

This is A Few Forgotten Women Article



"A Woman's Place is in the Home": the dutiful daughter, spinster, wife or outcast? A Woman's Choice?

Part 2

Times of Change

"Women have all the liberty they should wish to have. We have all the labour and the danger, and the women all the advantage. We go to sea, we build houses, we do everything, in short, to pay court to our women"

Johnson, Dr. Samuel, Temptation

Hardwick's Act came at the beginning of a period that was to see enormous changes, not only to marriage but in every aspect of people's lives. First with increasing mechanization which changed the face of agriculture and land-owning systems which altered agricultural communities, followed by the sweeping changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. This rapid development of industrial processes consequently altered every aspect of people's lives; where and how they lived, roles and status underwent dramatic change. The connections which had previously linked society, even between the classes, were broken.

There is great debate among historians as to the exact composition and relationships within the various strata of society and, from which ever perspective the historian views it, often based on the prevailing agendas of the time, different views emerge. Many do agree though that the paternalistic/deferential nature of pre-Industrial Revolution England was changed to one where those with the wealth, paid others to work and that was

the end of the contract. The deference of previous centuries had gone, and society was being questioned on all levels, sometimes violently.

Initially after Hardwick women's situation in marriage remained the same; a man's wife was his property. 10 years after Hardwick, Sir William Blackstone in his Commentary stated that a woman was still subjugated and "by marriage the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being of legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage or at least incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything". This was coverture and she surrendered everything. Seebolm Rowntree in his survey of York considered that "as one went up the social scale, the emphasis on respectability grew and couples were more likely to be married ... less likely to admit to being unmarried"

Work/Home Life



Stoke upon Trent, A Pictorial History, Alan Taylor, 1995

As the work /life of the family changed, the decline of cottage industries, the agricultural economy declining and industrial production swallowing up the agricultural labourers, women were still expected to look after the home and the man of the house but the ethos of the co-operative family/community declined as the men went to work in the factories along with many of the children and if the family income was insufficient for the often large families, the wife also went out to work, but her income still belonged to her husband.

There were some industries where the family still had a bond and were all employed by the same company or even as in the pottery industry, the husband may have a job which he had obtained because of his father's work at the factory, and the husband would then employ members of his family, including his wife, if necessary, as part of his "team". After Lancashire, the Potteries had the highest proportion of married women employed.

Industrialization brought with it overcrowding in the rapidly built houses leading to insanitary conditions and illnesses both from the home and work environments, all of which the wife had to cope with. Margaret Bonfield noted that educated married women had an end to their ambitions but poor women "would look forward to marriage with hope and dread - hope of economic security and dread of the unknown- ordeal of childbirth" (Margaret Bonfield, *A Life's work* 1949)

Social Class



George Eliot (1819-1880), aged 30

*by the Swiss artist Alexandre-Louis-François d'Albert-Durade (1804-1886)
Source: National Portrait Gallery, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

There was still a class divide, perhaps some social movement by ambitious working-class men and expectation of women's roles differed with the social strata in which women found themselves. Karl Marx believed in the exploitation of the working class by the upper classes but later historians like

Professor H. J. Perkin believed that it was the middle class who triumphed over both classes. The lives and expectations of middle- and upper-class women were frequently highlighted and explored in the literature of the time, not usually in an aggressive way but highlighting the growing wish for more independence by the heroines from writers such as Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters (who wrote under male pseudonyms, also George Eliot in England and Georges Sands in France), - female writers were unacceptable. Touching the lives of those lower down the social scale, often in sub plots were novels by Mrs Gaskell and even Thomas Hardy.

The problem of spinsterhood was, earning a living, when many professions required a higher, to university level of education, access to which was denied women, consequently denying them entry into many professions. Many occupations which did admit women denied them the choice of marriage, as they forbade married women entry. This was also the case for some working-class women particularly those who went into service, and should they become pregnant they would suffer immediate dismissal.

This narrow range of employment opportunity frequently meant that in old age or illness single women were more reliant on family and failing that poor relief than even a widow and they ended their days in the workhouse, frequently becoming the “forgotten women” we are searching for. Despite the difficulties of obtaining work, except in the growing factories, paid work was mostly regarded as the province of single unsupported women.

Consequences of Marital State: Middle/Upper Class



The Only Daughter by James Hayllar
Source: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

For the compliant middle- and upper-class woman there were rules of etiquette which were transgressed at their peril. Marriage was almost a necessity. Their choice of husband was, in many cases, not theirs to make (and admittedly this applied to some younger sons) but formed part of family dynastic ambitions with the daughters used to bolster family finances. The poverty of women was often a result of legal inheritance rules favouring men, particularly where the eldest son was the beneficiary.

Whether a woman was married or not was where their personal lives interacted with their public persona; a husbandless woman was regarded as not a complete person, causing an ambiguity in women's situations, manifesting itself as, the married woman had social standing and respectability but had no legal rights, whereas the opposite pertained to the spinster, a social outcast but having far more rights.

Middle- and upper-class women had advice of all kinds on the ways to behave; they should apply great diligence to seeking the right and suitable husband as making a mistake would result in "a lifetime not of pleasant submission ... but of patient suffering and unhappy martyrdom". Once a husband had been chosen, the wife was to manage and humour him to promote domestic bliss. They were coached in the responsibilities of the home. They did not have the freedom afforded to some of the lower orders as they were not allowed to be alone with a man and had to be chaperoned during their courtship prior to marriage, which was to produce heirs and not for emotion or enjoyment of sex. The husband, it was thought, should be older than his wife, to emphasize his superiority. There was therefore no need for a young woman to have had an extensive education rather just in the domestic arts in preparation for marriage.

Growing Discontent

"Should I also tell you whether a woman's nature is clever and quick enough to learn speculative sciences as well as to discover them and likewise the manual arts? I assure you that women are equally well suited and skilled to carry them out and to put them to sophisticated use once they have learned them"
(*de Pizan, Christine, Book of the City Ladies [15th century]*)

It was mainly from the middle class from which the growing dissatisfaction with the treatment, liberties, education and general life of women came. They had the best opportunity for education and chance to follow intellectual pursuits. They also had the best opportunities to highlight these frustrations of women regarding the roles in home, life and society. The women engaged

in the growing protest developed from female social interactions; single women perhaps had more time and association but with other women. Their issues were wide ranging, employment, freedoms, property and financial rights, equal access to divorce and children. These emerging ideas were often regarded, as Enid Stacy, a feminist wrote, “the agitation was almost entirely carried out by unmarried women and in much was said and written by them or on their behalf, a strong ‘anti-man’ and ‘anti-marriage’ tone was observable” and Mabel Atkinson pointed out that the position of these women led them to ‘hostility to normal relations’. Bessie Rayner stating that “A single woman is so free, so powerful”.

The inequalities of the wife’s position were highlighted by numerous women in a lecture in 1871 when Millicent Garrett wrote that a man could prevent his wife exercising control over her children, could separate them from her; take control her of her money and property and give it to his mistress. This economic independence with laws guaranteeing rights of women to own property was an early aim of the feminist movement and might be regarded as only of benefit to the middle and upper classes but it did help married working class women, who went to work, and would not have to hand over her earnings to her husband. Mary Pankhurst worked as a gold grinder in the 1860s.

She took out a restraining order against her husband, Joseph Caton, a provision of which was that she should be able to retain her earnings, foreshadowing the Married Woman’s Property Act which came in 4 years later

Sussex Advertiser, 27th June 1866 reported that:

Protection Order

Mary Pankhurst applied for protection from her husband and for her earnings. Her husband, who was a butcher, deserted her in April 1865, and went to Australia, since which time she had not seen him.

The Bench granted her the usual protection.

(Note the request for protection of her earnings)

However, it was not all the single, anti-men /marriage, women who were keen for reform. Many women wished to marry, for love, in some cases, but this meant that they were looking for a marriage of equals, which patently was not always the case at this time. They supported the feminist movement and often their husbands were very supportive, frequently agreeing with and helping the cause. In 1874 Elizabeth Wolstenholme, a prominent feminist, became

pregnant she did not originally intend to marry but it was her feminist colleagues who urged her to marry because of the detrimental effect that an illegitimate child would have on the movement. Some women marked their bid for independence by not promising to obey in the marriage service and others retained their own maiden name combined with her husband's.

NOTE: References to this article can be found at the end of Part 3