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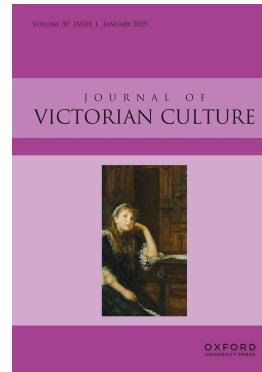


Separate spheres? Expectations of the Victorian woman

■ December 16, 2025 ▾ Yuying (Elizabeth) Zhang ▾ Essay, Other

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 coloured 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

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fail, her family would be ridiculed by all their neighbours. 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 supposed Victorian woman.

Virtuous, selflessly devoted, and wholly pure, women of the Victorian era have often been compared to angels. Yet, the definition of domesticity shifted during the Victorian era to better reflect the role that women played in society. While the concept of domesticity has long represented all that has to do with the house and home, expectations of women in the Victorian era encompassed not only this ideal, but also included labour typically reserved for those in full-time occupations practiced outside of the home. Therefore, the term 'professional domesticity' more accurately defines the expectations placed upon women during this era.

The standards set in place for Victorian women were overlaid with expectations of perfectionism and professionalism like those put upon professionals in the workforce. Victorian women needed to have the same devotion to their labour as financially compensated professionals did, without any of the potential for personal and career growth.

To better visualize the scope of domesticity and female influence in Victorian society, scholars have used the concept of 'separate spheres'. Deborah Gorham explains in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* that these spheres helped to define where female influence began and ended.^[1] While life in the public eye, dealing with business and politics, was considered to be the realm of men, women were considered responsible for maintaining life behind the drawn curtains of one's own

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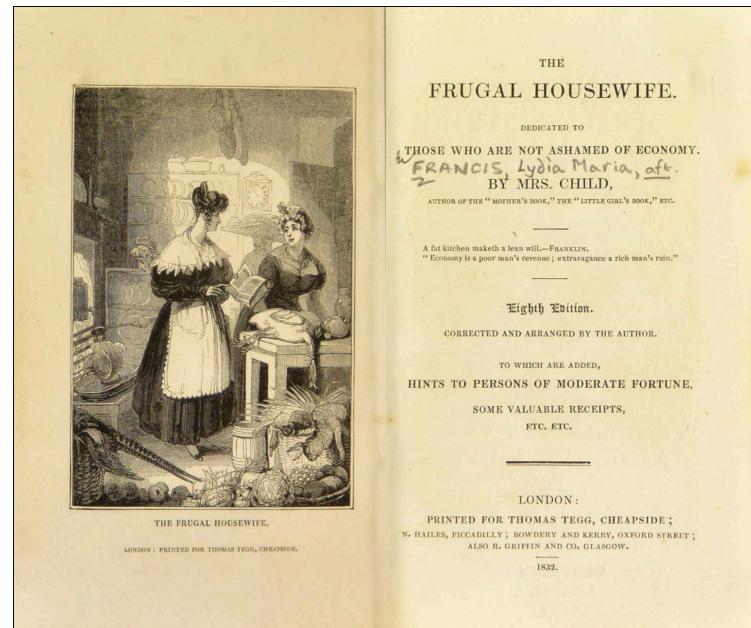
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home. Matters concerning love, emotions, and domesticity fell in the realm of Victorian women. However, professional domesticity complicates decades worth of theorisation through spheres by further blurring the presumed separation between working women and women in the home.

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. Even though 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 regarding social standards. Daniel Walker Howe 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...' [2] In both countries, 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.

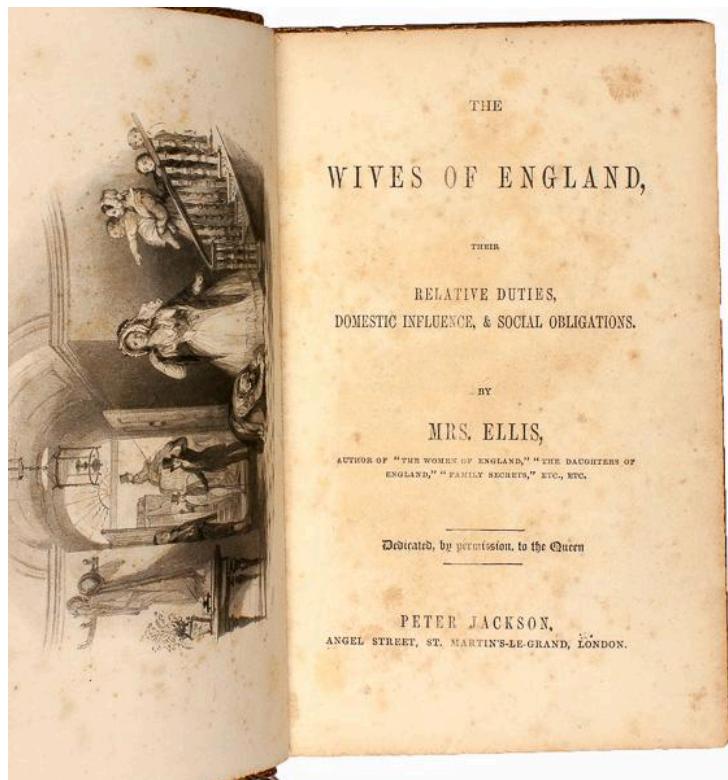


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[Lydia Maria Child, *The Frugal Housewife* \(1832\).](#)

Frugal Housewife was 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, Victorian women, 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. Victorian women were professionals in their own right. They were described with terminology not typically associated with domesticity, such as 'managers'.

British author Sarah Stickney Ellis, 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. Throughout her work, Ellis uses professional language in the context of domesticity, illustrating how the language of professional domesticity set higher standards of perfectionism for women.



Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (1834).

In her 1834 book, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations*, Ellis documents the stark difference in garnered respect and expected professionalism between men and women of the Victorian era. The expectation for women's professionalism went beyond even what men experienced in the workplace. 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... [3]

A woman who could not grasp the importance of all matters within the realm of professional domesticity was not ready for as heavy a responsibility as taking care of an entire household.

Placing the language of the professional into the domestic concept heightened ideals of perfectionism for Victorian women. In *The Wives of England*, Ellis uses vocabulary typically deployed in professional settings 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...'[4] Here, Ellis characterised the domestic labour of Victorian women as 'management'.

Scholars have such as Wanda Neff have argued that 'Women workers did not harmonise 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'.^[5] Still, the role that Victorian society had created for women inside the home encompassed the tasks of other full-time occupations. Neff points out that while Victorian critics believed that women did not belong in places of work, the Victorian woman's labour inside the home grew to have many of the same expectations as women's labour outside the home.

Since the definition of domesticity adapted during the Victorian era to fully recognise all the labour that Victorian women did to maintain both their household and those living within, the concept of the 'domestic sphere' fails to recognise the sheer breadth of the Victorian woman's influence. While the conceptualised domestic sphere expanded significantly during the Victorian era, women's role in society never truly changed; their accepted standards did.

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 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 is the true Victorian woman.

Notes & references

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

[2] Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly*, December, 1975, 508.

[3] Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (United Kingdom: Appleton, 1843), 243.

[4] Ellis, *The Wives of England*, 241.

[5] 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.

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Header image: "The Contest for the Bouquet: The Family of Robert Gordon in Their New York Dining-Room," Seymour Joseph Guy. Public Domain.

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