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The Victorian theory of spinsterhood

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Abstract
In 1897 'John Le Breton' published a novel called Miss Tudor, introducing a certain Mrs Richardson and her two daughters. The elder daughter, who was married, 'seemed a person to be looked up to as one having attained an assured position in the world'. The younger, who was not married, was a person of no consequence as far as her mother was concerned.
In 1897 'John Le Breton' published a novel called *Miss Tudor*, introducing a certain Mrs Richardson and her two daughters. The elder daughter, who was married, 'seemed a person to be looked up to as one having attained an assured position in the world'. The younger, who was not married, was a person of no consequence as far as her mother was concerned. Commented the authors:

The modern bachelor-woman, working contentedly at a business or profession, and making sufficient money to lead a healthful and cultivated life, whilst making a provision for old age, was in her opinion a far less dignified sight than the ordinary slave-woman, bound to the male of her kind by a marriage certificate and a wedding-ring, giving her valuable labour for the privilege of bearing his name, and his children, and nine times out of ten left unprovided for, after a youth and middle age passed in profitless work and mental stagnation."
Mrs Richardson was not untypical of her society. In the Victorian world women were created to be wives and mothers. Nature had intended it so, and God had ordered it; instinct, custom and common sense proved the point. They filled their appointed place in the community, they transmitted its ideals, and they received its full approval and support. But spinsters, in adopting what 'respect for Grandfather Adam and Grandmother Eve must compel us to admit, is an unnatural condition of being,' faced a limited and imperfect future; for 'the only true life is got by experience, and women who are neither wives nor mothers know only half the truth, and assuredly only half the joy of existence'.

Nevertheless, it was a fact of life in Victorian Britain that not all women could marry. Throughout the nineteenth century there was an ever-increasing surplus of women, until by the time of Miss Tudor there were a million more females than males. A third of all women aged 25 or more were single. If the trend continued, one in every four or five would never marry.

And people knew this. The figures were well-publicised and widely discussed. In 1862 W.R. Greg's paper 'Why Are Women Redundant?' sparked a debate on the causes and cures of 'superfluous women', a problem most apparent in the middle
classes where no alternative career to marriage (except perhaps governessing, a profession which was rapidly becoming overcrowded) could respectably be envisaged. John Stuart Mill's treatise on the shortcomings of Victorian marriage, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), provided an explanation which raised another storm. A debate on the question 'Is Marriage a Failure' drew 27,000 letters to the *Daily Telegraph* in the 1880s. There were many ardent defenders of the Victorian ideal, but the marriage rate continued to fall. And despite the efforts of feminists and philanthropists to open new jobs in business and the professions to middle-class spinsters, whose success proved that women could have happy and fulfilled careers outside of marriage, the bogey of the old maid remained to frighten girls into marriage and ensure that no spinster ever felt complacent about her lot.

In the middle classes the division of labour was organised within the family, and based upon the home: institutions which, to the Victorians were as essential to civilised life as the state itself, requiring the same proper government and loyalty. The duties of men, though heads of families, lay outside the home, for they took upon themselves the labour of the world, in order to free women from burdens too heavy for their strength. The duties of
women lay within the home where, sheltered from the rough life outside, they bore and raised children, and ministered to the men who supported and defended them. Thus women's sphere was one household, man's the whole world; and an ideal ostensibly established to protect the guardians of the race became a tyranny for those who had no race to guard.

The law of the land recognised these different roles. By an accident of history a woman succeeded to the most prestigious inheritance in England at a time when the state regarded her sex more or less as minors. 'Our woman sovereign is an heirloom from the ages when rank and not sex constituted a qualification for a voice in the government, and when women of rank were not held to be incapacitated by sex from the exercise of the most important political functions,' observed the spinster suffragist Lydia Becker. In Victorian England single women could administer and control their property, if they had any, and sue and contract, but they could not vote, and they lost all their rights when they entered upon what was held to be their noblest vocation: marriage. 'A married woman in English law has no legal existence,' Mrs Caroline Norton told the Queen, 'her being is absorbed in that of her husband.'

Men had almost complete control over their wives: the automatically took possession of everything their brides
owned, along with the right to their future earnings and services, and those of their children. Only after 1870 were married women entitled to keep their earnings, and separate ownership of property did not come till 1882. Husbands had exclusive guardianship and control of the family. Separated wives might have custody of their children after 1839 but it was not until 1886 that widows automatically became guardians of theirs. Divorce was virtually impossible to obtain before 1857, and even after that date discriminated against women: a man had only to prove his wife's infidelity, but a woman had to prove incest, bigamy, cruelty or separation as well. Husbands could detain their wives against their will, and wives could be imprisoned if they refused to go home. The courts upheld husbands' rights to 'correct' their wives, with force if necessary. 'Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law,' declared John Stuart Mill. 'There remains no legal slave, except the mistress of every house.'

Why then were women so eager to marry? Because social status mattered more to women than legal status. In the words of Florence Nightingale, who spoke from experience, 'a married woman of eighteen has more independence, and is thought better able to act for herself than a single one of thirty-six'. Women brought up to believe this did not
think to question it. Trollope's Lizzie Eustace (in The Eustace Diamonds, 1873) believed that an unmarried woman's strength lay solely in the expectation of approaching matrimony.9 Gissing's Maud Gresham (in Workers in the Dawn, 1880) confessed that she married simply for the sake of a position in society. 'Now-a-days an unmarried woman of more than one-and-twenty stands in an anomalous situation. Her maidenhood brings with it nothing but disadvantages'.10 Hardy's Sue Bridehead (in Jude the Obscure, 1895) realised that she was by no means alone in regretting her marriage. 'Fewer people like marriage than you suppose,' she told Jude, 'only they enter into it for the dignity it is assumed to confer, and the social advantages it gains them sometimes.'11

Economic considerations were often an additional motive. Parents with several daughters - the usual Victorian arrangement - were only too anxious to rid themselves of them as soon as possible, and the prospect of lonely poverty in the future frightened many a girl into accepting the first offer she received. 'It seems to me that it would be dreadful, dreadful to live one's life alone,' agonised Monica Madden in Gissing's novel The Odd Women (1893), vividly conscious of the plight of two destitute older sisters: '...I had rather, oh, far rather kill myself than
live such a life at their age'. From the experience of a terrible misalliance she admitted later that 'I should never have married him if I hadn't been tempted by the thoughts of living easily'.12 In a novel by another Victorian writer a similar sentiment was expressed. 'Marriage with me simply meant earning my living in the easiest way,' Mrs Crane told her sister, Miss Traill. 'I was twenty and penniless; under such circumstances one naturally falls in love. It is a different thing when one has an income and an establishment, and no need to marry at all.'13

The Victorian understanding of women's natural characteristics made definition of their duties within marriage unnecessary, although this did not prevent their being set out and laid down repeatedly in handbooks designed for female edification: books like Mrs Sandford's Woman in her Social and Domestic Character and 'A Lady of Distinction's' Guide to Matrimonial Happiness. The duties of unmarried women were not so clearly stated. That is not to say that no time or effort was put into conceiving and compiling them. 'If in the multitude of counsellors there is safety, how blest must be the security of single women!' exclaimed Dora Greenwell.14 'Old Maids, spinsters, the solitary, heart-broken women of England, have quite a little
literature of their own, which is not certainly cheering to
our forlorn spirits,' wrote Anne Thackeray, before she
escaped into matrimony. '...There are Sunsets of spinster
life, Moans of old maids, Words to the wasted, Lives for the
lonely, without number...'

When a woman by chance or choice failed to create a home of her own through marriage, her advisers by general agreement expected her to play out her female role in helping to make the homes of parents or relatives. If a certain degree of sympathy, charity, and selflessness was assumed in wives and mothers, an infinity of these was required of maiden ladies, whose whole lives were to be dedicated to caring for — not one immediate family, but anyone and everyone who laid claim to their attentions. In return they were supported economically, but there was none of that respect that was granted to the wife and mother who occupied a recognised place in society and carried on its ideals. Willing slaves, unpaid housekeepers, governesses, nurses, attendants: these were the ubiquitous Victorian maiden aunts, cherished, certainly, and valued by their families, but only in proportion to society's estimate of them as second-rate.

So Mrs Sandford who, like all the writers of women's affairs, allotted one token chapter to the duties of unmarried ladies, admitted a place for spinsters in the
household - 'The kind Sister, or Aunt, will always be welcomed' - but she could not be considered the equal of the married woman, who 'occupies a higher place'. It behoved the Victorians to make this absolutely clear, so that no girl should take it into her head to repudiate the Victorian ideal and prefer the single life to the tedious duties of marriage. 'One book, I remember,' Anne Thackeray recounted, after describing a life passed in abstract study, in nursing sick people, in visiting unhappy ones, in relieving the needy, exclaims (or something very like it): - 'But ah! What at best is such a life as this, whose chief pleasures and consolations are to be found in the cares and sorrows of others? Married life, indeed, has its troubles;' these single but impartial critics generally go on to state; 'but then there is companionship, sympathy, protection' - one knows the sentence by heart.

The constant reminders lead one to suspect that some parts of Victorian society felt threatened by spinsters. Married women, bound by emotional and financial ties to their husbands and families, as well as by law, were less likely to question manmade ideals than unmarried women who were only economically dependent on an institution in which they played a role of doubtful satisfaction and minimal utility. Men and women alike exerted themselves to keep spinsters in social and economic subjection, the first in order to prevent an assault on their own territory, the second through the personal jealousy and rivalry engendered
by the conventions of their upbringing. Having been educated to believe that matrimony was the crowning honour and achievement of her life, no wife and mother cared to see women whom she had previously regarded as failures enjoying equal status with her and enjoying lives which were patently more interesting and rewarding than her own conjugal and maternal ministrations.

The Victorian ideal, which elevated marriage above all other states, claimed a basis in Christian teaching. Marriage was part of God's design for earthly existence. The Bible asserted principles, and left them to operate, stated William Hamley, but regarded marriage 'under what we will call the sensible view - that which consolidates states and families'. Christ himself had little to say on the subject; his favourite disciple Peter was a married man, although he went on to found a church with a celibate clergy. When Christ's followers questioned him on the subject, he told them that the single life is something which not everyone can accept, but only those for whom God has appointed it. For while some are incapable of marriage because they were born so, or were made so by men, there are others who have themselves renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. Let those accept if who can. Blackwood's reviewer was surprised to find that the Irish historian Lecky (in his History of European Morals, 1869) considered chastity a virtue although he could find 'no
utility, no good reasons, for an approval of perpetual virginity, which would lead, we need not say, to the depopulation of the world... Mr Lecky's readers, we are persuaded, would one and all refuse any tribute of approbation to man or woman simply for remaining unmarried all their lives.²⁰

The Victorians found in Christ's mysterious birth more evidence to support a cult of motherhood than one of virginity. Yet Christ included many unmarried people among his friends - Mary and Martha, for instance, who as saint and worker typified the dual role of the Victorian spinster - and he himself never married. 'He was so devoted to God and mankind that He appears not to have wished for marriage,' Florence Nightingale pointed out. She added: 'We profess, but it is only a profession, to take Him for an example.'²¹

The Anglican church based its stand on marriage not so much on the words of Christ as on the writings of St Paul. Although Paul gave notional assent to his master's view of the equality of the sexes, he was an ardent misogynist. His attitude was manifest in those sections of the Epistles which were incorporated into the Anglican marriage service, enjoining wives to obey their husbands 'For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church...'²² But on the question of spinsters Paul followed
Christ's teaching. 'The unmarried or celibate woman cares for the Lord's business, her aim is to be dedicated to him in body as in spirit; but the married woman cares for worldly things; her aim is to please her husband.' When calling upon scriptural authority the Victorians were careful to quote only statements which were calculated to comfort the unmarried person, but not to elevate the single life above the married. St Paul was a bachelor himself, and preferred people to follow his example if they could; so he wrote, 'if a virgin marries, she has done no wrong. But those who marry will have pain and grief in this bodily life, and my aim is to spare you'.

The Victorian concept of marriage and the single life also owed something to the Hellenistic notion, perpetuated by the early fathers down through the Roman Catholic church, that sex was evil. For those who held this opinion virginity was naturally superior to marriage. Origen castrated himself in order to escape the temptation of lust. Tertullian regarded sex even within marriage as sinful. Augustine denied that the benefit of children was comparable with the blessedness of celibacy, and wrote Of Holy Virginity to show that although married people could win eternal life, they would not occupy the places closest to God. St Cyprian called virgins 'the flower of the church,
the honor and the masterpiece of spiritual grace, ... the
most brilliant portion of Christ's flock'. St Chrysostom
equated sexual coupling in marriage with death. Aquinas
regarded the contemplative and celibate life as higher than
the active and married one, and saw that Christ himself had
expressly preferred virgins by choosing one for his mother,
and by remaining one himself. The Council of Trent
formalised the position subsequently adopted by the Roman
Catholic church down to the present day:

If any one shall say that the state of marriage is to be
preferred to the state of virginity or celibacy, and that
it is not better and more blessed to continue in virginity
or celibacy than to be joined in matrimony, let him be
accursed, (anathema).25

The Victorians had the same uneasy suspicion of sex.
In his History of European Morals Lecky spoke of 'that
universal perception of conviction which I believe to be an
ultimate fact in human nature, that the sensual side of our
being is the lower side, and that some degree of shame may
appropriately be attached to it'.26 But it did not follow
for the Victorians, as it followed for the fathers of the
Roman church, that the spinster (by definition devoid of
this sensual aspect) was more honourable than the married
woman (by definition tainted by its shame). The Protestant
ethic with its pragmatic approach to morality triumphed over
these scruples. Like the Jews of antiquity, both Luther and
Calvin saw it not only as a right but as a duty for all but a select few to marry. The cause had nothing to do with the need to perpetuate the race (although for the Victorians this was an additional consideration of some importance); it was the result of Luther's experience of clergy who shamelessly violated their vows of chastity, and of Calvin's conviction that most convents were also brothels, together with their consciousness of their own physical desires. They believed that man's sexual needs could only be satisfied in a Christian way within marriage, which had been instituted by God for this purpose. Religious celibates were good and holy, but they were not necessarily better than anyone else. Celibacy was not intrinsically virtuous. Indeed, as Luther asserted in one of his more vehement moods, God intended women to be either wives or prostitutes; and this concept of a dual nature survived into the nineteenth century.  

The Reformation in England led to the dispersal of the religious communities which had provided a refuge for the country's single daughters who, like the Vestal Virgins of ancient times and the saintly Eastern and European nuns, had set a standard of virtue which also enhanced the condition of their secular sisters. The Catholic church had set aside religious functions for its unmarried members which were the most honourable functions of all, but when these ceased to
exist, unmarried women were left with nothing to do. 'I
know not of any more distressing development of the cruel
spirit of Protestantism,' wrote Newman,

than the determined, bitter, and scoffing spirit in which it
has set itself against institutions which give dignity and
independence to the position of women in society. As matters
stand, marriage is almost the only shelter which a
defenceless portion of the community has against the rude
world; - a maiden life, that holy estate, is not only left
in desolation, but oppressed with heartless ridicule and
insult ...\textsuperscript{28}

Theoretically Protestant teaching always acknowledged
the sanctity of all callings, and even before Anglican
sisterhoods and the institution of deaconesses gained a new
foothing in England in the nineteenth century, religious
celibates were occasionally exempted from the general
degradation of spinsterhood. 'Nay, it would take a volume
to shew forth the many ways in which the world has been
indebted to the self-denying and assiduous devotion of
unmarried women.' exclaimed the author of Woman's Work and
Worth (1880); and another writer admitted grudgingly that
'some of the noblest lives are attained by those who live
single, and would even (it may be) in given circumstances
by marred by Marriage'.\textsuperscript{29} But this was plainly not the
popular view. Biographies of Catherine of Siena and her
saintly sisters were usually only to be found in books of
comfort to the unfortunate. The widespread and bitter
opposition to the re-establishment of religious communities on English soil in the nineteenth century showed that the public was not inclined to accord even the tolerance advocated by the Protestant ethic to contemporary women who abstained from marriage for religious reasons.

The Victorians found proof of their preference for marriage over the single life not only in the teachings of the church but in the laws of nature. Woman's 'natural' vocation was that of wife and mother. By dividing and apportioning the sexes, 'nature' had intended that there should be one woman for every man, his wife, the mother of his children. The ambiguous definition of the word 'nature' enabled the Victorians to confound the biological and the social purposes of humankind, at the same time ignoring the religious concept of creation. Women were designed physically for motherhood, but so were men for fatherhood, and it was not suggested that all men had to adopt this career, still less that it should be the only one open to them. Moreover, it was only the convention of a civilised society that added the refinement that marriage should precede motherhood. This obscured the purely animal nature of the female function and permitted the addition of a whole new range of duties which were then taken, without justification, to be as 'natural' as motherhood itself.
Monogamous marriage was not a natural state. Other civilisations had sufficiently distinct forms of social organisation to prove this conclusively. But the Victorians were not the first nor the last peoples to conceive of their own arrangements as the norm from which all others were measured as deviations.

Nevertheless they showed themselves to be perfectly aware of the paradox when they claimed that their history was a tale of progress from barbarism to civilisation. Material and cultural achievements reinforced this view, according to which marriage appeared to be not only the most natural, but also the most civilised moral order. But civilisation is, of course, the very opposite of nature. Victorian men used the status of women as the test of the degree of civilisation in history: their own age being the most civilised, the position of their own leisured ladies was the standard by which all others were judged. Hence the idea that women should perform the work of men was nothing short of barbarous. As Edmund Widdowson explained to his young wife in Gissing’s novel *The Odd Women*:

Woman’s sphere is the home, Monica. Unfortunately girls are often obliged to go out and earn their living, but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish ... If a woman can neither have a home of her own, nor find occupation in any one else’s she is deeply to be pitied; her life is bound to be unhappy. I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man.30
As if it were not sufficient to have the sanction of God, nature, and the laws of a civilised society, the Victorian view of marriage as the best and true state of women was also justified by 'universal experience'. This conflicted with the civilisation theory, and was not borne out by the facts. Throughout history women had naturally been occupied largely with childbearing but it takes no great amount of research to see that in any period this was never their sole occupation. The women of the lower social orders - the 'working classes' in fact as well as name - always had to engage in additional employment, in cottage industry, on the farm, in the factory, in domestic service. In different ages, such as the Renaissance ladies played an important part in the culture and politics of their state. Great women in history have not been numerous but they were not invariably celebrated for marital and motherly virtues. Elizabeth I, a spinster Queen, ruled England in its Golden Age. Joan of Arc led an army and died a hero. Florence Nightingale, the very antithesis of the Victorian ideal, came to exemplify the feminine nobility of her generation. "Saints and geniuses ..." suggested the American feminist Margaret Fuller. But lesser souls, too, deserved the epitaph Berenger inscribed on the tomb of a lady who died unmarried: 'She was never a mother, yet many sons arose and
The Victorian ideal was a middle-class one, and applied only to themselves. The upper classes continued to enjoy aristocratic immunity ('They have no abject dependence on marriage; - the sneering epithet of "old maid" is never heard in their ranks') and the working classes, male and female, serviced the rest of the community. In putting forward the notion that his conventions were proved by custom and tradition the middle class arbiter of society forgot that he himself was a relatively new phenomenon. He had no tradition to follow. He was part of a group which emerged out of the Industrial Revolution with a philosophy of life developed to suit its novel character. Driven by the desire for profit he did not retire to live a life of leisure in imitation of the aristocracy but demonstrated his equal means by insisting that his wife must not work, her inactivity being proof that he could afford to support her in an aristocratic lifestyle. His sons would follow in his footsteps but his daughters, like their mother, stayed at home, completely dependent on their father financially and socially, until such time as their husbands took over the responsibility. No other career was open to them.

John Langdon Davies said that when children cease to be altogether desirable, women cease to be altogether
necessary. 35 So far as the Victorians conceived the roles of the sexes, this was true. Theoretically women had no existence apart from men; dominated, protected, provided for, they found childbearing to be practically their only active role in life. Clearly in a situation where motherhood was the sole reason for woman's existence, the spinster was a misfit and an aberration. Deprived of the means to support herself independently, she was an economic burden as well. She was an object of embarrassment to her society in a way that the bachelor was not. Victorian disapproval of single women had no basis in fact in theories of religious teaching, nature, civilisation or historical tradition. It was the product of the pragmatic view of social organisation adopted by middleclass Englishmen. 36

Disapproval was manifested in several ways. The least subtle was the way in which reference was made to unmarried women. The word 'spinster', which means literally 'woman who spins', derived from a custom current before the Industrial Revolution that a maiden should have spun a certain task of woollen yarn before she could be considered properly eligible to become a housewife. It was not in itself a term of abuse, and even in the nineteenth century had not acquired the pejorative overtones associated with it use today. But even as it was being accepted into the
language as the precise, uncoloured synonym for 'unmarried women', the role itself was coloured with prejudice, and the expression 'old maid' replaced it in common use, conveying society's opprobrium for its spinster members. In the eighteenth century the standing of unmarried women had already sunk so low that when it came to recognising the exceptional achievements of ladies like Miss Hannah More, their laudators bestowed upon them the courtesy title of 'Mrs', the highest honour they could confer on people who would probably never have achieved anything to warrant public notice had they won the title in the usual way. This practice was occasionally followed in the nineteenth century, as with Harriet Martineau, for instance.

The unmarried woman was generally referred to as 'poor Mary' or 'poor Miss Smith'; she was 'unfortunate'; she had 'missed out'; she was 'on the shelf'. 'Nothing is more reliable than the irritability of all references to prolonged virginity: behind us, and undoubtedly before us, stretch infinite tracts of abuse of maiden ladies, old maids, schoolmaids, dried-up spinsters, etc., etc.,' observed Mary Illmann. A single woman with intellectual interests was branded a 'bluestocking', the implication being that she was unfeminine and unmarriageable; and even Mrs Gaskell's heroine Molly in Wives and Daughters (1866), who was more
independent than most Victorian girls, would 'rather be a
dunce that a blue-stocking'. Literature betrayed the same bias. Spinsters (excluding nubile young girls) were, like peasants, rarely the heroines of novels. 'A pretty, witty, charming girl must not be left single or all is not well in the world of romance,' wrote Margery Fry. Novels closed almost obligatorily upon a wedding scene, the heroine set to live happily ever after as wife and mother. Fiction was an especially influential medium through which to perpetuate a convention and propagate an ideal, often wishful thinking, since as an art form it was not required to be scrupulously realistic. Meanwhile on the outskirts of the plot hovered the inevitable old maid or two, moulded in easily perceived caricature, whose idiosyncracies stood out in nice relief against the virtues and attractions the story's leading ladies.

But some things were more galling than names and caricatures. Pity - with its inference of condescension - was one. 'The happiest and busiest spinster in the world, if compassioned for her lot by a woman bound to a tedious husband and a family of troublesome children, will find that the integrity of her bliss has suffered some damage,' Margaret Bateson pointed out. The spinster was commiserated for her loneliness, her poverty, her limited social life, as
If these were the inevitable penalties of her lot, and her
lot alone, until she came to believe in them herself, and
began to act accordingly — as she was expected to do. A
lady prominent in the educational world was heard to express
horror at the sight of a pretty tea-set in a young
spinster's rooms: it suggested 'hedonic images' utterly
foreign to her concept of the maiden lot'.

It followed that no woman was single by choice. 'There
is no woman, from the humblest to the highest, who has not
had her dream of a heart she might indeed call her own, of a
home, and a husband, each like the altar and the gift upon
it, endearing and sanctifying the other,' asserted the
author of 'Our Single Women', herself a spinster. 'How
universally is it the language of society to maintain that
no lady willingly remains single.' exclaimed Catherine
Sinclair's Jane Bouverie (1846). But the single life had
not been without its advocates in history, even excluding
those with religious vocations who were in a sense,
'married' to Christ. 'Unlit she goeth, and alone,' wrote
Euripides of the single woman; but like the Victorians he
forgot, what was written elsewhere that 'He travels fastest
who travels alone'. Francis Bacon spoke not only for his
own sex when, in an essay 'Of Marriage and the Single Life',
he declared a preference for his own calling, upon the
simple ground of liberty. Queen Elizabeth I told Lord Sussex that she hated the idea of marriage, without ever divulging the reason. Frances Power Cobbe turned up a quaint little seventeenth-century treatise called 'How to be Happy though Married', whose tenets nonetheless Miss Cobbe did not herself put to the test. Mary Astell wrote A Serious Proposal to the Ladies in 1694 and in 1739 another lady produced A New Method for Making Women as Useful and as Capable of Maintaining Themselves as the Men are and consequently preventing their becoming Old Maids or Taking Ill Courses.

In the eighteenth century the bluestocking ladies who met to discuss matters of art and literature, often in the company of men, contended that marriage was not the only possible career for women, and so paved the way for the emancipation through education of their fellows a century later. William Hayley published a Philosophical, Historical and Moral Essay on Old Maids in 1785 and Mary Wollstonecraft Vindication of the Rights of Women followed in 1792. Spinsters of that age who made original contributions to posterity included the writers Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth; Dorothy Wordsworth and Caroline Herschel rendered invaluable service to greater brothers; Harriet Boudler wrote a novel pleading the cause of old maids.
Eleanor Butler chose to flee into peaceful retirement in the Vale of Llangollen with her friend Sarah Ponsonby where, in her role as a self-confessed old maid she wrote her Hymn to Diana:

From the scorn of the young, and the flouts of the gay,  
From all the trite ridicule rattled away  
By the pert ones who know nothing better to say,  
Oh a spirit to laugh at them give her.

On the principle that 'It is better to increase life than to multiply it' some intelligent people demonstrated an unnatural antipathy towards parenthood. Seeing a mother-to-be, Jane Austen exclaimed: 'Poor woman. How can she be honestly breeding again.' Deferring to convention, Miss Austen married off all her heroines, but did not succumb herself. The essayist Charles Lamb, who lived in contented bachelorhood with his spinster sister Mary, complained of the 'excessive airs' which married people gave themselves in the company of their unmarried friends.

We will allow them to understand the mysteries belonging to their own craft better than we, who have not had the happiness to be made free of the company: but their arrogance is not content within these limits. If a single person presume to offer his opinion in their presence, though upon the most indifferent subject, he is immediately silenced as an incompetent person.

The disadvantages of the single life did not end there. Dredging round for further evidence of the superiority of marriage, Victorian scholars came up with the information...
that married women enjoyed longer lives than the unmarried (at least once they passed the age of childbearing), that they had better health, and that the greatest number of criminal offences committed by women were attributable to unmarried or divorced ones, 'thus proving that a woman needs the support, the coherence of family life, and is more likely to be led astray under circumstances of isolation'.

They might equally have pointed out that by far the greatest number of prostitutes were single women and that moral factors were not the only ones involved.

The most effective form of discrimination against spinsters was the system of education accorded to Victorian girls. A contemporary writer reported that the girl who asked her parents and teachers, 'What am I created for? Of what use am I to be in the world?' received the succinct reply, 'You must marry some day. Women were made for men. Your use is to bear children, to keep your home comfortable for your husband. In marriage is the only respectable life for woman.' The education of middle-class girls was simply a training for this vocation. The course of study therefore related directly to men. In suggesting that girls should learn more or less the same subject as boys, John Ruskin thought himself very liberal and progressive; but their respective upbringings were still to be quite
speaking broadly, a man ought to know any language of science he learns, thoroughly - while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends.

This was the principle; in practice the emphasis was somewhat different. Mrs Grey attacked the 'pretty theory' that girls were educated to be wives and mothers in a paper given before the Society of Arts in 1871. 'They are not educated to be wives, but to get husbands,' she declared, and added that those who were successful under this system generally made the worst wives, equal victims with the unsuccessful of a perniciously incomplete and biased upbringing.

But girls and their mothers acted on the principle that the risk of marriage, even where the conditions were indifferent, were less to be dreaded than a life of lonely spinsterhood. The naive heroine of Miss Jewsbury's novel The Half Sisters (1848) wondered what would happen should a bride discover she loved someone more than her husband, or if, having married for money rather than love, her husband should lose all his money in business. Her mother was appalled that the very notions - 'shocking' and 'depraved' as she called them - should have entered Alice's head.

'When you are married it will be your duty to love your
husband more than any one else in the world; and no young woman with a well-regulated mind ever thinks of doing otherwise.' 'But why must I marry at all?' asked Alice. 'For what else do women come into the world,' replied her mother, 'but to be good wives?' She went on:

Poor profitless, forlorn creatures they are, when they live single and get to be old; unless indeed they are rich enough to keep up an establishment, with a parcel of dogs and cats and parrots. Depend upon it, Alice, if a young woman is lucky enough to be married to a steady, respectable young man, it is the best thing that can happen to her; and then she is something in the world.

Alice accepted this judgement and made a marriage which was not conspicuously successful. Her creator Geraldine Jewsbury was content to remain single.58

For the young women who were convinced they were on the shelf at twenty-five, a variety of periodicals, newspapers, novels and manuals of etiquette provided no dearth of instruction and advice. The 'Young Widow' who produced How to Get Married although a Woman; or, The Art of Pleasing Men was wide awake to the problems of superfluous women in her society. She believed that any girl could marry if she wished. If she missed out, the fault was her own. Certain rules had to be observed in the marriage game: 'A man,' the lady explained, 'likes to look, as it were, in a mirror. He likes to see himself reflected in the eyes that meet his...

... I is a man's pronoun. You is a woman's.'59
When all else failed, an advertisement placed in some periodical such as the Matrimonial Times, and Matrimonial Advertiser might bring results. But it was to be feared that too many notices were inserted by girls like Kate, aged 23: 'She has no fortune, and nothing but a loving heart to offer, and would make a good man a loving wife.' This lady's prospects could not be rated good.

The laws and customs of Victorian society, its education system and public opinion all enforced and reinforced the principle that women were made for marriage. Spinsterhood, according to this definition, was an unfortunate mischance, a poor second best, never chosen, never planned for, a degraded and unalleviated condition. Common sense tells us that the definition must have been inappropriate for at least some unmarried women, comprising as they did one-third of the adult female population. The facts confirm this impression. Many notable writers, educators, business and professional people and feminists came out of the ranks of Victorian spinsters; and many forgotten women too who, happy in the careers they adopted by choice or by chance, belied the stereotype that other people invented to keep them in their place. Florence Nightingale was not the only Victorian woman who refused to give herself in marriage, preferring the single life.
Yet despite the great changes in the situation of middle-class women over the Victorian period, the ideals did not change much. Millions of women spent a lifetime oppressed by the knowledge that marriage was their only respectable destiny and that, should any of them remain single, the fault lay not with the institutions of society but with the individual herself.

Married life is a woman's profession, and to this life her training - that of dependence - is modelled. Of course by not getting a husband, or by losing him, she may find that she is without resources. All that can be said of her is she has failed in business and no social reform can prevent such failures.62

Victorian spinsters could look for no consolation here.
NOTES

1. John Le Breton (i.e. M. Harriet Potts and T. Murray Ford), Miss Tudor (London 1897) pp42-3.

2. (Mrs Craik), A Woman's Thoughts about Women (London 1858) p 2. Eliza Lynn Linton, Ourselves (London 2nd ed. 1870) p 60.

3. Census of 1901.


5. Lydia Becker, Words of a Leader (Bristol 1897) p 6.


11. Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (London) 1966 p 265.
15. (Dora Greenwell), 'Our Single Women' in the North British Review XXXVI (1862) p 62.
19. Matthew 19: 10-2 (New English Bible)
21. (Nightingale), Suggestions for Thought ... II, p 232.
23. I Corinthians 7:34, 28. (New English Bible)
35. John Langdon Davies, quoted Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth 1945) p 110 (1928); and see John Langdon Davies, *A Short History of Women* (London
1928).


38. Mrs Gaskell, Wives and Daughters (London 1907) p 241 (1866).


40. Margaret Bateson, Professional Women Upon their Professions (London 1895) p. 130.

41. ibid p 132.

42. (Greenwell), 'Our Single Women' in the North British Review XXXVI (1862) p 6


45. Francis Bacon, 'Of Marriage and the Single Life' in *Essays* (London 1906) p 23


47. (F.P. Cobb) 'Celibacy v. Marriage' in *Fraser's Magazine* LXV (1862) p 228.


49. (Hamley) 'Old Maids' in *Blackwood's Magazine* CXII (1872), p 103.


57. Maria Grey, 'The Education of Women' reported in the *Women's Suffrage Journal* II (1871) p 88.


59. 'A Young Widow', *How to Get Married Although a Woman* (N.Y. 1892) pp 21-31.


61. For further information on this subject see my Ph.D thesis *Victorian Spinsters* (A.N.U. 1975).

62. 'Queen Bees or Working Bees' in the *Saturday Review*, 12 Nov 1859, p 575.