

Challenging or Conforming to the Norms of Victorian Society: Queen Victoria's Stance on Women's Social Status

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Recommendation: Conrad Joseph Molden

(engcjm@cc.au.dk)

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Emilie Arildsen

ABSTRACT

Queen Victoria represents a personality split between the values of the submissive contemporary woman and the values of a powerful monarch. She was head of her country, but a married woman too, and this combination entailed situations that were difficult to navigate while retaining the values of the ideal Victorian woman and simultaneously meeting her duties as queen. I claim that by combining her two roles and becoming the mother of the Empire, Queen Victoria ultimately bettered women's social status by influencing the mindset of her contemporary women. Her influence is apparent in writings of both feminists such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett and conservative Sarah Stickney Ellis as well as in the lives of her own daughters.

Keywords: Queen Victoria; gender roles; Victorian society; women's social status; feminism; female monarch

Corresponding author: Emilie Arildsen (emilie@arildsen.dk)

Department of English, Aarhus University

Introduction

As the name implies, the Victorian Era was highly characterised by its reigning monarch, Queen Victoria. In 1837, the 18-year-old ascended the throne as Queen of the United Kingdom; a position she retained until her death in 1901. Encompassing her role as a woman, she was happily married to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha with whom she had nine children, while she ruled over an ever growing empire making countless advantages in both scientific, industrial, and societal matters. One question, however, comes to mind: how did she, as a female monarch, navigate a society so heavily dominated by men that it usually allowed no place for women to participate? With a successful reign of 64 years and a time period named after her, it seems likely that Queen Victoria must have had an impact on the society, over which she ruled. Indeed, as she is representing a set of values divided between the socially acceptable status of a devoted wife and that of a victorious woman of power, one cannot help but wonder what a position of such a remarkable state brought with it. Was she perhaps the incentive behind the women's suffrage movement? Or could her preservation of the wifely role and her conservative values have subsided the progress of it? I will examine how Queen Victoria simultaneously mirrored and broke the norms of her contemporary society, while arguing that she herself ultimately bettered the social status of women.

Queen Victoria's Position of Power

Already as a young woman, Princess Victoria displayed an interest in politics. In the extensive correspondence between herself and her uncle, King Leopold of Belgian, several political matters were discussed. In September 1836, she expressed to him that 'the state of Spain is most alarming and unfortunate' and that she 'take[s] a great interest in the whole affair', continuing with inquiring about the political affairs of Portugal, Naples, and France (Queen Victoria 1836, 64). Shortly after her coronation in June 1837, she wrote a letter to King Leopold, in which she depicts her new role as a queen:

I have seen almost all my other Ministers, and do regular, hard, but to *me delightful*, work with them. It is to me the *greatest pleasure* to do my duty for my country and my people, and no fatigue, however great, will be burdensome to me if it is for the welfare of the nation (Queen Victoria 1837, 103).

By showing such an immense interest in her occupation, her status as a political queen is first established.

However, due to the fact that the United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy, the power of the monarch is restricted to certain royal prerogatives. In principle, the monarch can exercise them at

own initiative, but since the 19th century it has been the convention that they are only used through the advice of the prime minister or the cabinet. Following this, Queen Victoria's power was considerably smaller than that of many of her predecessors. Nevertheless, John lists the following prerogatives that she had the right to exercise:

The right to be informed of all significant government decisions and see all government papers.

The right to refuse a dissolution of parliament if requested by her prime minister.

The right to decide whom she could ask to form a government. ...

The right to encourage and warn ministers in their actions (John 2003, 25).

On the grounds of her political interest, Queen Victoria exercised all of these prerogatives during her reign – despite her being a female monarch. According to John, the right to be informed was one she took very seriously (John 2003, 27). When meeting opposition to it, the Queen had no difficulty asserting her right, which happened several times when foreign secretary Lord Palmerstone was sending off dispatches without consulting the Queen, eventually resulting in his dismissal. Furthermore, this episode also gave her reason to exercise the right to warn ministers, one she continued to use frequently. Because she so thoroughly emerged herself into her work, John states that she 'was exceptionally well informed about state business and no politician could approach a meeting with her lightly' (John 2003, 27). He continues with saying that 'this in itself made her a real power in the constitution' (John 2003, 27). Hence, her strong work ethic made Victoria able to influence state affairs and thus a woman of power.

John writes that learning from previous failures, Queen Victoria 'never dismissed a Prime Minister or dissolved a parliament at all under her own volition, and that 'in this manner Victoria consolidated the new constitutional practice' (John 2003, 25). However, she did come very close to breaking it during the so-called Bedchamber Crisis. The 7th of May 1839, the leader of the Conservative Party, Robert Peel, was asked to form a new government. Since such a government would hold a minority in the House of Commons and thereby be weak, he wished for the dismissal of some of the Queen's Ladies of the Bedchamber, because many of them were wives of Whig politicians. However, as Victoria was very fond of her ladies, had a close relationship with the outgoing Whig Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, and was reserved towards Peel, she refused to do so. Consequently, Peel declined to form a government and Melbourne continued as Prime Minister. In a letter to Lord Melbourne, Victoria wrote that 'I [she] was calm but very decided, and I [she] think[s] you [Lord Melbourne] would have been pleased to see my [her] composure and great firmness ; the Queen of England will not submit to such trickery' (Queen Victoria 9th may 1839, 205). Although, Victoria's actions were adjacent to being unconstitutionally by dismissing a coming Prime

Minister, the opinion expressed in the letter, her actions, and work in general nevertheless places her as a monarch of political power.

Queen Victoria's Situation in the Social Norms

With a society dictating that women had no place in the public sphere, let alone in positions of power, it is interesting to examine how Queen Victoria navigated in it. Indeed, she does represent a highly conflicted personality. On the one hand, she has been established as a political queen of power, but on the other hand, she represented a very conservative view of the role of women.

Conforming to the view of the contemporary time, Victoria displayed a traditional approach to marriage. In February 1840, after marrying Albert, Victoria wrote a letter to King Leopold expressing her utmost joy in being married: 'Really, I do not think it *possible* for anyone in the world to be *happier*, or AS happy as I am ... To look in those dear eyes ... is enough to make me adore him. What I can do to make him happy will be my greatest delight' (Queen Victoria 1840, 274). This opinion places her as a model female of the Victorian Era, where a woman's sole joy should be that of her husband. However, the Queen marrying caused a series of difficulties concerning her role as both a monarch and a woman. As the ruling monarch, Victoria was obliged to announce her intent to marry Albert to the Privy Council herself – a circumstance she was not entirely comfortable with. Afterwards, she wrote to Albert declaring that 'it was rather an awful moment, to be obliged to announce this to so many people, many of whom were quite strangers' (Queen Victoria, 23rd of November 1839, 248). Ward comments on this quote saying that 'these actions were those of a sovereign, but not those of a woman' (Ward 2006, 280). Essentially, as it did not conform to the traditional norms stating that women should be subject to men, this may be why Queen Victoria detested the obligation so. Moreover, according to Ward 'Victoria had insisted that the word "obey" should not be deleted from her marriage vows' (Ward 2006, 281), which underlines her intention to conform to society's norms.

The gender roles that Victoria asserted as she married Albert were some, which she retained throughout her life. In the census of 1851, the household of the royal family were included too. The census return accounts for details such as profession and relation in the household. Albert's relation in the household is listed as the head of the household and Victoria's relation as the wife of the head of the household, although her profession is listed as the Queen: a position, which technically renders him her subject (The National Archives 2018). This return depicts the royal household as one of traditional norms and emphasises Queen Victoria's role of a wife. Ward notes that 'private domestic life was equated with femininity; public life being more in accordance with a masculine domain. Her public life meant that she was caught in an apparent dilemma between her perceptions of womanliness

and her need to fulfil her queenly work' (Ward 2006, 279). This observation is exactly what is conveyed in a letter from Queen Victoria to King Leopold where she wrote the following:

Albert grows daily fonder and fonder of politics and business, and is so wonderfully *fit* for both – such perspicacity and such *courage* – and I grow daily to dislike them both more and more. We women are not *made* for governing – and if we are good women, we must *dislike* these masculine occupations ; but there are ties which force one to take *interest* in them *mal gré bon gré*¹, and I do, of course, *intensely* (Queen Victoria 1852, 438).

Although, as Ward points out, 'there is a definite element within her viewpoint which asserts her strong inclination to do this "unfeminine work" ' (Ward 2006, 281), it nevertheless unmistakably presents Queen Victoria's attitude towards what an ideal women should be. Furthermore, Victoria did not only seek to heighten her husband's position in their personal lives, she argued for him obtaining a higher status in public life too. In a memorandum from 1856, she questioned why '*the wife of a King has the highest rank and dignity in the realm after her husband assigned to her by law, the husband of a Queen regnant is entirely ignored by the law*' and continued with remarking that '*this is the more extraordinary, as a husband has in this country such particular rights and such great power over his wife, and as the Queen is married just as any other woman is, and swears to obey her lord and master ... This is a strange anomaly*' (Queen Victoria 1856, 244). Once again, she refers to the traditional gender roles of her contemporary time while striving to situate herself as a proper wife and woman. This strive continued despite of Albert's untimely death at age 42, where Victoria wrote that it was their '*pure, happy, quiet, domestic life, which alone enabled me [her] to bear my [her] much disliked position*' (Queen Victoria 1861, 603). Victoria's grief was so substantive that she entered a state deep mourning and dressed herself in black for the rest in her life. These actions assert her as a devoted wife in the outlook of the public. However, one cannot help but wonder if Victoria's inclination towards the traditional gender roles within her married life and partially her public life was an attempt at pleasing Albert and benefit his social status as well as her own – particularly considering her political and powerful reign.

Bearing in mind that Queen Victoria bore nine children, her pregnancies and her role as a mother assuredly were of great importance to her life and her public image, while simultaneously showing her conflicted role. Commenting on this role, Ward writes that '*maintenance of her monarchical integrity was profoundly important to Victoria. But the very feminine function of reproduction paradoxically forced her, from time to time, to acknowledge publicly that she could not*

¹ French: whether one likes it or not

fulfil some of her queenly work' (Ward 2006, 280). To someone with a very strong work ethic, these pregnancies forced her to limit her role as a sovereign and thereby it eventually caused a conflict; she was both a sovereign and a mother but could never fully devote herself to one. Furthermore, the contemporary view of pregnancy were rather problematic for a female sovereign; According to *Victoria's Secrets* by Davidoff and Hall, the view of the Victorian society was that 'women when pregnant and thus incontrovertibly sexual beings, were associated with animalistic nature, which was incompatible with the serious work of the world' (Ward 2006, 280). Likewise, 'her state of "bad nerves" and "lowness" after the birth of her second child ... was viewed by Albert and his advisor, Baron Stockmar, as having been inherited from her grandfather²' (Ward 2006, 280). Views such as those must have placed Victoria under a great pressure to prove herself as a rational being, which may have contributed to the seriousness of her work ethic.

Nevertheless motherhood proved to be the tool with which she could unite her two roles; aligning with sentimental values, she became the mother of the Empire. Ward notes that as 'she could also fulfil dynastic expectations by producing an heir; motherhood and queenship could happily co-exist' (Ward 2006, 278), while Ulrich states that following her actions 'she presented herself to her subjects as the devoted wife and mother, allaying their anxieties about female rule by personifying her culture's most sacred type of femininity' (Ulrich 2005, 28). Thereof it can be argued that her strive to situate herself a wife and a mother functioned a softening of her position that made it more appealing to the public – and perhaps to herself as well. Moreover, Dorothy Thompson states that 'a female on the throne must always have appeared less "political" in an age in which public political action was exclusively a male preserve' (Elliot 1991, 372). Consequently, by appearing less political she would have had a greater influence on the women of her time, as they did not associate her with masculine power. Thus, the combination of motherhood and queenhood became a very powerful position, which asserts that Victoria must have had an immense influence on her subjects.

Queen Victoria's Impact on Her Society

Having considered Queen Victoria's place in the political sphere and her place in the societal norms for women, it is relevant to examine how her situation and opinions may have been an influence on the women of her contemporary time.

Generally, the public had a positive opinion of Victoria as the sovereign – after all, the United Kingdom has a history of placing females on the throne. This positivity was very visible during the United Kingdom's imperialist conflicts with Madagascar's queen, Ranavalona. The Britons could easily have expressed their dislike of her reign by relating it to Ranavalona's gender, but as they themselves had a woman preparing to ascend the throne, it was not an option (Chernock 2013, 430).

² King George III

Instead the media and prominent figures chose to juxtapose these two women by arguing that ‘the civilized queen was a woman who displayed sympathy, morality, and self-sacrifice in ways deeply aligned with Christian ethics’ while ‘savage queens, by contrast, reflected the tendencies of women at an earlier stage of cultural development: coarseness of manners, heathenism, physicality, and a pronounced lack of sensibility or feeling for others’ (Chernock 2013, 430). The missionary William Ellis being one of those figures wrote the book *History of Madagascar* wherein ‘he stresses that a nation needs a particular kind of queen ... in order to thrive under female leadership’ (Chernock 2013, 432). Consequently by assigning such a high status to Queen Victoria and thereby heightening her popularity, her influence on the public must have increased.

As Queen Victoria did not express any clear feminist opinions or act explicitly provocative, it is uncertain how much she could have influenced the women’s suffrage movement. Yet, to some of the activists she became a tool with which they could advance their cause. One such suffragist is the columnist Lily Bell. She wrote under pseudonym of uncertain origin³ in the end of 19th century and dealt with many social issues. In general, she criticised Queen Victoria ‘feeling that ordinary women were given ... impossible double messages regarding how they should conduct their lives and how they should be’ (Stevens 1988, 110). Nevertheless she used her critique of Queen Victoria’s persona as a tool when she wrote the following in January 1897:

We are entering upon the sixtieth year of our Queen Victoria's reign, and all sorts of projects are on foot for its fit and proper celebration. Curiously enough, none of these schemes which are at present being aired in our public newspapers, seem to take into consideration the fact that our Queen is a woman ... one would naturally think that the most appropriate form which could be given to what is, virtually, national testimony to the fitness of...one woman to occupy the position she has held over us for so many years, would be a public recognition of the fitness of her sex to share in the government of the country (Stevens 1988, 110).

Bell believes that Queen Victoria’s situation should be contributory in giving women the right to vote and exercise the right of citizenship. Another prominent suffrage figure that used Queen Victoria as a tool is Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the president of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. In contrast with Bell, Garrett Fawcett used Queen Victoria ‘as a proto-feminist exemplar’ (Ulrich 2005, 117). She stated that ‘politics and political responsibilities of the weightiest kind have not unsexed [the Queen]’ (Ulrich 2005, 118). She carried on with pointing out that ‘if it were true that home duties and political duties were incompatible, the Royal Children would have had a sadly

³ Some claim it is the founder of the Labour Party and the newspaper *Labour Leader*, Keir Hardie

neglected childhood' (Ulrich 2005, 118). Hence, she argued that having career does not reduce femininity; indeed by comparing Victoria to her male predecessors, she claimed that 'it is precisely Victoria's natural feminine characteristics that made her such an effective British sovereign' (Ulrich 2005, 120). Thereby, Garrett Fawcett sought to establish that the Queen's situation had an impact on the social status of women.

One of the women whom Victoria may have influenced is the author Sarah Stickney Ellis, wife of the aforementioned William Ellis. Probably inspired by her husband, Stickney Ellis likewise made a comment on the juxtaposition between the queens Ranavalona and Victoria in *The Women of England*, when she writes that 'it was imperative that reigning queens demonstrate a "high standard of moral excellence" ' (Chernock 2013, 432). Correspondingly, having written several books revolving around women's place and behaviour in society, this comment is very much in alignment with her general view. According to Morgan, it was common sentiments in the 19th century 'that although women's primary role was within the family as wives, mothers and daughters, these relationships acted as conduits through which women exerted an active influence on the public life of the nation' while 'a strong moral influence in the home was held to be vital to producing men with moral courage and strength' (Morgan 2004, 186). Stickney Ellis's opinions were matching these sentiments to a great extent. In *The Women of England*, she wrote the following:

There are many humble minded women, not remarkable for any particular intellectual endowments, who yet possess so clear a sense of the right and wrong of individual actions, as to be of essential service in aiding the judgement of their husbands, brothers, or sons, in those intricate affairs in which it is sometimes difficult to dissever worldly wisdom from religious duty (Ellis 1839, 50-51).

Although she validated and brought value to the domestic role of women when speaking of their moral capacity, she still limited it by writing that 'the sphere of woman's happiest and most beneficial influence is a domestic one' (Ellis 1839, 40). However in the same paragraph, she continued with this:

[Stickney Ellis has] admiration of those noble-minded women who *are* able to carry forward, with exemplary patience and perseverance, the public offices of benevolence, without sacrificing their home duties, and who thus prove to the world, that the perfection of female character is a combination of private and public virtue (Ellis 1839, 40).

Here she expressed a more controversial outlook, almost identical to that expressed by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, by claiming that some women were successful in managing to combine the public

and the private sphere. Moreover, it can be considered as a direct referral to Queen Victoria who combined the two. Taking these opinions into account, it is likely that Stickney Ellis felt inspired or at least assured in her opinions because of the Queen's actions and opinions. Furthermore, Stickney Ellis was a devoted spokeswoman for better education for women, namely because she believed that women had a great moral responsibility. In *The Women of England* she wrote the following:

I cannot rest without attempting to prove that the present education of the women of England does not fit them for faithfully performing the duties which devolve upon them immediately after their leaving school, and throughout the whole of their after lives - does not convert them from helpless children, into such characters as all women must be, in order to be either esteemed or admired (Ellis 1839, 62).

By making this call, she argued that women have a need of being perceived as whole human beings, but as she subsequently wrote, the improved education should merely enable women to ask themselves: “What can I do to make my parents, my brothers, or my sisters, more happy? ... I hope to pursue the plan to which I have been accustomed, of seeking my own happiness only in happiness of others.” (Ellis 1839, 90-91). Thereby Sarah Stickney Ellis represented just as divided a personality as Queen Victoria: she advocated that women should develop into whole human beings while on the same time stressing the importance of the domestic sphere. Although some of her opinions kept women retained, they nevertheless contributed with real value to this given role, and place her as a strong woman of own opinions.

Lastly, a pronounced testimony to Queen Victoria's impact on women's social status can be found when considering the lives of her daughters. According to Millicent Garrett Fawcett ‘the Princesses had shown “the greatest sympathy with what is known in England as the women's movement” ’ (Ulrich 2005, 80), and Ulrich remarks that ‘their interest in empowering their fellow women legally, educationally, and financially must have been fostered by the naturalness of female power and self-determination as modeled by their mother’ (Ulrich 2005, 80). Although one cannot call the Princesses feminists, their actions nevertheless indicate that they are pro-women. They did a huge amount of philanthropic work to improve their conditions; for instance Victoria's oldest daughter the Princess Royal was, among other things, personally investigating slums and founding libraries, a cooking school, and children's schools’ (Ulrich 2005, 87), while expressing an early form of ‘conflicts regarding who has jurisdiction over the reproductive capacity of women's bodies’ when she was not allowed to travel to England to attend her father's funeral during her pregnancy (Ulrich 2005, 89). Princess Helena was a tomboy who loved swimming, running, boating, and horseback riding (Ulrich 2005, 93), while Princess Louise participated in the organization ‘Ladies’ Work Society, which ... sought to professionalize women's work’ (Ulrich 2005, 106). Moreover, Queen

Victoria trusted her daughters ‘to help her in her correspondence and even to interface with her Cabinets’ which ‘must have had an empowering effect’ (Ulrich 2005, 111). Thereof, Queen Victoria’s daughters should be viewed as strong women, who sought to use the power and privilege they had been given, by following the example set by their mother.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Queen Victoria represented a divided set of values. On the one hand, she was conforming to the norms of her society by displaying a highly traditional approach to marriage and domesticity, and by positioning Prince Albert as the head of the family. On the other hand, she had a successful and dedicated reign of more than 60 years, which asserts that she must have found some pleasure in her position in spite of her denying it. Ultimately, she came to terms with her conflicted situation, when the role of a sovereign and the role of a devoted wife and mother was combined in the position as mother of the Empire – Victoria became the one to educate and set the example for the whole nation. Consequently, her impact must have been substantial, and Dorothy Thompson points to the fact that her gender made her appear less political and thereby her influence on women must have increased. Indeed, it is apparent that she had an impact on many different women ranging from controversial feminists such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Lily Bell, to conservative authors such as Sarah Stickney Ellis, and lastly to her own aristocratic daughters. Although very different, all these women sought to better the life and the social status of women in their own manner. Hence, Queen Victoria left behind a legacy, which has been employed as an aid to better women’s social status in the society.

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