Empire & Spinsterhood: The Shaping of a New Identity

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Recommended Citation
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By the height of the Victorian Era, the doctrine of separate spheres ruled both thought and action. Men enjoyed public lives while women were safely relegated to private spaces. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, another path was beginning to open for the Victorian middle-class woman as a new appreciation for singlehood began to develop. This elective spinsterhood was made possible by rising evangelicalism and imperialism. By the second half of the nineteenth century, many women began to opt for this newly honorable singlehood in place of marriage. Far from feminists, these women substituted duty to country for duty to husband. What appears on the surface to be a discontent with marriage and a growing desire to escape oppressive, gender-based, socio-cultural mores is no more than a redefining of duty. This paper does not argue the growth of first-wave feminism through nineteenth century political, educational, and legislative reforms. It does, however, argue that spinsters of the Victorian Age most often engaged in acts of reform and socio-cultural improvements out of a sense of duty rather than a commitment to female suffrage.

In a very thought-provoking article, Zsuzsa Berend argues most effectively that spinsterhood in the nineteenth century was elective.1 As evangelicalism began to hold sway, ideas of love began to slowly take on new meaning. It was the emotionality of evangelicalism that imbued ‘true

Evangelicals associated spontaneity of feeling with true faith. Thus spontaneous emotions in heterosexual love, although treated cautiously, were no longer discredited; now they were regarded as a sure, though mysterious, sign of Providence.  

The evangelical movement effectively transformed romantic love into true love, complete with all the intrinsic values of Christian ideology.

Thanks to true love, a woman was bound by all that is holy to remain single until her one true love presented himself. To echo Zsuzsa Berend’s catch phrase, single women were opting for “The best or none!” Marriage became a spiritual union to be engaged in only when one was positive it was a God-ordained union. The expectation was that each human had an ideal match with whom spiritual completeness and wholeness was possible. Any lesser match was deemed second rate at best and a dismal failure at worse. To marry simply to be married denied the opportunity to establish the perfect union based on shared temperament and beliefs. It denied God’s plan. Attraction between a man and woman, if of sufficient strength, became proof positive of the union’s righteousness.

But what if the single Victorian lady failed to find this ‘true love’? Lucy Larcom calls it “a life of ‘single blessedness’” preferable to “‘marrying and giving in marriage’ unless one is sure that the one is the one, and no other.” Often the surfeit of nineteenth-century spinsters is pinned to an imbalance in numbers. It is surmised that too many women and not enough men was the root cause. However, Victorian diaries and letters are rife with examples of single women who, given the opportunity to wed, chose not to do so. Often these women were

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2 Berend, 937.
involved in long-term, courting relationships with their beaus. Though most often the gentleman in question represented a solidly potential mate, the woman would end the courtship by jilting her potential spouse on the grounds that no flood of emotion had yet besieged her and laid her defenses bare. This belief in both the acceptance of and expectation of ‘true love’ as a prerequisite to marriage is graphically portrayed in the 1995 film version of Jane Austen’s *Sense & Sensibility*. In several scenes, Marianne, the younger Miss Dashwood, repeatedly berates her older sister for a perceived lack of feeling and an inadequate depth of passion. Lacking that perceived depth, many real-world Victorian heroines opted for singlehood. The belief in these “noble truths” regarding true love was so great as to represent an abiding influence. If true love could not be found, singlehood was superior to any lesser option such as a lukewarm marriage.

This God-ordained true love coalesced into a concept of purity, nobility, selflessness, and moral fortitude that de-accentuated sexual implications and portrayed woman as the quintessential mother of morality. Referred to by scholars as domesticated love, its center of being was the home. Domesticated love rose above the sensual. Lasciviousness was anathema to the totality that was the Victorian woman. This moral motherhood validated and gave worth to the female emotional persona. During the Victorian Era, this persona became more highly prized, both on an individual and a national level. “The higher women rise in moral and intellectual culture, the more is the sensual refined away from her nature, and the more pure and perfect and predominant becomes her motherhood.”

True love and moral motherhood became inseparable concepts in

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4 Berend, 940.
the Victorian mind and began to extend beyond the confines of marriage. The role of the Victorian woman encompassed many tasks. She stood as a moral benchmark, a teacher, and a reformer as well as a wife. And many of these roles could be fulfilled sans marriage. Thus, it was no longer necessary for a woman to be wed in order to fulfill her destiny. As a single woman, she still had value to society.

Previous to this new definition of elective singlehood, spinsters were regarded as a social burden. Often without control of private funds, these women were forced to depend upon the natal family or extended relatives. They served as nursemaids, governesses, seamstresses, housekeepers, and all-around factotums. Often seen as financial burdens with frail health and nervous psyches, they were deemed objects of pity and vexation. But the changing role from burden to the nation’s moral mother enhanced the spinster’s societal and cultural worth. Even if one did not find their true and perfect match, the old definitions of spinsterhood need no longer be feared. Singlehood did not necessarily produce a pariah.

These new concepts of true love and elective singlehood came together to forge a connection between Christian virtue and usefulness. “Finding their life-work filled spinsters with a sense of God-given purpose, with the satisfaction of working for others.”5 This model of “service” was closely connected to wifely duty and motherhood. It was every wife’s and mother’s responsibility to provide guidance and aid to those in need. Such service was the responsibility of the single woman also. From society’s evolving point of view, she was but an unmarried mother. As a female member of the British culture, she was expected to fulfill her God-given potential – if not as a breeder of future Englishmen,

5 Ibid, 945.
then as an aid to all who fell short of the glory of the empire. This was woman’s work. Britain had attained the level, in their minds, of social perfection. It was up to the women to spread that moral perfection globally. This, after procreation, was their raison d’être. Thus, “home and the world, marriage and singlehood were not polar opposites but rather a continuum.”6 Women, both married and single, had a responsibility to extend the home fires into the empire at large.

This importance of Christian usefulness, in conjunction with the new singlehood, developed a secondary socio-cultural doctrine – that of vocation.

A vocation provided the calling by which one participated in God’s work and society’s progress. It set the individual on the road to perfection; it enabled her to develop her talents, compose her anxious psyche, and discipline her body. 7

The Victorian wife was expected to birth and nurture the succeeding generation of loyal Englishmen. However, this was a task not available to those women who opted for singlehood. If, as Chambers-Schiller argues, “Submission and duty were the ruling principles of Victorian life,” then to whom was the spinster to submit?8 To whom did she owe such duties? Simply by virtue of her female gender, the Victorian woman was expected to accept specific responsibilities for home, family, and God. Fortunately for the spinster, motherly love was not restricted to biological mothers. That same care, concern, and nurturing could be applied to the children of the British Empire – its subjects.

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6 Berend, 943.
8 Schiller, 42.
The most obvious path to caring for the diverse subjects of the empire was through missions. And though this was a path many single women did choose, it was not the only means by which they could exercise their vocations. Nurse, travel writer, naturalist, reformer, teacher and explorer were all areas in which single women sought to fulfill their duty to their society and to their country. In effect, these spinsters were married to their society and as such, carried with them a belief in their public responsibility.

Many middle-class spinsters opted for travel as a means of spreading British morals and Christian beliefs to indigenous peoples. Through travel they could interact with the indigenes and offer them the wisdom of the ruling society. “Women travelers to the American West articulated with other British feminists in their desires to ‘save’ their downtrodden Native American sisters.”9 Whether in the American West, the coastal ports of India, or the jungles of West Africa, British women travelers, missionaries and travel writers alike viewed native women as unhygienic, subjugated, and downtrodden. Women missionaries held similar beliefs. All held a new authority in the empire – a nationally perceived moral authority. Philippa Levine posits:

Single women missionaries resembled social reformers of their countries of origin, not because the messages they transmitted presaged those of “the new woman”, but in their assumption of a position of moral authority in relation to others whom they defined as in need of “uplift”.10

However, the conflict for the nineteenth-century woman was not whether she was equipped for a successful vocation but that she

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“shed no domestic responsibilities save motherhood with her rejection of marriage.”11 In order to exercise her vocation, she must also deal with her many familial obligations. Chambers-Schiller quotes Susanna Winkworth, British reformer and author:

> It is very difficult to think about oneself without its interfering with duties towards others. It ought not, and need not . . . but it is very hard to combine great energy in the pursuit of a worthy object, with a quick ear for the calls of duty in other directions, and an immediate yielding of the will to them when heard.12

Many single women still felt their desire for a vocation and their desire to fulfill their duty to society as being somehow de-feminizing. By responding to the demands of their vocation before responding to the needs of family, they considered themselves as unduly willful and lacking proper submission. Chambers-Schiller sees this as a simple role conflict. But it was much less simple and much more painful to the women of the time. Despite their adherence to their belief in their duty to God and their country, many spinsters acted in ways inconsistent with our twenty-first century concept of an independent, single woman. When Rose Kingsley traveled to the American West, it was in the company of British representatives to the Episcopal Church Convention to be held in Baltimore. As part of this company, Kingsley traveled to Colorado to visit her elder brother. She took with her a desire to uplift the heathen American Indian. However, in her book Kingsley repeatedly relates her concerns for her more delicate and feminine qualities. While visiting Colorado Springs, two Indians appear to be making sport of her by running past on all fours and engaging in other bizarre but harmless antics. A white man from the store comes out and holds the savages at bay

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11 Schiller, 43.
12 Schiller, 42.
allowing her to pass unmolested. Kingsley’s narrative “emphasized her feminine need to be rescued by the gallant white male, again not straying too far afield of a proper feminine voice.”

Kingsley’s contemporary, the renowned Lady Isabella Bird, voiced her own concerns that female propriety and femininity be maintained. Long touted by scholars as one of the nineteenth-century’s leading proto-feminists, Bird, like Kingsley, exhibits a palpable concern for womanly respectability and decorum. She advises future women travelers to the American West to adopt her own, peculiar mode of dress.

For the benefit of other lady travelers, I wish to explain that my “Hawaiian riding dress” is the “American Lady’s Mountain Dress,” a half-fitting jacket, a skirt reaching to the ankles, and full Turkish trousers gathered into frills falling over the boots, a thoroughly serviceable and feminine costume for mountaineering and other rough traveling.

Bird’s concerns center on the appropriateness and acceptability of her attire. When a London news reporter accuses her of wearing men’s clothing, she heatedly responds via her publisher. Claiming “that as she had neither father nor brother to defend her reputation, she expected him personally to horsewhip the Times correspondent.” Bird claims that for riding in the American West this was an acceptable and useful costume. However, while thus dressed, she still “‘shrank’ from the public eye.”

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16 Bird, 74.
As reported in their respective travelogues, both Kingsley and Bird, representative of their British social class, are unused to domestic chores. Their engagement in such activities as washing clothes or dishes is more akin to playing house than to keeping house. “Thus while Bird enacts domesticity, she simultaneously maintains her own version of true femininity by presenting herself ill-prepared and too delicate for work other than knitting and sewing.” Morin notes that middle- and upper-class Victorian women stood as a testament to their husbands’ success through their idleness. This idleness was a mark of femininity. And though such single women as Isabella Bird and Rose Kingsley were willing to brave the wilds of the American West in the late 1800s, they were not willing to tout those little conventions that defined their femininity.

Society’s norms and mores presented challenges when a single woman set out to fulfill her duty by engaging in her chosen vocation. However, the spinster’s principal external disadvantage was her family. Florence Nightingale stated:

> I have known a good deal of convents. And of course everyone has talked of the petty grinding tyrannies supposed to be exercised there. But I know nothing like the petty grinding tyranny of a good English family.

Despite personal commitment and a “sometimes” financial success, nineteenth-century spinsters often remained emotionally, if not financially, dependent upon their natal family and the approval of their society. Though the spinster saw virtue in her singlehood and her vocation, the family was willing to support her efforts only after she had met all familial obligations. As such, many spinsters struggled with family

bonds for years. Before permission to pursue their chosen vocations could be had, there may be countless hours reading to elderly relatives or years of nursing a fragile mother or infirm father. Dealing with mind-numbing years of repetitive household chores for a bachelor brother was equally confining. Even those that did manage to flee the oppression of the natal family were often recalled repeatedly and forced to return home again and again to nurse one family member or another or to fulfill some other family obligation. Evangelicalism and changing social values validated her singlehood and her vocation. However, her own emotional conflict regarding familial duty kept her tied.

Here again, if we look at Kingsley’s time in Colorado, she is protected by and responsible to her brother, Maurice. Even when she is offered an adventure of a lifetime, she meekly defers to her brother’s judgment. Kingsley describes how she is offered the opportunity to ride on the train’s cowcatcher as she and her companions approach Monument Park. She explains that “though in my secret heart I wished just to feel what it was like for once, M[aurice] told me it was really such a risk that I resisted the temptation.”

Scholars have long suggested that female reformers would have necessarily been spinsters since only a spinster would have had the leisure time necessary. But though spinsters did not have the demands of a husband or children, this only increased their responsibilities. As family members who were free to be called upon for any and all extra duties, the single woman was in high demand. A review of the diaries and letters of spinsters of the time validates this view. The Lamothe sisters were typical of this breed of single women. Judging by their correspondence, free time

was in short supply.\textsuperscript{20} Spinsters, by their very definition as husbandless and childless, were expected to care for elderly and infirm relatives, contribute to the family economy through garment sewing and household management, and to provide charity assistance to the parish poor and ill. It is a more reasonable and better founded assumption that it was married women who engaged in gender reform efforts.

Chambers-Schiller defines voluntary singlehood as a “dramatic new form of female independence.”\textsuperscript{21} Morin clearly argues that British women travelers to the American West represented a feminist drive to free Native American women from subjugation. Berend states, “Since they could be construed as pursuing autonomy and rejecting wifely dependence, spinsters are readily seen as ‘foremothers’ by contemporary feminists.”\textsuperscript{22} This construction of Victorian spinsters as proto-feminist reformers can be easily understood. Many of these women stand out in history as travel writers, naturalists, and reformers. Some increased their political standing by relocating to colonial possessions where they are no longer just women but “memsahib.” It was through their position as “domestic imperialists” that these women established themselves, at least within the colonies, as politically significant. Such imperial travel allowed many single women to exercise their physical and mental prowess by removing themselves from the confines of Victorian cultural mores. As travel writers, naturalists, artists, and commentators, single British women abroad experienced a socio-cultural freedom unavailable in England.

There is, however, little conclusive evidence that women’s decisions to remain single were propagated by a desire for feminist-brand

\textsuperscript{21} Berend, 935.
\textsuperscript{22} Berend, 935.
freedom. Female autonomy did increase during the nineteenth century. However, the belief that this was due to a growing discontent with marriage and a concerted drive for female autonomy through singlehood takes historical events out of context. There one attempts to explain the present at the expense of the past. Unfortunately, many women’s studies engage in this context-reversal.

Far from a progression along suffrage lines, elective singlehood among the middle and upper class during the Victorian Era was driven by socio-cultural changes in the accepted understanding of the concepts of love and marriage. Evangelicalism’s emotionality served to metamorph romantic love into a model of true love. This God-ordained model was perfect. Marriage was not seen as antagonistic but as the most desirable outcome. That outcome, however, was predicated upon the acquisition of true love – not just any love. Elective singlehood was far preferable to any marriage not based upon the God-approved union of two perfectly matched souls. This ideal of the perfect union became a Victorian reality.

In concert with this evangelical view of the marriage union, women, as the moral mothers of their society, adopted the Christian ethic of usefulness. Once again the evangelical view influenced these ideas of commitment, duty, and vocation. True love led to marriage, but, in lieu of a perfect life mate, it also led to singlehood. Women, both married and single, had a responsibility to the society and their nation. Women, as the keepers of society’s moral code, were responsible to stoke the home fires and provide a shining example for the many heathen stepchildren to the empire. Herein, imperialism provided new avenues where these single women could exercise their vocations. Single women transferred their patriarchal duty to the nation and its society. As travelers, nurses,
explorers, and missionaries these women spread the light of cleanliness and morality in an uncivilized empire. Women’s usefulness expanded. Spinsters no longer cowered under a mantle of social burden. They became bastions of British morality and exceptionalism. Inherent in their new worth was the understanding that these women could have, had they so chosen, married. But their high ideals and force of character led them to remain single instead of sacrificing their beliefs to a second-rate union.

By virtue of its Christian approval, feminine love, or true love, became a mainstay of social order and the British concept of superior humanity. Women’s motherly character was separated from reproduction. Female love was separated from sexuality. The development of the moral mother, married or single, became the foundation of social progress. The spinster had new worth because she had duty.