The Pleasures of Men and the Subjection of Women

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Debating the question as to whether women should be slaves to men's pleasure or equal companions[1], the Victorians took recourse to religious, moral, biological, economic, legal and political arguments. I will trace the major arguments for and against equality and will point out contradictions within the propositions against women's emancipation. The Victorian constructions of women had an enormous impact on the segregation of education and discrimination at work. However, working women in turn challenged the position of men in terms of performance, earnings, and masculinity. I will take a wider perspective of the Victorian age or rather of the 19th century from 1789-1918 because it is necessary to see the Victorian negotiation of gender as a transition between the containment of radical demands for women's emancipation in the late 18th century and the achievement of their national franchise in the 20th century. It is difficult to see women's history as a steady stream of progress because huge rocks of resistance to emancipation from both men and women of all classes rather suggest the image of a meandering river that has not yet reached its destination.

1. The "Failure" of Feminism

The restrictive construction of women's nature and position in the 19th century began with the end of feminism in the late 18th century. The figurehead of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, earned a negative reputation after the public learned that she had had an illegitimate child and had made an attempt to commit suicide. Her reputation impeded the influence of her work, and the conservative crackdown on radicals in the 1790s damped down women's fervour to clamour for emancipation. The times became less propitious for an advancement of women's rights.

In the context of the French Revolution and its conservative reaction in Great Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft claimed civil rights for women and

1 Vera Nünning analyses the negotiation of gender that prefigures the Victorian discussions in: "'The slaves of our pleasures' oder 'our companions and equals'? Die Konstruktion von Weiblichkeit im England des 18. Jahrhunderts aus kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht", *ZAA*, 44 (1996), 199-219.

criticized the fact that patriarchal rule reduced women to slaves because it denied them liberty, equality, and justice. Wollstonecraft seemed to con- firm male prejudices about women as the weaker sex, but she denied the argument of innate inferiority because she attributed women's degradation to their repression by men. She regarded women's bondage to their bodies as a key impediment to emancipation. She conceded that men were naturally superior in physical strength, which justified the subordination of the female to the male in the animal world.[1] In spite of the subordination of bodily power to moral and mental power in civilized societies, men tended to ignore women's minds and to consider women primarily as bodily sub- jects. She added that a woman is made a slave to her body because male sensuality reduced her value to arbitrary and short-lived physical beauty.[2] Since marriage was the only way to rise in society, women turned themselves into "insignificant objects of desire"[3] in order to attract prospective husbands and so acquire their social status. A married woman, the feminist deplored, forfeited her status as a legal person under the law of coverture and "is reduced to a mere cipher"[4]. Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the lawyers' Bible in the 18th and 19th centuries, stipulated that man and wife were "one person in law", but that person was the man, because "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband".[5] The law limited not only married women's management of their property, but almost turned wives into their husbands' private properties since it deprived them of their status as independent legal subjects. Wollstonecraft attacked marriage as an absolute male rule, which turned women into slaves, who were submissive or obtained power by cunning like children or favourites.[6] She demanded the liberation of women from male domination "in a physical, moral, and civil sense".[7] Instead of being kept in the state of "perpetual childhood"[8], women should become "rational creatures", "moral agents", and "free citizens".[9] Reason and judgement should be their guides to virtuous behaviour and replace coercion, which

1 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, 5 (London, 1989), pp. 74, p. 108.

2 Ibid., pp. 113, 115, 208.

3 Ibid., p. 76.

4 Ibid., p. 215.

5 Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period. The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (Harlow, 1993), p. 189.

6 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, pp. 77, 215, 226.

7 Ibid., p. 266.

8 Ibid., p. 75.

9 Ibid., p. 250.

merely enforced the slavish fulfilment of duties. She considered moral and intellectual education as a prime instrument in order to improve women's characters and functions in the private and the public spheres. The feminist demanded a "revolution in female manners [...] to restore to them their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world".[1] She considered the end of women's liberation as nothing less than the "progress of knowledge and virtue"[2] of mankind.

2. Backlash: Restrictive Constructions of Women

The early Victorian era between 1830 and 1848 has been called the period of reform or even a part of *The Age of Revolution 1798-1848* by Eric Hobsbawm, who conceded that the institutional reforms lagged far behind the economic, technical and social changes.[3] If we take the position of women into consideration, Hobsbawm's suggestion of progress rather ap- pears to be ironic because the first half of the 19th century saw the growing restriction of women's roles to domestic life and to the support of, and dependence on, men. Women took an active part in collective protests and strikes but could hardly advance their own position with regard to men within their class.[4] Central Victorian *discourses* continued and extended 18th-century arguments which narrowed down the range of women's capacities and activities: in spite of the egalitarian Protestant tradition that held

1 Ibid., p. 114.

2 Ibid., p. 66.

3 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 1789-1848 (New York, 1996), p. 303.

4 Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England* (Houndmills, 1995), p. 144. For example, women were active in the abolition of slavery and in the Chartist movement. Clare Midgley demonstrates that sentimentalism, economic and political action went hand in hand as abolitionist women boycotted West Indian sugar and handed in numerous petitions to Parliament (*Women against Slavery. The British Campaigns*, 1780-1870 [London and New York, 1992], pp. 1-120). Moira Ferguson and Clare Midgley explain that the women's struggle against the slave trade and slavery negotiated gender positions at home and indirectly advanced their own emancipation (Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others. British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery*, 1670-1834 (New York, 1992), p. 299; Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, pp. 202- 203). Still, women who raised their voice in public had to face opposition. As late as 1872, a minister felt obliged to assure the public audience that the female speaker for suffrage was a respectable character (Lilias Ashworth, quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, 1850-1900. *Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* [London, 1979], p. 7).

each individual responsible and accountable for his or her life in the eyes of God, religious authorities maintained that God designed woman to be man's helpmate.[1] If Christian meekness, charity, and compassion were thought to be predominantly female characteristics, Victorians increasingly foregrounded Christ's manliness and muscular Christianity, shifting moral esteem from women to men.[2] In 18th-century biology and medicine, the one-sex model, which assumed the basic similarity between men and women, was dismissed in favour of the two-sex model, which established the basic opposition and hierarchy between the sexes. Differences in physical gender were extended to psychological ones as women were held to be physically weaker than men, and more emotional, intuitive, and passive.[3] Phrenology and physiology suggested that women's smaller brains implied less intelligence and reason. Theories about the evolution of the human, or rather the English, race stipulated that survival and progress depended upon reproduction and education that required women's presence as wives and mothers at home. Domestic family life formed the core of society.[4] Conservative voices in society and politics maintained that the family was a microcosm of the commonwealth that must be headed by a patriarch, and any questioning of his authority or the hierarchy within the family had repercussions on the order and stability of the nation. (A woman as the head of state was not accepted as a counterargument because, after all, Queen Victoria had a husband to give advice to her.) The law codified the hierarchy between men and women. The First Reform Bill of 1832 extended the franchise to propertied male adults but excluded women who might be eligible due to their possession. The law of coverture, already criticized by Mary Wollstonecraft, still disempowered women. Frances Cobbe voiced her discontent with the legal degradation of women in an apt series of subjects excluded from equality: '"Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors' are the classes of people considered unfit for most legal and political rights at the time".[5] In addition, women did not necessarily have the moral right to paid work even if they saw the necessity to work for money. The sphere of pro- duction was supposed to be reserved for men, the sphere of reproduction for women. Women were thought to be guided by the morality of social

1 J. Burgon, quoted in Patricia Hollis, Women in Public, 1850-1900. Documents of the Victorian Women 's Movement (London, 1979), p. 8.

2 Ina Schabert, Englische Literaturgeschichte. Eine neue Darstellung aus der Sicht der Geschlechterforschung (Stuttgart, 1997), p. 550.

3 Ibid., pp. 40-42.

4 Karl Ittmann, Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England (Houndmills, 1995), p. 142.

5 Quoted in Robin Gilmour, The Victorian Period, p. 189.

relations in the household as a necessary counterbalance to the self-interest that drove men in the competitive economic market.[1] Female compassion and charity should compensate for the economic aggression and exploitation by middle-class men.[2] Due to a change from the middle-class family as an economic co-operative unit, in which everyone contributed to the family income, towards individual wage-earning, professional life became increasingly segregated from family life in the 18th century[3], and women were compelled "to consider marriage, not as a question of happiness, but of subsistence"[4] in spite of romantic ideals of marriage. An article in the *Saturday Review* of 12 November 1859 warned that women's economic independence would ultimately ruin the commonwealth:

> the greatest of social and political duties is to encourage marriage. The interest of the State is to get as many of its citizens married as possible. [...] Wherever women are self-supporters, marriage is, *ipso facto*, discouraged. The factory population is proof of this. In the manufacturing districts women make worse wives and worse helpmates than where they are altogether dependent on the man. And where there are fewer marriages there is more vice ...[5]

The writer continued that paid work tempted women to abandon the family and neglect the more tedious and unpaid domestic chores. So the needs of men to be served by women were as important as the social control of women according to this view of economics and society. Having identified key arguments in important Victorian discourses concerning gender, we proceed with the discussion of difficulties and contradictions in famous texts on gender by Sarah Ellis in the 1830s and 1840s, and by John Ruskin and Eliza Linton in the 1860s and 1880s.

Sarah Ellis was one of the most famous writers on women in spite of or because of her negative bias towards her sex. According to her, woman's nature was determined by the love of self-indulgence, vanity, indolence, a multiplicity of floating ideas, and the "constant overflow of her feelings"[6], which made women deviate from reason and propriety. Society did not

1 Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender, and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (Houndmills, 2000), p. 102.

2 Jna Schabert, *Englische Literaturgeschichte*, p. 56.

3 Ibid, p. 45.

4 Maria Grey and Emily Shireff (1872), quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, p. 13.

5 Quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, p. 11.

6 Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England. Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (London, 1839), p. 287, cf. p. 45.

need fashionable ladies but useful women at home.[1] Women had to subdue their natural propensities in order to fulfil their central function in society to promote others' happiness and morals, and to serve as "interesting and instructive companions to men".[2] The essential qualities required from women aimed at their secondary and domestic existence in their relationship to men. Her popular work *The Daughters of England* (1842) told young women that

> the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men - inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength. [...] For a man it is absolutely necessary that he should sacrifice the poetry of his nature for the realities of material and animal existence; for women there is no excuse - for women, whose whole life from the cradle to the grave is one of feeling rather than action; whose highest duty is so often to suffer and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who has nothing, and is nothing, of herself; whose experience, if unparticipated, is a total blank. [...] Love is women's all - her wealth, her power, her very being.[3]

Her arguments of natural inequality fly in the face of Mary WollstonecrafT, who rejected any inference from the physical inferiority of women to any other characteristic or position of women. Sarah Ellis's statement that women had "no excuse" to tamper with the material and animal existence of reality seemed to qualify her embellishment of men's work as a "sacrifice" and ignored the vast majority of her sex, who had no excuse not to feed their babies, wash their nappies, to scour the floors at home or as a maid-of-all-work at other households. Victorian sources on social and working conditions of the poor suggested that a middle-class man's sacrifice of "the poetry of his nature" could have led to the reckless exploitation of workers due to starvation wages and the literal sacrifice of their lives for his profit. But Ellis had the morals of middle-class husbands rather than the lives of lower-class workers in mind when she complained that men are exposed to "evils of competition"[4] and suffer from "degrading cares and sordid views that occupy the working world"[5], as she told *The Women of England*. Ellis saw no contradiction in her view that, for a gentleman, al- most any degrading occupation was acceptable as long as it procured him the means to support a "respectable establishment at home".[6] She even

1 Ibid., p. 11.
2 Ibid., p. 352.
3 Quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, p. 16.
4 Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England*, p. 255.
5 Ibid., p. 340.
6 Ibid., p. 345.

argued that women should help men to keep "a separate soul for his family, his social duty, and his God".[1] Women had to "assist in redeeming the character of English men from the mere animal, or rather, the mere mechanical state"[2], which the capitalist economy seemed to reduce them to. Implicitly, the hypocritical writer justified men's amoral behaviour towards others in business by the comfort and esteem provided for his own family. In turn, wives at home became the healing source for their corrupted and contaminated husbands. Women's corrective function was restricted to the moral supervision of the status quo rather than socio-economic reform be- cause women were to support society and the commonwealth by serving as "the minor wheels and secret springs of the great machine of human life".[3] Sarah Ellis reversed the feminist evaluation of the gendered spheres as she attributed to women contradictory positions at the visible periphery of alienating public or professional life and at the invisible center of authentic life in the private homes of families, in which human beings came into their own.

In his popular lecture "Of Queen's Gardens", published as a part of "Sesame and Lilies" in 1865, John Ruskin did not share Sarah Ellis's annihilation of women's natures as ciphers apart from men but stressed that man and woman complement each other in an ideal way: "We are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in speaking of the 'superiority' of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not; each completes the other, and is completed by the other."[4] However, the promise of equality was undermined by implicit value judgements in Ruskin's concept that harked back to the chivalrous medieval age:

> 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 recreation, but sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the quality 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 and 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 trial - to him therefore must be the failure, the of-

1 Ibid., p. 58.

2 Ibid., p. 343.

3 Ibid., p. 106.

4 John Ruskin, "Sesame and Lilies", in: The Works of John Ruskin, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderbum, Library Edition, 18 (London, 1905), p. 121.

> fence, the inevitable error; often he must be wounded or subdued, often misled, and always hardened.[1]

Ruskin's pathos about wounded and hardened heroes bordered on the ridiculous as it suggested epic dimensions in male life, which according to Ellis had lost its poetic qualities in capitalist competition. We may assume that, returning from the daily fight with the dragon of capitalist forces, our Victorian hero found shelter from the hostile world in the sacred temple of the hearth. Ruskin may have had Queen Victoria in mind when he attributed rule and order to women, but at second glance, Ruskin's generous attribution of power to "ordinary" women looks far less attractive because they were to sympathize with and praise men but should not ask for any reward for themselves: women may award the crown to men but must not share their throne. For their domestic offices and their role as man's helpmate, women did not need extensive knowledge or elaborate education because, after all, they should not be turned into dictionaries and lose their charm of sweet, childish beauty.[2] Ruskin's idea of mutual dependency did not eliminate hierarchy: the husband should be obediently devoted to his wife, but the loving wife was truly subordinate to her husband.

Not only old-fashioned arguments looking back to some golden age, but also modem statements referring to the theory of social evolution served to restrict women's claim to emancipation. Eliza Linton managed to define ideal "Womanliness" (1883) in terms of the natural function of motherhood while denying its animal nature and "natural" or undisciplined qualities in women:

> She knows that part of her natural mission is to please and be charming. [...] She knows that she was designed by the needs of the race and the law of nature to be a mother. [...] She has no newfangled notions about the animal character of motherhood, nor about the degrading character of housekeeping. On the contrary, she thinks a populous and happy nursery one of the greatest blessings of her state; and she puts her pride in the perfect ordering, the exquisite arrangements, the comfort, thoughtfulness and beauty of her house. [...] She has taken it to heart that patience, self-sacrifice, tenderness, quietness, with some others, of which modesty is one, are the virtues more especially feminine; just as courage, justice, fortitude, and the like, belong to men. Passionate ambition, virile energy, the love of strong excitement, self-assertion, fierceness, an undisciplined temper, are all qualities which detract from her ideal of womanliness, and which make her less beautiful than she was meant to be.[3]

1 Ibid., pp. 121-122.
2 Ibid., pp. 122-128.
3 Quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, p. 20.

Linton conceded that women may have strong passions but maintained that they should not indulge their feelings for the sake of beauty, expressed in the wife's meek subordination to, and devoted reverence of, her husband. June Purvis sums up the conservative construction of gender: "femininity became identified with domesticity, service to others, subordination and weakness while masculinity was associated with life in the competitive world of paid work, strength and domination".[1] In the eyes of most conservative Victorians, the domestic function of women as wives and home-makers required little education. "Married life is woman's profession; and to this life her training - that of dependence - is modelled. Of course by not getting a husband, of losing him, she may find that she is without re- sources. All that can be said of her is, she has failed in business; and no social reform can prevent such failures."[2]

In order to make women eligible for marriage, education had to be specified according to the categories of the "good woman", who worked for her own family and/or as a servant for other families, and the "perfect lady", the devoted wife and mother who created a decorative, loving and morally uplifting home.[3] Working-class education for most girls usually began and ended at home. Until 1851, only about 10 per cent of them had any formal schooling, and women who took care of children while their mothers were at work usually taught them the basics of reading, sewing and knitting, sometimes writing and arithmetic. The British and Foreign Society and the much more powerful Church of England National Society ran about two thirds of all schools which provided elementary education. The Sunday schools offered part-time education, which for almost half the children of the poor was the only education in reading, sometimes spelling and writing, and usually included religious teaching, that aimed at the moral formation and submission of the lower classes. In contrast to lower-class girls, who were taught very basic practical skills, middle-class girls whose parents could afford better schools learned about "ornamental knowledge that might attract and impress a suitor".[4] The emphasis was definitely not put on intellectual skills and knowledge but on "accomplishments", such as singing, dancing, playing the piano, drawing or painting, a smattering of languages, the art of pleasing conversation and deportment, and above all the

1 June Purvis, *A History of Women 's Education in England*, Gender and Education Series (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1991), p. 4.

2 *Saturday Review*, 12 November 1859, quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, p. 11.

3 I am indebted to June Purvis, *Women's Education* (pp. 5-8, 12-21, 53, 64-71) for most of the subsequent information on education.

4 June Purvis, *A History of Women 's Education*, p. 64.

moulding of submissive characters to attract men in order to become a genteel "ladylike wife and mother"[1] In the rather permissive 1860s, ladies went great lengths in order to provoke men's interest. At a time when it was considered to be indecent to wear loose pantaloons, it was acceptable to expose the shoulders and even the breasts to the male gaze at fashionable balls, which reminded the eye-witness Arthur Munby of "how thoroughly conventional, in such matters, is modesty".[2] Needless to say, education by parents, governesses or tutors, by small private day schools or boarding schools usually did not qualify women for highly skilled work. I will turn to reforms concerning women in the second half of the 19th century before I present how women at work shaped the negotiation of gender.

3. Reforms: The Struggle for Emancipation

In the second half of the 19th century, the conflict over gender roles sharpened. The "woman question" became the topic of the day in the 1860s, renegotiating women's nature, proper sphere, education, and work. Resistance to emancipation was voiced by many, including Queen Victoria, who wrote in a letter of 29 May 1870 that she was

> anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of 'Women's Rights', with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. [...] God created men and women different - then let them remain each in their own position.[3]

Of course, Queen Victoria's position as the head of state contradicted the ideology of the segregated spheres, which she endorsed in that letter. In reverse, Florence Nightingale, who appeared to Victorians as the ideal mythic "English Sister of Charity, the self-denying caretaker - a mother, a saint, or even a female Christ"[4], chafed about conservative restrictions of women and precepts of the homely housewife in a text that remained unpublished during her life-time, "Cassandra". Full of sarcasm, Nightingale

1 Ibid., p. 65.

2 Quoted in Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life* (London, 1979), p. 39.

3 Quoted in Jan Marsh, "Votes for Women and Chastity for Men: Gender, Health, Medicine and Sexuality", in: *The Victorian Vision. Inventing New Britain*, V&A Publications, ed. John M. MacKenzie (London, 2001), p. 98.

4 Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments. The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), p. 167.

condemned those of her own sex, alluding to Sarah Ellis, who told women that "trifles make the sum of human things"[1], and who praised domesticity as a tabernacle that was too sacred for sons and daughters, not to speak of sleeping husbands. She asked: "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity - these three - and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?"[2] A job, she claimed, was a liberation from tedious domestic duties that encroached upon women's time, which was thus rendered valueless: "Women often long to enter some man's profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring the intellect with others), and, above all, time."[3] She complained that only "Widowhood, ill-health, or want of bread, these three explanations or excuses are supposed to justify a woman in taking up an occupation."[4] Most of all, she resented that most women took marriage to be a sacrifice of all other things:

> That man and woman have an equality of duties and rights is accepted by woman even less than by man. Behind his destiny woman must annihilate herself, must be only his complement. A woman dedicates herself to the vocation of her husband; she fills up and performs the subordinate parts in it. But if she has any destiny, any vocation of her own, she must renounce it, in nine cases out of ten.[5]

Ironically, Florence Nightingale did not think that the time was right for the immediate publication of her trumpet call for women's role in public life at present: "The time is come when women must do something more than the 'domestic hearth'".[6]

Women found an important ally in John Stuart Mill, who wrote *The Subjection of Women* in collaboration with his stepdaughter Helen Taylor in 1861, but who also postponed its publication in order to wait for a more promising situation (1869). Mill summarized the issues of the woman question and demanded the full emancipation of women. He reiterated and expanded Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments about 70 years after the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and met with similar scorn and defiance as his famous predecessor. John Stuart Mill was aware that his rational views of women would outrage his Victorian

1 Florence Nightingale, "Cassandra", in: *Cassandra and other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey (London, 1991), p. 229; cf. Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England*, p. 279.
2 Ibid., p. 205.
3 Ibid., p. 210.
4 Ibid., p. 212.
5 Ibid., p. 219.
6 Ibid., p. 229.

contemporaries because he attacked "almost universal opinion".[1] The reviews of his essay were devastating, and he was even accused of immorality and madness.[2] What offended his contemporaries? Mill (1) fundamentally questioned that there were "natural" differences between the sexes, and (2) sharply criticized its consequences, such as women's discrimination in education, their legal subordination to men, especially in marriage, and their political disenfranchisement.

(1) Mill undermined the basis of the gendered power structure in Victorian society, the assumption that women were by nature different from, and inferior to, men. He argued that the concept of a God-given inferior nature was an ideological construction that had served masters of all historical periods to justify injustice and legitimize their own privileges. He said that the circumstances women suffered from distorted their characters to such an extent that their nature, if there was any, was nowhere visible and discernible: "What is now called the nature of woman is an eminently artificial thing - the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others."[3]

(2) He criticized the fact that women's education lead to the enslavement of their minds and hearts:

> Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the women most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one; not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. [...] All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.[4]

Mill's attack on the Victorian sacred home and marriage as a site of domestic slavery, which reduced women to bondservants of despotic patriarchs[5], provoked those Victorians who maintained that benevolent husbands and fathers created a safe haven for their angels at home. He exposed the ideology of the self-less woman and her subordinate role as an old trick that led to male privilege and power. He revealed the contradiction between the ideal of the moral guidance of men by women and their expected sub-

1 John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women, in: On Liberty and Other Essays, ed. with an introd. by John Gray (Oxford, 1991), p. 472.
2 Kate Millet, "The Debate over Women: Ruskin vs. Mill", in: Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, 1972), p. 124.
3 John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women, p. 493.
4 Ibid., p. 486.
5 Ibid., p. 503.

mission to men. Although Mill polemically remarked that women who read and write "are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element"[1], formal education was advanced in the second half of the 19th century.

Educational reforms improved the basic skills of the masses but remained gendered, as it aimed at providing women's unpaid services within the family, raising healthy children and sustaining husbands for the sustenance of the skilled male labour force and the benefit of the nation.[2] In 1870, the Elementary Education Act stipulated schooling for all children but attendance between the ages of five and ten was made compulsory only in 1880. Gradually, evening schools added the instruction of domestic or vocational skills to elementary education. Scholarships for secondary and vocational schools were gender-biased: boys were to attend trade schools or junior technical schools, girls rather to go to domestic economy and domestic service schools. The Education Department gave grants to schools in 1878, demanding that girls be taught domestic economy, added grants in 1882 for the teaching of cooking and, in 1890, for laundry work; "the 'new' subjects should involve the learning of useful, practical skills and character training"[3], which meant discipline, cleanliness, carefulness, and order, to turn women not only into good housewives but "Home Managers" or even "Home Geniuses" according to *Longman's Domestic Economy Readers* in 1896.[4] Working men's and working women's colleges run in co-operation between the lower and middle classes added humanitarian education to that of basic skills offered by mechanics' institutes. Even if the Working Women's College founded in Queen's Street, London, in 1864, promoted the necessity of knowledge for women, it aimed rather at better domestic service than social mobility.

Middle-class girls had better opportunities to receive a good education, albeit with a gender bias. 1850 saw the foundation of the North London Collegiate School, which provided religious and liberal education to daughters of gentlemen in order to turn them into useful modem mothers, accomplished ladies, and philanthropic citizens. That institution formed the model for secondary schools for girls, which were established increasingly after the Endowed School Act of 1869, and which introduced mathematics and natural sciences but in general offered little or no vocational training, such as shorthand, typing, and book-keeping. Universities did not hurry to

1 Ibid., p. 501.

2 The subsequent information on education is based on June Purvis, *A History of Women 's Education*, pp. 15-54, 77-83, and 109-120.

3 Ibid, p. 26.

4 Ibid, p. 27.

admit women. University extension classes began in 1867 upon the initiative of middle-class women, who invited a Cambridge professor for a series of lectures outside the institution. The fact that some universities accepted women for degree courses, such as London University in 1878, Victoria University in 1880, and the University of Durham in 1895, does not necessarily mean that they were on an equal footing with their male peers. Newnham College at Cambridge University provided a separate and different education for women, whereas Girton College at Cambridge offered the same education and examinations to female and male students with a decisive difference: in 1881, Cambridge University allowed women to take examinations but did not award them degrees. At Oxford University, women had to wait until 1919 to receive the same degrees as men, and at Cambridge until the middle of the 20th century. After all, a degree would officially recognize a woman's high quality of education, which, according to Sarah Sewell in 1868, was detrimental to her ordinary work:

> profoundly educated women rarely make good wives or mothers. The pride of knowledge does not amalgamate well with the every-day matter of fact rearing of children, and women who have stored their minds with Latin and Greek seldom have much knowledge of pies and puddings, nor do they enjoy the hard and uninteresting work of attending to the wants of little children.[1]

Unfortunately, the educational efforts of women did not lead to substantial progress in the job market. Lower-class women were better qualified for lower-class work, and middle-class women had better professional opportunities in teaching and in national bureaucracy at the beginning of the 20th century but had not been able to enter male professions in large numbers. However, the position of married women gradually improved due to legal reforms.

John Stuart Mill touched on a sensitive spot as he criticized the legal bondage of wives to husbands and their inability to escape sexual coercion since the law handed women over to men as "their thing, to be used at their pleasure"[2], and he demanded more legal reforms in the 1860s. If we consider that married women were not assumed to be legal subjects because the married couple was one person in law under the head of the husband, and that married women's property belonged to their husbands in common law, the legal reforms were large steps ahead but stopped short of women's equality. In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act established a civil divorce court in London and stipulated that wives could sue for divorce provided

1 Quoted in June Purvis, *A History of Women's Education*, pp. 111-112.

2 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 508.

that they could prove two of three charges: cruelty, desertion, adultery - husbands, however, had only to prove one charge in order to obtain a divorce. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 allowed for divorce for cruelty as a single offence and granted women the right to claim maintenance and the custody of children. In 1870, the Married Women's Property Act entitled women to 200 pounds of their own earnings but initiated more improvements concerning women's control of their possessions upon marriage. The act was extended in 1884 to ensure that married women had the same right to manage their own property as unmarried women. Wealthy fathers, however, had always been able to arrange marriage settlements for daughters, which established by contract the wife's control over her separate property. Still, wives had no reciprocal claim to the property of their husbands, which is significant since many a wife became the unpaid domestic servant to her husband if he was the only provider of an income. The denial of suffrage to women may have been a serious impediment to progress since it definitely curbed their influence on politics and therefore on the legislative body responsible for reform acts.

In the Victorian mid-sixties, the increasing demands for the female right to vote in national elections polarized the electorate. John Stuart Mill insisted on women's perfect equality and demanded their right to vote as a matter of justice beyond any allegations of inferior female faculties but his amendment to the Second Reform Bill in 1867 in order to extend the franchise to women was rejected in Parliament.[1] The opponents of female suffrage brought forth a series of mutually exclusive and contradictory arguments. Some maintained that women's fickle emotional and biological nature violated the necessity of a reliable electorate, others argued that suffrage would draw women into corruption and turmoil at elections, a fact that clearly speaks for an unreliable male electorate and, what is worse, corrupt political candidates. Women would not need franchise because they were represented by their husbands, but the implied unanimousness of husband and wife was destroyed by the argument that separate votes would spark quarrels between husband and wife. Radicals and liberals were afraid that women would vote for conservatives under the influence of clergymen, forgetting that women clamoured for progress by social and legal reforms. The arguments for female suffrage were based on the claim of women's equality to men, the need of a voice of their own because their husbands might not represent their wives' views and interests, and the necessity to have a say in politics since politics interfered with women's lives. Even if women gained opportunities to exert influence on local boards and elec-

1 Ibid., pp. 526-527.

tions for county borough councils, resistance to their national franchise was too strong among Victorians. If suffragettes fought for legal reforms of the franchise, working women experienced legal bills relating to working conditions as a mixed blessing because laws that protected women from particular forms of work also reduced their competitiveness. Whereas restrictive constructions of women and the consequent lack of vocational training had a negative impact on women's opportunities and positions at work, their practical performance in particular jobs implicitly undermined gender constructions and challenged male authorities in the capitalist market.

4. Women's Work and Working Women's Challenge of Gender Constructions

Many women suffered from the obvious contradiction between the middle-class ideal of segregated spheres and the necessity for most women of the lower and the middle classes to make a living without having been qualified for it. The problem was particularly acute for the so-called redundant or surplus women, spinsters and widows.[1] The numbers of women exceeded that of men by half a million in the mid-19th century, and by one million at the end of the century, so that "ten to twenty percent of all adult women remained permanently unmarried".[2] In spite of the fact that the marriage bar meant the end to paid work for those women whose husbands earned a family wage, the majority of women had to work both at home and outside the home, which was particularly difficult for mothers: "for those with dependents, the choice was often restricted to part-time, poorly paid, home-based work that might be fitted around domestic duties"[3]? Poor women's little monetary income was also "supplemented by non-wage earnings"[4], the preparation of food, the keeping of livestock, or the cultivation of kitchen crops.

Most of the women who had to work went into domestic service. In 1851, about 10% or 750,000 of the female population worked as domestic servants, doing the household chores for their superiors.[5] Education at home qualified most women for cleaning, sewing, and cooking, but working con-

1 Sheila Ryan Johansson, "Demographic Contributions to the History of Victorian Women", in: *The Women of England. From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present. Interpretive Bibliographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Kanner (London, 1980), p. 281.

2 Ibid., pp. 277-278.

3 June Purvis, *A History of Women's Education*, p. 53.

4 Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender, and Industrialisation*, p. 45.

5 Jan Marsh, "Votes for Women", p. 101.

ditions and wages varied: Johannsson optimistically maintains that "Domestic service paid relatively high wages, and it offered a young woman the opportunity to learn valuable social and household skills that might lead to better marriages and upward mobility".[1] Emma Paterson had a rather different point of view in 1879:

> domestic service is incessant hard work at all hours of the day and sometimes of the night also. It is at best but a kind of slavery, and when a girl has a home it is only a human feeling, and one that we should respect, if she prefers to undertake work in trades, because she can return at night and on Sundays to the home circle.[2]

The consideration that domestic service enabled a comfortable middle-class family life at the cost of their servants' own family lives probably escaped their employers. The difference between a poor domestic servant's rather bare room-and-kitchen home and the parlour she had to clean in a well-off household must have been considerable. The lady of the house decorated the parlour with an accumulation of objects in order to fulfil the demands of comfort and aesthetic experience as well as the construction and communication of identity via conspicuous consumption.[3] The parlour served as an interface between the private and the public, a site of intimacy for the family, from which servants were mostly excluded, and the display of identity and of social status to visitors, which included the number of servants in the household.[4]

The trades of sewing, weaving, and lace-making often allowed women to work at home but did not necessarily ensure their survival. In the ball season, ladies required seamstresses to toil without end in order to procure dresses for balls, which, at least in the case of Mary Ann Walkley, lead to death by overworking and starvation after she worked for more than 26 hours without a break.[5] Even if Walkley's case was extreme, most poor women certainly did not suffer from the want of work which Florence

1 Sheila Ryan Johansson, "Demographic Contributions", p. 280.

2 Quoted in Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public*, p. 64.

3 Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour. A Cultural Study* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 76.

4 Ibid., pp. 27-31. John Tosh points out that the Victorian home was as important to the gendering of (middle-class) men as of women since a man achieved his full social status as a bourgeois patriarch by the establishment, the protection, the control of and the provision for a household, which he could retreat to after work and which was supposed to fulfil his needs of affection, order, mastery, and social status (*A Man 's Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* [New Haven and Lon- don, 1999], pp. 2-4, 47).

5 Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 24.

Nightingale in her upper-middle-class perspective described in an exaggerated way as the lot of women, who felt as if they were going mad at the end of day because "they suffer at once from disgust of the one and incapacity for the other - from loathing of conventional idleness and powerlessness to do work when they have it".[1] Poor women were rather hampered by weakness from want than from leisure if they became "incapable of consecutive or strenuous work".[2]

In order to survive, many women had to work hard for low wages outside their homes, for example in sweat shops or textile mills, in spite of concerns for the neglect and disintegration of their families, whose welfare they were held responsible for: "the factory tears her from all these duties: homes become no longer homes; children grow up uneducated and entirely neglected; the domestic affections are crushed or blunted, and woman is no longer the gentle sustainer of man, but his fellow-drudge and fellow-la- bourer".[3] Working women risked not only the integrity of their families but social esteem as well since some forms and conditions of work were considered to be unwomanly - but not necessarily inhumane. When the amateur inspector Arthur Munby saw young women dealing with offal in a slaughterhouse, he was afraid that this kind of work threatened to "coarsen and unsex a young woman and destroy all grace of form and character".[4] Munby was not at all concerned with poor women's health or wages but with the possible consequences of gross work in the shape of impudent or disrespectful behaviour towards middle-class gentlemen, for which he was glad not to find any evidence.[5] In general, middle-class gentlemen were less interested in the reform of working conditions than of working women, whose independence beyond the control of fathers or husbands gave rise to the fear of license and prostitution.[6] Women working outside their homes also provoked the renegotiation of gender in various ways. Mining, which seemed to violate womanliness, and nursing, which seemed to realize womanliness, raised disputes about gender roles that revealed various challenges to men's superiority and their responses in order to maintain "masculinity" and contain female competition.

1 Florence Nightingale, "Cassandra", p. 221.

2 Ibid.

3 Samuel Smiles, quoted in June Purvis, *A History of Women 's Education*, p. 8; see also Christopher Hibbert, *The English. A Social History, 1066-1945*, third edition (London, 1988), p. 592.

4 Quoted in Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 15.

5 Ibid., p. 16.

6 Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family*, pp. 150-152.

Patricia Hollis notes that 11,000 women laboured in mining in 1851.[1] Girls and women who worked in the mines and women who cross-dressed in order to earn male wages[2] contradicted prejudices about the weaker sex, implicitly questioned male superiority, and rivalled men for jobs. The explicit public debate on women workers in or at mines focused on morals rather than economic necessity, wages, or health. The First Report of the Children's Employment Commission in 1842 revealed that girls worked half-naked and in more or less tattered pants in mine shafts, which sent moral shockwaves through the middle-class public. The fact that girls pulling wagons in mines and women working at pit brows wore men's used trousers and coats, "queer clothes"[3] in the apt words of a pit brow girl, was considered to be almost as immoral as the exposure of breasts in mine- shafts. The offense taken by the public can be measured by the fact that "the Great Breeches Question"[4] remained a topic of recurrent public debates in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s. Male miners joined middle-class inspectors in denouncing their fellow-labourers for three reasons: their presence and clothes gave rise to degrading contacts and acts of gross immorality with male workers; hard work unsexed women through their manliness in external appearance and behaviour, and their work interfered with women's domestic duties.[5] The outraged official report by middle-class men, which stressed those women's deterioration of character and loss of self-respect, stood in marked contrast to the women's own comments, which asserted the custom, convenience, and usefulness of male clothes, and expressed pride in the ability to perform well in their jobs.[6] In 1867, the Select Committee on Mines had to admit that no evidence of indecency was to be found and therefore did not see the need for legal interference.[7] In sum, the Factory Acts intended less to protect women from exploitation than to restrict their choice of work, their chance of earnings and their competitiveness, thus promoting women's domestic functions.[8] Miners and their unions opposed women workers in spite of or rather because of women's performance and competition at half the men's wages in order to enhance

1 Patricia Hollis, Women in Public, p. 53.

2 Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women, pp. 41-43, 89; Camilla Townsend, '"I am the woman for spirit': a Working Woman's Gender Transgression in Victorian London", Victorian Studies, 36 (1992/93), 293-314.

3 Quoted in Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women, p. 87, cp. p. 92.

4 Arthur Munby, quoted in Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women, p. 85.

5 Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women, pp. 48, 50-52, 57.

6 Ibid., p. 52.

7 Ibid., p. 56.

8 Ibid., 58-59; Katrina Honeyman, Women, Gender, and Industrialisation, pp. 69, 93.

their own definition of masculinity by being the sole providers of their families' incomes.

Whereas miners fought present competition by women, men in the medical profession rather tried to preempt future competition by women. Domestic nursing was considered to be a prime function of mothers but doctors claimed the authority to determine the nature of the disease and its cure. Sarah Ellis supported the strict professional segregation between nurses and doctors. She considered nursing to be one of the essential domestic duties in every woman's life because women had to attend to the sick-bed of children and parents, and she demanded women's education in health care but warned women not to interfere with the work of doctors.[1]

Florence Nightingale, the embodiment of the new middle-class nurse, extended the range of women's domestic work by leading a team of nurses at Scutari during the Crimean War, raising the public esteem for nurses.[2] In her writings, she defined nursing as hygienic and moral discipline, which aimed at reform by civilizing the poor, and "ultimately challenged the basis of medical men's power - the right to define who was a patient in need of health care".[3] Nightingale argued that nature rather than medicine cured human beings, and that nurses rather than doctors created conditions amenable to healing, but she did not advocate medical training for nurses in order to avoid conflicts with doctors.[4] Mary Seacole went even further than Florence Nightingale, who declined her offer to serve as a nurse in the Crimea. Mary Seacole, a creole of Scottish and Caribbean descent, pursued a double strategy, which asserted and challenged gender constructions at the same time. In her autobiography, she characterized herself (ironically?) as an "unprotected female"[5], and endorsed the dominant opinion that women could soothe the injured best as nurses in a motherly way.[6] She then debunked men when she described that the injuries unmanned the soldiers, who were in need of motherly care, and that she herself was "doing the work of half a dozen men"[7] in her incessant labour to relieve the

1 Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England*, pp. 76-78.

2 Jan Marsh, "Votes for Women and Chastity for Men: Gender, Health, Medicine and Sexuality", in: *The Victorian Vision. Inventing New Britain*, ed. John M. MacKenzie (London, 2001), p. 113.

3 Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p. 166; see also pp. 191-192.

4 Catherine Judd, *Bedside Seductions. Nursing and the Victorian Imagination, 1830-1880* (Houndmills, 1998), p. 25.

5 Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, introd. William L. Andrews, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (Oxford, 1988), p. 8.

6 Mary Seacole, *Wonderful Adventures*, p. 75.

7 Ibid., p. 149.

pains of wounded troops. Finally, she asserted her own superiority not only as a nurse in implicit comparisons to the British ones, but also as a doctress due to her expertise in Afro-Caribbean medicine and some medical training by army surgeons: "I had gained a reputation as a skilful nurse and doctress".[1] As a nurse, she subordinated herself to the British doctors at their hospital, but she also set up her own practice as a rival doctor who helped patients with her own concoctions of medicine. Even if army doctors dismissed her authority, she cured many patients with great success if we may trust the testimonies she inserted in her autobiography.[2] Her lack of recognition by war officials in England before her departure to the Crimea and by the medical authorities in the theatre of war were easily countered by her demonstration of skills, which culminated in her cure of a surgeon who had given up the hope to survive.[3] Her success and her good reputation as a doctress, and her services to the British army were acknowledged in Great Britain after the war but did not allow her to work as a medical professional in the mother country. The British Medical Association was established in 1856 as a male preserve. In the same year, Jessie Meriton White was not admitted to examination for a diploma in midwifery and surgery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital simply for the reason that she was a woman.[4] Since its foundation in 1858, the General Medical Council, which was responsible for licensing doctors, refused to register women doctors.[5] But in the long run, they relented and admitted women to the profession, so that by 1901, Great Britain had 212 female physicians, 140 dentists, and 3 veterinarians.[6]

The examples of mining and healthcare show that in the field of unskilled labour, men opposed women because of their competitive performance, and in the field of skilled labour, men tried to preempt women's access to professional training, examination and practice in order to prevent future competition. Whereas well-educated women wormed their way into the professions towards the end of the Victorian age, unskilled women formed unions of their own in opposition to unions of skilled work force, who largely represented men and excluded women, who had a questionable advantage over men because they usually were paid half the wages. Wherever women had the opportunity, they proved to be equal to men, but it seemed to take the First World War for men to realize and accept that women did "men's"

1 Ibid., p. 7; cf. p. 89.
2 Ibid., pp. 101, 127-134, 171-172, 194.
3 Ibid., pp. 69, 101,78-79.
4 Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women, p. 41.
5 Jan Marsh, "Votes for Women", p. 113.
6 Ibid., p. 102.

work, at least as long as men were busy with warfare. It would be wrong to claim that by the end of the 19th century womanliness had become detached from domesticity, but it seems safe to say that working women dissolved the segregation of genders by mere practical performance as much as writers who clamoured for emancipation.

In 1972, Kate Millet stated that the Victorian woman question had not fundamentally changed, that apart from some new contemporary catchwords the Women's Liberation movement still battled against male prejudices and privileges.[1] Although it is true to say that even now, in 2002, women are still denied total equality, they have made some headway since the Victorian age. Disappointed by the failure of the moderate National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (1897) to influence politics significantly, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst founded the militant Women's Social and Political Union in Manchester in 1903, which stepped up suffragist activities. They staged a protest in Hyde Park attended by about 250,000 people on 28 June 1908, and resorted to arson and bombing as the General Electoral Reform Bill was abandoned in 1913, and on 4 June 1913, Emily Davison died after having thrown herself under the king's horse in order to demonstrate how women were abused in Great Britain. The war of the sexes was temporarily displaced by World War I. The suffragettes sus- pended the militant campaign at home because they had decided that no longer British men but the Germans were the number one enemy. The war effort took pressure off politicians to battle against women at home. The front abroad triggered other changes on the home front: British women entered jobs that were better paid after these had been vacated by men drafted into the army. Historians have discussed whether militant suffragettes promoted or harmed the case for enfranchisement, and whether the changing position of women in World War I swayed politicians to favour women's franchise. I would argue for an accumulation of factors: the fact that women proved in World War I that they could adequately replace men as workers might have helped to promote their cause, but women did that before; the pressure of both moderate and radical suffragettes was possibly less decisive than the radical suffragettes' support of their country in the war effort, which seemed to have changed their image as lunatic anarchists into that of responsible citizens. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act granted all male citizens at 21 and women over 30 years of age the right to vote. Women had to wait for the fulfilment of their equal right to vote in national elections until 1928. Further reforms continued the gradual progress of the Victorian age. In 1969, the Divorce Reform Act acknow-

1 Kate Millet, "The Debate", p. 139.

ledged the irretrievable breakdown of a marriage as a sufficient reason for divorce for both men and women. Women, however, still have to wait for equal pay, which the Equal Pay Act of 1970, which was put in force in 1975, should have ensured. The Sex Discrimination Act (1975), which was to safeguard equal opportunity in education, employment, housing, and the provision of public services, tells us as much about the legislative attempts to attain equality of the sexes as about the inadequate social reality which needs the law to enforce what does not go without saying. The ongoing series of further reform acts reveals that what was considered to be desir-able by many women and some of their political representatives has not been put into current social practice. The woman question is, after all, also a question of man.