples, warning that “misery and suffering [is] caused by ill-regulated desires and extravagant indulgences among married people.”<sup>47</sup> The guidelines he recommends limit sexual intercourse to nothing more frequent than twice a night every ten to fourteen days.<sup>48</sup> These restrictions appear unnecessarily extreme and controlling, regardless of Acton’s biological reasoning behind his suggestions. Contemporaries of Acton defined woman as a “sperm absorber... a drag on the energy, spirits and resolution of her partner.”<sup>49</sup> If Acton shared in these beliefs, restraint of intercourse may have been an attempt to not only maintain the health of the

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<sup>46</sup> William Rathbone Greg, “Prostitution,” *The Westminster Review* 53 (1850), 456-457. As cited in: Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 110.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 111. The doctor only allows for twice in one night in order that the *vasa deferentia* may not be completely emptied by one act of intercourse.

<sup>49</sup> Augustus Kinsley Gardner, “The Physical Decline of American Women,” *The Knickerbocker* 55, no. 1 (January 1860):37. As cited in: Barker-Benfield, “The Spermatoc Economy,” 55.

couple, but to also promote an appropriate balance of the equilibrium.<sup>50</sup> Acton believed that, “Too frequent emission of the life-giving fluid, and too frequent sexual excitement of the nervous system, is... in itself most destructive.”<sup>51</sup> This attitude represents the possibility that Acton may have transposed his biological concerns onto society; a bodily imbalance in one sphere might lead to an overall imbalance between the separate spheres. The most drastic representation of this would be in a woman developing a greater sexual appetite which, by Victorian standards, would liken her to a man.<sup>52</sup> Given the extreme division between male and female spheres, there was absolutely no room for this in virtuous, middle-class Victorian society.

Whatever Acton’s biological fears, his strict sexual beliefs did little to enable couples to experience married intimacy on a more regular basis. Health and social dictates of the nineteenth-century already caused interference with normal sexual relations of couples. Among these causes for marital abstinence, Duffey includes “monthly periods; ...one month after confinement; for three months after miscarriage; during convalescence from any ordinary sickness...any uterine difficulty which renders cohabitation painful...”<sup>53</sup> These natural obstructions to a normal sex life had the capacity to create a moderate amount of marital tension and stress without even considering Acton’s restrictions. Acton dismisses these natural interruptions, citing the “periodical unwillingness of the human female to permit copulation” as an ideal restraint, and reasoning that men have “no need for and no *natural* impulse toward any great

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<sup>50</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 54.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> Barker-Benfield, “The Spermatic Economy,” 54.

<sup>53</sup> Duffey, *What Women Should Know*, 118.

extravagance in sexual indulgence.”<sup>54</sup> The sexual ideals of the doctor becomes evident through these remarks and observations. The best type of marital relations, in the eyes of a Victorian moralist, occurred only once every fortnight and only between married couples.

Acton’s ideal sexual attitude places even more strain on a married couple. Husbands possessing a normal sex drive and a sense of moral obligation not to practice marital excess would have struggled with their own sexual awareness. Wives feeling inclined to obey Acton’s suggestions would have felt morally bound to refuse their husbands, save for once a fortnight, while also making sure they did not succumb to the vice that was so prevalent. While Acton’s advice place strain on men, it nearly doubled for women; they were responsible not only for themselves, but also for the moral and physical well-being of a husband who might turn elsewhere if the angel in the house did not fulfill her marital, domestic, and moral obligations. If Acton was genuinely attempting to prevent vice from expanding into the middle-class home, his sexual guidelines appear to have been more of a hindrance than a help.

William Gladstone frequently found himself privy to these sexual frustrations, created by varying circumstances for occasional abstinence, as revealed by his diaries. During times of enforced abstinence, separation from his wife, financial worries, or even exposure to prostitutes, Gladstone records in his diaries an ‘X’ next to specific dates, indicating he had indulged in reading pornography.<sup>55</sup> In 1849, the dates of Gladstone’s

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<sup>54</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 118.

<sup>55</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: 492-493. Entries regarding pornography range from November 1845 through April 1849. See also, Matthew, *Gladstone*, 90. Author notes that Gladstone’s friend, Monckton Milnes, had a “well-known and outstanding library of pornography.”

pornographic indulgences correlate directly with the statesman's extended absence from his family while pursuing the estranged wife of his friend, Lord Lincoln.<sup>56</sup> The situation of chasing after a beautiful adulteress may have titillated Gladstone's sensuality, similar to the way contact with prostitutes aroused him. Additionally, Gladstone was away from his family for an extended amount of time, explaining the frequent occurrences of reading pornography; between January and April of 1849, Gladstone read pornography five times and flogged himself in retribution a total of six times.<sup>57</sup>

Overall, Gladstone's strict religiosity, which enforced his celibacy until marriage at the age of twenty-nine, meant that he took literally the Church of England's implication that the marriage bed was "first... for the procreation of children."<sup>58</sup> Victorian religious convictions espoused that "children were given by Heaven as an obligation but also as a delight."<sup>59</sup> This belief was embraced by the Gladstones at home and in politics; Catherine Gladstone was pregnant nine times in fourteen years and Gladstone violently opposed any form of birth control.<sup>60</sup> This ideal moral character in Gladstone enabled him to somewhat conquer his own sexuality, with the aid of his faith and self-discipline. Additionally, Gladstone and his wife appear to have enjoyed a congenial life together, one that would have been debilitated if Acton's prescription of intercourse once every fortnight had been observed. Instead, the fidelity of the Gladstone

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<sup>56</sup> Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, I: 364-365. See also, Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 71-98.

<sup>57</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 4: August 5, 1849. *The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: 492-493.

<sup>58</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 2: July 26, 1839. Newlywed Gladstone's sentiments following his wedding night suggest the virginity of both Gladstone and his new wife. See also, Marlow, *Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone*, 18. Matthew, *Gladstone*, 90.

<sup>59</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 330.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 89-90.

marriage bed and their obvious sexual compatibility enhanced their relationship, contrary to the belief system imparted by Dr. Acton.

The manner in which Gladstone concealed his impure thoughts in his diaries through the use of symbols, a type of self-censorship that Mendus and Rendall indicate was also practiced by Victorian women, reveals the desire of many Victorians to conceal their sexual yearnings, even in private.<sup>61</sup> The desire to conceal any form of sexuality can be traced back to the dictates of Acton and his contemporaries. Individuals who were religiously or morally convicted would have been influenced by the available literature, which demanded domestic order and chastity for the angel in the house. Furthermore, the “disorder represented by the sexual appetite was... perceived and feared,” a fact that would cause any young wife and mother to worry that any type of sexual longing was inappropriate or “licentious.”<sup>62</sup> The strict division of spheres did not allow for sexuality within the hearth and home.

One literal example of this belief system is evidenced in the unusual marriage of John Ruskin and Effie Gray. Entering into marriage with little knowledge about sex, Effie probably expected to learn from her husband on her wedding night; she was grossly mistaken and disappointed. Confronted with a husband who “avowed no intention of making [her] his Wife,”<sup>63</sup> would have been both humiliating and isolating. In the context of Victorians monitoring their private journals with secret codes, the options for Effie to obtain advice or counsel for her situation would have been limited. Extensive arguing

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<sup>61</sup> Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> James, *The Order of Release*, 220. Dated March 7, 1854.



with her husband about his decision of celibacy, while it proved fruitless, could also have succeeded in making Effie feel like one of the desperate, licentious women depicted by moral reformers. During a time when the sexuality of middle-class women was guarded as a national virtue, it is hardly surprising that Effie suffered a breakdown shortly after her marriage. She was trapped in an unhappy and unusual union, yet was bound by a moral code to maintain silence about her enforced chastity.<sup>64</sup>

Acton did not believe in finding sexual reprieve or solace through marriage. He does refer to marriage in religious terms, quoting Genesis as he instructs, “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth – in the way appointed by the Almighty Himself.”<sup>65</sup> Acton stops short of actually lauding the pleasures of connubial bliss. Instead, he takes great pains to point out that many new brides are “so anxious, and so apparently isolated” that most would prefer “for the first few days to dispense with what in most instances is to her...a most painful and distressing climax to her other agitations.”<sup>66</sup> Referring to newlywed intercourse as an “agitation,” from the female perspective, could hardly have promoted the anticipation of marriage among the men who read Acton’s work. For a man who supposedly understood the widespread popularity of brothels and commercial prostitution, it is unusual that Acton would believe that his advice would help maintain fidelity.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 132-149. Effie becomes ill in the early part of 1849 and returns to Perth to stay with her family, where she is found to be suffering from a nervous disorder. On July 5, 1849, Ruskin refers to Effie’s illness as “a nervous disease affecting the brain.” Eventually, Ruskin cites this as the reason for non-consummation of the marriage.

<sup>65</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 103.

Although he supposedly promotes marriage, Acton tells men that they should not expect a wife to respond in the same fashion as a courtesan; women who exhibit such sexual awareness are either “low and vulgar” or suffer from nymphomania, “a form of insanity.”<sup>67</sup> This strict definition of sex for procreation, as opposed to sex for pleasure, did little but contribute to the Victorian problems with vice. Wives were not supposed to enjoy sex with their husbands and by associating a woman’s sexual appetite with insanity, a misguided attempt to intimidate women from experiencing sexual enjoyment in favor of social stability is revealed. Acton explains to men that any sexual reciprocation on the part of a wife is “only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, [she] would far rather be relieved from his attentions.”<sup>68</sup> This indirectly encourages men to either seek sexual pleasure outside their marriage, or learn to do without, as Acton asserts that genuine ladies will not enjoy intercourse.

The “modest English girl” of Acton’s feminine ideal belonged in the “domestic sphere,” where she need never set foot in the bedroom, save for the few minutes it might take to conceive.<sup>69</sup>

Acton’s beliefs somewhat coalesce with the didactic material of the era. While Duffey and Ellis instructed women how to maintain the home and raise children, Acton and his medical peers used their academic research to keep Victorian wives and mothers within their appropriate sphere. The scholastic and biological means implemented by Acton and his medical peers indicates varying levels of manipulation. Nevertheless, they

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 103, 133.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 103.

believed that by stressing moderation as a solution for overwhelming sexual passion, they would be providing the groundwork for a generation of self-restraint. However, these attempts to monitor and control so many aspects of home life may have worked against the original intentions of medical professionals, as far as combating the rise of prostitution. By 1844, one estimate puts the number of brothels in London between 3300 and 5000, with approximately 8000 prostitutes.<sup>70</sup> This broke down to about one prostitute for every sixty men living in London.<sup>71</sup>

The rate of prostitution and the desire to ensure the virtuous, middle-class woman was kept “in chaste and prudent counsels caged,”<sup>72</sup> created a reactionary type of feminine sexuality. A combination of desirable social mores and virtues, coupled with fears of licentious female sexuality and the marital “immorality” affiliated with separation and divorce, caused men like Acton to concoct an unrealistic feminine ideal.<sup>73</sup> Melodramatic treatises by men like Talbot and Tait further contributed to society’s worry that middle-class women, the pillar of British morality, were themselves at risk of falling victim to sexually licentious behavior as witnessed in prostitutes. Talbot included a dismal, if not exaggerated, depiction of such a situation in *The Miseries of Prostitution*.

I will suppose a virtuous female, sheltered within the hallowed circle of domestic life – happy in the enjoyment of conscious innocence, and surrounded by all that is calculated to elevate her thoughts, to expand her mind, and to sweeten life. In an unguarded moment, she is lured from her home, and falls a prey to the seducer... The one fatal step which has brought shame upon her head, has

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<sup>70</sup> Lover of His Country, *An Appeal to Britain on a Subject of Vast Importance*, 5. In 1832, the year of publication, the author asserts there were approximately 50,000 prostitutes inhabiting London.

<sup>71</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 10-11.

<sup>72</sup> Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, Book II, Canto II: 10.

<sup>73</sup> Regarding the immorality of marital separations, see, Handley and Kemple, “A Review of a Bill to Provide for the Access of Parents to Their Children,” 282-283.

banished shame from her heart...She plunges deeper, and still deeper, into vice and iniquity, until she is irrecoverably lost.<sup>74</sup>

Lynda Nead identifies the correlation between a prostitute's sexual disorder and a loss of domestic tranquility. In losing her feminine purity, a fallen woman represents a decrepit interior and failure of the domestic ideals so heavily lauded by women like Ellis and Duffey.<sup>75</sup> This concept would alarm Victorian men to the possibility that a member of their household might fall prey to the lure of vice. If a man's wife became corrupt, who would then provide a moral guidepost for the rest of the family?

Overall, in displaying an overzealousness to prevent vice, purge impure sexuality from the home, and protect feminine sexuality, Acton's sexual ideals may have succeeded in little more than adding sexual confusion and stress to Victorian married life.

Contrary to the representations in Acton, there were Victorian men who did not view sexual desire in women as a "disease."<sup>76</sup> Medical doctors, like Dr. Michael Ryan, acknowledged the "sensation of desire in females," pointing out that "in order to have coition effectual, there is a mutual relation necessary – a union in mind and pleasurable enjoyment as well as in body..."<sup>77</sup> During the same time, Richard Carlile and George Drysdale both contributed to the egalitarian representation of masculine and feminine sexuality. Carlile openly points out, "Why should not the female state her passion to the

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<sup>74</sup> Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*, 44.

<sup>75</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 34.

<sup>76</sup> Barker-Benfield, "The Spermatic Economy," 54.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Ryan, *A Manual of Midwifery*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: np, 1831), 58. Cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Marriage to Birth*, 232-233.

male, as well as the male to the female?”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Drysdale asserts, “In woman, exactly as in man, strong sexual appetites are a very great virtue, as they are signs of a vigorous frame...and a naturally-developed sexual disposition...If chastity must continue to be regarded as the highest female virtue; it is impossible to give any woman real liberty.”<sup>79</sup> Henry Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) not only asserts the equality of women and promotes their suffrage, he denounces the type of chivalry that has previously been discussed in relation to Sir Walter Scott’s representations of feminine protection.<sup>80</sup> Ellis writes, “The economical independence of women can alone place the sexual relationships on a sound and free basis.”<sup>81</sup> This would infer the removal of women from an existence solely within their “domestic sphere.” Ellis’s suggestion promotes the physical, moral, and emotional health of sexual relationships, more so than any representations made by Acton, yet evidence will shortly reveal that the economic independence of women actually evoked hostile sexual opinions.

These opinions vary widely from those of Acton, Tait, and Talbot. It is important to note the assertion by Jalland and Hooper that, “there was no single orthodoxy about female sexuality in Victorian and Edwardian England, in spite of attempts by some writers to simplify the issues and create a common sexual consciousness.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Carlile, *Every Woman’s Book or What is Love?* 8. As cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 233-234.

<sup>79</sup> George Drysdale, *Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion: By a Student of Medicine* (London: np, 1855), 172-173. As cited in: Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Havelock Ellis, “The Changing Status of Women.” *Westminster Review* 128 (April 1887): 825. “If the intimate association of the sexes destroys what remnant may linger of the unhealthy ideal of chivalry... that is a matter for rejoicing.”

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 827.

<sup>82</sup> Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 214.

While Acton's work with prostitutes contributed to his strict promotion of sexual restraint, in the case of George Drysdale, his involvement with the suffragette movement enabled him to form an entirely different opinion about women.<sup>83</sup> Acton enabled his views concerning female sexuality to be formed by the immorality and oppression of prostitution, circumstances which caused him to create unrealistic, ideal models for feminine sexuality. Drysdale lacked the need to form such an ideal model, because he knew that the true representation of female sexuality was neither asexual nor depraved. It was simply healthy.

Feminine sexuality is a topic fraught with many contradictions and convoluted ideals. Considering the pressures placed on middle-class women to maintain a sense of domestic tranquility, not only for their families, but for the morals of the Empire, perhaps it is more understandable that certain individuals took the protection of feminine sexuality too far. Denying women the right to their own sexuality, whether or not for the sake of the Empire, was an inappropriate method of ideal protection exercised by some. Perhaps the most interesting contradiction concerning feminine sexuality is that the ideal roles for a woman to occupy were those of wife and mother, "conditions which publicly proclaimed sexuality."<sup>84</sup>

#### *Education and Sexuality: The Protection of Potential Reproduction*

Until the later part of the nineteenth-century, a young woman's education was focused towards the ultimate end of marriage and motherhood. Sarah Stickney Ellis

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<sup>83</sup> Drysdale, *Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion*, 270. As cited in: Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 81.

<sup>84</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 322.

enforces the concept that ladies, upon emerging from school, needed to recognize their duties lay within the home and contributions to the “domestic sphere.” In fact, she chides young ladies who emerge from finishing schools and display a “ridiculous assumption of modern refinement” that excludes them from their former household duties. “Gentlewomen they may be, and refined women too; for when did either gentleness or true refinement disqualify a woman for her proper duties?”<sup>85</sup>

It is through the channel of education where concepts of feminine protection and sexuality merge and provoke debate. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it was accepted practice for ladies to be educated by way of a finishing school or governess. Ladies fortunate enough to belong to the upper-class or aristocracy were privy to more flexibility concerning their education. In addition to studying the drawing room “arts” of dancing and singing, ladies of the upper-classes could be expected to have a wider knowledge of European languages, given the broader social circles in which they could expect to travel.<sup>86</sup> These talents and characteristics represent the “education of quality” which M. Jeanne Peterson defines as, “an education most likely to attract a gentleman.”<sup>87</sup>

In *Juventus Mundi*, Gladstone references the work of Henry Thomas Buckle, whose article on “The Influence of Women on the Progress of Knowledge” held great interest to the statesman on his discussion of the morals and ethics of Homeric women.<sup>88</sup> In addition to observing “that women are constantly growing more influential,” Buckle likewise praises the deductive abilities of women, while lamenting that “the remarkable

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<sup>85</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 107.

<sup>86</sup> Peterson, *Family, Love, and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen*, 52.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi*, 408.

rapidity with which women think is obscured by that miserable...preposterous system, called their education.”<sup>89</sup> It is interesting that Buckle praises the intuition of women, as well as their emotions, for giving them “insight into character...and the fine tact for which they are remarkable,” as these feminine characteristics caused many critics to denounce higher education for women because of certain hormonal and reproductive concerns.

In contrast, Dr. Henry Maudsley expresses in his article, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” the importance of preserving a woman’s ability to reproduce, no matter the cost. He writes that the “bodily and mental changes that are connected with the development of the reproductive system,” which are all in “preparation[s] for conception, and nothing is more necessary to the preservation of female health than that these changes should take place...”<sup>90</sup> Concern over puberty and adolescence in young women not only indicates a penchant for protection amongst Victorians, but could also relate a masculine uneasiness about the evolution of feminine ideals. Writing his medical opinions in 1874, Maudsley may have been slightly reminiscent of the past era of the angel in the house, which peaked between 1837 and 1857. At that time, concurrent with the publication of Ellis’s *Women of England* series, the family provided the basis of national stability, an object to which middle-class women wholly devoted their efforts. Women were inundated with responsibilities within their “domestic sphere,” ranging from moral and emotional to sexual. Within the home, they were charged with the duty

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<sup>89</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle, “The Influence of Women on the Progress of Knowledge,” *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* 57, no. 340 (April 1858): 395, 399.

<sup>90</sup> Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” 467.



to “re-create society from below.”<sup>91</sup> If women emerged from the “domestic sphere” to participate in the “male sphere,” men would have seen this as a prospective threat to the morality and stability of homelife.

Men who shared Maudsley’s attitude would not have interpreted women’s pursuit of higher education as a mark of evolving femininity. Instead, they would have deemed it as a physical threat on two fronts: domestic and maternal. Women who obtained higher education and desired to enter the professions would no longer be available to provide the type of domestic tranquility promoted by Ellis. A woman’s professional career would interfere with reproduction, either by the specific use of birth control methods or, as promoted by Maudsley, reproductive damage caused by extensive studying.

Therefore, the reaction of Victorian males towards the changing status of women reflects their fears about feminine sexuality being repressed in favor of pursuits outside their sphere, and its impact on reproduction. This conveys the male desire to maintain the status quo, although in the decades following Sarah Stickney Ellis’s first book in her *Women of England* series, attitudes concerning domesticity were quickly changing. One example is again demonstrated by the work of Henry Havelock Ellis, who argues that women are “bound by a thousand Lilliputian threads” and are worse off than a mine worker who “has two-thirds of the twenty-four hours to himself.”<sup>92</sup> He then dispels worries about reproductive concerns, pointing out that, “Hunger and love are the two great motor impulses, the ultimate sources, probably, of all other impulses... and

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<sup>91</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 183.

<sup>92</sup> Ellis, “The Changing Status of Women,” 824-825.

reproduction is always the chief end of the nutrition which hunger waits on, the supreme aim of life everywhere.”<sup>93</sup>

Nevertheless, Maudsley emphatically promotes the protection of feminine sexuality when he relates the research of Dr. Edward Clarke, whose book, *Sex in Education* (1874), paints a grim picture about the future relationship between women, their health, and education. Clarke cites “an excessive educational strain” as bearing responsibility for “baneful effects upon female health,” which has caused women to become “permanently disabled to a greater or less degree by improper methods of study, and by a disregard of the reproductive apparatus.”<sup>94</sup> Clarke and Maudsley collectively contribute to the ever-growing list of methods by which to protect the sexuality of a young lady. Although their advice is not as superficial as the fashion tips provided by Duffey or Ellis, the doctors nevertheless reveal a desire to protect the reproductive organs of potential wives and mothers.

The reproductive fears expressed by Clarke and Maudsley could also be interpreted as oppressive towards young women desiring to leave the confines of the “domestic sphere.” Anne Digby discusses the controversy regarding women pursuing higher education, listing the popularity of “Social Darwinism” among the reasons for men stressing motherhood and reproduction as women’s highest calling.<sup>95</sup> She points out that Victorian males tried to use a “biological rationale for gender differentiation in

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 825-826.

<sup>94</sup> Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” 474.

<sup>95</sup> Anne Digby, “Women’s Biological Straitjacket,” in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, eds., Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 213.

society.”<sup>96</sup> The interpretation expressed in Digby’s article, “Women’s Biological Straitjacket,” reveals little in the way of feminine protection. Instead, she expresses the belief that medical men, “having mapped new territories in psychiatry and gynaecology...were keen to exploit their colonized territory and restrict the opportunities of their ‘captive’ subjects – women.”<sup>97</sup> This assertion, coupled with the first British female doctor, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, fighting against the belief that women would suffer “derangement of the functions of the female organization” in higher education, highlights the overzealousness of many Victorian men concerning the protection of female reproduction.<sup>98</sup> In Digby’s article, this culminates in the attitude that women were actually forcibly incapacitated by medical opinions, rather than protected.

In attempting to protect the social stability which women had come to represent, some Victorian males did mistakenly exchange feminine protection for feminine suppression. This is evidenced by the medical assertions of Maudsley and Clarke, who attempted to define all women by their sexuality. Davidoff and Hall similarly concede with this assertion, citing that men are the ones who retain gender neutrality.<sup>99</sup> Women are defined by their sexuality to some extent, inasmuch as their reproductive capabilities define the proliferation of the future generation. However, in terms of Victorians and feminine sexuality, it was a select group of men who elected to define women in terms of their sexuality. As a gender, women were not wholly defined by their sexuality until men

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>98</sup> Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” 475. As cited in: Digby, “Women’s Biological Straitjacket,” 209.

<sup>99</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 29.

became concerned that, in leaving the “domestic sphere” for higher education in the “male sphere,” reproduction rates would be negatively effected.

It is critical to recognize that all Victorian males were not anti-feminists, as illustrated by the writings of Buckle, Havelock Ellis, and Mill, and the ideal of feminine piety under which Gladstone labored. Those who were misogynists used their medical research to not only condone taboos about sexuality, but to also contribute their social attitudes to their scientific opinions. This is evident in a speech given by James MacGrigor Allan in 1869. Concerning women and their menstrual cycles, he determines, “They suffer under a languor and depression which disqualify them for thought or action, and render it extremely doubtful how far they can be considered responsible beings while the crisis lasts. Much of the inconsequent conduct of women, their petulance, caprice, and irritability, may be traced directly to this cause.”<sup>100</sup> Medical men who already harbored misogynistic beliefs would have needed very little encouragement to readily assume that all women were temporarily impaired, both mentally and physically, every month. Additionally, men who believed women had no place in the professional world viewed negative research regarding feminine sexuality and reproduction as a license to stifle the changing status of women. Men who may not otherwise have objected to the presence of women in the professions could have changed their minds after medical opinions preyed upon their fears that women would forfeit their ability to reproduce if they left the “domestic sphere.”

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<sup>100</sup> James MacGrigor Allan, *Anthropological Review* 7 (1869), cxcviii-cxix. As cited in: Elaine and English Showalter, “Victorian Women and Menstruation,” in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), 40.

Victorian males had different reasons for asking themselves the same question: “why should we spoil a good mother by making an ordinary grammarian?”<sup>101</sup>

There were women who believed they should remain within their appropriate sphere and protect their reproductive functions. Jalland and Hooper quote a letter written to Mary Gladstone Drew in 1888 concerning “Nature’s Clearest Indications for Women.” “To a large extent I agree with you that you may trust to Nature, without interference, as to what work women can take up. But then I think those who insist on ignoring the very weakness which you so fully allow, are really running counter to Nature’s clearest indications, and are perverse in wishing women to go at men’s work till they drop.”<sup>102</sup> The conservative morals conveyed between Mary Drew and her friend, Lucy Cavendish, reflect Gladstone’s paternal impact, which would have included the statesman’s own religiosity and feminine protectiveness. Gladstone opposed birth control, female suffrage and had tirelessly fought against the Marriage Act on the grounds of its immorality. He was so passionate about his desire to prevent the passage of the Marriage Act that, according to biographer Matthew, Gladstone neglected his wife, who was in the throes of a nervous breakdown following her sister’s death.<sup>103</sup> Prior to her marriage, Mary Drew worked as her father’s political secretary and her younger sister, Helen, remained single and became the headmistress of Newnham College in the 1870s. Considering these

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<sup>101</sup> T. S. Clouston, *The Hygiene of Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Methuen, 1906), 581. As cited in: Digby, “Women’s Biological Straitjacket,” 213.

<sup>102</sup> Lucy Cavendish to Mary [Gladstone] Drew, November 27, 1888, Mary [Gladstone] Drew Papers, BL Additional MS. 46235, folios 239-240. As cited in: Jalland and Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death*, 24-25.

<sup>103</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 161. See also: Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 42-43. Catherine and her younger sister, Mary, were so close that when both sisters became engaged, they had a double-wedding in 1839.

circumstances, Mary Drew's assertions indicate a conditional, rather than definite, exclusion of women (married or not) from higher education and the professions.<sup>104</sup>

Among the categories of Victorian educational activists, historian Pauline Marks refers to liberal humanists as those who believed "the function of female education was to fit [women] more properly for wife-and-motherhood."<sup>105</sup> These educational goals appear to coincide with the emergence of a genteel middle-class and the separation of spheres during the early years of Victoria's reign. Likewise, Duffey suggests that young ladies receive an education that prepares them for motherhood, criticizing the fact that girls are "usually excused if not excluded from the study of physiology, particularly in the special parts of it which they most need to know; books which might be of use to them are kept out of their sight."<sup>106</sup> Duffey's comments interestingly combine conflicting Victorian attitudes regarding female education; she concedes that girls should be included in various fields of study, but only so that their understanding about childbirth and motherhood will be broadened. These remarks meet the opponents of women in higher education, and its proponents, in the middle. Duffey realizes that changes are needed in female education, yet only for the extended knowledge required to become a better wife and mother.

Ellis believes women should refrain from leaving the "domestic sphere" or even pursue higher education. She prefers that women be educated to learn good virtues,

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<sup>104</sup> Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 10. Matthew, *Gladstone*, 315-316. Helen Gladstone attended Cambridge University and then taught at Newnham College in the 1870s and 1880s.

<sup>105</sup> Pauline Marks, "Femininity in the Classroom: An Account of Changing Attitudes," in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, eds. Mitchell and Oakley (New York: Harmondsworth, 1976), 185. As cited in: Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Duffey, *What Women Should Know*, 141.

morals, and selflessness. Her words are laced in sarcasm when she asks, “What man is there in existence who would not rather his wife should be free from selfishness, than be able to read Virgil without the use of a dictionary.”<sup>107</sup> Ellis describes in detail the best type of education ladies can receive as follows:

Look at all the heroines, whether of romance or reality... [who] are held up to universal admiration – at all who have gone down to honoured graves, amongst the tears and the lamentations of their survivors. Have these been the learned, the accomplished women; the women who could speak many languages, who could solve problems and elucidate systems of philosophy? No: or if they have, they have also been women who were dignified with the majesty of moral greatness... who, endued with an almost super-human energy, could trample under-foot every impediment that intervened between them and the accomplishment of some great object upon which their hopes were fixed...<sup>108</sup>

Davidoff and Hall charge Ellis with being instrumental in “rigidifying existing views that it was not genteel for women to work.”<sup>109</sup> In her books, Ellis speaks solely to women who intend to marry, manage their husband’s household, and provide selfless support to her family. The subject of higher education or gainful employment is ignored, save for Ellis’s sarcastic remarks about the pointlessness of a woman learning to read Virgil. Likewise, this is the same audience to whom Duffey addresses her manual nearly forty years after Ellis. These opinions also reflect a class-consciousness. For a middle-class woman to seek education and a profession outside the home, it would be lowering herself to the status of the working-class. Ellis reflects this class-consciousness when she

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<sup>107</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 71.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>109</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 184.

warns her readers that, “When a lady descends from her own proper station, to speak in an irritating or injurious manner to a servant, she is herself guilty of impertinence...”<sup>110</sup>

The dictations of class and gender are the factors that incite Penelope Holland to pen her article, “Our Offence, Our Defence, and Our Petition,” in 1869. Holland reflects the frustration of her sex at being denied opportunities in higher education and the professions, which would cost them their femininity and, according to men like Maudsley, their reproductive abilities. The resentment against masculine charges that Victorian ladies have given themselves “up to a mad search for pleasure...[caring] for nothing save dress, extravagance, and the vanity of personal appearance,”<sup>111</sup> believing that it is society that has pushed these types of frivolities on women. The romanticism of Patmore, Ruskin, and Scott reveals the ideal type of femininity as depicted through poetry and prose. Scott wrote entire essays lauding the virtues of chivalry which was dominated by a “devotion to the female sex,”<sup>112</sup> a sentiment which Havelock Ellis challenges more than sixty years later. Over time, this type of chivalric devotion metamorphosed into protection, the likes of which began to frustrate women like Holland who felt “the only object of their lives [is] a rich or noble marriage.”<sup>113</sup> While some women do marry for love, Holland points out that many others find themselves in unhappy, “mercenary marriages,” so that the bride can escape the “insipid uselessness of her life.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 181.

<sup>111</sup> Holland, “Our Offence, Our Defence, and Our Petition,” 324.

<sup>112</sup> Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, 21.

<sup>113</sup> Holland, “Our Offence, Our Defence, and Our Petition,” 324.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.



The domestic order established by the separation of spheres, following international instability, economic crises, and the accession of a new monarch, emerged to provide a much-needed form of social stability for England. As time progressed and more internal stability was acquired, the importance of the “domestic sphere” increased and its boundaries tightened. The emergence of more legal rights for women and the rise of industry, as highlighted by the 1851 Great Exhibition, indirectly served to initiate change in the “domestic sphere.”<sup>115</sup>

### *The ‘Redundant’ Single Woman*

The constant of protective female sexuality emerges amidst varying contradictory beliefs. Among the medical and moral opinions of Maudsley, Acton, Tait, Talbot, and even Ellis and Duffey, there is a fixed emphasis on marriage and motherhood. William Rathbone Greg writes, “marriage, the union of one man with one woman, is unmistakably indicated as the despotic law of life. This is *the* rule.”<sup>116</sup> Approximately thirty years prior to Greg’s article, barristers Edwin Handley and John Kemple just as emphatically declared the roles of wives and mothers as “the two most honourable estates of womanhood... [whose] natural and proper sphere of duty [is] the home of her husband...”<sup>117</sup> Advice imparted by Duffey and Ellis is directed at women whose entire

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<sup>115</sup> For more on the Great Exhibition, see, Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). Yvonne Ffrench, *The Great Exhibition: 1851* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950). Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace: 1851-1936, A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise* (London: Hugh Evelyn Ltd., 1970). For more on social implications of the Great Exhibition, see, Lorenza Stevens Berbineau, *From Beacon Hill to the Crystal Palace: The 1851 Travel Diary of a Working-Class Woman*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002). G.F.A. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain: 1851-1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 230-263.

<sup>116</sup> Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” 438.

<sup>117</sup> Handley and Kemple, “Review of a Bill to Provide for the Access of Parents to Their Children,” 274, 283.

upbringing had centered around the acquisition of a husband, children, and household. Women who did not attain these goals could occupy other respectable arenas of society. Pat Jalland dedicates a chapter in her study, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, to the examination of spinsterhood amongst the upper middle-class and aristocratic families. She encourages the review of each spinster to “be seen in the context of her own family,” as some women did remain unmarried in order to care for their relatives.<sup>118</sup>

This is evident in the case of Beatrice Potter, who remained at home and acted as her widowed father’s hostess, while her seven elder sisters progressed into lives as respectable married women. When Beatrice did find love, it was with a man beneath her family’s social strata, which “meant that she could not marry him during her father’s lifetime ‘without grieving the old man past endurance.’”<sup>119</sup> This reveals two interesting social implications concerning spinsters. First, although it was preferable for every woman to marry, if a daughter remained single, she could retain a level of respectability by devoting herself to caring for her aged parents or acting as housekeeper for a sibling’s family. This type of filial devotion is dramatized in Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit*, by way of Amy Dorrit’s dedication to her emotionally troubled and financially irresponsible father.<sup>120</sup> Cobbe promotes this selfless type of care-giving, a form of luxurious charity that married women cannot afford. A single woman who has no husband or children “feels that in the power of devoting her *whole* time and energies to some benevolent task,

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<sup>118</sup> Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 254.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 257, 53.

<sup>120</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1857; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1953). For a Regency-era example of dutiful, unmarried daughters in fiction, see, Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818; repr. New York: The Modern Library, 2001).

she is enabled to effect perhaps some great good...”<sup>121</sup> This type of social diversion for unmarried women afforded them a level of insulation from idleness or social disapproval by giving them a purpose.

Additionally, if a marriage prospect did arise for a spinster, serious consideration was given to the social status that would be attained through matrimony. This exposes an interesting dichotomy concerning marriage for the middle- and upper middle-classes. In some circumstances, it was better to remain unmarried and retain a more respectable domain of society, rather than trade marriage for a lower social class. This represents an interesting form of protection for unmarried women, whereby they are cautioned by the threat of losing social status to not marry too recklessly, should the situation present itself. This is revealed by Beatrice Potter’s decision to refrain from marrying a man beneath her rank, until after her father’s death, thus avoiding parental displeasure and possible intervention.<sup>122</sup>

While some authors lauded the qualities of noble and selfless spinsters, there were similarly many writers looked with criticism on the women who had failed at the only societal demand required of them: marriage. The cynical outlook of Greg in his article, “Why Are Women Redundant?” reveals his belief that nothing good can come of women who do not marry. As previously mentioned, the most acceptable type of celibacy for women was for charitable or religious purposes. Regarding “all others who go through life unmarried, celibacy is unnatural, even though it may in one sense be voluntary.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Cobbe, “Celibacy v. Marriage,” 233.

<sup>122</sup> Regarding the loss of social status with marriage, see also, Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” 446.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 440.

Greg criticizes women who do not appear to desire marriage, labeling them as, “devoid of the *fibre féminine*, to whom Nature never speaks at all.” Other women, who pursue the professions and exhibit intellectual qualities, are described as “epicene,” or sexless, androgynous individuals who are “abnormal.”<sup>124</sup>

These types of women, criticized by Maudsley, were to be feared and disdained for stifling reproduction and the proliferation of the Empire. Maudsley offers a sharp critique of the roles occupied by unmarried women, correlating a woman’s pursuit of higher education or a profession with the potential loss of the maternal instinct. He refers to these women as “those in whom the organs are wasted...[as] a race of sexless beings who, undistracted and unharassed by the ignorable troubles of reproduction, shall carry on the intellectual work of the world, not otherwise than as the sexless ants do the work and fighting of the community.”<sup>125</sup> This reveals a masculine intimidation by women who refused to conform to the pre-determined Victorian mold of marriage and motherhood. As indicated by Havelock Ellis, women who attained their economic independence would acquire sexual equality in their relationships, and no longer have to suffer under a state of complete dependence. Social and masculine fears regarding a woman’s independence from male authority is highlighted in the 1830s, whereby the denial of a mother’s right to her children is promoted as a “safeguard to preserve the institution of marriage...”<sup>126</sup>

The desire to continue to enforce these standards and maintain the angel in the house is evidenced in the appeals of Maudsley and Greg, presenting a woman who does

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>125</sup> Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” 477.

<sup>126</sup> Handley and Kemple, “Review of a Bill to Provide for the Access of Parents to Their Children,” 278.

not conform to the Victorian ideal as a sexless, “evil and anomaly to be cured.”<sup>127</sup> In his article, Greg tackles the problem of disproportionately unmarried women in relation to unmarried men, recognizing that excessive male migration throughout the Empire and into parts of North America has contributed to the phenomena. Greg’s suggested solution, however, conveys that he regards the redundant number of women as little more than commercial items in need of exportation. “If the redundant numbers *here* were transported thither, they [new countries] would scarcely be filled, and we should be denuded.”<sup>128</sup> He gives little consideration toward the sentiments of the individual women, referring to them merely as statistics that are in need of “a natural rectification.”<sup>129</sup>

Regardless of Greg’s concern over the disproportionate amount of men to women, Jalland points out that “spinsters were not a new problem in the nineteenth century, though the Victorians wrote as if they had invented ‘redundant women.’”<sup>130</sup> Lawrence Stone attributes a rise in spinsterhood between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as “owing to the level of low nuptiality among younger sons and... the rise in the cost of marriage portions.”<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, the Victorian concern over spinsters not only relates to the ideal of femininity promoted in literature and society, but also through emerging science and technology. Mendus and Rendall write that “a move was made from the belief that the world was a strange, mysterious, uncontrollable collection of supernatural

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<sup>127</sup> Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” 440.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics*, 254.

<sup>131</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England*, 380.

forces... to the belief that the world was composed of inert stuff whose operations were governed by scientifically discoverable and regular laws of nature.”<sup>132</sup> The Victorian desire to monitor all aspects of society is evidenced through the careful division of male and female spheres, advice books covering all topics from attire to appropriate conversation and Acton’s encouragement to conquer marital excesses. All of these examples share one common characteristic: the maintenance of control.

The desire to eliminate the abundance of spinsters also reveals some indirect representations of feminine protection. As unusual as it may appear, men like Greg and Maudsley may have introduced the use of medical intimidation in order to convince some women that maintaining their single status was unfeminine. Maudsley warns women that subjecting themselves to the same type of education or training as men causes the following:

The special functions which have relation to her future offices as woman, and the full and perfect accomplishment of which is essential to sexual completeness, have been deranged... she is unfit for the best discharge of maternal functions and is apt to suffer from a variety of troublesome and serious disorders in connection with them.<sup>133</sup>

Unmarried women who may have desired to marry eventually, including Beatrice Potter Webb and Mary Gladstone Drew, would have been caused undue worry by such medical opinions. Nevertheless, if writing against the higher education and professional careers of women succeeded in scaring some spinsters to the altar, perhaps men like Maudsley, Acton, and Greg believed their efforts were worth it. Making women afraid of losing their maternal instincts or femininity and thereby intimidating them into marriage,

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<sup>132</sup> Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 8.

<sup>133</sup> Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” 475.

would have made the aforementioned doctors and moralists feel their protection was warranted, whether the women wanted it or not.

In writing about the plight of spinsters and suggesting their deportation, men like Greg may have also believed they were assisting single women in raising their social status. While he does indicate that some women may step down the social ladder by marrying beneath their rank, he likewise attempts to convince women that their morale will improve with marriage. “Women who are condemned to celibacy, struggle, and privation here, might, if transferred to the colonies or the United States, find... usefulness, happiness, domestic affection, reasonable comfort, and ultimate prosperity.”<sup>134</sup> In contradiction, Cobbe points out the opposite social situation, writing “till lately the condition of an unmarried woman...was so shackled by social prejudices that it was inevitably a dreary and monotonous one.”<sup>135</sup> However, Cobbe continues to observe, “the ‘old maid’ of 1861 is an exceedingly cheer personage, running about untrammelled by husband or children...‘My life and what shall I do with it?’ is a problem to which she finds the happiest solution...”<sup>136</sup>

Single women were in need of protection for both their own good and the good of society. Fear of female sexual licentiousness, as expressed by Tait and Talbot, illustrates that Victorians were concerned about more than an unmarried woman’s lack of reproduction. They were also concerned about the unchecked passions of unmarried women. If the opinions of Carlile and Drysdale were to be believed, and women possessed a sexual nature that was equally as powerful as that of men, single women

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<sup>134</sup> Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?” 446, 445.

<sup>135</sup> Cobbe, “Celibacy v. Marriage,” 232.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 233.

could serve as a downfall to respectable society. Greg viewed a woman's sexuality as the basis of all societal control, something which is revealed by his desire to solve the problem of excessive numbers of single women. This mentality demonstrates the need that Greg and Maudsley would have encourage regarding the protection, and subsequent control, of a woman's sexual prowess. Exporting British spinsters and subsequently marrying them off revealed itself as a suitable conclusion to maintaining protective control over the sexuality of single women.

Overall, a woman without a husband represented a form of social instability and a main reason why specific spheres were created in the first place. If all wives belonged in the "domestic sphere" and men belonged in their own sphere, where did this leave the single woman?

Hence, Victorian society's harsh opinion of their unmarried women.

One striking example of an unmarried woman who never conformed to society, and never achieved a form of domestic stability, is Helen Gladstone (1814-1880). Youngest sister of William Gladstone, Helen is described by historian Joyce Marlow as a "casualty among the Gladstone children...she had as good a brain as any of them...but it was given neither nourishment nor direction."<sup>137</sup> Helen and her brother were close in their youth, writing to each another to lend moral support. Gladstone's relationship with Helen paled in comparison to the one he had once enjoyed with his elder sister, Anne. In Anne, Gladstone saw evangelicalism, purity, piety, and selfless combined. Anne

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<sup>137</sup> Marlow, *Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone*, 6.



Gladstone died an unmarried virgin of twenty-six, in 1829; her brother thereafter commemorated the anniversary of her birthday with religious solemnity in his diaries.<sup>138</sup>

Helen Gladstone found herself held to the ideal standard of her late sister, in addition to the social and moral expectations of society. Gladstone's biographer, H.C.G. Matthew, notes that, "Helen brought out an otherwise nonexistent trait in her brother: he bullied her."<sup>139</sup> The ideals of feminine piety observed by Gladstone, especially evident in his attempted rescue of Lady Lincoln, also reveal his desire to hold women to high standards. He believed all women were capable of some form of redemption. This would be especially true within his own family; his own wife was devotedly religious, as was his late sister, Anne. Helen's sense of religiosity differed widely from that of Gladstone, and in 1842 she converted to Roman Catholicism. This type of religious apostasy, in Gladstone's eyes, constituted a behavior from which Helen needed redemption.

Rather than approaching his sister with the protective caution he warranted Lady Lincoln, he became strict, dogmatic, and condescending. His own recollection of his conversations with Helen about Roman Catholicism in relation to his book, *The State in Its Relations with the Church*, reveal Gladstone's less-than-amiable demeanor. On June 11, 1842, Gladstone recalls, "I pressed her to tell me as clearly as she could which portions she had read," supposedly in an attempt to "not overstate the case" of the Church of England in his book. Nevertheless, in the same conversation he chides his sister for

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<sup>138</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: December 24, 1842. Gladstone recorded Anne's birthday by writing: "Never let me forget that on this day dearest Anne saw first the light." See also: David W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids, MI: William R. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 6-7, 30.

<sup>139</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, 328.

her infrequent attendance at church since 1837, although she claims to attend often. He quips, “perhaps six or eight times.”<sup>140</sup>

This represents a form of feminine protection Gladstone offered his sister, Helen, in an attempt to rescue her faith. Yet if he believed his strict demeanor towards his sister would persuade her to return to the Church of England, he was mistaken.

As Helen grew older, she emerged into the antithesis of everything Gladstone idealized about women, especially in relation to her faith. She went to the Continent and, for a time, was engaged to the Catholic Count Leon Sollohub; she struggled with an addiction to opium; and she never married or settled into a resourceful life of productivity.<sup>141</sup> Although Helen had lost her only sister and mother when she was still fairly young, she was afforded no sympathy by her older brother. Gladstone may have believed that, if he had been able to work past the loss of loved ones, so too should Helen. However, Helen had not the opportunity to obtain a college education and pursue a professional career, unlike her brother.

Helen’s addiction to opium and a suicide attempt culminated in her being treated in an extreme fashion by her family. At one point, it has been alleged that she was illegally confined on the top floor of her father’s home. Shortly thereafter, she was again confined by her family, first near the Gladstone estate in Fasque and later at Leamington. While Helen was being treated for addiction between 1846 and 1848, there was speculation that she was also being treated for “hysterical” conditions, or gynaecological

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<sup>140</sup>*The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: June 11, 1842.

<sup>141</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 2: December 6, 1838. *The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: June 11, 1842, October 1845- November 1845.

problems.<sup>142</sup> This could indicate treatment that was being prescribed in accordance with the medical beliefs of Acton, who linked many signs of mental instability or depression to the practice of “solitary vice.”<sup>143</sup> Helen’s erratic behavior, which was closely monitored, coupled with her opium addiction and gluttony, may have indicated to her family that she was struggling against sexual licentiousness. Acton even identifies over-eating as an outward sign of a person’s indulgent character that impacted an “imaginary increase of sexual power.”<sup>144</sup>

Isba portrays Anne Gladstone as representative of all that Gladstone aspired to be, while Helen was his dark side.<sup>145</sup> Most likely, Gladstone saw beneath the troubled layers of his young sibling, recognized the similarities in their passionate natures, and saw in Helen all the indulgent evils that had the propensity to overwhelm him if he should ever waver in his morals. Gladstone had learned to conquer his inner demons through prayer and self-control, and he saw in Helen the failure to do the same. This best explains his strict treatment of her, including expelling her from his immediate family and home at Hawarden in 1843.<sup>146</sup> In their attempts to protect Helen from her many mental and physical problems, the Gladstone family illustrates an unusual case of extreme treatment towards an unmarried woman, supposedly for her own good. Furthermore, if there was concern that Helen was participating in the solitary vice, the Gladstones would have believed that they were also protecting her sexuality.

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<sup>142</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 59-64.

<sup>143</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 54. Conditions of sexual uneasiness can be revealed by “agitation, disquiet, and *malaise*... melancholy or misanthropy...”

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>145</sup> Isba, *Gladstone and Women*, 67.

<sup>146</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries*, 3: May 4, 1843.

There existed a narrow line of appropriate behavior where Victorian feminine sexuality was concerned. Many Victorians assumed women were sexually dormant; those who enjoyed sex too much risked being labeled as licentious. The unmarried status of a young lady was socially acceptable for nearly the first thirty years of her life, during which time her sexuality and innocence were closely monitored. This type of protection showed towards unmarried ladies relates not only to their physical safety from unwanted sexual advances, but also the indirect maintenance of social stability. Once a woman married, her sexuality was likewise guarded to maintain domestic stability and the progeny of her husband's household. If women failed to marry, solutions were suggested to rectify their redundancy in order to maintain protective control over the social problems that could arise from unguarded female sexuality. During her life, there was no time when a Victorian woman of the middle-class was free from some form of sexual protection.

Whether a woman was too young to know any better or too old to care, Victorian society created a system by which respectable feminine sexuality was protected, adulterous feminine sexuality was punished, and all collective forms of feminine sexuality were limited.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### *Victorians and Feminine Protection*

The ideals associated with the “woman’s sphere” contributed to the desire of Victorian society to protect British femininity and morality. Concepts of domestic tranquility and social stability, promoted by the imagery of authors like Sarah Stickney Ellis and Coventry Patmore, not only romanticized the role of middle-class women, but portrayed them as intrinsically valuable assets in need of protection. The popularity of feminine protection increased substantially during the 1830s and 1840s, the result of several developments. As previously mentioned, the Napoleonic Wars had come to an end and protection that had formerly been focused abroad could be turned inwards. Thus by the 1820s, the middle-class believed the time had come for domestic stability. The separation of the “woman’s sphere” from the “man’s sphere,” brought about by domestic changes of the Industrial Revolution, served to epitomize the home as a specifically feminine domain. Men worked elsewhere, thereby relegating the home to their wives and family members during the majority of the time. Additionally, one of the most influential authors on domesticity and femininity, Ellis, began publishing her *Women of England* series in 1838. This had a definitive impact on the standardization of domesticity and femininity.

The concept of feminine protection is a broad topic which may be interpreted in many ways. There are also many layers to the concept of ideal Victorian femininity; only the middle-class was examined in this study, because of its distinct affiliation with the

representation of the domestic tranquility promoted by Victorian society. A broader, more inclusive, study of feminine protection in Victorian Britain could easily expand to include the working-classes and upper-classes. These various classes all differed slightly in their view regarding what was respectable and feminine. Ellis describes the varying types of femininity among the classes:

...The higher the rank, and the greater the facilities of communication with other countries, the more prevalent are foreign manners, and modes of thinking... Neither is it entirely amongst the indigent and most laborious of the community, that we can with propriety look for those strong features of nationality which stamp the moral character of different nations... because the urgency of mere physical wants... induce a certain degree of resemblance in social feelings and domestic habits amongst people similarly circumstanced, to whatever country they may belong.<sup>1</sup>

Ellis's representation of the different social and economic circumstances of the working- and upper-classes of Britain explains the reasons for her exclusion of them from her audience. Their lifestyles are not necessarily conducive to models of ideal British femininity. Keith Thomas also points out that the social differences and expectations between classes, explaining that the stringent sexual double standards of the middle- and upper-classes were practically non-existent among the poor.<sup>2</sup> Given the differences between the classes it was necessary, for the purposes of this study, to select one social class on which to focus.

The examination of Victorian literature, Parliament, and sexuality reveals evolving and conditional examples of feminine protection. The most ideal concept of femininity and its protection emerges through the work of classic romantic authors, such as Sir Walter Scott, who illustrates the model of modest femininity and virtue in *Ivanhoe*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, *The Women of England*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, "The Double Standard," 206.

The popularity of *Ivanhoe* had a long-term effect on concepts of feminine protection, virtue, and chivalry throughout the nineteenth-century. A good example is the Eglinton Tournament in 1839, inspired by medieval imagery, chivalry, and *Ivanhoe* itself.<sup>3</sup> It is through literature that the ideal representation of femininity worth protecting is conveyed. Extremes of feminine protection are also revealed through various forms of writing, such as the diary of William Gladstone or the personal life of John Ruskin. While the former was convinced that all women were innately pious and spiritually pure, the latter desired to protect the beauty and innocence of his bride to the point of refusing to consummate their marriage. Outwardly, both men adhere to extreme characteristics of ideal femininity. Yet Gladstone's optimism concerning womanly virtue is highly idealistic, while Ruskin's behavior towards his wife represents social awkwardness and impotency rather than protection.

Conditional protection is evident in parliamentary measures aimed to protect only certain types of women. The CD Acts are an example of grossly misdirected protection. Women suspected of prostitution were made to prove themselves innocent, or else they were forced to submit to an invasive examination. Those who refused risked imprisonment or becoming blacklisted from employment.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to protect one class of women, who had proven themselves worthy of feminine protection in the eyes of the law, another class was forced to endure the price of that protection. Lynda Nead points out that for a woman to commit an act of adultery was viewed as a violation of her

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<sup>3</sup> Anstruther, *The Knight and the Umbrella: An Account of the Eglinton Tournament*, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 110. Walkowitz gives an account of dance hall performer who refused to submit to an examination, refused to register as a prostitute, became blacklisted from work, and subsequently committed suicide to escape police harassment under the CD Acts.

femininity. Prostitutes had forsaken any form of feminine protection because of their “unnatural...irrevocable...” and adulterous behavior, which illustrates the Victorian legal expectation of women proving their worth before receiving protection.<sup>5</sup>

English Common Law operated on the assumption that all men were chivalrous and genuinely cared about protecting the interests of their wives and families. This is pointed out, verbatim, by William Blackstone in his *Commentaries*. “Even the disabilities, which the wife lies under, are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit. So great a favourite is the female sex of the laws of England.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this type of ideology was abused by many husbands, and many women were denied protection from marital violence or were forced to endure separation from their children, as revealed by the case of Caroline Norton. Although her husband was guilty of abusing her, the father’s rights were more powerful than those of the mother, and Norton was separated from her children for years. The mentality behind excluding women from direct legal representation, especially in cases of potential marital separation, was the intention of keeping families together.<sup>7</sup> This extreme form of legal restriction represents one circumstance of protection that women were subjected to, whether they wanted it or not.

An examination of the protection of feminine sexuality reveals restrictive attitudes of maintenance and control. Prior to marriage, young ladies were subjected to various forms of sexual control, including the supervision of reading material, clothing selections,

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<sup>5</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, 2: 445.

<sup>7</sup> Handley and Kemple, “A Review of a Bill to Provide Access for Parents to Their Children,” 278. The loss of maternal rights is referred to as “one restraint” by which to keep families from separating.



and social behavior. Once married, close supervision and the maintenance of feminine sexuality did not end, but rather increased. Married women were bound by legal disenfranchisement and medical authorities to remain chaste and sexually dormant. Single women were viewed as an unnatural anomaly: a problem that needed solving. Overall, sexuality was a valuable feminine asset that needed protection. As previously mentioned, the loss of a woman's sexual innocence was likened to her loss of femininity. The concept of ideal femininity was affiliated with domestic tranquility, and so the loss of a woman's femininity was equated with instability in the domestic sphere. Therefore, Victorian society believed that feminine sexuality needed to be maintained and protected, at all costs.

There was no shortage of Victorian authors and medical professionals willing to offer their opinion on the topic of feminine sexuality. The protection of feminine sexuality was advised by men like Dr. William Acton and Dr. Henry Maudsley. Acton writes that "sexual feeling in the female is in abeyance," and furthermore asserts that a "married woman has no wish to be treated on the footing of a mistress."<sup>8</sup> His medical peer, Maudsley, writes that women who do not wish to become wives or mothers are "intellectually and morally... defici[ent]... and fail to reach the ideal of a complete and perfect womanhood."<sup>9</sup> The undermining of feminine sexuality is one manner of extreme protection and was utilized by men who were nervous about the possible domestic repercussions of active female sexuality, a point highlighted in the works of William Tait

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<sup>8</sup> Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, 134-135.

<sup>9</sup> Maudsley, "Sex in Mind and in Education," 477.

and James Beard Talbot.<sup>10</sup> There were Victorians who believed that the strength of female sexuality equaled that of men, including Charles Drysdale and Richard Carlile. The strength of the opinions of men like Acton, Maudsley, Talbot, and Tait, produced an abundance of moralist and medical literature that not only denied the sexuality of modest women, but conveyed the abnormality of active sexuality in women. While these attitudes appear oppressive towards feminine sexuality, understanding the context of the research conducted by men like Acton and Tait reveals that at least one of their motives was protection of femininity and society, rather than the blatant oppression of either. This demonstrates that the Victorian mentality was that feminine sexuality was something to be protected, supervised, and maintained. The unguarded sexuality of one woman was not the overall concern, but rather the possibility of what unrestrained feminine sexuality represented to Victorian society, domesticity, and the Empire.

The examination of Victorian femininity through the lens of protection enables a new approach toward nineteenth-century gender relations. There are certain aspects of the lives of Victorian women wherein it would be easy to jump to the traditional, feminist conclusion of oppression and domination, such as the male attempts to keep women from higher education and the professions. However, upon reading the medical treatises prepared by men like Maudsley, who believed a woman's future reproductive capabilities were in danger if she overtaxed her mind, a new interpretation regarding Victorian attitudes towards women emerges. More than one hundred years after Maudsley's medical opinions were published, it has been demonstrated that his assumptions were incorrect. Within the context of the nineteenth-century, based on the interpretations of

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<sup>10</sup>See: Tait, *Magdalenism*. Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution*.

varying evidence, it is conceivable that some men would believe that a woman could suffer mentally and physiologically if she pursued higher education during her formative years.

The Victorians believed in moderation and strict self-discipline, something which is evidenced by the habits of Gladstone and Acton. Maudsley writes, “When Nature spends in one direction, she must economise in another direction.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, this belief was held by many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century doctors, who believed certain fluids needed to be frequently released to maintain balance and let off “psychological steam.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach to the examination of material concerning various aspects of middle-class, domestic femininity enables the formation of new historical opinions. It is through the survey of different categories of research and their combined interpretation, that new revelations about the lives of middle-class women are highlighted. In this circumstance, the consideration of literature, Parliament, and sexuality in the Victorian era illuminates a protective mentality which many men embraced. For example, the consideration of feminine protection and its ties to domesticity, social stability, and the Empire, enable a different interpretation of the misdirected protection expressed by Maudsley in his article, “Sex in Mind and in Education.”

On the other hand, while men may have been intending to protect women and their interests in many respects, this was not always achieved with success. The lack of feminine protection in various circumstances does not necessarily mean that protection

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<sup>11</sup> Maudsley, “Sex in Mind and in Education,” 467.

<sup>12</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 497.

was the ultimate intention of society or Parliament. Instead, while Victorian men tried to maintain feminine ideals, they often failed in reflecting masculine ideals of chivalry and honor, and became overwhelmed with the desire to exercise the power and control that England's patriarchal society had afforded them. This is particularly evident in the circumstance of Caroline Norton's abusive marriage and inability to obtain a divorce. By the time Norton was fighting for custody of her children in 1838, her research exposed not only numerous court cases where the father's rights had dominated mothers' petitions, she also revealed the slowly evolving legal opinions in Parliament. In the case of Mrs. Greenhill in 1835, a woman whose husband was living openly with his mistress and demanded full custody of their three infant daughters, the courts finally admitted to consider "the real question... whether the right of the father amounts to the exclusion of the mother."<sup>13</sup> This indicates that, while the courts were ultimately concerned with maintaining family stability, they were not wholly intent on dominating or oppressing the rights of the mother. Blackstone's *Commentaries* indicate protection of women as the mentality behind the construction of the English legal system, yet not all men behaved with the honorable intentions required to make the protection of femininity successful. By the end of the 1830s, the presence of small legal changes reveals Parliament's slow evolution towards derailing the protective mentality espoused by Blackstone.

Overall, conditions of feminine protection did vary throughout the nineteenth-century. The romanticism expressed by men like Scott, Patmore, and Gladstone, evolved into conditional protection under the law. Eventually, this romantic and conditional protection emerged into a restrictive form of protection in regards to feminine sexuality.

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<sup>13</sup> Norton, *The Separation of Mother and Child*, 64.

These methods and conditions of protection all emerged out of Victorian society's desire to ensure the success of the source of society's stability, which happened to be the middle-class woman.

Victorian society was determined to protect the angel in the house, whether she wanted it or not.

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