

Expectations of Victorian Women

{A STUDY IN PROFESSIONAL DOMESTICITY}

Submitted for *The Concord Review*

A woman is on her knees, scrubbing the floor. Her hands are red and angry. They scream at her, beg her to stop. She scrubs until she can no longer feel her arms, and then she scrubs some more. The baby blue sleeves on her long-sleeved cotton shirt are wet, soaked in filthy water. Later, she accidentally pokes herself with her needles when she is mending her child's clothes. A small scarlet bead of blood forms. She hisses at the pain, licks the droplet away, and continues with her work. She descends the creaky wooden stairs. She prepares a dinner of roast beef and potatoes for her husband, son, and daughter, plating the food neatly on delicate plates made of fine china. She calls the children in from the yard, and they all sit together, waiting for the final member of their family to arrive. After dinner, she washes the dishes and cleans the rest of the kitchen, making sure every surface is spotless. This was the supposed Victorian woman.

Virtuous, selflessly devoted, and wholly pure, women of the Victorian era have often been compared to angels. A particularly well-known example of this comparison is Coventry Patmore's late 19th century poem *The Angel in the House*, a poem that is an extended

metaphor portraying Victorian women as domestic angels. Patmore's vision of an angel in the house might seem to represent the female Victorian stereotype, but authors through various time periods have demonstrated that, due to the expanded definition of domesticity, such an analogy is no longer a fully accurate depiction of Victorian women. The definition of domesticity shifted during the Victorian era to better reflect the role that women played in society as Victorians began to realize the full scope of the Victorian woman's influence. Victorian women began to be described with terminology not typically used in domestic settings such as managers and universal solvents. Women of the Victorian era were professionals in their own right, the expectations imposed upon them were incredibly similar to those placed upon individuals working professionally in the workforce. Still, women of the Victorian era were not granted the same level of respect, professional or otherwise, or given the same opportunities for career and personal growth. Even within the sphere of domesticity, it was difficult for Victorian women to thrive in such an environment due to the perfectionist



“Running Through Time”

ideals overlayed on top of the already demanding professional expectations.

The concept of domesticity has long represented all that has to do with the house and home. Indeed, expectations of women in the Victorian era encompassed not only this established ideal but it also

included labor typically reserved for those in full-time occupations practiced outside of the home. Therefore, given that the definition of domesticity expanded as Victorian society came to acknowledge the other roles that the Victorian woman played in society, the term professional domesticity more accurately defines the expectations placed upon women during the Victorian era.

Professional domesticity was not professional in the classic sense that there were hourly wages. It was professional in the sense that the standards set in place for Victorian women were overlaid with expectations of perfectionism and professionalism similar to those put upon professionals in the workforce. Victorian women needed to have the same devotion to her labor as monetarily compensated professionals did without any of the potential for personal and career growth in order to thrive as the woman of the household.

To better visualize the scope of domesticity and female influence in Victorian society, scholars have used spheres. For instance, Deborah Gorham, a historian from New York, introduced in her novel *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* the concept of spheres in the way that they have been used to define women and domesticity.¹ Gorham explains that these spheres helped to define where the female influence in the Victorian era began and ended.² While life lived in the public eye dealing with business and politics was considered to be the realm of men, women were considered responsible for maintaining the part of life lived behind the drawn curtains of one’s own home. Matters concerning love, emotions, and domesticity fell in the realm of Victorian women. However, professional domesticity complicates decades worth of theorization through spheres by further blending the presumed separation between working women and women in the home.

Even the work of major philosophers reflected this shift. In the introduction to a 1977 anthology of essays titled *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, editor Martha Vicinus discusses the thoughts

¹ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1982).

² Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, 4.

of John Stuart Mill, a 19th century English philosopher. Mill is one of the most impactful thinkers from the last several centuries and has contributed several works to social and political theory. According to Vicinus, Mill saw proof of the expanding role of women in Victorian society. He “spoke of the enormous potential of women, which he saw being realized in the period when he wrote. His sense of their widening sphere of moral and social activities was not wholly a product of his own idealism.”³ Although women had always held influence over matters outside the household, it was only during the Victorian era that philosophers such as Mill began to realize that women had the capacity to manage much more than just household chores.

This turn in expectations was a global phenomenon. Women in both England and the United States adapted to this overlap of professional and domestic expectations. Despite the fact that during the Victorian era these two nations were at different stages of development and had discrepancies in their political and economic situations, they were incredibly similar in regard to social standards. In a volume of *American Quarterly*, Daniel Walker Howe, an American historian, inspects the relationship that existed between the two nations of America and England. He notes that “[a]lthough the United States had become politically independent, economic interdependence continued to characterize Anglo-American relations...The cultural connection was, if anything, even closer than the economic one. Victorianism was a transatlantic culture...”⁴ Howe states that American society and British society were deeply interconnected despite the vast waters which separated them, acknowledging that the morals which permeated Victorian culture were not contained to England. For matters such as domesticity during the Victorian era, England and the United States had nearly identical attitudes. In both countries, various authors published manuals such as *Frugal Housewife*, an American manual published in 1832, and *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, an English manual published in 1838, that demonstrated this expanded concept of domesticity

during the Victorian era which outlined what a Victorian woman ought to do and offered advice for professionally domestic women.



“Drifting Away”

Manuals from the Victorian era regarding the topic of domesticity covered a wide range of subjects. *Frugal Housewife*, for example, is authored by Lydia Maria Child, an American author who also published other works such as *The Girls’ Own Book* and *The Mother’s Book*. It is a how-to manual that guides its intended audience, women of the Victorian era, through various techniques that would allow them to save money. Its topics range from rationing soap to finding the least expensive cuts of meat to seeming presentable both inside and outside the house. *Frugal Housewife* shows that, during the Victorian era, the domestic sphere in which Victorian women operated expanded to include expectations drawn from the world of working professional women, further causing expectations of women’s work in the domestic sphere to be heightened.

³ Martha Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (United Kingdom: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1977), ix.

⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, “American Victorianism as a Culture,” *American Quarterly*, December, 1975, 508.



"Breaking the Mold"

Similarly, Sarah Stickney Ellis was a British author who, during the 1830s and 1840s, wrote several books about the role of women in Victorian society which document the gradual change in the defining of and attitude towards domesticity during the Victorian era. Born in 1799 as Sarah Stickney, she lived for about seventy-three years and died as Sarah Ellis in June of 1872, having married Reverend William Ellis.⁵ The two of them were both authors and had a shared love of literature, prompting them to publish works on a wide range of subject matter, from religious missions to feminine ideals of the Victorian era. Ellis believed that it was women's responsibility to model good behavior that would reflect well on society as a whole.⁶ Much of her work was directed at the then rapidly growing middle-class of women.⁷ Throughout her work, Ellis used professional language in the context of domesticity. Her work provided an example of how the language of professional domesticity set higher standards of perfectionism for women.

⁵ "Sarah Stickney Ellis | Author | LibraryThing," LibraryThing.com, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.librarything.com/author/ellissarahstickney>.

⁶ "Women in the Literary Marketplace," n.d., https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/womenLit/literary_market/Stickney_Ellis_L.htm.

In 1838, Ellis wrote and published her novel, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*. It explored the idea that women operating in the realm of domesticity were expected to work in the same way that male professionals in the workforce did, the only difference being that, professionally, Victorian women did not garner the same respect as Victorian men. In her book, Ellis documented the stark difference in professionalism between men and women of the Victorian era. The expectation for women's professionalism went beyond even what men experienced in the workplace. The standards set in place for Victorian women were relentless, demanding perfection at every turn. Ellis wrote that "...[A] considerate and high-principled woman, may, without loss of dignity, and certainly without loss of respect, make them feel that she regards it as her duty to be their friend as well as their mistress..."⁸ What Ellis noticed here was that the Victorian man would not have had the same capacity to be at ease with his coworkers in his home in the same way that the Victorian woman did. For men during the Victorian era, the workplace and the home were two different settings that required two different attitudes. Although this was the standard for Victorian men, Victorian women faced an entirely different reality.

Women of the Victorian era had to relax in the company of other members in the household. This was the expectation set in place for them. Their workplaces were their homes and their colleagues their family members. "[S]he looks upon herself as under a sacred obligation to advise them in difficulties, to guard their welfare, and to promote their comfort, simply because the all-wise Disposer of human affairs has seen meet to place them within the sphere of her influence"⁹ The Victorian woman could not separate her work from her home because they were one and the same. She was always at work, because she did not stop caring for her family outside of her designated hours, of which she

⁷ "Women in the Literary Marketplace."

⁸ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (United Kingdom: P. Jackson, late Fisher, Son & Company, 1845), 211.

⁹ Ellis, *The Women of England*, pg. 211.

had none, for she was not compensated for the labor that she did as a woman of the household.

Placing the language of the professional into the domestic concept heightened ideals of perfectionism for Victorian women. In another one of her novels, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations*, Ellis used vocabulary typically used in professional settings and used them to describe women in domestic roles. “In pursuing the subject of domestic management, we are again struck with the importance of speaking of things by their proper names; for by some strange misnomer, those women have come to be generally called good managers...”¹⁰ Here, Ellis characterized the domestic labor of Victorian women as “domestic management” and called them “domestic managers”. In doing so, she has brought professional connotations along with such terms and placed them directly within the context of domesticity. Management is a term has traditionally been used in professional settings—time management, project management, people management. There is so much shared language between the concept of professional of domesticity and the world of compensate professionals and Ellis’ use of it in this context further demonstrates the expansion of the domestic realm and its overlap with the sphere of professionalism.



“Serenity”

In addition to that, Ellis established perfectionism as a major part of the professional expectations of Victorian women operating in the realm of domesticity. Housekeeping was a sophisticated work, one that not all Victorian women could manage gracefully enough. “For when we consider the simple fact, that it comprehends—nay, is mainly dependent upon the art of giving to everything which comes within the sphere of practical duty its proper weight, and consequently its due share of relative importance, we see at once that it cannot be within the province of a common or a vulgar mind...”¹¹ Ellis wrote that a common or vulgar mind would not have been able to comprehend the gravity of the domestic sphere. A woman who could not grasp the importance of all matters within the realm of professional domesticity, an unperfect woman, was not ready for a heavy a responsibility as taking care of an entire household.

¹⁰ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (United Kingdom: Appleton, 1843), 241.

¹¹ Ellis, *The Wives of England*, 243.



“Round and Round We Go”

There was a certain exclusivity, for although Victorian women needed technically need no formal training to become the woman of the household, many upper-class Victorian women received lessons during their youth that helped prepare them to take on the heavy duty of a housewife. In this sense, it took training and education, inherently professional processes, for a Victorian woman to become a skilled woman of the household. “How necessary is it, therefore, for all women to have learned to manage themselves, before undertaking the management of a household, for the charge is both a serious, and a comprehensive one...”¹² Ellis overlayed the already demanding expectations of professionalism with language that would suggest perfectionist standards set in place for Victorian women. In describing domestic labor as “serious” and “comprehensive”, Ellis demonstrated that not just any woman could be a true woman of the household. It had to be woman who was highly professional, who was sincerely dedicated to her labor.

¹² Ellis, *The Wives of England*, 246.

¹³ Ellis, *The Wives of England*, 246.

¹⁴ “Coventry Patmore,” The Poetry Foundation, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/coventry-patmore>.

It had to be that way because there was no room for mistakes—the Victorian woman had to be perfect. The lives of all those around her depended on it. “[H]owever inexperienced the wife may be, however helpless, uncalculating, and unequal the task, she no sooner takes upon herself the duties of a mistress, than she becomes, in a great measure responsible for the welfare of every member of the family over which she presides.”¹³ The Victorian woman did more than simply cook and clean. She was the glue that held everything together, the director running everything from behind the scenes, the project manager in charge of organizing all matters. This had always been the case, but it was during the Victorian era that people began to realize that the full scope of female domesticity extended to areas of professionalism.

In terms of literature, the stark difference between *The Angel in the House* and “An Extinct Angel” clearly displays the shift in the conceptualization of domesticity. Even though the scope of the Victorian woman’s influence reached far beyond the household, traditional concepts of female domesticity did not recognize the labor that she did outside of the home. Even so, both the traditional and expanded concepts of domesticity include themes of professionalism and perfectionism.

The established feminine ideal can be most clearly seen in the particularly influential poem *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, an English scholar who worked for the British Museum in his youth.¹⁴ The poem has two parts, the first one was published in 1854 while the second was published in 1856.¹⁵ Together, the two pieces, published years apart from one another, paint an image of the ideal woman and her ideal role in Victorian domestic life.

The Angel in the House allows modern-day scholars a glimpse not only at what Patmore envisioned to be the perfect Victorian woman, but what Victorian society as

¹⁵ “The Angel in the House, by Coventry Patmore,” accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm>.

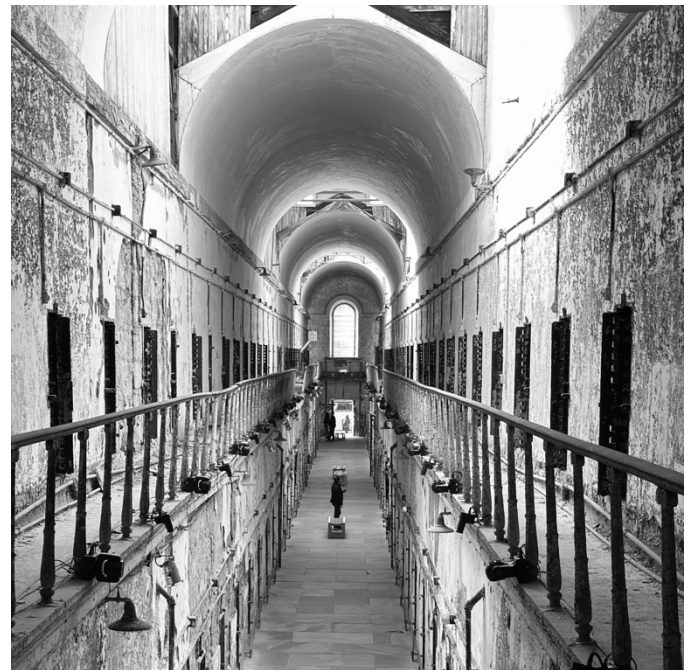
a whole envisioned to be the perfect Victorian woman. It represented the unachievable perfectionist standards placed upon women during the Victorian era. In their eyes, the idealized Victorian woman was beautiful, pure, and wholly dedicated to her domestic duties.

Although the domesticity he described was extremely traditional, there are several instances in which Patmore's domestic ideals betrayed themes of professionalism. He described the ideal Victorian woman as "pure dignity, composure, ease...", descriptors which could all have been used in the context of a well-trained professional but were instead being used in the context of domesticity.¹⁶ Patmore also wrote that "Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman's pleasure..."¹⁷ Once again, Patmore's ideal of Victorian women aligned closely with expectations of working professionals, further blurring the lines between domesticity and professionalism. Although at first Victorian society did not realize the inherent professionalism in the domestic standards they had set, it had always been present in their conceptualization of female domesticity. *The Angel in the House* demonstrated that even though before the expansion of the definition of domesticity, women during the Victorian era had been working under the same principles.

Patmore's depiction of women in *The Angel in the House* stayed in the public consciousness and inspired criticism from many, including renowned American scholar Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who published her piece titled "An Extinct Angel" in the weekly magazine *Kate Field's Washington* in response to Patmore's poem.¹⁸ Best known for her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman wrote a myriad of pieces criticizing the assigned gender roles of the Victorian era. She offered alternate ways of thinking about feminism and the duties of women in Victorian society. In her lifetime, Gilman wrote around eight novels,

nearly two hundred short stories, hundreds of poems, a handful of plays, and thousands of essays.¹⁹ Having been such an active writer and activist, Gilman allows modern scholars to better understand various interpretations of Victorian domesticity and its overlap with professionalism and perfectionism.

Gilman's satirical response to Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* contrasted Patmore's feminine ideal yet still acknowledged the perfectionism with which the Victorian woman had to carry herself in the realm of professional domesticity. In the very first sentence, Gilman wrote: "[t]here was once a species of angel inhabiting this planet, acting as a 'universal solvent' to all the jarring, irreconcilable elements of human life."²⁰ Through the extension of Patmore's angel metaphor, Gilman indicated that whenever a problem arose, the woman was expected to handle it. She asserted that the



"No Escape"

¹⁶ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (United Kingdom: G. Bell, 1897), 24.

¹⁷ Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, 53.

¹⁸ "An Extinct Angel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman," Library-of-short-stories, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.libraryofshortstories.com/online-reader/an-extinct-angel>.

¹⁹ "Gilman, Charlotte Perkins | Women of the Hall," accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/charlotte-perkins-gilman/#:~:text=Gilman%20was%20a%20much%2Dsought,an d%20literally%20thousands%20of%20essays.>

²⁰ "An Extinct Angel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman."



“Rock On”

Victorian woman was a “universal solvent”, demonstrating that regardless of whether the issue was in the home or not, women of the Victorian era had to be perfectly equipped for all situations. The scope of Victorian women’s influence, and in turn, professional domesticity’s, had no bounds. Gilman’s text demonstrated that even though the definition of domesticity was just beginning to expand as Victorian society realized the full extent of women’s influence,

²¹ Monica F. Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

women had always been doing the same labor, only without the recognition.

Women of the Victorian era indeed tried to adapt to this overlap of professional and domestic expectations, however they were not necessarily accepted into professional work outside the home. In 1998, Monica F. Cohen, a professor at Columbia University, wrote a novel titled *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home*. In this novel, Cohen found that, through careful readings of various Victorian works such as *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, there was a clear discrepancy in the sentiments toward female professional domesticity and toward female professionals in the workforce. “[B]eing a housewife could never be quite the same as being a doctor...midwifery may have been professionalized, but it was nevertheless closed out from that profession called medicine...”²¹ Victorian society recognized the intensity of the labor for which women of the era were responsible. The written literature of the time, both the how-to manuals and the novels, encouraged professionalism within the realm of domesticity. Even then, professionally domestic Victorian women were not afforded the same respect as paid professionals.

Scholars have such as Wanda Neff have looked back on the Victorian era and wondered why there was such a contrast of attitudes, despite professional expectations having been normalized within the domestic sphere. Neff argued that Victorian society did not believe women to be workers, that such a term fit them. “Women workers did not harmonize with the philosophy of the Victorians, their definition of the home. Women ought to marry. There ought to be husbands for them. Women were potential mothers.”²² Still, the role that Victorian society had created for women inside the home encompassed tasks of other full-time occupations. Neff pointed out that while Victorian critics believed that women did not belong in places of work, the Victorian woman’s labor

²² Wanda F. Neff, *Victorian Working Women: An Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions 1832-1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 14.

inside the home grew to have many of the same expectations as women's labor outside the home.

Since the definition of domesticity adapted during the Victorian era to fully recognize all the labor that Victorian women did to maintain both her household and those living within, it would be unfit for modern-day scholars to continue to force Victorian women into boxes created based on outdated concepts of the domestic sphere, which fail to recognize the sheer breadth of the Victorian woman's influence in Victorian society. Victorian women were endlessly determined to thrive even when they had professional and perfectionist expectations thrust upon them. When consuming any work from or about the Victorian era, it is vital to know that they were not merely housekeepers who cooked and cleaned but that their devotion to their labor in fact kept the entire household from falling apart. While it may be that conceptualized domestic sphere expanded during the Victorian era, women's role in society never changed

dramatically, only the standards set in place for them did.

A woman gently lifts the arm of her seven-year-old son to wrap a bandage around his wound. She smiles softly in encouragement when he cries out in pain, brushing walnut colored hair out of his eyes. She kisses him on the forehead and leaves him to rest. She wanders in the marketplace, surveying the selection of furniture before her. A new dining table is needed, as well as a new chandelier to go with it. It is her job to make sure everything in the house is pleasing to look at. Should she fail, her family would be ridiculed by all their neighbors. When her son bickers with his younger sister about who gets to play on the rocking horse, she soothes their tempers with her kind voice. She leaves once they have calmed down. Soon the guests will be arriving for afternoon tea, and she still needs to prepare the flower bouquet meant for them. This is the true Victorian woman.



"A Hard Day's Work"

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