

Victorian Perspectives on Gender Roles

- I. Gender roles were based on the ideology of separate spheres, mentioned in the Mary Wollstonecraft discussion
 - A. Women's sphere was the private sphere
 1. This was the sphere of the home
 2. The woman had moral authority and transmitted the moral values to the next generation
 - B. Men's sphere was the public sphere, the world of business and politics
 - C. The prevailing view was that, without separate spheres, there would be chaos
- II. Female education
 - A. Frances Power Cobb's autobiography details her experiences at a fashionable English boarding school
 - B. Subjects were music, dancing, drawing, deportment (proper behavior), and modern languages
 - C. Discipline was severe
- III. Victorian conduct manuals often dealt with female conduct
 - A. Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote a number of these guides, including *The Daughters of England*, *The Wives of England*, and *The Mothers of England*
 - B. She stressed women's roles as providing a positive moral influence on the men of their families
- IV. Other Women's issues
 - A. Governesses
 1. This was discussed in the context of Jane Fairfax in Austen's *Emma*
 2. Both Charlotte and Anne Brontë worked as governesses
 3. Governesses occupied an ambiguous space in the social hierarchy, often treated as servants despite their education
 4. An 1839 letter of Charlotte's detailed some of the "horrors":
 - a) Long hours, often including menial chores such as needlework
 - b) No free time
 - c) Poverty wages
 - d) Often no disciplinary authority with the children
 - B. Women's legal standing
 1. Caroline Norton wrote about the legal climate prior to 1857's "Matrimonial Causes Act," which legalized divorce
 2. A woman had no separate legal identity once she married
 3. Her identity was "covered" by her husband's ("coverture")
 4. An English wife could not make a will
 5. She could not legally claim her own earnings
 6. She could not sign a lease or transact business
 7. Divorce (prior to 1857) required an Act of Parliament
 8. Even after 1857, the law treated husbands and wives unequally in divorce cases
 - a) A man could divorce his wife for infidelity alone
 - b) A woman could not divorce her husband for adultery alone, unless there was an additional cause, such as cruelty, desertion, or incest
 - c) Husbands almost always received custody of their children