Subversion of Victorian Gender Roles in Oscar Wilde's Selected Plays

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To my dearest family members, my supporters in life.

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PREFACE

Originally based on my PhD dissertation, this book reveals how social construction of Victorian gender roles is disrupted in three plays of the prominent late Victorian poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde. As in all social constructs, what seems permanently attached to genders is merely an illusion maintained to regulate communities in terms of their individual and collective choices. People are trained from the earliest stages of their lives to become either women or men, and they are forced to keep on performing the roles imposed upon their genders throughout their lives. As a homosexual himself, Wilde challenges these roles without favoring any sex. He has always been a subject of investigation in gender-related study areas, feminist, and queer studies with his elegantly rebellious nature. As an attempt to contribute to the literature, this book is focused on the argument that Wilde is meticulous in showing the social aspect of gender construction. In Lady Windermere's Fan, An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest, he destroys all moral balances in order to create a new perception where no strict borders exist to discriminate the properly gendered person from the improper; hence, neither women nor men can fit into the groups of "good" or "bad" in the way Victorian society compels them to. The first chapter covers Lady Windermere's Fan and the constructs of angelic and corrupt women, pointing out the impact of morality on both women and men. Though being aware of the moral requirements, characters get out of their pre-assigned roles and forge an environment where it is not possible to define the correct manners of a woman and a man. In the second chapter on An Ideal Husband, I focus on the construct of the perfect husband and the ways which people, domestic wives being in the first place, feed with this ideal and then face the reality: a man displays several behaviors that contradict the beliefs attributed to him as a decent man. Lastly, the third play, The Importance of Being Earnest reveals all the hypocrisy women and men show in order to gain acceptance in marriages. Portrayed as typical Victorian characters, they either deviate from their moral grounds, or trivialize love and courtship, serving to undermine the superficial atmosphere where neither women nor men appear truly dignified. By drawing on these three plays, this study demonstrates that Wilde removes the boundaries of gender roles and consciously violates the perceived patterns of womanhood and manhood. Therefore, the former gender

categories of Victorian society lose their credibility and transform into a new, chaotic pattern.

I

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In nineteenth-century England, traditional social boundaries were blurred due to industrialization, the rise of the market economy, and class divisions. Not only gender boundaries but all social relations were affected by these developments. In this period, gender division also came to reflect class divisions. The characteristics of different social statuses began to differ for men and women. "Womanhood" and "manhood" took on different meanings and overtones. The new interactions between gender and class led to shifting views about how women and men were situated in the society. Indeed, one's social status was deeply connected to their economic and political power in Victorian society, which was not to be changed easily. Yet, the shifting mode of economic production redefined male and female positions in Victorian society, and by the same token, gender roles.

This book investigates the shifts in the perceptions of gender roles in three works of the late Victorian author and playwright, Oscar Wilde. The discussion focuses on the ways in which these plays first reflect and then invalidate late-Victorian constructions of gender. The central claim is that common male and female constructs of the period are gendered under the impact of institutions, politics, morality, and religion. Victorian constructs of gender are intertwined with class issues; therefore, cultural and institutional constructs of Victorian social classes require scrutinization. At this point, two institutional constructs are found to be directly related to gender roles: marriage and family.

In the Victorian period, literature about daily life was very much in fashion, and it contained reflections, criticisms, and satirical portrayals of cultural and social traditions. Such literature particularly dealt with gender issues within the context of marriage and family relations. So, there was a considerable amount of literary production that focused on the marriage plot. Apart from the novel, plays that dealt with marriage, family, and the roles of women and men came to the forefront. Oscar Wilde is perhaps the most important playwright of the late Victorian period with his plays that

reflect on, and satirize the institutions of marriage, family, and the gender conventions these institutions impose on the individuals. He treats the social and cultural constructs of gender roles in a comical way by creating fantastic situations and exaggerated characters. Although he adheres to the common ending of marriage plots, which is the happy ending, he still generates remarkable satire. His satire emerges from the points where he furnishes differing attitudes of men and women towards matrimony and family relations. He shows how these attitudes are shaped under the influence of the sociocultural habits and conventions by creating extreme situations in daily life, and scenes that require questioning the gender conventions. He, therefore, looks closely at the daily lives of the middle and upper classes where much of the reality of the gender conventions are observed. In other words, Wilde shows his audience that conventional gender constructs are reproduced in the mundane details of the Victorian daily life. So, in his plays, he brings out what goes unnoticed, namely, the ways traditional constructions of gender are generated in the daily attitudes, behavior, and language of the individuals. What, therefore, seems to be trivial and insignificant is actually the most important locus where the established gender conventions are affirmed and repeated. Wilde's significance is not limited to his satirical representations of the Victorian middle- and upper-class behaviors and attitudes; his minute observations regarding the shifts that gradually took place in the Victorian attitudes toward gender roles also matter. In his plays, he shows that conventional gender roles eventually collapse; as the nineteenth century closes, women and men start to redefine their roles and positions in British society. Wilde presents a fluctuating range of behaviors, which make it impossible to comprehend the realms of genders in their assumed forms.

Gender roles in the Victorian period: Separate spheres

The gender role records of Britain in the Victorian period can be interpreted as being under an extensive masculine pressure that prioritized men, while at the same time involving a gradual female challenge to the ruling patriarchy. Some shifts regarding gender roles took place in educational, social, or political contexts, but a just allocation of roles and a fair understanding of sexualities did not yet exist when the period ended. Despite some laws asserting the idea that women and men were equal but fundamentally different in their nature, most of the laws still depended on women's reliance upon men. Slight changes did not affect men's role as the public manager of the family or their claim to the domestic service they

were provided with in the private sphere. Furthermore, in the period, sexuality was under the control of religion and social morality.

Accession of a woman, Queen Victoria, to the throne was, indeed, a conflicting issue for Victorian society. Women were traditionally associated with weakness and subordination. They were considered inferior to their fathers, husbands, even their sons in the private sphere, as well as to men who already dominated the public sphere. However, all these units were subordinate to the monarchy of an eighteen-year-old female as of 1837. Still, as she referred to in her letter in 1870, this woman was strictly holding on to the gender roles her society had espoused:

> The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of "Woman's Rights", with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety... It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different - then let them remain each in their own position.[1]

This statement reveals Queen's absolute opposition against women's rights. Especially in the early Victorian period, gender roles assigned to men and women were the same across classes; so, women in general were marked as the subsidiaries to their husbands who were the industrial workers and the breadwinners. Supported by various philosophers such as John Ruskin, Auguste Comte, Arthur Schopenhauer, Herbert Spencer and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, assignment of different roles resulted in the formation of the "separate spheres" ideology, where men were depicted as the fighters within the corrupt, industrial domain in contrast to the women who were portrayed as the representatives of the "angelic" and the "moral" in this corrupt world. The construct of gender roles attained a so-called scientific value with respect to Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory from the 1860s onwards. From an evolutionary perspective, men now took place on a higher scale than women. John Ruskin commented on this ideal as such:

> The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest... But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision... She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise - wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she

[1] Martin, Queen Victoria as I Knew Her, 69-70.

> may set herself above her husband, but that she many never fail from his side.[2]

In other words, Ruskin located women and men in separate spheres since they were "naturally" two opposites. Indeed, the Victorian period was filled with "great men" with great stories that were issued in the National Portrait Gallery and the Dictionary of National Biography, or in literary texts and essays such as On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History (1841) by Thomas Carlyle and Self-Help (1859) by Samuel Smiles. Manhood, with all the bravery and endurance it promoted, was an element of commercial value in the military campaigns as well. Women held a subordinate position with respect to all the selflessness and loyalty they would show while serving their men. Besides being a pure virgin at the time of marriage, being a mother was the most ideal construction of women.

In Britain, unequal gender roles diffused into all aspects of life throughout nineteenth century. In this regard, John Stuart Mill asked:

> Think what it is to be a boy, to grow up to manhood in the belief that without any merit or exertion of his own... by the mere fact of being born a male he is by right the superior of all and every one of an entire half of the human race. . . How early the youth thinks himself superior to his mother, owing her forbearance perhaps but no real respect; and how sublime and sultan-like a sense of superiority he feels, above all, over the woman whom he honours by admitting her to a partnership of his life. Is it imagined that all this does not pervert the whole manner of existence of the man, both as an individual and as a social being?[3]

As seen in Mill's argument, men were under the heavy burden of putting themselves above any women in their lives. The impact of industrialization and urbanization regulated the way this perception of manhood spread in the Victorian period. Within the process, work and business were gendered more distinctively. While wives were occasionally supporting their husbands in family businesses at the beginning of the period, for instance, the ideology of separate spheres, promoting workplace and home as separate areas, was permanently implemented during the 1890s. While it was men's main duty to work outside home, it is estimated that only one-third of the total number of women had occupations in the social domain. The military consisted completely of men, who also dominated the fields of construction, shipping, science, politics, or religion.

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[2] Ruskin, Sesame and Lilies, Part II.
[3] Mill, The Subjection of Women, 112.

Therefore, the concept of separate spheres leaked into all segments of life, gender being the most noteworthy. For almost 20 years between 1828 and 1846, political voices often announced the necessity of equality, freedom, meritocratic societies, and the separation of spheres for women and men. Domestic confinement erased the possibility of middle-class women's contribution to the economy. Idealization of wifehood and motherhood was the most frequently adopted behavior. The Victorian period, with its competitiveness and ferociousness brought about by industrialization, required women to be confined to a space where they would preside over the moral values in a peaceful atmosphere. Home was supposed to be the place where one would avoid "those eager pecuniary speculations" and "that fierce conflict of worldly interests, by which men are so deeply occupied as to be in a manner compelled to stifle their best feelings."[4] Female features such as softness, pureness, affection, compassion, and sympathy were there to serve the husbands' and children's needs of safety, which, in turn, would support them in their struggles within the industrial society.

Meanwhile, from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, the new political philosophy based on individual rights, meritocracy and dignity had become effective and started to challenge the traditional concepts of favoritism, hierarchical social relationships and economic forces. Supporters of the 1832 Reform Act that came from the middle-class drew a line between the "moral" middle-class people and the "immoral" lower class and upper class. Domesticity marked this line as it was considered as a virtuous trait inherently found in the middle class. On the other hand, some radical groups within the working class denied the middle-class assertion about the separation of the public sphere and domesticity. Before the mid-Victorian period, the ideology of the caring woman and wife, and the man as the protector had already gained power, opening the door for the working-class men in cities to vote through the Constitution Act in 1867. Radical groups in general criticized the "old corruption" under the terms "sexuality" and "gender". The press depicted women as the saviors who eliminated that "old corruption." This image of heroism associated with women reinforced the separate spheres ideology, pushing women further to the virtuous side. Domestic life went parallel to women's virtuousness, especially for the middle class and the upper class. At the same time, some radical female groups claimed women's position at home to be a political matter for discussion.

[4] Ellis, The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility, 8.

The concept of domesticity found supporters in the royalty, too. After George IV's death in 1830, King William and his royal family circulated the theme. Together with Queen Victoria's reign, the Empire was domesticated to the highest degree. Her absolute devotion to her husband Albert, bearing nine children for him, her endless pain upon Albert's loss, and her sleepless nights while taking care of her sick son, the Prince of Wales, demonstrated the priority attached to family in British society, no matter who they were. Her acts and decisions portrayed all aspects of an evangelical lifestyle and demonstrated a middle-class morality rather than an upper-class "arrogance". Both middle-class and upper-class women, thus, heard considerable number of affirmations that validated the separate spheres ideology. In the private sphere, they had the chance to get protection and respect. According to politicians and the royalty, domesticity taking over the nation was earning Britain a higher position than other countries. How women were treated by men showed how civilized the British were; this could even be used as a criterion by the colonized groups to see their degree of autonomy. Prior to that, in the eighteenth century, society had been depicting women as evil beings who were prone to temptation and instinctive desires. This image would not supersede the nation's respectability anymore.

Regarding gender roles and the privileges given to men, things were not much different especially for the working-class people. With the Poor Law in 1834, women's dependency on men for a living got stronger. This law also aimed at managing women's sexual activities and brought an unequal dimension to the sexual activities of women and men. For example, fathers of illegitimate children were not held accountable; rather, it was their single mothers who always had to be with the children. These women needed to go and find a place for themselves in workhouses when they could not afford to look after their children because single mothers had to suffer much more than the fathers under the rules of God. Men were not put under limitation in sexual terms. Women, who were "shameless" and "unprincipled" while manipulating men with their sexuality, were required to be condemned by the Poor Law in order not to continue their guilty activities.

The Factory Acts legislated in the 1840s restricted the working hours for women and the jobs they could occupy in this respect. This was a direct interference of the institutional power with the roles of women and men. Many supporters of liberalism followed the way of categorizing women as "unfree agents", emphasizing female inability in terms of leading their own lives and needing to get help from governmental units. On the other hand, the legislative powers declared men as "free agents" who could perform their work under harsh conditions if required. This was a motivating factor

for men. They had been feeling their manhood since they had been the breadwinner and the primary worker of the house for a long time. Since industrialization brought about participation of women and children in the workforce, many manufacturers had started viewing these two groups as suitable candidates for their own workplaces due to the minimal wages they could be paid. Women in the manufacturing industry caused men to feel less manly; in order to regain their position as the protector and the breadwinner, and hence, to be a part of the society in proper terms, they had to send women away from the workplaces. At this point, these groups effectuated the domestic ideal. Chartists too built the middle-class concept of separate spheres into their belief systems. They declared that work life, especially in factories, exhausted women and damaged their health. A Chartist poster in 1842 claimed that textile manufacturers "reduced thousands of tender mothers to a worse state than brute beasts."[5] A Chartist newspaper, Northern Star asked in 1840: "Was it not enough for mothers to leave their infants at home, at five thirty in the morning, and to be exposed to the insolence of some domineering wretch, with only a half hour for breakfast, an hour for dinner, for eleven shillings?"[6] Rather than leaving home early in the morning and working at a factory under hard circumstances in addition to their household duties, the concept of staying at home and taking care of the household was welcomed by many women. A group of Chartist women in Aberdeen, Scotland grumbled: "We find ourselves outworn by toil in keeping our offspring from a premature grave"[7], and married cotton workers in Lancashire, England complained that they were treated "worse than their master's horses."[8] A woman called Mrs. Wrigley exclaimed: "We are wives – not slaves!"[9] Chartists argued that similar to the middle-class people, the working class had the right to have a domestic lifestyle. Robert Blakely said in 1839: "I see no reason why working men, whose labor creates every necessary and luxury of life, should be denied the pleasures and comforts of home."[10] Women in workplaces were a threat to the way men became "real" men in Chartists' point of view, recalling Friedrich Engels's argument that industrialization almost turned men into eunuchs. They condemned the industrial system as it changed husbands into "that crowd of women-men,

[5] Kent, Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990, 175.
[6] Clark, The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class, 236.
[7] Ibid., 238.
[8] Ibid., 238.
[9] Ibid., 238.
[10] Clark, "The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language, and Class in the 1830s and 1840s", 62-88.

inverting the order of Nature, and performing a mother's duties."[11] William Dodd, an American author, pitied men in 1842 for their "taking care of the house and children, and busily engaging in washing, baking, nursing, and preparing the humble repast for the wife, who is wearing her life away in the factory."[12] Now the husbands' masculinities were being questioned.

Morality was an influential tool used by the Chartist male groups to ensure that the state units discourage women's participation in manufacturing. Factories demeaned women, declaring them immoral, dependent to men, and self-absorbed. It was impossible for men in the industry to find "moral" girls to marry among these women, because they were contaminated, loose, and did not know the principles of managing a household. Too many working men stated that women were "unfit even to fulfill the office of menial to the rich, are the only parties whom, ordinarily, the male factory worker has a chance of obtaining as a wife."[13] The government, in this case, needed to take action in order to save women from the perils of the industry. If industrialization corrupted family life, there would be strikes that would bear violence, which, in turn, would threaten the reputable position of the whole state. As Lord Ashley pointed out in 1843, "When the women of a country become brutalized, the country is without hope."[14] As the Factory Acts declared, women were supposed to be mothers, not industrial workers. Besides that, the political arena was a male sphere. Ultimately, throughout the late Victorian period, the male duty of bringing food to the family and the separate spheres ideology were internalized.

Moreover, it was openly stated in the Reform Act (1832) that women were disqualified from the right to vote. While rising liberalism was extinguishing the rule of aristocracy, it was also depriving women of their basic right as citizens: voting. This paradox was ultimately resolved by attributing the cause to biological differences between the sexes. Men had the ability to use reason, take action, combat, act freely, and watch their own profits; women, on the other hand, were suitable for the feminine sphere with their passive, submissive, emotional and selfless manners, all of which were asserted to stem from their sexual anatomy. Considering the female body to be sexed by the society, theorists in the Victorian period constructed a certain concept of "femininity." This breakdown in the area of sex and gender created a vision on the purity of women; hence, they needed to be

[11] Zlotnick, Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution, 185.
[12] Dodd, The Factory System Illustrated in a Series of Letters to the Right Hon. Lord Ashley, 68.
[13] Kent, Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990, 176.
[14] Ibid., 176.

taken out of the public sphere and be bound to the male dominance in the private sphere, too. Women were to follow a path parallel to the religious values and morals, while men stood for the material and the degenerate. In the era of gross industrialization, women stood for ethics; men, on the other hand, moved through wickedness, selfishness and tricky transactions. Women were associated with nature and were described as wild and untamed, while men represented the cultivated society with their duty to control and systematize. While women were reproductive beings, men were given the duty to manage the productive sphere. In both situations, the concept of femininity relied on women's sexuality. Whichever class they belonged to, women in the Victorian period were exclusively renowned for their sexual traits and were named as "the Sex". This brought up a new discourse employing two different archetypes: the respected mother-wife, and the wicked prostitute. These groups were commonly barred from functioning in political and financial areas. Besides that, the fact that women were labelled as "the Sex" paved the way to their sexual harassment.

Traditional perspectives on gender roles excluded women from almost any other role in society except the domestic ones. As both working-class and middle-class men defined working as a male activity with the enactment of the Poor Law and the Factory Acts, the possibility of women taking part in work life was low. In 1851, a woman's primary occupation was accepted to be motherhood since "the child receives nurture, warmth, affection, admonition, education from a good mother; who, with the child in her arms, is in the eyes of all European nations surrounded by a sanctity which is only expressed in the highest works of art."[15] In 1881, it was officially declared that doing any sort of work at home, from housework to running a family business, was not accepted as a profession. The term work was reconceptualized after the elimination of housework from the list of occupations. The wages paid to men were higher than before, so the number of women who were able to join the workforce became much less than ever.

Most of the middle- and upper-class women whose fathers or husbands earned enough money to run the household did not even consider working outside the house. Yet, it was a requirement for the working-class women to contribute to the income of the family. For these women, working meant survival. However, due to the ideological imposition of men as the ultimate breadwinners and women as the wives whose jobs construed with the limits of home, work life for women was never supported either by the public or by the employers in the factories. A working woman was referred to as a threat to men in that she would jeopardize masculinity and ruin its primary

[15] Census of Great Britain, Population Tables I: Number of the Inhabitants, 87.

position in the household. When women remained far from the industrial work, the identities of their husbands and fathers as powerful, responsible and respected men could be consolidated. Both the members of the trade unions and the "moral" people of the middle class tended to label these women immoral with respect to their rejection of doing housework in the private sphere, their supposed habitat. Here, it became possible for these women who once attempted to be a part of the public sphere to adopt another public identity as a prostitute, who served in return for money. Indeed, the fact presented here is that the ideology of the private and public spheres was deeply nourished by prostitution.

Because of the dilemma women experienced in this period, only unmarried women tried being a part of the work industry in the 1850s. When married, they quit work and started doing what they were expected to at home. In many instances, wives simply left their jobs. By the 1850s, only single women tended to work in factories; upon marriage, they ceased the factory job and took an occupation that they could perform at home. Some women were involved in industrial housework such as laundry, but this took too much time, was exhausting, and paid too little.

Domesticity and the concept(s) of womanhood

Domesticity fed on the ideal that all women should get married and give birth. Marriage was the ultimate point of arrival in the Victorian period; young people were able to marry without obtaining land or a specific occupation if they were earning money. The public view asserted that if a woman, especially from the working class, did not wish to marry, there was no way that she could make a living. Such women generally affiliated themselves with men, or got together with single women like themselves, and shared the same household and the expenditures. Among the middle-class women, the ones who did not earn an income had to lead their lives with the male members of their family until death if they wanted to preserve their reputation in society. It was such a rare occasion that they could live alone. Indeed, due to the increase in the number of the unmarried women in the 1850s, these women set out to be "the problem to be solved, the evil and anomaly to be cured."[16] For William Rathbone Greg, these "redundant" women formed a threat to men with the competitiveness they caused in the work arena. Later on, he made another analysis: unmarried women were social contributors to the act of prostitution and if they were fewer in

[16] In Poovey, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, 1.

number, hence, their "value increased," men could easily be involved in those "illicit" interactions with corrupt women. These single women had to be conceived as a problem to maintain morality in society. Greg suggested at this point that these "surplus" women be "remove[d] from the mother country. . . to the colonies" because in the colonies there was need for more women due to the high number of men.[17] The typical roles attributed to women were evident in these statements: a moral woman as a mother-wife, and a prostitute.

The anti-slavery movement of 1823 provided a suitable sphere for the revelation of women's morality and spirituality. Interpreted as a reflection of the humane traits women inherently had, this movement was more a representation of religious values and morals than a political manifesto. Followers of this movement urged women to give in to the "sacred cause" of abolishment for Christ's sake. "Should they, for His sake, actively engage in this labour of Christian love, they cannot fail, whatever be the issue, to inherit 'the blessing of those who are ready to perish', and the richer blessing of Him who declares that even a cup of cold water given in His name shall not lose its reward."[18] The movement, considered a continuation of the echoes of female domesticity, had direct influence on the Victorian construction of women's roles without exceeding the social barriers surrounding it.

Hence, in this period, the perception of women as sexual beings shifted. Women's fundamental domestic duty was the preservation of the moral values. The "angel in the house" was supposed to be virtuous and deprived of any indicators of passion. It was traditionally believed until the eighteenth century that women were endlessly passionate, but were able to turn into pious humans with the help of God. Following that, the idea of women as lustful beings changed into the notion that they were, indeed, less passionate than men. The concept of passionless women was constructed within the masculinization process of the industrial revolution and through limiting women's activity in the political arena. Being passionless came out of the alleged female nature, which was inherently moral. Such a status would provide them with a higher social level than the one they previously held. Women referred to as sexually treacherous now transformed into a form shaped by the claim that their sex had social, cultural, and political defects putting them in a fragile position.

Being devoid of sexual passion also offered a life in favor of the women who would play a role in the ideological implementation of it. However,

[17] Greg, "Why are Women Redundant?", 434-60.
[18] In Kent, Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990, 186.

physicians in the mid-Victorian period converted the state of lack of passion from a moral entity to a concept made up of biological laws. This new ideal attributed sexuality to the female in the traditional manner. Women were sexually weak, which would be a cause for men to retreat from pursuing them. Indeed, on one hand, this new "science of sex" claimed a nonexistence in women's sexual desire; on the other hand, there was the belief that the female body was already filled with sex. William Acton, in his book Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs (1862) stated that

> The majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally . . . Sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance, and that it requires positive and considerable excitement to be roused at all; and even if aroused (which in many cases it can never be) it is very moderate compared with that of the male.[19]

Acton also asserted that women's unexcited attitude towards sex was an inherent feature in them, which helped men to save their energy and not to waste too long in an attempt to feed a woman's appetite. This passionless style of existence launched by the physicians helped strengthen the puritanism in society, especially among the middle-class people, and promoted the idea that dismissing sexuality meant an increase in the public innocence. The common preference was for women who had either little or no knowledge about their sexuality and reproductivity. The situation where women were depicted as innocent and pure, in contrast to men who were passionate and horny, established the duality on the traditional perception of genders. Men were hard and daring, whereas women were constructed as victims to this bold attitude.

The physicians who declared women as passionless were, at the same time, insistent on women being bodies that were controlled by their reproductive system. A gynecologist named W.W. Bliss conceptualized "the Sex" as the "gigantic power and influence of the ovaries over the whole animal economy of woman"; these ovaries, for Bliss, had a destructive power if not regulated properly.[20] Dr. Horatio Storer, a member of the Medico-Chirurgical and Obstetric Societies of Edinburgh, declared that "woman was what she is . . . in health, in character, in her charms, alike of body, mind and soul because of her womb alone."[21] Women's being referred to as "the Sex" was so public that any action they took that damaged the constructs of motherhood or wifehood, such as seeking political rights or

[19] Acton, Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, 112.
[20] Bliss, Woman, and Her Thirty Years' Pilgrimage, 96.
[21] In Kent, Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914, 42.

struggling for education, was an implication of being "unsexed". In other words, women were believed to be managed by their reproductive organs in the Victorian period. Henry Maudsley, a British psychiatrist, mentioned in Popular Science Monthly (1874) that "the male organization is one, and female organization another . . . it will not be possible to transform a woman into a man . . . she will retain her special sphere of development and activity determined by the performance of those [reproductive] functions."[22] Reproduction in women necessitated some effort to operate; consuming the energy in different ways would demolish the female anatomy, which was their fundamental reason for living. Women were, as stated before, reproductive bodies, not productive ones; their childbearing performance would diminish otherwise. Due to the way their bodies functioned, scientists concluded that women were not able to face up to the struggle education or dense intellectual activity would cause. Any intervention with the reproductive development of the female would significantly risk women's health, namely, their capacity of childbearing. In order for women to perform their reproductivity properly, they must not proceed on the same route with men. "They cannot choose but to be women; cannot rebel successfully against the tyranny of their organization"[23], as Maudsley stated. Hence, women must be deprived of any kind of training which would "unsex" her since "sex is fundamental, lies deeper than culture, cannot be ignored or defied with impunity . . . if the attempt to do so be seriously and persistently made, the result may be a monstrosity – something which having ceased to be woman is not yet man."[24] Women, who were recognized as sexual bodies regulated by their reproductive aspects, would lose their status in the society if they resisted and challenged their given roles.

Eventually, Victorian construction of womanhood evolved into a dichotomy. A woman was the angel in the house, possessing the moral qualities of a mother and a wife, or she was the corrupt type with all her immorality. The virtuous and pure middle-class woman image was located in opposition to its contrasting image, which was the wicked woman. Acton suggested that motherhood was the frame in which all female sexual activities could be positioned; however, men were driven by their innate desires. He argued that "there are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever . . . Many of the best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of

[22] Maudsley, "Sex in Mind and Education", 198-215.
[23] Ibid, 198-215.
[24] Ibid, 198-215.

home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel."[25] The moral woman, asking for no sexual arousal, "submits to her husband's embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved of his attentions."[26] In some situations where some women expressed "positive loathing for any marital familiarity whatever", "feeling has been sacrificed to duty, and the wife has endured, with all the self-martyrdom of womanhood, what was almost worse than death."[27] Some women, "who, either from ignorance or utter want of sympathy. . . not only evince no sexual feeling, but, on the contrary, scruple not to declare their aversion to the least manifestation of it."[28] Men marrying these women grumbled in Acton's opinion, due to the fact that "they are debarred from the privileges of marriage, and that their sexual sufferings are almost greater than they can bear in consequence of being mated to women who think and act in the above-cited instances."[29] He also pointed out that being devoid of a comfortable sexual space might be highly hazardous to the husband's physical health, which was a problem ultimately leading to impotence.

It can be understood from the statements above that Victorian society accepted male sexuality and desire as innate masculine features in opposition to the conceptualization of female sexuality which was based on morality. For W.R. Greg, men intrinsically carried the desire of having sex, so they could feel this desire any time. For Acton, male sexual instincts could be managed but never be suppressed. A balance between the innocent, moral angel in the house and the male with sexual impulses necessitated a sexual understanding that introduced a twofold structure. In this respect, masculinity established its existence on the duality of maternity and prostitution. In the nineteenth century, masturbation, for example, was announced to be a factor in several pathologies. In such a case, the only remedy in a social environment dividing sexuality from virtues such as maternity would be constructing another group of women, prostitutes, who were constantly ready to satisfy the male sexual drive. William Lecky in History of European Morals (1869) argued that prostitution occupied a very

[25] In Helsinger et al., The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883, 62.
[26] Acton, The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth and Advanced Life Considered in Their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations, 102.
[27] Ibid., 210.
[28] Ibid., 114.
[29] Ibid., 215.

significant space in terms of sexual safety for Victorian society. With respect to the prostitute, he stated:

> She is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted, and not a few who, in the pride of their untempted chastity, think of her with an indignant shudder, would have known the agony of remorse of despair. On that degraded and ignoble form are concentrated the passions that might have filled the world with shame.[30]

Therefore, in Victorian Britain, the official acknowledgement of prostitution served to confirm masculinity.

Furthermore, the efforts to construct the moral-immoral binary opposition and to locate prostitution on a legitimate ground via the Contagious Diseases Act were some actions that correlated with the dominant separate spheres ideology of the period. Moral women stayed within the borders of home, and this place witnessed the sexual relationship they had with their husbands as a proof of love and reproduction, which, in turn, strengthened the construction of the angel in the house. The public sphere belonged to the immoral women, where they promoted their body in return for money. Supporters of the Diseases Acts insisted that these two groups of women had no relation at all with each other. In Victorian society, prostitutes appeared to be the figures who tempted men, disrupted morality, and carried diseases. These women were considered to take up this "job" with pleasure and covetousness. Women in the private sphere, who could be sexually provoked only when the they were expected to become mothers, did not need to feel nervous anymore since the existence of this type of women ensured that their husbands could continue performing chivalric behaviors toward them. This unjust separation of moral mother-wife and immoral prostitute declared a single type of manhood, whereas there were two aspects of womanhood. Feminists argued that if there was a single form of masculinity, a single form of femininity must also exist. They also opposed the idea that the respected angels in houses could have no connection with a sickening type of a human such as a prostitute. They defended the fact that the existence of two groups of women was partly due to the traditional values that elevated female ignorance in sexuality. They wanted to undermine that belief, recalling those prostitutes mattered significantly to every woman. As Josephine Butler stated, the anticipation of such modesty loaded on women was "the cause of outrage and destruction to so many of our poorer fellow women… I cannot forget the

[30] Lecky, History of European Morals, 90.

misery, the injustice and the outrage which have fallen upon women, simply because we stood aside when men felt our presence to be painful."[31] Butler referred to the traditional perspectives toward womanhood highlighted by the Contagious Diseases Act. Indeed, in the Victorian period, the association of middle-class women with immorality and degradation was a common occasion. Some feminists even carried this association to a personal level. They insisted that the attribution of morality and immorality to women, and so, grouping them into two was an illusion. Butler told men: "Sirs, you cannot hold us in honour so long as you drag our sisters in the mire. As you are unjust and cruel to them, you will become unjust and cruel to us."[32]

Women and marriage

In the Victorian period, marriage was the ultimate goal for most of the English women in the middle and working classes. Although the marriages they came across were the reflections of people's harsh lives, they did not give up this ideal. Traditional gender role constructs had already rendered marriage as the option to choose naturally in the course of life. In the early Victorian period, average age for marriage was 25.3 for males, and 23.4 for females. In the late Victorian period, these numbers had only slightly increased.[33] Like middle-class women, working-class women wished to marry. Their desire was to attain the higher value marriage would earn them in the eyes of the public, a house they would belong to, a husband to be with, legal sex, and children. They did not focus on the experience of being the "angel in the house", like the middle-class women did.

In terms of the gender roles of the working-class men and women, it is possible to say that these people had to live controlled lives, avoid the habits of drinking or gambling, spend their time refraining from rough hobbies and activities, defend virginity until- and remain faithful in-marriage, and compensate for their financial needs. They valued prudence, pride, concealing ill luck, and getting the best out of things more than anything. At this point, British reformer Francis Place was known to be a tough-minded member of the working class who praised self-reliance and prudence as virtues. In his autobiography, he referred to the inexorable impacts which led him, together with his wife, to the internalization of such

[31] In Kent, Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914, 202.
[32] Jordan and Sharp, eds. Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic, 144.
[33] Wrigley and Schofield, The Population History of England, 1541-1871, 255.

virtues.[34] Being respected was a core value; it came to mean possessing a proper perception of one's identity, dressing up and physically keeping that respected image.

Many working-class women were unconditionally attracted to the evangelical belief that women traditionally had a special duty; they were the ones to manage a household, which was the center of moral values and where self-discipline, order and abstinence were learned. They were mostly focused on the act of control: controlling their possible deeds, their husbands, how many children they would give birth to, the way these children would be educated, and how much money they would spend on family expenditures. As virtuous women and men, parents had their children attend Sunday schools, where they learned the difference between "right" and "wrong", became better boys and girls, and were kept away from misbehavior. According to the reports, before 1914, six million children were attending these schools. They must have executed their roles as women and men throughout their lives in accordance with the teachings they got as children.[35]

Quite typically, women were responsible for the housework, food preparation and taking care of their children. It was, however, unclear why they were also responsible for the financial management of the household. It was possibly because they could process money under hard and limited circumstances. Women in public places, if they had a chance to be in this setting, earned much less than men; in addition, they did not see many possibilities to spread out their wages. As a matter of fact, there was also a psychological reason behind women's financial management of the household. Anna Martin summarizes the condition as such:

> The women have a vague dread of being superseded and dethroned. Each of them knows perfectly well that the strength of her position in the home lies in the physical dependence of husband and children upon her, and she is suspicious of anything that would tend to undermine this. The feeling that she is the indispensable centre of her small world is, indeed, the joy and consolation of her life.[36]

In other words, Victorian gender perceptions promoted the private sphere as the only place where a woman was able to perform her skills, fulfill her ideals, and feel alive. Under the Common Law, a wife had already been recognized through her husband on legal grounds. If she was earning a wage, the husband was not responsible for supporting her; it was the same

[34] Thale, The Autobiography of Francis Place: 1771-1854.
[35] Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, 246.
[36] In Perkin, Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England, 146.

for the children. Similar to upper-class women, though for different reasons, working class women were not governed by the civil law at all. Because these women possessed too few or no goods that required protection, they remained outside the field of law.

In order for a family to attain certain living standards, it was not enough to receive a certain wage. It was also connected to the way family resources were managed, and this was mainly the duty of the wife. The amount of money spent on various items, preferences on expenditures such as food or luxury items, and sparing money for rent or gambling were all under the command of the perfect wife, who, at this point, was the manager of home affairs. If a woman acted, so to say, whimsically, or if she had a physical incapableness in terms of regulating the domestic life, the husband would not be able to get over the financial imbalance that was to arise at home. This meant that a woman was face-to-face with the probability of getting married with someone who could not manage the family's financial processes.

It is also known that Victorian society was rather uncommunicative about the issues of courtship and marriage. Both women and men found it irrelevant to express their emotional lives in the public sphere. For them, people outside their household would regard any disharmony in their relationships as personal deficiency. Even though sexual attraction was an influencing factor especially in courtships, "love" in marriages was written down in complete absence of physicality. The efforts to become respectable women and men caused the denouncement of both sexual marginality and sex. Elizabeth Roberts revealed that women were seriously anxious and ignorant about sex before getting married. According to one of them, they were just as innocent as grave. Sexual intercourse outside marriage was absolutely despised.[37]

The traditional belief that women were the endless source of patience and support in the households spread not only orally but also through publication. Maternity: Letters from Working Women (1916) documents the means through which women in the Victorian period needed to support their husbands and children, even in the toughest situations. They had to be full of love, affection and endurance. In Round About a Pound a Week (1914), it was reported that working class women mentioned their husbands in good terms despite the fact that their children occupied their whole life. One woman reported her relationship with her husband as such: "E's a good 'un. 'E ain't never kep' back me twenty-three bob, but e's that spiteful

[37] Roberts, "A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940", 313.

Satterday nights I 'as ter keep the children from 'im".[38] Hence, managing a husband and several children in a household necessitated a serious amount of understanding and patience.

Challenging separate spheres

The concepts of marriage and family under domesticity were strictly based on a romanticized ideal connected with love and spiritual equivalence of the female and the male; however, women's position in the society had to confirm this in legal terms. As previously stated, due to the coverture law, married women had their rights only in connection with their husbands. The known aphorism, "my wife and I are one and I am he" reveals the case where a married woman is bound to her husband to claim her rights, properties, life, even her body; all these lay in the existence of her husband.

In the Victorian period, an argument regarding the large number of women in comparison to the number of men in society dictated that daughters in middle-class families might not find a mate to marry. In order for these women to be freed from men, they had to overcome the obstacles that were hindering them from attending school. A step towards this was Queen's College, which was established in 1848 and gave degrees to women. In the middle of the century, Mary Frances Buss and Dorothea Beale established the Collegiate School for Ladies in North London and Cheltenham for unmarried women to gain qualification and find an opportunity to earn an income.

Women's rights could make some progress in the area of divorce regulations, an area where they would normally be perceived as properties of men. The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) led to the possibility of divorce based on solid grounds. Previously, only men could divorce their wives due to betrayal alone. Women, on the other hand, were required to show evidence for their husbands' betrayal, violence, abandonment, rape, and so on. According to the declaration of The Royal Commission on Divorce in 1850, women's betrayal had to be taken much more seriously than men's. Although this act permitted divorce on the women's side as well, it promoted a double-standard.

Quite radically, women opposed the patriarchal pattern by asking for social and individual acceptance at the same level as men. John Stuart Mill supported women's enfranchisement when he was elected to the parliament. As a writer, both he and his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, offered a basis for the suffrage movement for women. Harriet Taylor Mill published

[38] Reeves, Round About a Pound a Week, 135.

"Enfranchisement of Women" in 1851, arguing that the alleged differences between the female and the male referred to the ones defined by nature with respect to the biological differences between the sexes. However, the idea of separate spheres, which based itself on the biological differences, purported to women's abstraction from sources of power and strengthened the concept of womanhood as "the Sex". This served to render them fragile against the male violence. She reminded readers that "many persons think they have sufficiently justified the restrictions on women's field of action, when they say that the pursuits from which women are excluded are unfeminine; and that the proper sphere of women is not politics or publicity, but the private and domestic life."[39] She asserted that the man and the woman as culturally constructed phenomena were not in any way connected to the male and the female in actuality. She continued: "We deny the right of any portion of the species to decide for another portion, or any individual for another individual, what is and what is not their 'proper sphere'. The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to"[40]. She believed that the basis for this discourse of differences was rooted in the socialization process of girls and boys, stating that the ways of raising boys and girls made them individuals filled with either a sense of freedom, or the duty to be moral and pure. The difference in growing up is the mere factor in the generation of two "different natures." Besides this, John Stuart Mill (1869) declared that "if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of the men, something might have been positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing… What women are is what we have required them to be."[41]

As Harriet Mill declared, the separate spheres ideology promoted an unjust power balance. The portrayal of "self-will and self-assertion" as "manly virtues," and "abnegation of self, patience, resignation, and submission to power" as "the duties and graces required of women" came to mean that "power makes itself the centre of moral obligation, and that a man likes to have his own will, but does not like that his domestic companion should have a will different from his". She stated, "what is wanted for women is equal rights, equal admission to all social privileges; not a position apart, a sort of sentimental priesthood."[42] Additionally, John Stuart Mill argued that women's reliance on men led to a circumstance

[39] Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women".
[40] Ibid.
[41] Mill, "The Subjection of Women", 372-74.
[42] Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women."