Rewriting the Woman Question: Female Writers and Victorian Ideologies of Emotion

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Abstract: This paper aims to untangle Victorian perspectives concerning the answer to the Woman Question as they pertain to broader understandings of ethical reasoning and emotion in nineteenth-century England. With careful consideration of the form, content, and style of Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* (1839) and Caroline Norton's *A Letter to the Queen* (1855), this paper examines how Ellis and Norton reveal the stratification and glorification of women's roles in their writing while simultaneously contributing to a culture that devalues them. In this way, Ellis and Norton redefine the culture of, and attempt to answer, the Woman Question.

The Woman Question, more plainly stated as the question of women's ideal role in society, was one of the most divisive and disputed affairs of the nineteenth century. Discourses concerning the answer to this question often emphasized the widening division of labour within the public and private spheres, a distinction that was rapidly garnering attention alongside the rise of British industrialism. While both Sarah Stickney Ellis and Caroline Norton wrote with female readers in mind, their primary audiences differ in economic status and political power. Ellis's *The Women of England* (1839) is a conduct book—a detailed advice manual that aims to influence the lives of domestic middle-class women. Contrastingly, Norton's *A Letter to the Queen* (1855) takes a more direct approach to advocate for societal change: addressing Queen Victoria herself. While Ellis relies on the collective action of women to maintain the status quo, Norton seeks to persuade England's highest authority to advocate

for social reform. With careful consideration of the content, form, and style of Ellis's *The Women of England* and Norton's *A Letter to the Queen*, this paper will examine how Ellis and Norton enable the stratification and glorification of women's societal roles while simultaneously contributing to a culture that undermines and devalues them. Through their writing, Ellis and Norton redefine the culture of, and attempt to answer, the Woman Question.

Ellis and Norton wrote within a social framework that undoubtedly informed their respective texts. As a result of rising industrialist and capitalist systems, the separation between male and female labour widened, adding enormous pressure on men to become the sole breadwinners of their families. This division promoted the emergence of a cut-throat capitalist market defined by hegemonic hyper-masculinity that is "aggressive, ruthless, competitive, and adversarial" (Acker 29). Such a society values ruthlessness and individual success so heavily that the consequent value ascribed to traditionally feminine tenderness and warmth lessens. It is for this reason that many scholars regard the nineteenth century as the moment when "emotions [are] domesticated," as the feminine and motherly implications associated with emotion become widely acknowledged by women and men alike (Ablow 375). As the public sphere continues to be identified by its rationality and rivalry, the private sphere becomes more explicitly emotional and feminine—subjecting women to increasingly suffocating social and economic limitations. The pressure on men to provide creates a dynamic between husbands and their wives that relies on women to exist as their husbands' moral compasses. "The Angel in the House," a narrative poem by English poet Coventry Patmore, embodies this idea, fetishizing and glorifying the life of his wife, Emily, as the "ideal" Victorian housewife. This poem, and the predominant rhetoric of the nineteenth century, glamourizes the married woman as the moral guardian of the house and makes this position synonymous with a fulfilling and honourable life.

Despite painting Victorian women as morally superior, society barred them from most of the workforce, domes-

ticating their influence. Instead of working in the public sphere, women influenced society by regulating their husbands and sons, and these men, supposedly, would then guide society. The role of the female teacher visibly embodies this trickle-down morality, as knowledge flows from female teachers to male students. Because of the nature of this work, any direct praise or credibility a woman could amass for the betterment of society is erased—acclaim for her upstanding morality is quickly placed onto her husband, her sons, or the students she teaches. Gesa Stedman, author of *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture, and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, outlines the indirect ways that passion colours public and political life only by working its way into society through the "'fountainhead' downwards: through the influence of mothers" (Stedman 233). She further argues that women's emotional influence not only served to soften their husband's rough edges but also permitted the "cautious call" for teaching as a female occupation (Stedman 233). Though the door began to open for women occupying space in the public sector, they remained bound to feminine roles of nurturing, caretaking, and child-raising. A vital aspect of the Woman Question was to challenge how women might inhabit the public sector. While Victorian discourses on emotionality substantially limited women's involvement in the public sphere, they simultaneously created new spaces for it.

When analyzing these discourses, it is essential to consider the forms in which they are presented. As a conduct book, Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* describes and glorifies middle-class women's domestic role, idealizing the separate-spheres ideology and helping to shape the glass ceilings inhibiting women that will later prove difficult to shatter. Though misogynistic, conduct books for women did not always exist with the sole intention of oppression. Ellis's *The Women of England* seeks to help Victorian women thrive in their domestic roles, reflecting a reactionary form of feminism that assumes compliance within the patriarchal system without the intention to reform it. The guidance presented within *The Women*

of England indicates the expectation of women to remain complicit within their sphere of domesticity, defining success as demonstrating the most personal influence possible within it: keeping their husbands' moral weaknesses under control.

The form of Ellis's domestic conduct book is compatible with the female-dominated private sphere. On the other hand, Caroline Norton's *A Letter to the Queen* employs the traditionally feminine form of writing—the letter—to enter the male-dominated sphere of political writing. The palatable language of letters translates into an available and accessible way for women to write in the Victorian period. Norton's letter provides her with space to critique controversial ideas and systems, namely England's laws concerning marriage rights and women's personhood, without immediately transgressing gender boundaries by appearing overly masculine upon first impression. In her letter, Norton opposes the lack of "legal existence" allocated to women alongside the implications this lack of autonomy—it forbade women from making wills, claiming their earnings, or filing for divorce (Norton 8–11). Using the form of the letter, Norton contrasts elements of femininity with more blunt and masculine diction. This masculine writing style allows her work, upon publication, to reach a legislative audience—one that might have chosen to discard her work as presumptuous had she decided to present it as a more formal legal document, such as an official pleading. Alongside this advantage, the epistolary genre also allows Norton to tailor her writing to suit a single subject: Queen Victoria. In addressing a powerful political figure directly, Norton clarifies her intention of direct and tangible change for Victorian women in England through the reform of martial laws. Norton's chosen form is a considerable aspect of what makes her letter so influential, as it concerns both the gendered implications of letter writing as well as her intended audience.

Like their forms, the content of Ellis and Norton's writing further indicates their stance on Victorian gender roles. In *The Women of England*, Ellis describes the "secret in-

fluence" women have in society as they relieve men from the responsibility of thinking and acting for themselves and leading them ethically through life (Ellis 411). She then notes that this work is often undervalued, particularly by women themselves, as they feel that they hold little influence over society. Ellis counters this assumption and explores the significance of women's natural moral superiority, arguing that Victorian businessmen require this moral assistance more than ever as the individualistic aspects of capitalist work rush to corrupt and contaminate them (413). Women, remaining in the domestic sphere, can abstain from this corruption. In the feminist anthology *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Women*, Carol Christ notes a similar concept, writing that "[r]eligious doubt and the viciously competitive atmosphere of business combined to threaten the stability of many traditional religious and moral values" (Christ 146). These values were then "relocated … in the home and in the woman who was its center" (Christ 146). The perceived inherent ability of women to remain unimpaired by the "pecuniary objects which too often constitute the chief end of man" allows them to retain this position of ethical righteousness, a skill which then influences and ultimately benefits men (Ellis 411). In her conduct book, Ellis aims to provide the framework upon which a Victorian woman can build a successful and fulfilling life: by remaining submissive and morally pure.

Conduct books such as *The Women of England* communicate to women that their work carries insurmountable influence over society, yet this work is awarded little formal recognition. Women's work is often done in darkness, exemplified in Ellis's description of a working husband returning home in the evening, confused by the moral dilemmas that he encounters throughout the workday, to be comforted by his wife and the remembrance of her upstanding morality and ethical reasoning (Ellis 413). He is said to stand "corrected before the clear eye of [women]" as she detects the "lurking evil" within him and then works to repair it (Ellis 412). The light of her work, her moral influence, is shone entirely onto her husband, remedying his troubles; howev-

er, the patriarchy downplays the importance of emotional labour and thus contradicts its apparent necessity in keeping society intact.

Distinguishing herself from Ellis, Norton clarifies her intent to reach other powerful political figures by publishing her work in 1855. Scholars credit Norton's focus in passing England's Marriage and Divorce act of 1857—an act that allowed both men and women to file for divorce, though only in cases of adultery, cruelty, or desertion (Savage 103). Norton's *A Letter to the Queen* outlines the sexist marriage laws that essentially defined women as secondary, subhuman citizens, limiting their control over their own lives and decisions. The Victorian woman held very little power politically and economically, lacking the ability to claim her earnings, defend herself in a divorce trial, or enter a contract, among other patriarchal laws (Norton 11–12). Norton condemns the legislative erasure of women's autonomy—married women were "non-existent" under the law and lost financial control over their assets (Norton 4). The law justifies the lack of economic and political power it granted to married women, in part because of the scientifically dubious claim that men are fundamentally independent and that women are fundamentally dependent (Steinbach 166). Regardless of the lack of scientific evidence to support this claim, the perceived natural dominance of the male gender was weaponized within Victorian England's legal system to assert authority over its women.

Similarly essential to the analysis of their influence are the styles of Ellis and Norton's writing. Ellis's *The Women of England* is noticeably descriptive, embellished, and emotional, exemplified within the book's metaphoric passages that confirm women's moral importance through comparison with the earth. In these passages, Ellis writes that women regularly nourish their husbands in their "lovely bosoms" and that this support is never-ending: she claims that even when the sun is "shrouded, and the showers forget to fall, and blighting winds go forth," women still open their "hidden fountains" and yield their resources to "invigorate, to cherish, and sustain" (Ellis 410). In emphasizing the beau-

tiful nature of women as they share their never-ending resources with those around them, Ellis reinforces the idea of inherent female morality as glamorous and attractive. She makes a careful comparison between women and the earth, choosing to highlight the innately nurturing and dependable nature of both. Thus, Ellis's romanticization of unwavering womanly support promotes the construction of subservient femininity as prestigious and rewarding. *The Women of England* does not seek to inspire women's resistance to their patriarchal society, but instead hopes to explain the innate beauty and utility that the patriarchy supports.

Unlike Ellis's poetic diction, Norton's writing style is factual, plain, and argumentative. Though presented in a traditionally feminine form, Norton's writing is masculine in style and serious in tone. She does not hesitate to draw attention to the inequity found within England's marriage laws, highlighting that "[as] her husband, he has a right to all that is hers: as his wife, she has no right to anything that is his" (Norton 13). This somber and masculine style allows her work to be taken seriously in a society that values masculinity over femininity and male voices over female ones. Her masculine writing style is especially apparent in her summary of England's marriage laws: "A married woman in England has no legal existence: her being is absorbed in that of her husband … An English wife cannot legally claim her own earnings … An English wife may not leave her husband's house" (Norton 8–10). Norton abstains from emotional appeals and first-person pronouns, instead focusing on the absurdity in the laws themselves. The contrasting stylistic choices throughout Ellis and Norton's works signal the different audiences and objectives of each piece: Ellis appeals to women searching for success within a patriarchal system, whereas Norton appeals to the politically powerful—those who uphold the system itself.

Supporting Norton's desire to establish legal change through her writing is her will to expose the hypocrisy encompassing the legal structure of Victorian England, notably the Queen's authority itself. Norton highlights "the grotesque anomaly which ordains that married women shall be

'non-existent' in a country governed by a female Sovereign," stressing that these marriage laws "cannot become 'the law of the land' without [Her] Majesty's assent" (Norton 4). The strong language in the phrase "grotesque anomaly" affirms Norton's frustration towards this injustice, a controversial emotion for a woman to express under Victorian social conventions as it contrasts the pleasant and agreeable demeanour expected of femininity. Norton does not embellish her intentions; instead, she contrasts the Queen's utmost authority with the subjugation of the rest of England's women. This efficient and stark language demonstrates women's capability in realms other than that of the intellectually unstimulating household and, as a result, advocates that women deserve personal rights on par with Victorian men.

Though education opened the door for female employment, most formal involvement in traditionally masculine fields (such as politics) remained inaccessible to women. If, as Ellis believes, England's integrity rests on the shoulders of its women, why would the power of inherent female morality not suffice as a reason to place women in positions of political power where their influence could theoretically have the furthest reach? Similarly, why would feminist complaints of ethical shortcomings not suffice as an adequate reason to reform the misogynistic marriage laws outlined by Norton? Why, to enact real change, must women present their arguments in the most apathetic way possible? If women's morality is as crucial for the development of wiser, better men—and therefore a wiser, better society—women in positions of political power should be similarly accepted. In reality, this remains untrue. The discrepancy between the idea of women as moral authorities and their actual ability to assert influence over ethical matters in the public sphere is immensely confining.

The form, content, and style of Norton and Ellis's writings embody how Victorian conceptions of emotion facilitated the stratification and glorification of gender roles, confining women to domestic tasks and limiting their involvement in the public sphere. Though Ellis argues, in *The Women of England,* that the inherent morality of women is

essential to the integrity of society, it remains undervalued as a commodity from which women can profit. This devaluation is exemplified through the straightforward and unembellished style of Norton's *A Letter to the Queen*, which maintains the narrative that the public sphere was only accessible to women by appearing as masculine as possible. In understanding how the Victorians both perceived and valued emotion, one can understand the patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century Britain alongside the widely shared schools of thought that allowed it to flourish. Ultimately, Victorian discourses on emotionality, placed within a capitalist and industrialist setting, capture not only the contentious nature of the Woman Question but also how these claims affected women themselves—shaping how women responded to and eventually challenged their socially prescribed roles. The pursuit of prosperity under a patriarchal system is demanding and ambiguous; authors akin to Ellis fell victim to the promise of domestic success, while others such as Norton provided the rhetorical framework for modern understandings of gender and gendered obligations.

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