

**"They cannot choose but to be women."  
Stereotypes of Femininity and Ideals of Womanliness  
in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain**

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Towards the end of the nineteenth-century industrialised nations witnessed a notable shift in the rate of change. Within the span of about a hundred years, the Industrial Revolution had dramatically transformed the countries' economy and society. However, it had done so with considerable variation as to the extent to which the individual economic sectors or branches or the sections of society were affected. In addition, the process had evolved over a relatively long period of time so that its force had not been either constant or relentless, but rather varying according to the respective stages of the transformational process. When it entered on a new phase in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the twin forces of intensified industrialisation and modernisation directly and unabatedly drew every single element of the nation's life into its range, from economic sector down to individual company, workshop or farm, from social stratum or class down to its individual members. What is more, there no longer existed that concurrence of different stages of industrial development, that might have offered a niche in which the individual could evade unwanted concomitants of the emerging modern age. As long as emigration was no option, not even the idea of such an alternative existed.

In consequence, change became the watchword of the age. The only permanent thing, as commentators started to point out, was change. Thinking of the transformations in manufacturing and in society, Marx and Engels had identified permanent insecurity and shift as main characteristics of the capitalist era as early as 1848.

*"All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last com-*

*pelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.*"<sup>1</sup>

From the 1860s onwards more and more contemporaries fell in with their analysis, slightly modifying its basic image when introducing the idea of an accelerated rate of change. In the 1880s at the very latest, this assessment came to be voiced with doubt, apprehension or even fear

Compared to the 'world they had lost', to pre-industrial conditions, people's lives had indeed undergone a revolutionary change. The place of living and the place of work had been separated. The machine, perpetually rejuvenating by means of technical improvement and innovation, dictated the rhythm and intensity of labour. Indefatigably and with an ever increasing self-assurance science unearthed new insights into nature, promising man a securer and more comprehensive hold on the forces that determined his existence, while simultaneously making this hold look less firm with every new theory or discovery and every new field of scientific activity that was brought before the public. Confidence and familiarity gradually gave way to feelings of uncertainty and strangeness. The market was no longer a place of dealing one's goods only, but the name for an intricate network of economic interdependencies of national and international extension. From mid-nineteenth century onwards economic competition between industrialised countries started to acquire a new quality. For Britain the Great Exhibition had offered a platform to present its achievements to the world. But at the same time, it brought home the fact that other countries were not as backward in technological know how and manufacturing capacity as people in the first industrialised nation had hitherto assumed. Furthermore, they were working hard to catch up with Britain and even to excel her. In the last quarter of the century the increased sense of international competition found another outlet in the scramble for colonies, in which the rivalries of European nations were re-enacted on another plane and

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto", in: A Handbook on Marxism, International Publishers: New York 1935, p.26. The original text in German is more precise. The shorter English version, however, speaking of all solid things melting into air much better articulates the feeling prevalent in late Victorian Britain. "Alle festen, eingerosteten Verhältnisse mit ihrem Gefolge von altehrwürdigen Vorstellungen und Anschauungen werden aufgelöst, alle neugebildeten veralten, ehe sie verknöchern können. Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft, alles Heilige wird entweiht, und die Menschen sind endlich gezwungen, ihre Lebensstellung, ihre gegenseitigen Beziehungen mit nüchternen Augen anzusehen." Das Kommunistische Manifest, in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Werke, Vol. 4, May 1846 - March 1848, ed. by the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, Dietz, Berlin 1971, p.465.

in other parts of the world. In this atmosphere issues of reform obtained an element of urgency as yet unknown in the nation that still held and wanted to go on holding the lead.

Relations between classes and individuals, values, ideals, conceptions of the relationship between classes, between men and women changed alongside the material conditions of life. People began to realize that they were moving on shifting ground. It was the 'new sciences' in particular, that conveyed this impression. What had been a fundamental truth on one day, might prove an untenable falsehood on the next. What had been the farthest end of the known macrocosm - and microcosm - turned out to be nothing but the beginning of a terra incognita whose limits no one even dared to suggest.

Whoever brought the idea of reform before the public or demanded a change of conditions existing in whatever section of society had to reckon with reactions that did not immediately and solely follow from the respective issue put forward, but that took into account the whole gamut of contemporary tendencies and developments and the public's reactions to them. What some people called the "woman question" was one of these issues in Britain in late Victorian and Edwardian times. The debate connected with this question highlights some of the ideas, conceptions, images, with which people responded to one particular aspect of social change and, in a wider sense, to a society in flux.

A closer look, then, at the arguments on the true identity of woman - as opposed to that of man -, on her duties to society as well as on her place in it resulting from this identity helps to see attempts at reform in the legal position of women, in their access to educational institutions, to the professions and to the parliamentary vote<sup>2</sup> in the broader context of then current opinions. Extending the perspective beyond the structural impediments of reform it shows the obstacles the movement for the emancipation of women had to overcome in Britain in their proper dimensions. Secondly, it will become evident how deeply the proposed stereotypes of femininity and ideals of womanliness were entrenched in the trends sketched above, especially in the arguments of scientific discussion, a fact that led to the introduction of another element into the controversy, that of ferocity. At the moment when the destruction of established concepts and structures was, or rather seemed imminent, their supporters came to the fore to define them clearly. And they did so once more stating their claim to be the only ones to do so legitimately and bindingly for every single member of society. The very forces of change were harnessed to fix the status quo. In this sense, the (re-)definition of woman's proper identity and proper

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. the article of Ulrike Jordan and Jutta Schwarzkopf in this volume.

place may be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the bewildering and threatening diversity witnessed in everyday life and eventually to gain or regain stability in an age of transition.

The late Victorian and Edwardian discourse on the nature of woman was embedded in the older concept of the separate spheres. Before turning to the expositions of the discourse themselves, to their contents as given by economists, social theorists and proponents of the "new sciences", by physicians, biologists and psychologists in particular, the origins and developments of this idea of separate spheres will be sketched. This is to show how something that was, as a concept, hardly ever questioned or discussed in pre-industrial times - rather, it was tacitly accepted - came to be one of the foremost questions in the second half of the nineteenth century: woman's identity, her place in society and her rights as a member of it.

2.

In the patriarchal order of pre-industrial society women's lives and work were mapped out for them, by the male members of their family, fathers, brothers, husbands, sons. On the level of village and town, church and nation, power was distributed in like manner, men making the decisions and leaving women with just one duty, that of obedience. And yet, though subordinate as far as the male ideal went, women did not lead the lives of helpless dependents. With the male members of their household they shared that one sphere in which the majority of the labouring population spent most of their lives, work, recreation, family life. Women's productive skills, like men's, provided them with a sense of their importance within this order. Up until the eighteenth century economists as one group of commentators did not fail to appreciate this contribution on the family as well as the national level, albeit not to the rightful extent. For the labouring classes, particularly for the labouring poor, women's work played an important, even vital role, in the upkeep of the family. When seen against the background of contemporary economic reality the notion of the single male bread-winner so dear to many Victorians was not only an illusion, but an outright danger to the family's survival.

It was only later, with the combined - and successful - effort of economic transformations and ideological readjustments involved in the process of industrialization that women's productive role within the household as well as within the national economy was so dramatically reinterpreted.<sup>3</sup> In agriculture

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<sup>3</sup> The process of economic change and marginalisation of the wage-earning woman has recently been set forth in an intriguing study by Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial*

the bulk of subsistence work of women was swept away. In manufacture production was taken from the home into the factories, places of work with laws devised in spheres beyond the workers' reach. The idea of rationality and efficiency cherished by agriculturalists and political economists was carried into every economic sector, paving the way for an interpretation that perceived of pre-industrial methods as inefficient and very often as those applied mainly, if not exclusively in lines of production with a dominantly female work force. Thus, the older notion identifying woman with nature - and man with culture - was taken up in the process of industrialization adding the category of productivity according to gender as another element of the dichotomy. "Women workers, especially unmarried ones", so the argument ran, were clinging to tradition, i.e. to backward forms of labour, they were obstacles to progress, the very antithesis of the spirit of capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

This early twentieth-century assessment voicing a belief already widespread in early Victorian times implies a relevant feature of society after the advent of the market economy. For however underpaid and underrated their work was in industrial society women now had a choice. Patriarchal authority and traditional bases of - female as well as male - identity and self-confidence had been superseded, bringing in its wake not only new problems, but new possibilities as well. A woman's life was no longer as rigidly mapped out as it had been before. Her duties and rights in society had become an object of debate that soon saw women in the forefront of the controversy. Women of whatever social background had to deal with this problem. In short, there was a question, the "woman question"

Putting up new barriers was one way of answering it. And the factory system seemed to be a well-supplied quarry yielding the material for insurmountable demarcation lines. For the concept of two distinct spheres, the result of this search for an answer, seemed to be firmly rooted in economic and social reality as well as necessity. Consequently, the public and the private, work and home were invested with male and female attributes respectively, leading eventually to the idea of a supposedly typically male and a supposedly typically female domain. Legion are the texts in which Victorians described, refined, specified the (predominantly, though not exclusively male) middle class ideal of the separate spheres. They took up a tendency in western thought to identify woman with nature, biology, tradition and man with culture, technoi-

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Woman, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford 1995, cf. e.g. pp 42, 47-49, 100-102, 138-140

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Scribner, New York 1958, p 62.

ogy and change.<sup>5</sup> When the following widely read exposition of the concept was published in 1865 it had already become a received axiom reaching out into every stratum of society:

*"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 and creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office, her place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and all trial; - to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home - it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division."*<sup>6</sup>

Three elements combine in the idea: the moral, the psychological and the practical. On the ethical level each sphere had a distinct set of values attached to it. This was underpinned by the hypothesis of temperament differing according to sex so that a seemingly convincing and legitimate basis was provided to assign different activities to each. Hence, the spheres were not only distinctly cut out, but opposed to each other. In order to maintain a harmonious social order, so established opinion concluded, the boundaries of masculine and feminine, public and private, political and domestic had to remain unimpaired. Anyone call-

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<sup>5</sup> With this identification the debate in Britain proved itself to be in the mainstream of ideas on women in Europe and the United States. It retained this element when in the late nineteenth century theories of woman's true nature and proper place aspired to a claim to scientific objectivity. However, the note of vituperation prominent in the publications of some contemporary writers on the continent (Otto Weininger and his 'woman-baiting' would be one of the more conspicuous examples), is lacking in the discourse in Britain. For Weininger cf. footnote 31.

<sup>6</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, Lecture II: "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E.T. Cook, Alexander Wedderburn, Vol. 18, George Allen, London 1905, pp.121-122.

ing them into question, let alone trying to cross them was seriously endangering social stability.<sup>7</sup> In the competitive and corrupting world of industrial society it counted as woman's duty to individual man *and* to society to create and to preserve the refuge so aptly depicted by Ruskin as the bulwark against the looming threat of anarchy and degradation: "(...) this is fixt / As are the roots of the earth and base of all; / (...) Man to command, and woman to obey; / All else confusion."<sup>8</sup>

With this classification late Victorian and Edwardian proponents of an ideology of woman's nature had been given a most convenient foundation for their hypotheses.

3.

"The Eternal Feminine is in process of change" the author of a widely read article first published in the French magazine *LA REVUE* in 1910 stated. "When everything in the modern world is changing, can woman remain unchanged?"<sup>9</sup> On the shifting sands of an emerging modern society, the debate on woman's nature had been resumed, not least because people had begun to perceive of the so-called "woman question" as one of the central aspects of the transformation process or, more generally, as an essential of the traditional and familiar order of things. To modify the status of women by one jot, opponents of a change claimed, would not only accelerate the unwanted process of change, but in opening the flood-gates to an incalculable number of further changes would eventually lead to the destruction of the whole social fabric, as "Woman Suffrage attacks everything established; announces every imaginable change (...)"<sup>10</sup> It might even bring about the annihilation of humanity.<sup>11</sup> With

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<sup>7</sup> In the heat of the controversy over woman suffrage opponents of enfranchisement frequently availed themselves of this hypothesis "To grant one woman, on any plea whatever, the political franchise, would be the beginning of the end. Such a concession would inaugurate a political, social, moral, religious, and domestic revolution, compared with which all other revolts are but trivial." James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage Wrong in Principle and Practice. An Essay*, Remington & Co., London 1890, p 5

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Tennyson, "The Princess", V, lines 435-441, *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, Longman, London 1969, pp 814-815

<sup>9</sup> Jean Finot, *La mort de l'éternel féminin*, in *La Revue*, 88 (1910), p.294 and p.299. A translation into English was published in *Votes for Women*, London 1911

<sup>10</sup> James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage*, p.63 The fear of triggering off an interminable series of transformations was aptly voiced by Almroth Wright when commenting on an, to his mind illusory, "egalitarian equity" between classes and sexes: "(...) we have here a principle which, consistently followed out, would make of every man and woman in primis a

"the beginning of the end" imminent, then, the question of woman's true nature became one of prime importance.

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of the issue was a change in perspective that took place as the century progressed. Up to the nineteenth century, the discourse on gender had been one of great diversity, including arguments from the political, economic and social just as well as the religious, moral and biological domains. With the turn into the new century the focus began to be narrowed down, with arguments still being derived from various domains but with a distinct tendency to gradually concentrate on only a few and eventually to give prominence to one particular domain. In his *Essay on Population* (1798) Thomas Robert Malthus marked out the course which many others were to follow. He not only offered an early depiction of the concept of the separate spheres when he presented men of the labouring classes as the family's providers and women as mothers and childrears. When emphasizing the supposedly natural characteristics of women's role in family and society, he reinforced a trend to ignore their economic functions and to highlight their biological ones instead. As will be seen, at the turn into the twentieth century this transformation had reached its apex with a discourse in which women or women's bodies were being treated primarily according to biological presuppositions. In this way the "woman question" was relegated to the domain of medical practice and psychiatry.<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of the debate on woman's nature were to be found the efforts to clarify and define the idea of womanliness. The image of the "womanly woman" as well as its complement, the "manly man", had long since had its place in people's minds. It was one of the most appealing stereotypes of femininity in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. When John Ruskin pictured the dichotomy of man and woman in 1865, he did so still in terms of cultural values and social norms. Although the seeds had already been sown for a different perception with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the

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socialist; then a woman suffragist; then a philo-native, negrophil, and an advocate of the political rights of natives and negroes, and then, by logical compulsion, an anti-vivisectionist, who accounts it unjust to experiment on an animal; a vegetarian, who accounts it unjust to kill animals for food; and finally one who, like the Jains, accounts it unjust to take the life of even verminous insects." Almroth E. Wright, *The Unexpurgated Case against Woman Suffrage*, Constable, London 1913, p 12.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault has called this process the hysterization of women or women's bodies Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Allen Lane, London 1979, vol 1, e.g pp 104, 146-147



biologically-based perspective, which was to dominate the mainstream of the discussion at the turn of the century, did not yet find its way into contemporary rhetoric. For Ruskin kept to the beaten track of supposedly typical elements of female identity when he described his aestheticized ideal of social life.<sup>13</sup> A premise like his still left proponents of reform with reason to hope they may prove to their contemporaries, as Mary Wollstonecraft had done earlier on or John Stuart Mill<sup>14</sup> and Harriet Taylor Mill did in Ruskin's times, that the concept of womanliness - and of femininity - was a social construct, not a biological dogma.

And the appeal of the traditional assessment did not wear off all too quickly. Many later commentators on the "woman question" went along with Ruskin's rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> As late as 1883 one of the well-known statements of womanliness enumerated the traditional - middle and upper class - elements of femininity: parallel to an outward appearance that concurred with the contemporary ideal of feminine beauty<sup>16</sup> a catalogue of virtues was given that in-

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<sup>13</sup> "She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good, instinctively, infallibly wise - wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fall from his side wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service - the true changefulness of woman" John Ruskin, *Sesame*, p 123

<sup>14</sup> The classical text is, of course, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). The point mentioned is dealt with in chapter 1

<sup>15</sup> Some of the attempts to settle the matter once and for all had an unintentionally comic effect "Man ranges the world Stature, strength, and beard show him intended for an active outdoor life. Woman's existence is more sedentary Her sphere is home" James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage*, p.66

<sup>16</sup> In an age in which physiognomy and phrenology still linked outward appearance to character and status in society concurrence or lack of concurrence with the dominant ideal of the beautiful woman furnished a powerful argument Anti-suffrage campaigns freely and very often successfully evoked the negative image of the thin, angular, shabbily dressed and grim-featured spinster, clamouring for the vote The spinster's participation in the fight for women franchise, as far as the stereotypical argument ran, was a direct outcome of her unsatisfied sexuality, her childlessness that had transformed into intellectual disability Cf, for example, A.E Wright, *Unexpurgated Case*, p 38. The medical-psychiatric debate had provided the seemingly scientific legitimation for this hypothesis Henry Maudsley, for one, claimed that the woman who did not have children was tormented by "the unrest of an organic dissatisfaction, a vague void of being, the dim craving of something wanting to full womanhood" She was left only with "the dreary prospect of dying to herself through a weary sequence of days without aim, without desire, without hope" Cf Henry Maudsley,

cluded self-sacrifice, tenderness, modesty, "loving forbearance", "unwearied cheerfulness", the ability to remain undefiled even in the midst of defiling influences:

*"We call it womanliness when a lady of refinement and culture overcomes the natural shrinking of sense, and voluntarily enters into the circumstances of sickness and poverty, that she may help the suffering in their hour of need; when she can bravely go through some of the most shocking experiences of humanity for the sake of the higher law of charity; and we call it womanliness when she removes from herself every suspicion of grossness, coarseness, or ugliness, and makes her life as dainty as a picture, as lovely as a poem. She is womanly when she asserts her own dignity; womanly when her highest pride is the sweetest humility, the tenderest self-suppression; womanly when she protects the weaker; womanly when she submits to the stronger."*<sup>17</sup>

Here, woman is man's subordinate. Embracing these virtues she conforms to what society, or rather a certain section of society, deems a true woman. It is noteworthy that it is still her choice to do so, even though non-conformity, of course, would ostracize her.<sup>18</sup> Another point to be made is the fact that even this seemingly conventional late nineteenth-century exposition cannot remain unimpaired of tendencies current at the time, since its passages on the womanly woman's "natural mission", on her distaste of the "newfangled notions of the animal character of motherhood", her respect for "the needs of the race" and on her abhorrence of a rivalry with man "which a few generations will ripen into a coarse and bitter enmity"<sup>19</sup> prove it to take into account arguments from the scientific, mainly from the natural sciences, and political levels of debate, the latter comprising issues of imperialism, international competition and efficiency and the vote for women.

The physical strength argument was no less traditional than the list of virtues given in the passage quoted above. Herbert Spencer, for one, elaborated on it in his *Principles of Sociology*, providing an intersection for ideas from

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The Pathology of Mind. A Study of its Distempers, Deformities, and Disorders, Macmillan, London 1895, p.389.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Lynn Linton, "Womanliness", in: *The Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays*, Richard Bentley & Son, London 1883, Vol. 2, pp.109-110.

<sup>18</sup> This more or less voluntary detachment from established society would provoke stigmatisation, in the image of the strong-minded woman, the shrew or the fallen woman.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Lynn Linton, *Womanliness*, pp.116-118

several debates, that in social theory, in biology and evolutionary thought, in anthropology.<sup>20</sup> "By the Creator's eternal fiat",<sup>21</sup> McGrigor Allan, a physician and inveterate opponent of any change in the social and legal status of women, contended, man was physically stronger than woman, so that she could never be his equal. She was inferior in her logical powers as well, disabled by a mental short-sightedness, her mind full of intellectual defects, always hovering on the brink of unreason or even insanity,<sup>22</sup> in short, in all respects she was the "weaker vessel". "Why scream at the calm facts of the universe?" Only when acting out this allegedly pre-ordained nature could they claim to be truly man and truly woman.

*"No true womanly woman fears man's immense preponderance in physical force. (...) Female emancipation is (...) a mere ignis fatuus, pursued by visionaries, who mistake their own 'fads' for truth. (...) To the end of time woman will lean upon man. The physically and mentally weaker being must claim, and receive support, protection, guidance, control, government, from the physically and mentally stronger being."*<sup>23</sup>

Thirty years before this statement, Allan had already pronounced the, to his mind, final verdict on women's faculties as far as those characteristics were concerned that were needed in the public realm, in man's world:

*"So little demand is there for woman's assistance in those departments which are the essential prerogative of man, that could the male intellect be suddenly suspended or paralysed, there is not suf-*

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<sup>20</sup> Cf Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols., Williams & Norgate, London 1876-1882, particularly vol. 1, London <sup>3</sup>1885, Part III, Chapters X and XII

<sup>21</sup> James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage*, p. 42

<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, though with a more outspoken conclusion whose extreme character is even more conspicuous when seen against the background of arguments and activities for female education, Almroth Wright enumerated supposedly typical features of the female mind: "It is over-influenced by individual instances, arrives at conclusions on incomplete evidence; has a very imperfect sense of proportion, accepts the congenial as true, and rejects the uncongenial as false; takes the imaginary which is desired for reality, and treats the undesired reality which is out of sight as non-existent ( )". Consequently women had a "very unreal picture of the external world". In fact, the author of this passage asserted, their mind abounded with features that made them more akin to children and their modes of thought. Children, of course, needed guidance and control by their superiors. And female children, he concluded, should be taught the "defects and limitations of the female mind". Almroth E. Wright, *op.cit.*, pp.35-36. Cf also pp.26, 64, 71

<sup>23</sup> James McGrigor Allan, *Woman Suffrage*, pp 46-47

*efficient conception of the abstract qualities of justice, morality, truth, and virtue in all the women at present in the world, to keep civilisation alive for one week. Take away the strong protective arm of man, and woman sinks into an idiot and a slave.*"<sup>24</sup>

Allan's description of the differences between the sexes was firmly rooted in established ideas of female biology or rather female constitution. Though put forward with the dogmatism of a law of nature it was rather more in line with similar statements of previous centuries than with the emerging debate in medicine, psychology and Darwinistic theory that went along with a much greater intransigence and finality. New, then, was its tone, though not its arguments. New was its implicit link or concurrence with the theses put forward in contemporary scientific discourse. In thus restating the conventional arguments, Allan joined those whose writings assisted in the process of clearly marking out the boundaries of gender in turn-of-the-century Britain according to the traditional notion of women's inferiority.

With motherhood as the ultimate test of womanliness the image of the "womanly woman" widened to include another stereotype of femininity that evolved into a specific category in turn-of-the-century Britain, that of the mother of the race. In the second half of the century international competition sharpened an awareness of the nation's resources which were no longer understood in terms of mineral resources and commodities only, but in terms of man power too.<sup>25</sup> In Germany and the United States, journalist James Garvin told his readers in 1905, every year considerably greater numbers of workers were absorbed into industrial production than in Britain. Consequently, these countries would gain upon Britain in "man-power", "money-power", "fighting-power", "budget-power" and "sea-power", so that sooner or later the prominent position would have to be shared with them.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the looming acquisitiveness of old and new colonial rivals in the scramble for colonies created an atmosphere in which enthusiasts of Empire in Britain could effectively ac-

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<sup>24</sup> James McGrigor Allan, *The Intellectual Severance of Men and Women*, T.C. Newby, London 1860, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> "The history of nations is determined not on the battlefield but in the nursery, and the battalions which give lasting victory are the battalions of babies." Caleb William Saleeby, *Parenthood and Race Culture. An Outline of Eugenics*, Cassell, London 1909, p. 285.

<sup>26</sup> J.L. Garvin, *The Maintenance of the Empire: A Study of the Economic Basis of Political Power*, in: Charles Sydney Goldman (ed.), *The Empire and the Century. A Series of Essays on Imperial Problems and Possibilities by Various Writers*, John Murray, London 1905, pp. 79-81

centuate the strength in numbers. They depicted the preservation of the status quo as dangerous retrogression. To the alarmists among them, the statistical returns of a falling birthrate in the United Kingdom seemed to presage the suicide of the race. Malthusian fears of overpopulation came to be replaced by a concern that the British population might not increase fast enough to carry the banner of Anglo-Saxonism into the remaining supposedly empty spaces on the globe. The Boer War and subsequent reports brought about a surge of concern about an alleged physical deterioration, preparing the way for a willing reception of the alarmists' arguments.<sup>27</sup>

For women the quest for national efficiency so often evoked especially in Edwardian Britain spelt quite familiarly what in Wilhelmine Germany was summed up as the three Ks, "Kinder, Küche, Kirche", i.e. children, kitchen and church. What in another context had been seen as a duty of women to society,<sup>28</sup> as "woman's work for society at large",<sup>29</sup> appeared to imperialists as the prime task on which the future of the country, of the Empire and even of civilisation depended: the role as mother of the race was woman's destiny.

The nexus of Social Darwinism, eugenic proposals for the creation of a better race and imperial concerns helped advocates of the traditional idea of woman's nature to do away with recent tendencies epitomized in the "new woman" and to confirm women's subordination by means of an ideology of maternalism. Thinking mainly of middle class "mothers of a stronger and more virile race" a writer in the *Eugenic Review* in 1911 was highly doubtful about the beneficial effect of extended means of education for girls and women, the "new woman" embraced as one of her fundamental rights:

*"There is no doubt that the new woman is a more interesting companion than her predecessors, and that she has made great progress in the arts and sciences, in trades and professions, but the question of questions is - is she a better mother of the race? Does,*

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<sup>27</sup> As Anna Davin has convincingly shown, to make mothers bear the brunt of the blame as well as of the attempts to solve the problem offered the easiest solution to the problem. Decline, decadence, deterioration, degeneration, heredity's supposed links with madness and crime, catch words of a social moral panic that tightened its grip on the public mind towards the end of the century all could be laid at the door not of society and its structural defects, especially those producing mass poverty, but of individuals, namely those most unlikely to put up an effective opposition. Cf. Anna Davin, *Imperialism and Motherhood*, in *History Workshop* 5 (1978), pp 9-65

<sup>28</sup> Cf., for example, Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics*, Indianapolis, Ind 1978, Vol. 1, p.564

<sup>29</sup> Karl Pearson, *Woman and Labour*, in. *Fortnightly Review* (May 1894), p.575.

*for instance, her knowledge of mathematics, or even her efficiency in athletics, make her intrinsically a better mother than the natural, bright, intelligent girl interested in frills, dances and flirtations?"*<sup>30</sup>

Did the opportunities opening up to the "new" or "modern woman", then, signify a betterment of women's lives when seen in comparison to that of their mothers and grandmothers? Commentators arguing in the strain of Dr. Leslie would have answered in the negative or might even have taken the changes as unmistakable indicators of a decline. The ideology of motherhood, the image of the mothers of the Empire, provided them with a powerful argument that seemed to corroborate their assessment. It helped to confirm women's subordination at a time when the first tentative attempts at overcoming it began to produce results.

In another context motherhood turned out a convenient argument in order to legitimize the existing power distribution between the sexes. Again, the image of the new woman came into play for it symbolized a tendency of - middle and upper class - women to push more forcefully into the public sphere,<sup>31</sup> not least to participate in the debate on women. For physicians, evolutionists and psychologists the concept of motherhood served as the focal point of a definition of women's physiological and especially their mental framework. In the *Descent of Man* Darwin himself had dealt with the issue in assuming the male brain to be more highly evolved than the female brain and in describing women's constitution including emotional characteristics such as intuition, imitation and irritability as similar to that of the "lower races".<sup>32</sup> The age-old notion of women being more easily dominated by extreme emotions was thus incorporated into the new scientific discourse, in this way acquiring the ap-

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Murray Leslie, *Woman's Progress in Relation to Eugenics*, in: *Eugenics Review* (January 1911), p.283.

<sup>31</sup> In the attempt to contain these developments critics stigmatized this activity as "unwomanly", as a masculinization of women. Some propounded the extremist theory that "a woman's demand for emancipation and her qualification for it are in direct proportion to the amount of maleness in her." Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, Heinemann, London 1906, p.64.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2 Vols., John Murray, London 1871, Vol. 2, pp.326-327. And women had hardly any chance to remove this intellectual inequality between the sexes, for as Darwin put it, it would take many generations in which "women who excelled in the above robust virtues [= energy and perseverance, reason and imagination exercised to the highest point] were married, and produced offspring in larger numbers than other women" Charles Darwin, *Descent*, Vol. 2, p.329.

pearance of scientific authority in an age that contemporaries celebrated as scientific.

Similar statements were soon to abound. Herbert Spencer, one of the most influential of Darwin's followers, argued on grounds where traditional stereotypes and prevalent social and biological theories intersected. Even physics, in the form of one of the most prominent theories in the nineteenth century, i.e. the conservation of energy theory, made its way into the argument. Psychiatrist Henry Maudsley, who strongly advocated the popularization of medical knowledge and whose writings came to be widely read in England as well as on the continent, believed "the energy of a human body [to be] a definite and not inexhaustible quantity",<sup>33</sup> just as physicists assumed the amount of energy in the universe to be fixed once and for all. "Nature is a strict accountant," Spencer wrote, "and if you demand of her in one direction more than she is prepared to lay out, she balances the account by making deduction elsewhere."<sup>34</sup> According to him, motherhood was a tax women had to pay to society. As the reproductive process put an extraordinary strain on their physical and mental framework, the amount of energy they could dispose of was considerably reduced. The resultant assumption that little was left for activities beyond reproduction and child-rearing was well within the mainstream of discussion. In this way, education, any form of intellectual activity or duties performed by women in the public sphere were an unnecessary and, from the point of view of allegedly biologically determined and socially desired functions, unnatural transgression, a wasteful expenditure of energy.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Henry Maudsley, *Sex in Mind and Education*, in *Fortnightly Review* 15 (1874), p 467

<sup>34</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Education Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, Manwaring, London 1861, p 179 Nearly the same words were used by Maudsley: "When Nature spends in one direction, she must economise in another direction " Henry Maudsley, *Sex in Mind and Education*, p 467

<sup>35</sup> "The not infrequent occurrence of hysteria and chlorosis shows that women, in whom the reproductive function bears a larger ratio to the totality of the functions than it does in men, are apt to suffer grave constitutional evils to which there probably correspond smaller and unperceived evils in numerous cases " Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Ethics*, Vol. 1, p 565 Though certainly an argument of male science it was just as well put forward by women, i.e. those women who agreed with this thesis. "I believe (...) that woman by forcing herself into such a false and unnatural position [i.e. female participation in politics, in parliament and government] would elevate nothing, but would only degrade and dishonour herself " Margaret Mordecai, *Phases of Progress A Study of Evolution of Religion, Education and Woman*, Sands, London 1910, p.107 Perhaps the most prominent and most

Furthermore, so evolutionists, imperialists and eugenicists maintained, intellectual activity of women could only be achieved at the price of an interference with their prime function as "conceivers", making them first "unwomanly", then "unsexed", hence useless as mothers of future generations.<sup>36</sup> In the eyes of a group of medical men and scientists a further danger looming large was that of a particularly excessive mental strain on women resulting from an excess in female cerebral activity. When women gained access to the universities and to the professions, though only slowly, the scientists professed to prove that women were unsuited to academic work. In order to explain the increasing number of cases of mental illness, the American George M. Beard had put forward the concept of neurasthenia, a nerve disease he supposed to be the direct outcome of the conditions of modern life. In fin-de-siècle Britain and even more so in America, neurasthenia became *the* diagnosis for a host of nervous disorders.<sup>37</sup> In combination with Spencerian theories of biological and social evolution it made people think of the phenomenon as primarily affecting women, whose constitution failed to bear the burden of excessive physical or mental work. Consequently, the "modern woman" was more and more perceived of as the "nervous woman".<sup>38</sup>

George John Romanes, another follower of Darwinian theories, referred to *The Descent of Man* when elaborating on the alleged mental differences between the sexes. A difference in the weight of brain matter, five ounces missing in the female brain, could hardly be made up for "even under the most favourable conditions as to culture."<sup>39</sup> He, too, based his arguments on the premise that biology proved women as physically and intellectually inferior to men. And in their emotions:

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influential female opponent of woman suffrage in the debate around 1900 was Mrs Humphry Ward.

<sup>36</sup> The more conspicuous women, particularly women's rights proponents, acted in the public sphere, the more often fears of masculine women - and feminine men - or of unsexed women were vented. Cf., for example, Grant Allen, *Plain Words on the Woman Question*, in: *Fortnightly Review* (October 1889), pp.452-453.

<sup>37</sup> For an excellent exposition of the nineteenth century debate on "nervous women" cf. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*, Virago Press, London 1987, Chapter 5. It is seen in a broader perspective in an analysis of the degeneration debate in William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Maudsley, *Sex in Mind and Education*, p.468.

<sup>39</sup> George John Romanes, *Mental Differences between Men and Women*, in: *The Nineteenth Century* 21 (1887), p.666.



*"They cannot choose but to be women."*

*"(...) these are almost always less under control of the will - more apt to break away, as it were, from the restraint of reason, and to overwhelm the mental chariot in disaster. Whether this tendency displays itself in the overmastering form of hysteria, or in the more ordinary form of comparative childishness, ready annoyance, and a generally unreasonable temper - in whatever form this supremacy of emotion displays itself, we recognise it as more of a feminine than a masculine characteristic."*<sup>40</sup>

Biology, then, laid down that women were ruled by their - unruly - emotions, less likely to listen to the voice of reason and therefore a potential danger which had to be contained. As Henry Maudsley put it: "They cannot choose but to be women; cannot rebel successfully against the tyranny of their organization. This is (...) the plain statement of a physiological fact." With gender relations being seen to be biologically determined, at least as far as masculine science<sup>41</sup> was concerned, a change in the status of women in society would not only endanger the social fabric, but would overthrow the natural, scientifically sanctioned order of things. At this point of the discussion, scientific authority would no longer accept being called into question: "What was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by act of Parliament."<sup>42</sup> The dictates of nature left no alternative.

In Edwardian times the militant suffragists were to make this theory a walking reality, constantly reminding the public of the consequences the image of the over-emotional, and therefore potentially hysterical woman had taught to expect. It does not come as a surprise that opponents of women's emancipation knew how to turn the "hysterisation of women's bodies"<sup>43</sup> into a powerful and convincing argument:

*"No doctor can ever loose sight of the fact that the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiological emergencies. It is with such thoughts that the doctor lets his eyes rest upon the militant suffragist. He cannot shut them to the fact that there is mixed up with the woman's movement much*

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<sup>40</sup> George John Romanes, *Mental Differences*, p.657

<sup>41</sup> Cf. L.J. Jordanova, *Natural facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality*, in: Carol MacCormack, Marilyn Strathern (eds), *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1980, p.57.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Geddes, John Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (Contemporary Science Series), Walter Scott, London 1890, p.267.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, cf. footnote 11

*mental disorder; and he cannot conceal from himself the physiological emergencies which lie behind."*<sup>44</sup>

The "nervous woman" had turned into the "hysterical woman"

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The womanly and the masculinized or 'unsexed' woman, the new or modern woman and the nervous woman, the hysterical woman and the militant one: all these stereotypes and images of femininity played a prominent part in the debate on woman suffrage at the turn of the century. With their neatly separated categories they supplied something to hold on to not only to outright opponents of women's emancipation or other forms of change but to those, too, who were struggling in the quagmire of doubts and uncertainty groping for a lifeline that helped them back onto the firm ground of conventional notions that were only lightly veiled by a rhetoric posing as new and objective.

Slightly modifying a phrase Gareth Stedman Jones coined in his analysis of late Victorian and Edwardian fears of urban degeneration it may be said that the stereotypes of femininity sketched above could be seen as a mental landscape within which the (mostly male) middle class could recognize and articulate their own anxieties about the changing gender relations in an emerging modern world.<sup>45</sup> They offered an opportunity to give expression to subliminated fears of 'modern' women who started to successfully compete with men in the universities, the professions, in local politics and who began to demand more vigorously the ultimate test of citizenship, the parliamentary vote, refusing to be excluded "from the onerous burthens of citizenship which weigh so heavily on man"<sup>46</sup> To depict these women as obstinate Amazons, i.e. masculinized women, aiming at the suppression of the male sex, thus at the overthrow of the natural order, or as the dominating woman reducing man to a mere puppet accepting her orders,<sup>47</sup> seemed to provide a legitimate reason to reject women's claims and activities to come into their rightful place in the public sphere.

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<sup>44</sup> Almroth E. Wright, Letter to the Editor, The Times, March 28, 1912, reprinted in A.E. Wright, Unexpurgated Case, p.77

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Gareth Stedman Jones, Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, p.151

<sup>46</sup> James McGrigor Allan, Woman Suffrage, p.44.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. James McGrigor Allan, Woman Suffrage, p.68; A.E. Wright, Unexpurgated Case, p.79

Struggling for their rights as citizens implied fighting for the acknowledgement that it was women who were the authorities on women, that, if a definition had to be given at all, it should be women who defined the term 'womanliness'. But in accepting this notion women's rights campaigners did not simply meet their opponents on their ground. Instead, they took up the gauntlet in giving the idea a modified meaning, although this did not yet go so far as to completely reject the supposition of separate spheres. They transformed it into a proclamation of female identity, an optimistic self-image in which the existing and seemingly irreconcilable differences seemed to be reconciled. For they took equality with men not as the outcome of a levelling process blurring all the differences between men and women - proponents of women's rights in Victorian and Edwardian Britain never demanded equality in this sense, though their most inveterate critics untiringly accused them to do so - but rather their acceptance as women in the public sphere on the same footing as men. By and by, of course, this would erode the distinction of separate domains.

In order to (re-)define woman's proper place in the modern age as one of subordination, the new arbiters of opinion used the language of science. The medicalisation or even psychiatrisation of female identity furnished a seemingly legitimate and objective basis for those who wanted to relegate the female element in society back to the home. To add a potential element of pathology as an intrinsic feature of woman's nature carried the attempt of subordinating women even further, since it divested the remnants of the traditional ideas of woman's nature and role of any aspects that might have conveyed self-confidence for women in pre-industrial times. In this context, Social Darwinism, eugenics and imperialism came up as convenient helpmates, investing the "woman question" with a note of urgency and social importance.

To be sure, stereotypes of femininity did constitute only one element out of a whole range of conceptions making up the complex background of life in Britain around 1900. And the preceding paragraphs have sketched only those images and theses of the debate on women's place in society which proved an obstacle to change or explicitly aimed at stemming the tide of reform.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sympathizers with the idea of women's emancipation countered the arguments of the 'traditionalists' and anti-suffragists. In fact, contemporary natural sciences and social sciences did offer a different description of female identity too, though its proponents encountered formidable obstacles when trying to dissipate the widespread notion that traditional and more recent arguments against female emancipation converged most remarkably. To them, the alleged biological and psychological shortcomings of women, barring their entrance to what was still viewed as a man's world, were either non-existent or at least not the impediment traditionalists saw in them. This supposition led some to join John Stuart Mill in

Nonetheless they had to be reckoned with, not only in any attempt at removing existing injustice, but in seemingly uncontroversial acts of everyday life too. Here they might prove just as difficult to overcome as well-established rules and laws, perhaps even more so because of their elusiveness. Taking this fact into account, the commitment and the achievements of the fighters for women's rights in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain have to be seen in another perspective. What has to be stressed is not the fact that they failed to obtain their ultimate goal, the parliamentary vote, but that they initiated changes that would eventually lead to more rights, more opportunities in education, on the labour market and in political decision-making for women. The mental landscape, however, whatever its changes for the better may be when compared to the Victorian age, still awaits its conclusive shaping, since a true coexistence of male and female is not yet in sight.

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advocating equal opportunities for women in education, politics and in the world of labour and business. A minority was carried away by the idea of an all-inclusive liberation to demand full emancipation for women, making a sexuality freed from rigid social norms the ultimate test. A third group more or less resignedly accepted the changes in women's role in the emerging modern society, convinced that future social efficiency depended upon the full - and publically acknowledged - admittance of women to the male sphere. Karl Pearson, mathematician, philosopher and one of the prominent participants in the debate on national efficiency in Britain, was one who took up this position. Finally, there were those who, though not actually sharing the enthusiasm of women's rights proponents, described the changes as natural or at least as devoid of the socially explosive features more conservative contemporaries ascribed to this element of the many-faceted transformation process of modernity. Havelock Ellis, for one, advised his contemporaries to meet the changes perceived with an air of equanimity: "An exaggerated anxiety lest natural law be overthrown is misplaced. The world is not so insecurely poised. We may preserve an attitude of entire equanimity in the face of social readjustment. Such readjustment is either the outcome of wholesome natural instinct, in which case our social structure will be strengthened and broadened, or it is not; and if not, is unlikely to become organically ingrained in the species." Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters*, Walter Scott, London 1894, p. 397