HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

GOLDEN AGE TO SEPARATE SPHERES? A REVIEW OF THE CATEGORIES AND CHRONOLOGY OF ENGLISH WOMEN’S HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT. Two very powerful stories structure the history of the changing roles of English women. The tale of the nineteenth-century separation of the spheres of public power and private domesticity relates principally to the experience of middle-class women. The other story, emerging from early modern scholarship, recounts the social and economic marginalization of propertied women and the degradation of working women as a consequence of capitalism. Both narratives echo each other in important ways, although strangely the capacity of women’s history to repeat itself is rarely openly discussed. This paper critically reviews the two historiographies in order to open debate on the basic categories and chronologies we employ in discussing the experience, power and identity of women in past time.

I

‘Public and private’, ‘separate spheres’, and ‘domesticity’ are key words and phrases of academic feminism. The dialectical polarity between home and world is an ancient trope of western writing; the notion that women were uniquely fashioned for the private realm is at least as old as Aristotle. But the systematic use of ‘separate spheres’ as the organizing concept in the history of middle-class women is of more recent vintage. Formative for American feminist historians in the 1960s and 1970s was the idea that gender oppression, the experience of sisterhood and a feminist consciousness have a natural, evolving relationship. Resulting studies undertook a quasi-marxist search for this developing consciousness. Nineteenth-century advice books, women’s magazines, evangelical sermons and social criticism provided chapter and verse on the bonds of womanhood at their most elaborate, although such literature was prescriptive rather

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than descriptive in any simple sense. Thus a particularly crippling ideology of virtuous femininity was identified as newly-constructed in the early to mid-nineteenth century. What Barbara Welter dubbed the 'cult of true womanhood' prescribed the attributes of the proper American female between 1820 and 1860. She was to be pious, pure, submissive and domesticated, for the true woman turned her home into a haven for all that was civilized and spiritual in a materialistic world. The assumption that capitalist man needed a hostage in the home was endorsed by subsequent historians who linked the cult of true womanhood to a shrinkage of political, professional and business opportunities for women in the years 1800–40. In this way, the glorification of domestic womanhood became associated with the deterioration of women's public power, which was itself presented as a function of industrialization. Consequently, the early nineteenth century assumed its present status as one of the key, constitutive periods in the history of gender.

With the publication of Nancy Cott’s influential study of early industrial New England, the history of woman’s sphere became even more closely fused to a narrative of economic change. Cott related the formation of separate gender spheres: the private sphere of female domesticity and the public sphere of male work, association and politics to the emergence of modern industrial work patterns between 1780 and 1835 and, by implication, to the dominance of the middle class and its ideals. But it was not until the appearance in 1981 of Mary Ryan’s study of the family in Oneida County, New York, between 1790 and 1865, that a story of class-making was brought to the narrative forefront. Ryan’s central hypothesis was the notion that ‘early in the nineteenth century the American middle class moulded its distinctive identity around domestic values and family practices’. Ultimately, therefore, the cult of true domestic womanhood was presented as both a consequence of the rise of the middle class, and a vital component in the reproduction of middle-class collective identity.

In the meantime, the analysis of manuscripts written by middle-class women themselves prompted a more sophisticated understanding of the cult of domesticity. Instances were found of American women using notions of domestic virtue for their own purposes, particularly in the attempt to justify their efforts at moral reformation both within the family and outside the home. Furthermore, it was argued that in accepting the conventional message as to their domestic mission, women saw themselves increasingly as a group with a special destiny and their consciousness of sisterhood was therefore heightened. In other words, the bonds of ‘womanhood bound women together even as it bound them down’. However, life in a separate sphere was not in all senses impoverished, for it was in the private sphere that historians such as Carroll Smith Rosenberg discovered and celebrated a rich women’s culture of sisterly cooperation and emotional intimacy.

5 Ibid. p. 239.
7 For the quotation, see Cott, Bonds, p. 1. But consider also pp. 100 and 197.
Women’s sphere had an essential integrity and dignity that grew out of women’s shared experiences and mutual affection... Most eighteenth and nineteenth-century women lived within a world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting—that endless trooping of women to each others’ homes for social purposes. It was a world inhabited by children and by other women. Women helped each other with domestic chores and in times of sickness, sorrow, or trouble.8

Implicit in Carroll Smith Rosenberg’s account, and explicit in that of Nancy Cott is the theory that the private sphere nurtured a sense of gender-group solidarity which was ultimately expressed in mid-Victorian feminism, a sisterhood which foreshadowed the culture and ideals of the 1970s women’s movement.9 Thus, by now it should be apparent that these various chapters in the history of women can be incorporated into a long positive story, making sense of a swathe of time from the establishment of the first textile mill to the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and beyond. For many, the foregoing elements fused together to create the most powerful and satisfying narrative in modern American women’s history. As Nancy Hewitt regretfully concluded in 1985, despite the fact that Barbara Welter, Nancy Cott and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg all regarded their work ‘as speculative and carefully noted parameters of time, region and class, the true woman/separate spheres/woman’s culture triad became the most widely used framework for interpreting women’s past in the United States’.10

Although the foundation of the separate spheres framework was established through a particular reading of didactic and complaint literature, ensuing primary research was rarely designed to test the reliability or significance of this sort of evidence. Many women’s historians neglected to ask the questions posed by early modern family historians: Did the sermonizers have any personal experience of marriage? Did men and women actually conform to prescribed models of authority? Did prescriptive literature contain more than one ideological message? Did women deploy the rhetoric of submission selectively, with irony, or quite cynically? And to quote Keith Wrightson, did ‘theoretical adherence to the doctrine of male authority and public female subordination’ mask ‘the private existence of a strong complementary and companionate ethos.’11 Those modernists who reminded us that ‘the attitudes of ordinary people are quite capable of resisting efforts to reshape or alter them’ had little impact on the development of the field.12 Instead, research confidently built on the

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9 N. A. Hewitt, Beyond the search for sisterhood: American women’s history in the 1980s’, Social History, x (1985), 301. Hewitt’s extensive bibliography is testimony to the remarkably wide currency of these concepts and categories and the extent of uncritical acceptance and repetition. Her analysis of the development of the field is astute and convincing. Consequently, it is all the more surprising that Hewitt herself takes it as read that the interpretation fits the experience of most wealthy, white women, while rejecting this framework for the study of black and non-bourgeois women. The orthodox picture of bourgeois shackles is necessary to Hewitt’s conception of working-class resistance. Working women refused to be taken in by domestic ideology as peddled by middle-class women.
11 C. N. Degler, ‘What ought to be and what was: women’s sexuality in the nineteenth century’, American Historical Review, lxxix (1974), 1490. Another widely cited, but apparently
sands of prescription. The old sources predetermined the questions asked of the new. The process is here illuminated by Nancy Cott describing the evolution of the historical characterization of the ‘woman’s sphere’ from domestic cage, to ambivalent arena of both constraint and opportunity, to the safe haven of a loving female subculture:

The three interpretations primarily derived from three different kind of sources; the first from published didactic literature about woman’s place and the home, the second from the published writings of women authors, and the third from the private documents of non-famous women. It is worth pointing out that the more historians have relied on women’s personal documents the more positively they have evaluated woman’s sphere.13

However different these successive interpretations might seem, the conceptual importance of a constraining ‘women’s sphere’ is constant. Rather than conclude from positive female testimony that women were not necessarily imprisoned in a rigidly defined private sphere, the dominant interpretation simply sees the private sphere in a better light. Moreover, the assumption prevails that it is helpful and appropriate to examine culture and society in terms of intrinsically male and female spheres.

And indeed the dichotomy between the home and the world continued to structure the bulk of work on nineteenth-century American women until the mid to late 1980s. Recently, however, crucial criticisms of the American historiography have been offered by Linda Kerber, leading her to ask ‘why speak of worlds, realms, spheres at all?’ and American research now in progress seems more sceptical in its approach.14 Yet this interpretive tradition was by no means restricted to American women’s history, having predetermined the way historians have conceptualized the experience of middle-class women in England.16 And as British historians were slower to elaborate this conceptual framework, so now they are slower to abandon it.

Of course, elements of the interpretations were hardly new in British historiography. After all, in popular understanding ‘Victorian’ has long served as a general synonym for oppressive domesticity and repressive prudery. But more specifically, as early as the 1940s and 1950s cultural historians such as Walter Houghton, Maurice Quinlan and

unheeded, article has stressed the possible difference between what a woman was told to do, what she thought she was doing and what she actually did.; J. Mechling, ‘Advice to historians on advice to mothers’, Journal of Social History, ix (1979), 44–63. 13 Cott, Bonds, p. 197.

14 L. Kerber, ‘Separate sphere, female worlds, woman’s place: the rhetoric of women’s history’, Journal of American History, lxxv (1988), 9–39. The implications for future research were raised by L. Kerber, N. Cott, R. Gross, L. Hunt, C. Smith-Rosenberg, C. M. Stansell, ‘Forum. Beyond roles, beyond spheres: thinking about gender in the early republic’, William and Mary Quarterly, xlvi (1989), 565–85. The burden of Kerber’s argument is that we should regard ‘separate spheres’ primarily as a rhetorical device, which people called upon to express power relations for which they had no other words. However, she thinks we should not regard ‘separate spheres’ as a satisfactory explanatory framework, since it obscures a great deal more than it illuminates and its continued use prevents us from moving on to more satisfying analyses. ‘To continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships’ (pp. 37–9). My argument endorses Kerber’s at certain key points, although Kerber is primarily concerned with language and discursive strategies, while I have a greater interest in social and economic history and want to retain a focus on female behaviour. Obviously, my piece also differs from hers in its focus on England and in its preoccupation with chronologies of change from 1700 to 1900.

15 The argument has its analogue for working-class women in the debates around the rise of the male breadwinner and the family wage, however for reasons of space this material has not been discussed. A summary of the debate can be found in E. Roberts, Women’s work, 1840–1930 (Basingstoke, 1988).
Muriel Jaeger had seen the assertion of a new model of femininity as a central component in the rise of Victorianism— a shift in standards and behaviour which Quinlan and Jaeger saw in process from the closing decades of the eighteenth century. ¹⁶ Using the same sources (the sanctimonious novels and sermons of Evangelicals like Hannah More, Mrs Sherwood and Mrs Trimmer, the didactic manuals of Sarah Stickney Ellis and her ilk, and the sentimental or chivalric fantasies of Coventry Patmore, John Ruskin, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and so on), a younger generation of women’s historians told essentially the same story but with greater rhetorical flourish, arguing that a new ideology of ultra-femininity and domesticity had triumphed by the mid-Victorian period. The first studies painted a highly-charged picture of the typical woman of the nineteenth-century middle class. A near prisoner in the home, Mrs Average led a sheltered life drained of economic purpose and public responsibility. As her physicality was cramped by custom, corset and crinoline, she was often a delicate creature who was, at best, conspicuously in need of masculine protection and, at worst, prey to invalidism. And yet she abjured self-indulgence, being ever-attentive and subservient to the needs of her family. Only in her matronly virtue and radiant Christianity did she exercise a mild authority over her immediate circle. She was immured in the private sphere and would not escape till feminism released her.¹⁷

Thereafter, the rise of the ideology of domesticity was linked, as in the American case, to the emergence of middle-class cultural identity. It was separate gender spheres which allegedly put the middle in the middle-class.

Definitions of masculinity and femininity played an important part in marking out the middle class, separating it off from other classes and creating strong links between disparate groups within that class—Nonconformists and Anglicans, radicals and conservatives, the richer bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie. The separation between the sexes was marked out at every level within the society in manufacturing, the retail trades and the professions, in public life of all kinds, in the churches in the press and in the home. The separation of spheres was one of the fundamental organizing characteristics of middle-class society in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England.¹⁸


Of course, as organizing characteristics go, class had long been seen as central to history of nineteenth-century England. In adding gender to the picture of class society, historians of women confirmed a vision of the past shared by most social historians in England in the 1960s and 1970s. And indeed class was to remain a more powerful category in English women’s history than in its American counterpart, and as a result the notion of a universal sisterhood which triumphantly bridged the gulf between mistress and servant, prosperous philanthropist and poor recipient never took a firm hold in English historiography.

Less pronounced in the English literature than in the American was the argument that life in a confined sphere could be emotionally enriching for early Victorian women, although there is some work on the support networks and intense friendships of late Victorian rebels. However, the argument that women in prosperous families were robbed of economic and political function and incarcerated in a separate private sphere in the early years of the century came to serve as useful prelude to accounts of feminist assault on public institutions in the later period. Implicit and sometimes explicit in such accounts was the assumption that the private sphere operated as a pressure cooker generating pent-up frustrations which eventually exploded as mass female politics. Revealingly, the first significant history of the English women’s movement, written by the activist Ray Strachey in 1928, had opening chapters entitled: ‘The prison house of home, 1792–1837’, ‘The stirring of discontent, 1837–1850’, ‘The widening circle, 1837–1850’ and ‘The demand formulated, 1850–1857’.

As Ray Strachey’s subtitles suggest, support for the argument that feminism was a reaction to a new regime of domestic incarceration was found in the protests of the late Victorian and Edwardian feminists themselves. Many of them called from the soap-box for a female invasion of the male public sphere and used metaphors of confinement, restriction, stunting and belittlement to convey the frustrations of their girlhoods. The literary children of the Victorians, such as Vera Brittain and Virginia Woolf, who penned graphic portraits of stuffy parental mores, have also lent useful support to the familiar account of nineteenth-century women languishing or raging within an upholstered cage. Of course, in their efforts to debunk the reputation of the preceding generation, female critics were not alone. Convinced that they had thrown off the fetters of the nineteenth century (a conviction that became even more pronounced after the Great War), several early twentieth-century rebels turned a scathing eye on their parents’ shortcomings, and thus it is to the likes of Lytton Strachey, Samuel Butler, Edmund Gosse and so on that we owe the enduring caricature of the hidebound and home-loving Victorians.


The problems such portraits present to historians are glimpsed in a telling comparison by Carol Dyhouse. She observes that Vera Brittain’s retrospective autobiography written in 1933 attributes much more pent-up frustration to her younger self growing up in Edwardian Buxton,
Buttressed therefore by three types of evidence – didactic literature, contemporary feminist debate and post-Victorian denunciations – the separate spheres framework has come to constitute one of the fundamental organizing categories, if not the organizing category of modern British women’s history. Moreover, through the medium of women’s studies, the orthodoxy has been communicated to adjacent disciplines, where ‘public and private’, ‘separate spheres’, and ‘domesticity’ are rapidly becoming unquestioned key words.24

Of course, interpretations have developed over time. Proponents of the British separate spheres framework have revised many of their early generalizations. Sceptics have debated particular aspects of the framework, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Most are now at pains to present women as sentient, capable beings rather than as passive victims, emphasizing the ways in which women shaped their own lives within a male-dominated culture. The Angel-in-the-House model of Victorian ladyhood has proved most vulnerable to criticism. Using household manuals aimed at the lower middle-class wife managing on about £200 a year, Patricia Branca contested the representativeness of the pure and passive stereotype. Only prosperous upper middle-class ladies, she argued, idly received callers and supervised staff with cool aplomb. The vast majority of middle-class housewives coped with heavy housework and quarrelsome servants, while simultaneously struggling with the nervous art of creative accounting.26 Meanwhile, using the manuscripts of the wealthy, professional Paget family, Jeanne Peterson disputed the usefulness of the model for even the privileged few.

According to the received wisdom, Victorian ladies cared for nothing but homes and families, their education was ‘decorative adornment’ and they submitted to fathers and husbands. Three generations of Paget women do not conform to this. Their education was more than decorative, their relationship to money less distant than we thought, their physical lives more vigorous, expansive and sensual than either scholars today or some Victorians have led us to believe.26 The breathless inadequacy model of bourgeois femininity has also been questioned in studies of intrepid emigrants, formidable travellers and driven philanthropists. Feeble females would simply not have been capable of the courageous enterprise and


conscientious administration that recent work reveals. In fact, as Pat Thane has astutely argued, it is actually rather difficult to reconcile the 'strong sense of social responsibility, purpose and commitment to hard work with which Victorians of both sexes and all classes were socialized' with the conventional story of increasing female passivity.

In fact, where historians have researched the activities of particular individuals and groups, rather than the contemporary social theories which allegedly hobbled them, Victorian women emerge as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century. Not that diversity should surprise us. Early modern family historians have long stressed the unique role of character and circumstance in shaping a woman's freedom of manoeuvre in marriage. Assuredly, stern patriarchs sometimes married biddable girls, but by the same token strong women sometimes married weak men. Martin Pugh, for example, in an analysis of four elite Victorian marriages, duke and duchess of Marlborough, Lord and Lady Londonderry, the earl and countess of Jersey, and Lord and Lady Knightley, observes: 'each of these husband and wife teams included a partner who tended to be home-loving, unambitious and easily exhausted by the stress of public life; in every case it was the male'. As women in the past have varied in strong-mindedness and the ability to exert influence, so brains, force of character and a lofty indifference to persuasion have not been equally distributed amongst the male population – a fact which novelists have noted even if historians have not:

The theory of man and wife – that special theory in accordance with which the wife is to bend herself in loving submission before her husband is very beautiful; and would be good altogether if it could only be arranged that the husband should be the stronger and greater of the two. The theory is based upon that hypothesis and the hypothesis sometimes fails of confirmation.

The endless permutations in matrimonial power relations that can result from the accidents of circumstance and character have led some scholars to argue for the unpredictable variety of private experience, in any given period, whatever the dominant ideology. But even if we reject such extreme particularism, the history of ideas tell us that in every era alternative 'ideologies' are usually on offer. Another look at Victorian sexual debate, for instance, reveals it may not have been so universally

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30 Tosh, 'Domesticity and manliness', pp. 50–1.

31 M. Pugh, *The toires and the people*, 1880–1935 (Oxford, 1985), p. 48. He concludes that 'the stereotyped view of men who go boldly out into the world and women who love to stay at home disintegrates upon close examination of several late Victorian marriages'.


33 This conclusion is expressed most forcibly by Larminie, 'Marriage and the family', p. 18.
'Victorian' as we have been led to believe. Wherever angelic uniformity was to be found, it was not in Victorian sitting rooms, despite the dreams of certain poets, wistful housewives, and ladies' advice books.

Most historians now concede that few women actually lived up to the fantasies of Ruskin and Patmore, but still differ as to how seriously the Victorians took their didactic medicine. Martha Vicinus, for instance, reflects that if 'nineteenth-century women were not always the passive, submissive and pure creatures of popular idealizations...neither were they completely free from this stereotype'. However, much recent scholarship has refused to see the domestic ideal as a force which, in and of itself, severely limited a woman's freedom of manoeuvre. Most vehement in this vein is Jeanne Peterson, who concludes that the ideal of the domesticated Madonna was simply an irrelevance in upper middle-class households. The imposition of such a constraining behavioural model, she suspects, would have made rebellious New Women of an entire generation. 'Instead the freedom, the adaptability, the choices inherent in genteel family life laid the basis for a profound conservatism.' In parallel, Martin Pugh's study of aristocratic women and conservative politics signals the important possibility that ladies paid only lip-service to formal subservience in order to spare their husband's flimsy egos or perhaps the censure of posterity. Certainly, the memoirs of many late Victorian female politicians seem contrived to convey a suitably unthreatening picture of satisfied maternity and genteel leisure, so much so that they sometimes contain no reference whatsoever to a customary gruelling work-load of canvassing, committees and public speaking which can be substantiated from other sources. Similarly, a thorough conversance with conservative assessments of woman's proper place (worried over in her diary) failed to keep Lady Charlotte Guest from translating the Mabinogian from medieval Welsh and managing the Dowlais iron works after her husband's death, while simultaneously mothering her ten children. Of course, these particular examples are culled from the records of the socially exalted, who were better placed than most to flout convention or indulge exciting enthusiasms if they chose, nevertheless their experience still serves to remind us of the elementary, but crucial, point that women, like men, were eminently capable of professing one thing and performing quite another. Just because a volume of domestic advice sat on a woman's desk, it does not follow that she took its strictures to heart, or whatever her intentions managed to live her life according to its precepts.

Nevertheless, faith in the constitutive power of domestic precepts still lingers in the explanation of the achievements of mid-Victorian heroines. The heroic narrative assumes that a model of domestic femininity was actively imposed on women, who experienced feelings of entrapment of such strength that they were led fiercely to resist

34 Consider, F. B. Smith, 'Sexuality in Britain, 1800–1900: some suggested revisions', in M. Vicinus (ed.), A widening sphere: changing roles of Victorian women (Bloomington, Indiana, 1977), pp. 182–98. 35 M. Vicinus, 'Introduction', in M. Vicinus (ed.), A widening sphere, p. xix. 36 Peterson, 'No angels', p. 708. 37 Pugh, Tories and the people, p. 47. 38 See R. Guest and A. John, Lady Charlotte: a biography of the nineteenth century (1989). This study reproduces some of the very few instances I have ever seen of a woman actually debating with herself over domestic duty. Charlotte Guest sometimes claimed to be 'quite careless of all but matters of domestic solicitude' or recorded that 'to remain in quiet and undisturbed pursuance of my duties is now my only wish' (p. 33). However, as the authors shrewdly point out, these pious statements 'almost invariably followed a particularly active period of literary or business activity and were at the same time one way of adjusting to the fact that she was about to produce yet another child.' Perhaps, therefore, it will be focused studies like this which will help us assess the interaction of conventional lip-service and 'unconventional' behaviour in the future.
their containment, resulting in a glorious escape from the private sphere. To be sure, extraordinary women like Florence Nightingale have left passionate writings which ask us to see public heroism as an inevitable reaction to a previous period of mind-numbing cloistralion. However, while Nightingale felt her early career aspirations cruelly thwarted, she herself had been taught Latin and Greek by her father, and was expected to engage in a ceaseless round of good works and charitable visiting in young adulthood. Although Nightingale undoubtedly lacked scope for her great ambitions, she was hardly locked in the parlour with nothing but advice books for nourishment.

The power of domestic ideology as a catalyst is an implicit argument in Jane Rendall’s thoughtful micro-study of female aspirations and activity amongst the fortunate. As young women in the 1840s and 50s, Bessie Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith both resented and complained of their limited horizons. By extension, Rendall implies that their subsequent formidable careers as managers, campaigners, essayists, travellers and energetic participants in radical and bohemian London society should be seen as a reaction to this stultifying containment, rather than evidence that domestic prescripts had limited purchase in certain circles. Interestingly, however, both Parkes and Leigh Smith, like many of their confederates in the Victorian women’s movement, hailed from radical political backgrounds. Of course, the importance of the radical inheritance has long been acknowledged (and not least by Rendall), yet few have reflected on the possibility that equal rights feminism was less a reflex response to a newly imposed model of stifling passivity, than the fruition of a political tradition. Privileged women saw social and political freedoms newly won by their fathers and brothers, while their own rights as citizens languished. Liberal feminists borrowed the rhetoric of unjust exclusion and applied it to their own case. But a feminist consciousness of educational disadvantage, virtually non-existent career structure, and exclusion from the major institutions of state is not, in itself, proof that the majority of women in comfortable households had no engagement with the world outside their front door. Nor, when exploring the question of causation and chronology, need a

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39 See Florence Nightingale, Cassandra, republished in Ray Strachey, The cause.


42 In a similar vein, Sally Alexander has reflected that ‘the emergence of mass female politics is often attributed to the effects of the industrial revolution and the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie. The former by separating work and home, the latter by instilling ideas of domesticity among the working classes, allocated women to the private and public domains respectively. But we come closer to the terrain of feminist grievance and capture a decisive moment in its political temporality if we examine the forms of working-class politics themselves in the 1830s and 40s, and their language of demand and aspiration.’ See S. Alexander, ‘Women, class and sexual differences in the 1830s and 40s: some reflections on the writing of a feminist history’, History Workshop Journal, xviii (1984), 130.
flowering of female politics be read as evidence that the preceding years had witnessed the social internment of middle-class women.

In consequence of recent work both theoretical and empirical, doubts now circulate within women's history about the conceptual usefulness of the separate spheres framework. As Jane Lewis remarked in 1986: 'while such a separation of spheres appears to fit the recent historical experience of western women well, anthropologists have found, first that the dichotomy conflates too easily with public/private and reproduction to be a useful conceptual tool and second that it has more descriptive than analytical power'.

But despite the dissenting voices, the questions, focus and chronology of the separate spheres framework still holds an uneasy sway. At conferences and seminars, participants raise queries and criticisms, while defendants of 'separate spheres' acknowledge the weaknesses of many aspects of the framework, yet still 'separate spheres' is believed to be of central importance in the history of nineteenth-century women and remains the model taught to students. To add to the confusion, the vocabulary of separate spheres also overlaps with that deployed by political historians to rather different ends; specifically, in the argument that the eighteenth century saw the creation, through the market in print, of a public sphere of politics, in contrast to the previously closed political world of Westminster and the royal court. A major study by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall has tried to take account of recent doubt and debate, but still asserts the historical significance of the ideology of separate spheres. As a result, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class* offers the most complex use of separate spheres as an organizing concept to date. Indeed, many see the book as the last word on the subject. Unquestionably, therefore, a landmark of English women's history, *Family fortunes* is an appropriate focus of detailed critical attention.

The explicit aim of *Family fortunes* is to insert an awareness of the constitutive role of gender into the main agenda of social and historical analysis. This is achieved by bringing the analysis of gender relations to bear on the question of mid-Victorian class formation. To this end, *Family fortunes* offers an account of the economic, associational, religious and domestic lives of middle-class families in Birmingham, Essex and Suffolk, between the years 1780 and 1850. And indeed the study impresses as a massively detailed and richly elaborated account of gender relations in a certain religious and institutional milieu. It offers much invaluable illumination of the complexities which lie beneath the stereotypes: the hidden investment of female knowledge, labour and capital in apparently male-only enterprises; the varying organization of the different churches and religious associations which offered women a place, albeit circumscribed; the role of wider kin in the life of the supposedly intensely nuclear bourgeois family; and the contradictory nature of middle-class taste and aspiration – even in the papers of the pious families studied, the scandalous Lord Byron was cited almost as often as...
the unexceptionable William Cowper and Hannah More. If anything, however, the
richness and singularity of the picture Davidoff and Hall reconstruct refuses the general
structure they seek to impose. The picture still stands although the claims they make
for it, in my opinion, do not. In brief, they argue that gender played a crucial role in
the structuring of an emergent, provincial, middle-class culture, for it was the ideology
of domesticity and separate gender spheres which gave distinctive form to middle-class
identity. Yet this claim rests upon a series of problematic assumptions which must be
explored if women’s historians are truly to assess the usefulness of the modified separate
spheres framework and to build on the research of Davidoff and Hall in creative ways.

First and foremost, Family fortunes rests on the conviction that a class society emerged
between 1780 and 1850. For many historians of women, E. P. Thompson’s inspirational
masterpiece, The making of the English working class celebrated the making of a class with
the women left out. Family fortunes, by contrast, presents the making of the middle class
with women and the family emphatically in the spotlight. Without reference to the
ever-growing literature on the culture and consequence of the early-modern middling
sort, Davidoff and Hall assert that the provincial middle class took shape in the late
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Set apart from aristocracy and gentry by
virtue of evangelized religion, a domestic value-system and non-landed wealth, the
middle classes experienced a ‘growing desire for independence from the clientage of
landed wealth and power’ which culminated in the political incorporation of the first
reform act. Despite internal differences in income and outlook, the nineteenth-century
middle class were bound together by a distinctive culture; moderate, rational and
commercial, but above all moral and domesticated. These cultural values stood in
marked contrast to the lavish and licentious mores of the aristocracy and gentry,
although eventually the middle-class world view would become ‘the triumphant
common sense of the Victorian age’.47

This account, however, begs many questions. The last decade has witnessed a
massive rethinking of Marxian categories and narratives, particularly in the context of
early nineteenth-century England.48 Yet despite all the recent scholarship, both
theoretical and empirical, the old theories about class-making remain fundamental to
Family fortunes, and surprisingly are not open to debate. Their picture of a mid-
Victorian bourgeois triumph does not account for new research and novel
interpretations. Nineteenth-century historians have re-emphasized the resilience of
landed power in government, economy and society, the strength of vertical allegiances
up and down the social structure as a whole, and the internal divisions among the
commercial classes themselves.49 Meanwhile seventeenth and eighteenth-century
historians might ask what was so novel about men of middling wealth enjoying both

47 Ibid. p. 28.
48 The modern historical vision of class making through the interaction of radical politics and
economic transformation was set forth by E. P. Thompson, The making of the English working class,
(1963), and held sway for almost 20 years. However, many historians have been doubtful about
the relationship between the sociology of class and the language of politics: a scepticism which has
been particularly pronounced since the publication of G. Stedman Jones, ‘Rethinking chartism’
90–178. Attempts to defend the conventional class project include, N. Kirk, ‘In defence of class:
a critique of recent writing on the nineteenth-century English working class’, International Review
49 For a readable synthesis of recent scholarship, consult F. M. L. Thompson, The rise of
political power in urban institutions and a sense of moral purpose from a cozy home life. And indeed exactly how and why the transition from a ‘middling sort’ to the archetypal ‘middle class’ is made between 1688 and 1850 has not yet been elucidated.

Although concerned to assert the distinctiveness of middle-class culture, Davidoff and Hall’s research was not designed to test the extent to which the posited ‘middle-class values’ were shared by provincial gentry or, for that matter, by urban artisans. An untested assumption throughout is the vitality of an oppositional culture of commerce versus land. Thus the pious, domesticated burgher is contrasted with the profligate, indiscreet aristocrat. While some aristocrats may have conformed to the melodramatic stereotype, recent scholarship tends to stress the canny commercialism and social restraint of noble land-owners. But, in any case, the vast majority of untitled landed gentlemen were far from fast, loose and raffish. The peerage were few and exceptional (only 267 families in 1800), while the gentry were legion and cautious. Despite their enormous numbers, the role of the lesser gentry in the epic battle of commercial versus gentle mores is virtually never mentioned. By implication, the gentry can be subsumed into one camp or the other: either they represented the lesser echelons of aristocracy, somehow sharing the world view of noble families with one hundred times their income, or they should be seen as rural rentier bourgeois. In fact, it remains to be seen whether the mid-Victorian gentry differed so markedly in life-style and outlook from wealthier merchants, manufacturers and professionals. Perhaps they shared a common, polite, provincial world far removed from aristocratic licence and the London court. But to be sure, the notion of a cultural chasm yawn ing between an emergent ‘middle class’ and a regressive ‘aristocracy’ is extremely unhelpful in the context of rural, provincial society between 1750 and 1825, however embryonic these formations are supposed to be before Victoria.


51 Davidoff and Hall drew heavily on the then unpublished work of R. J. Morris. This has since appeared as R. J. Morris, \textit{Class, sect and party: the making of the British middle class, Leeds 1820–50} (Manchester, 1990), which stresses the role of voluntary associations, while underestimating their significance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.


53 In ignoring the gentry, Davidoff and Hall are not alone. One of the only historians to address the ambivalent position of the gentry is E. P. Thompson on the ‘agrarian bourgeoisie’, see idem, ‘Eighteenth-century England society: class struggle without class?’, \textit{Social History}, \textbf{3} (1978), 162.
The possible complexities of genteel society in the provinces emerge in my own micro-study of north-east Lancashire between 1750 and 1825. By reading the papers of commercial families in conjunction with, instead of in isolation from, gentry collections, an altogether neglected aspect of the pyramid of local society is revealed. In social and administrative terms, this part of Lancashire was dominated by landed gentry, professional and commercial families – a local elite who exhibited considerable cohesion. The menfolk of these families served together on local turnpike commissions and were listed side by side on the commissions of the peace for Lancashire and Yorkshire. They employed between 5 and 8 servants, and most of their households were sufficiently unassuming to escape the tax on male servants levied in 1777. In addition to their shared role in administration, landed gentlemen, professional gentlemen and gentlemen merchants stood shoulder to shoulder on the grouse moor and river bank. They combined for hearty, exclusively male meals, notably pre-expeditionary breakfasts and formal dinners at local inns. Meanwhile, their wives exchanged information on child-bearing and child-rearing, servants, prices, fashions, recipes and remedies. Whole families encountered each other at dinner parties and ate off similar mahogany dining tables; most of these purchased from the same craftsmen, Gillows of Lancaster. Intellectual sympathy across the elite was pronounced. Establishment prejudice, both whig and tory, and unenthusiastic Anglicanism is everywhere apparent. Nevertheless, polite dissenters, such as the gay Quakers of Lancaster, could be absorbed into the elite, since the most significant religious fault-line in the county ran between protestants and catholics, not between Anglicans and dissenters. Possessed of the same intellectual and material culture these families all enjoyed the equipment of gentility. Of course this local elite did not exist in a vacuum. Gentry and professionals were sometimes linked by blood and friendship to the supreme county families; many commercial and gentry families had relatives struggling in lesser trades. All of the factors led to minute discrimination within the local elite itself – by their associations were they known – but snobbery was not a powerful enough solvent to separate into distinct landed, professional and commercial fractions families who had so much else in common. Nor did snobbery lead the old landed families to associate themselves with the values of the fashionable aristocracy. They read of the scandalous activities of London-based lords and ladies with an appalled and untiring fascination, but strongly defined themselves against such outrageous self-indulgence.

But was this social cohesion peculiar to north-east Lancashire? After all, the parish of Whalley is not England. Different social relations may have prevailed in areas without a larger lesser gentry presence, a long history of manufacturing, or with a different religious history. Yet because few historians have concerned themselves with the lesser gentry, the case studies that would settle the issue are scarce. This is not to suggest, on the other hand, that north-east Lancashire was aberrational. Far from it. Equivalent studies of eighteenth-century Leeds, Bury St Edmunds and Norfolk have also emphasized the extent of cultural homogeneity. Moreover, my own recent work

on genteel correspondence in Yorkshire, Cumbria and Northumberland has tended to confirm the Lancashire picture of an inclusive local elite throughout the period 1750–1825. However, all this is not to assert that prosperous provincial families were utterly unaffected by the course of economic change – a cohesive local elite may not have survived intact into the mid-Victorian period; but it is to demonstrate that local studies can reveal both the social integration of families involved in very different economic activities, and that assumptions about appropriate behaviour for men and women were shared across land and trade. Ultimately, therefore, if the lesser gentry practised virtually the same domestic life and sexual division of labour as merchants and manufacturers, it is hard to see how definitions of masculinity and femininity could have made the archetypal middle class.

In the assertion that modern class and gender relations were made in the period from 1780 to 1850, Davidoff and Hall call into play vintage assumptions about the impact of economic change. The period from 1780 to 1850 is a conventional choice for nineteenth-century historians and in characterizing these seventy years as formative, Davidoff and Hall are not unusual. They do not aim to examine the late eighteenth century in any detail; in fact their close focus is saved for the period 1820–50. Again the eighteenth century is the sketchy before-picture, the primeval sludge out of which modern, industrial society emerges. There seems to be a consensus in the literature about nineteenth-century society that 1780 is a key social and economic moment. Implicitly this derives from an old idea of a late eighteenth-century industrial ‘take-off’ which enabled historians to cite the industrial revolution as the deus ex machina accounting for most social developments. But in the light of a revised economic history which has variously stressed the vigour of seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century international commerce and domestic manufacturing, and/or down-played the socio-economic contrast between 1750 and 1850 in England as a whole, it is surprising that social historians should continue to present, with relatively little qualification, an apocalyptic industrial revolution, 1780–1850, as the midwife of

Perhaps manufacturers became progressively frozen out of land-based polite society. Indeed, it is Wilson’s contention that while the Yorkshire elite could easily absorb greater merchants in the eighteenth century, it drew the line at manufacturers in the nineteenth. Certainly, a literary distinction between genteel merchants and vulgar manufacturers had popular currency throughout the period. The commentator and cleric Josiah Tucker, for example, distinguished in 1757 between ‘farmers, freeholders, tradesmen and manufacturers in middle life and ... wholesale dealers, merchants and all persons of landed estates...in genteel life’, Tucker, Instructions for travellers (1757), p. 26. Meanwhile, novelists sympathetic to trade made heroes of merchants at the expense of new manufacturers: J. Raven, ‘English popular literature and the image of business, 1760–90’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1985). See especially the case study of Mrs Gomershill of Leeds, pp. 281–317. Nevertheless, the experience of the Preston cotton manufacturers John and Samuel Horrocks, whose children married into clerical and Domesday families, suggests the continued inclusiveness of Lancashire high society, a feature which has been remarked by other studies of the county: P. Joyce, Work, society and politics: the culture of the factory in later Victorian England (1980), pp. 1–50.


modernity. After all, seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century wealth creation was sufficiently impressive for there to be plenty of commercial families supporting non-earning wives, prospering long before Hannah More and William Wilberforce took up their campaigns. Similarly, the ideas and institutions which allegedly defined both economic man and a manly economy: accounting, banking, an investment market, a complex retail network and so on were also well-established before 1780.

If the economic changes of the period 1780 to 1850 were not as dramatic as Family fortunes implies, it cannot be said that the same years were unmomentous in terms of politics. Davidoff and Hall stress the role of the shock-waves of the French revolution and the campaigning zeal of the evangelicals in creating a new moral climate in English social and political life discernible from the 1790s. In the turbulent decades ahead, it is argued, the image of pure womanhood unsullied by public cares, was to offer the English middle class a vision of harmony and security in an uncertain world. What should we make of this version of events? Firstly, it is clear that texts extolling domestic virtue and a clear separation of the realms of men and women circulated long before 1789, so it cannot be the case that political fears begat this particular theory of social organization. Secondly, while no-one would deny that evangelicalism was a crucial force in nineteenth-century society, the extent to which evangelicalism was an exclusively middle-class project is unclear: the Clapham sect themselves hailed from lesser gentry, while the appeal of methodism was obviously felt far down the social hierarchy. Thirdly, it would be mistaken to see evangelical enthusiasm thriving in every middle-class home, just because the history of the tepid, the backsliding and the utterly indifferent nineteenth-century household remains to be written. And fourthly, the extent to which shifts in public morality actually stripped women of important powers and freedoms is also obscure. Of course, it is beyond question that the Victorians were different from the mid Georgians in their public reactions to sex. Moreover, many early nineteenth-century commentators believed that manners and mores had undergone a transformation in their lifetime. Witness Emily, Duchess of


For example, Dod and Cleaver’s Household government (1614) made it clear that while a husband was to ‘Travel, seek a living...get money and provisions...deal with many men...dispatch all things outdoor’, a wife’s duties were to ‘keep the house...talk with few...boast of silence...be a saver...oversee and give order within.’ (I am indebted to Susan Lippit for this reference). The notion of women as guardian of the family’s heart and virtue was also well-established. In 1697, Mary Astell cited the mother’s crucial influence over men in childhood as reason enough to support any scheme to improve female education: M. Astell, A serious proposal to the ladies, for the advancement of their true and greatest interest by a lover of her sex (1697), p. 97. Addison, Steele and many other writers of courtesy literature glamorized the pure domestic woman in the early decades of the eighteenth century. At mid-century Thomas Marriott praised women for their superior purity, their crucial role as mothers and their smiling guardianship of the sanctuary of the home. Women’s virtue, he asserted, was vital to the preservation of the state and the British race. This exemplary virtue justified female efforts to reform society’s morals: T. Marriott, Female conduct, being an essay on the art of pleasing practised by the fair sex (1759).
Leinster musing in retrospect in 1804 on the explicit writing style of Mary Wortley Montagu:

Lady Mary’s are certainly not hints, but very plain speaking, and I am apt to think that want of delicacy was very much the fashion in those days [i.e. 1720–40]. It was going off in my times [i.e. 1750–65], but I still remember it was retained by all those women who were [regarded?] wits among the old ones, and there was always a fan held up to the face when their jokes were repeated before any young people by those middle age. Lady Townshend went on with it for many years when quite out of fashion, but she was singular.82

Similarly, looking back on his youth in 1827, Sir Walter Scott reflected that elite men no longer dared ‘to insult decency in the public manner then tolerated’ although he was undecided as to whether a profound transformation of values had occurred or merely a change in outward appearances: ‘we are not now, perhaps, more moral in our conduct than men of fifty years ago, but modern vice pays a tax to appearances, and is contented to wear a mask of decorum’.83 Assuredly, the behaviour of both women and men became more constrained in certain public contexts. Yet does the onset of prudishness necessarily signal the haemorrhage of important powers for women? That so many of us have presumed it does, ipso facto, is perhaps more of a testimony to the continuing strength of the 1960s belief that sexual adventure and social liberation are synonymous, than the result of research on early nineteenth century social practices. Still, evangelical fervour may have resulted in the discrediting of certain public arenas within which privileged women had once been active, like the theatre auditorium, the assembly room and the pleasure garden, although research on this issue is in its infancy. Nevertheless, if evangelized religion took from some women’s public lives with one hand, it undoubtedly gave with the other in the burgeoning of religious associations, moral campaigns and organized charity. Certainly, this was Wilberforce’s rather self-serving conclusion:

There is no class of persons whose condition has been more improved in my experience than that of unmarried women. Formerly there seemed to be nothing useful in which they could naturally be busy, but now they may always find an object in attending the poor.84

Moreover, Linda Colley has recently argued that the conservative backlash of the 1790s offered opportunities for greater female participation in a new public life of loyalist parades, petitions and patriotic subscriptions. Viewed from this angle, in fact, reactionary politics offered these ‘angels of the state’ a higher public profile, not an upholstered private cage.85

And this brings us back to the vexed question of separate spheres. Taking account of feminist revisionism, Davidoff and Hall recognize that the prescriptions of sermons and conduct books can never offer a perfect design for living. (In fact, Davidoff herself suggested in an important essay in 1977 that the ideal system laid out in sermons and manuals was belied by the complexity of lived experience.46) Davidoff and Hall argue that the spheres could never be truly separate and that it was impossible for Victorians to live as if that separation was absolute. Nevertheless, they still assert that the ideology

82 British Library, HHMS (1804), Letter from Emily Duchess of Leinster to Hon. Caroline Fox. (I am indebted to Stella Tillyard for this reference.)
84 Quoted in Jaeger, Before Victoria, p. 37.
86 Davidoff, ‘The separation of home and work? Landladies and lodgers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’, in Burman (ed.), Fit work, pp. 64–97. This study serves as a reminder ‘that there is no natural or fixed separation between a private and public sphere’ (at p. 93).
of separate spheres had a powerful hold on the imagination of the Victorian bourgeoisie and that negotiating this ideology was a central middle-class concern. It was the middle-class belief in appropriate spheres which shaped the formal organization (if not the day-to-day running) of their emergent institutions. Their argument for the ideological significance of ‘separate spheres’ rests upon the existence of a large body of nineteenth-century texts extolling the strict separation of the public and private, and the fact that religious institutions tended to segregate the formal activities of men and women. But does this juxtaposition offer sufficient proof that the Victorians exerted themselves to live up to the rhetoric of separate spheres? Davidoff and Hall do not offer evidence from personal manuscripts of a constant dialogue between precept and practice. Instead, they detail the attempts of churchmen of all denominations to ensure a proper division of labour between the sexes: women were allotted subsidiary roles, directed to single-sex committees and for the most part expected to content themselves dispensing liquid and emotional refreshment. However, this raises a crucial question – is the maintenance of a sexual division of labour within institutions the same thing as the separation of public and private spheres? If we decide it is, then we must conclude that the drive to create separate spheres is universal, transcending class and time, for throughout history and across cultures there are virtually no institutions which have not differentiated between men and women when it comes to dispensing power and prestige. Of course, if the segregation of men and women within church organization can be shown to be a novel development, then it might be read as another manifestation of the forces that spawned the separate spheres literature, thereby confirming the status of ‘separate spheres’ as a powerful ideology. And in this vein, Davidoff and Hall assume: ‘as so often, increased formality led to the increasing marginalization of women’. Yet, few eighteenth-century historians would claim that women enjoyed an institutional heydey in their period. If anything, the early nineteenth-century growth of female committee work and the like looks like an expansion of the female role, not a diminution. Indeed, one might go further and argue that the stress on the proper female sphere in Victorian discourse signalled a growing concern that more women were seen to be active outside the home rather than proof that they were so confined. In short, the broadcasting of the language of separate spheres looks like a conservative response to an unprecedented expansion in the opportunities, ambitions and experience of late Georgian and Victorian women.

In questioning the ideological power of the separate spheres rhetoric in the making of the middle class, or the confinement of women, this essay does not argue that the vocabulary of public and private spheres had no currency in nineteenth-century society. Linda Colley’s female patriots used the rhetoric of separate spheres to legitimize their actions. ‘Posing as the pure-minded Women of Britain was, in practice, a way of insisting on the right to public spirit.’ Equally, philanthropists deployed this rhetoric to justify their non-domestic activities. That they should call on the language of true womanly duty is hardly surprising. After all, even St Paul conceded that good works became good women. Moreover, sentimentalists like Ruskin handed rhetorical success on a plate when they mused: ‘a woman has a personal work or duty, relating to her own home, and a public work and duty which is also the expansion of that’ and ‘wherever a true wife comes, [home] is always around her’. In arguing that organized charity represented an altogether natural extension of female domestic

68 Ibid. p. 119.
duties, a form of ‘social housekeeping’, activists defeated the opposition with its own weapons. Demonstrably, also, the language of separate spheres was deployed in the late Victorian controversy about women’s citizenship. Numerous campaigners stated categorically that they wanted access to the public sphere, by which they clearly meant the universities, the professions, local and central government. Gissing’s fictional New Women called for ‘an armed movement, an invasion by women of the spheres which men have always forbidden us to enter’ and categorically rejected ‘that view of us set forth in such charming language by Mr Ruskin’. As the reference to John Ruskin suggests, feminist speeches were tactically contrived to argue with those who contended that women ought to return to their traditional responsibilities and stay out of institutional life. Feminist polemic was designed to convert and galvanize an audience; it did not pretend to be a nuanced account of women’s everyday lives and informal powers. Of course, to stress the debating role of feminist rhetoric is to labour the blindingly obvious, but the proselytizing function is worth remembering, before we assume firstly that the well-reproduced speeches offer a simple description of the daily reality of life in domestic prison and secondly that what campaigners meant by the public and the private coincides with what those words mean to historians.

It should be emphasized that none of this is to argue that Victorian women had a fine time of it. It is beyond question that they laboured under great disadvantages: legal, institutional, customary, biological and so on. Nor should one suppose that all was happiness and harmony in the middle-class family. Clearly, if a husband was deaf to persuasion, resolved to push his prerogatives to the utmost, then marriage could mean miserable servitude for his unlucky wife. But it is to say that the metaphor of separate spheres fails to capture the texture of female subordination and the complex interplay of emotion and power in family life, and that the role of an ideology of separate spheres in the making of the English middle class, 1780–1850, has not been convincingly demonstrated. It is also to suggest that our preoccupation with the ideology of separate spheres may have blinded us to the other languages in play in the Victorian period. As a sociological study of a particular set of gender relations at a particular historical moment, Family fortunes has much to offer to the next generation of women’s historians, but the overarching historical narrative it seeks to tell should be discussed and debated, not given the unwarranted status of holy writ.

II

The unquestioned belief that the transition to industrial modernity robbed women of freedom, status and authentic function underlies most modern women’s history. One can hardly pick up a text on women’s lives in the nineteenth century which is not founded on the conviction that things ain’t what they used to be. But were the work opportunities and public liberties enjoyed by propertied women before the factory so much greater than those of the Victorian period? Much of the literature on early modern women’s work and social lives would have us believe so. The second major account of change in the history of middle-class women rests on a tale of female marginalization resulting from early modern capitalism. Like so many theories in social and economic history, the intellectual origins of this story lie in the nineteenth century.

72 Consider the contemporary arguments relayed in J. Lewis (ed.), Before the vote was won: arguments for and against women’s suffrage (1987) and B. Harrison, Separate spheres: the opposition to women’s suffrage in Britain (1978).
Socialist writers, particularly Friedrich Engels and the first generation of female professionals, were preoccupied with the idea that women were infinitely better off before the coming of commerce. The overthrow of capitalist society, Engels confidently predicted, would see a return to the traditional equality of the sexes. Political democracy would not crumble if women were admitted as full citizens, implied the first female historians, since reforming legislation would simply restore the status quo ante. In so arguing, however, these pioneer thinkers engendered a compelling vision of a pre-capitalist utopia, a golden age, for women, which shapes the writing of history to this day. At the same time, they sketched a social, cultural and economic transformation so abstract that it could be applied to almost any region or historical period.

And indeed it has. Countless historians follows Engels by presenting women as valued and productive on page one of their study, but then ultimately devalued and redundant by the conclusion, usually fifty years later. Take two classics of English economic history: Alice Clark's *Working life of women in the seventeenth century* (1919) and Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women workers and the Industrial Revolution* (1930). These historians held differing views on the quality of industrial life and the implications of female exclusion from it. Nevertheless, both saw the declining role of the woman worker and the associated rise of the male breadwinner as a consequence of capitalism in various guises, although for Alice Clark the key period of loss was the late seventeenth century, while for Pinchbeck the crucial decades fell between 1790 and 1840. Despite the chronological inconsistencies, however, Clark and Pinchbeck share many assumptions about the character and consequences of economic change which have been assimilated to a generalized narrative.

According to customary wisdom, sometime between 1600 and 1800 a wholesome 'family economy' wherein men, women and children shared tasks and status gave way to an exploitative wage economy which elevated the male breadwinner and marginalized his dependants. The commercialization of agriculture and the enclosure movement strangled the informal livelihood contrived by many labouring families on the land. The housewife lost her ability to contribute through husbandry, while female field workers who had previously worked shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk were suddenly marginalized in sporadic, demeaning and low-paid agricultural occupations. Meanwhile, the mechanization of industrial processes took manufacturing out of the early modern home and into the modern factory, separating for ever after the home and workplace.

Thus, in brief, the orthodox version. However, there is now a growing chorus of heretical voices. In 1983, Olwen Hufton questioned the validity of the decline and fall model of women's work in early modern Europe, since it rests on the dubious assumption of a lost egalitarian Eden, which has proved elusive to empirical research.

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The more research that is done, concluded Hufton, the more the vision of the *bon vieux temps* recedes into an even more distant past. In parallel, Judith Bennett argued in 1988 that if women's work was 'low-skilled, low-status and low-paying' in the nineteenth century then it always had been. Thus the basic continuities in women's work between 1200 and 1900 must render inadequate the conventional explanation of female subordination in terms of capitalism and industrialization. Along with general criticisms of the master narrative, the last few years have also seen the publication of case studies which undermine particular aspects of the story for early modern England. Unfortunately for our purposes, most of this work concentrates on the experience of labouring women, however it is useful briefly to summarize some of the new findings here as they have important implications for the discussion of the wealthier women that follows.

The saga of the good old days and their sorry demise has been problematized by new work on agriculture, rural manufacturing and urban labour. When it comes to women's work in agriculture, the universal narrative fails to capture the different histories of sheep-corn and wood-pasture farming, the contrast between the well-studied South-East and the under-researched North-West, and the different experiences of families with a skilled and unskilled head. Moreover, even for the corn belt, the notion of a sudden metamorphosis of the sturdy independent small-holder into the landless proletarian is belied by the long, drawn-out history of enclosure. After all, there had been waged day labour on the land since at least the sixteenth century. And most significantly, there is little convincing evidence that men and women's agricultural work had ever been interchangeable. Certainly, one of the few substantial case studies, a recent examination of Norfolk farming in the late sixteenth century, convincingly demonstrates that men and women's work was clearly differentiated in terms of tasks, status and remuneration. Unless old, feeble, or simple, men rarely did jobs like weeding or picking over corn, 'any more than women built houses, hewed timber, ploughed, weeded fields, milked cows, and did all that they could to build a house and a family'.

The different economic experiences of families headed by specialist and non-specialist rural labourers is suggested by the excellent, A. Hassell Smith, 'Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk, parts one and two', *Continuity and Change*, iv (1989), 11-52, 367-94. Much less work has been done on pastoral regions, which is ironic since these were traditional areas of high female employment. Nevertheless, even at this stage of research it seems unlikely that female predominance in the dairy was seriously threatened until the rise of big commercial dairies in the later nineteenth century. See D. Valenze, 'The art of women and the business of men: women's work and the dairy industry, c. 1740-1840', *Past and Present*, cxv (1991), 142-69. In addition, research on agricultural work also has a profound bias towards the south and east. Yet it is clear that the north and west has a very different history. Roughly speaking, this part of the country was more often characterized by a rugged terrain, higher rainfall, poorer soils, coal deposits, successful proto-industry and later the classic factories, and startling urban growth. A chronology for women's work based on enclosure, the decline of handicraft manufacturing, and the exacerbation of rural poverty therefore seems most unhelpful.
harrowed, threshed, carted hay and corn, dug ditches or cut hedges." But if early modern agriculture was no bed of roses for women, was rural industry any better? While it is undoubtedly the case that women experienced substantial losses in this sector due to the mechanization of handspinning in the late eighteenth century, it is not clear that women's non-agricultural paid labour was especially rewarding before the factory. The received picture of a self-sufficient, non-alienating family enterprise is not supported by the available case studies. In fact, production by the family as a unit was far from being the norm. For example, for the vast majority of the worsted handspinners of Yorkshire and the lacemakers of Devon, their work was not a complement to their husband's trade, but an entirely separate form of waged employment. Emphatically, waged work was no invention of nineteenth-century industrialists, nor was work before the factory as household-centred and as communitarian as has been suggested. But even where men and women did work alongside each other on a shared project, in the classic proto-industrial family, for example, a sexual division of labour usually prevailed. Furthermore it is not clear that a woman's industrial work was any more agreeable when directed by a husband, rather than a formal employer, or that her obvious contribution to the family's manufacturing output necessarily translated into higher status. Indeed the belief that a heavy workload automatically translates into power and prestige is a curious one for women's historians to espouse.

Yet even if the history of the textile industry could be made to fit the conventional chronology of economic decline, an all-inclusive chronology for women's labour should not be derived from textiles alone. Firstly, women had a different experience in other rural industries. In metalwares and the smaller domestic industries mechanization only reinforced a pre-established division of labour, and women's labour remained paramount throughout the nineteenth century. Secondly, whatever the change over time in women's work roles in the countryside, there was virtually none in the city. Peter Earle's recent comparison of female employment in London in 1700 and in 1851 reveals that domestic service, charring, laundry, nursing, and the making and mending of clothes were the most common occupations in both periods. While participation

77 Hassell Smith, 'Labourers', p. 377. See also Bennett, Women in the medieval English countryside: gender and household in Brigstock before the plague (Oxford, 1987).
78 The vast majority of the worsted handspinners of Yorkshire and the lacemakers of Devon were not married to men in textile-related trades. For the Devon findings, see P. Sharpe, 'Literally spinster: a new interpretation of local economy and demography in Colyton in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', Economic History Review, 2nd ser., XXXIV (1991), 46-65. The Yorkshire findings are those of John Styles based on an examination of Yorkshire convictions for the false reeling of worsted, see W.Y.R.O. QE 15/1-13 (1777-81), QE 15/39 (1795) and QE 15/40 (1797). For the vast majority of married spinners who were convicted, husbands' occupations are also given. From this information it was calculated that well over two-thirds of convicted wives were married to men outside the textile trades. Since there is no reason to believe that convicts were not broadly representative of worsted spinners as a whole, this data must cast doubt on the automatic assumption of widespread family production units before the factory. (Personal communication.)
rates declined, the general structure of the female labour market remained the same. There was no systematic reduction in the range of employments available to labouring women over the period. So while the end of the eighteenth century was distinctive in the history of women’s work insofar as this period witnessed the grievous loss of remunerative employment in one important sector of the economy, the domestic manufacture of textiles, the decline of handspinning is not sufficient in itself to support a theory of absolute and comprehensive decline for every working woman in everything from economic power and legal independence to public assertiveness and sexual respect.

It is against this background of scepticism about a history which blindly insists that women’s status had deteriorated from a past golden age that we should assess the parallel arguments about wealthier women. Here the central tragic theme is the much-lamented metamorphosis of the seventeenth-century business woman or diligent housekeeper into the nineteenth-century parasite. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, so Alice Clark famously argued, the wives of craftsmen and manufacturers made a substantial contribution to the family enterprise since the home and workplace were usually one. Women at all social levels were true partners to their husbands, demonstrated a capacity for business and their engagement in commercial life aroused no comment. It was usual for gentlewomen to be active in household and estate management, public affairs and even government. But as the century wore on the rapid increase of wealth permitted the wives of prosperous men to withdraw from all forms of productive activity. In parallel, the spread of ‘capitalistic organization’ ensured that manufacturing became concentrated on central premises. Once production left the home, the wife was divorced from her husband’s trade and lost the informal opportunity to learn his skills. Creative housekeeping fell into decay. In contrast to their hardy and resourceful Elizabethan grandmothers, the moneyed ladies of the Restoration were distinguished only by their ‘devotion to idle graces’.

This resonant tale of a female descent into indolence and luxury has been frequently reiterated. Moreover, it is tacit in most accounts that the female liberation from

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82 Nor should the particular marginalization of the late eighteenth century be seen as a unique cataclysm, the moment when capitalism tossed labouring women aside. Rather, there were several moments in the last millenium when women were drawn into the formal economy in enormous numbers only to be dispensed with when demographic conditions or technological innovations rendered their contribution less vital. A fluctuating pattern of mass female engagement in different areas of the formal economy is suggested by the work of Shelaigh Ogilvie on early modern Germany and Jeremy Goldberg on later medieval England: S. C. Ogilvie, ‘Women and proto-industrialisation in a corporate society: Wurtenberg woollen weaving, 1590—1760’, in P. Hudson and W. R. Lee (eds), Women’s work and the family economy in historical perspective (Manchester, 1990), pp. 76—103, and J. Goldberg, ‘For fairer or laither’: marriage and economic opportunity for women in later medieval Yorkshire’ (unpublished seminar paper, Women’s History Seminar, Institute of Historical Research, London University, November, 1991).
83 See Clark, ‘Working life’, pp. 14, 41, 296. Interestingly, Clark included the aristocracy and nouveau riche businessmen in her category of ‘capitalists’ since the two groups approximated to each other in manners, see pp. 14-41.
manual labour is *ipso facto* disempowering. Laurence Stone, for instance, leaves us in no doubt about the frivolousness and futility of a woman's life once she had vacated the dairy and laid down the distaff.

Wives of the middle and upper classes increasingly became idle drones. They turned household management over to stewards, reduced their reproductive responsibilities by contraceptive measures, and passed their time in such occupations as novel reading, theatre going, card playing and formal visits...The custom of turning wives into ladies 'languishing in listlessness' as ornamental status objects spread downwards through the social scale.85

Some have built on the tale of woman's divorce from useful labour, to assert that the 'new domestic woman' was the inevitable bride of the new economic man.

[With the] eighteenth-century glorification of 'Man' came a radical narrowing of women's participation in and contribution to productive and social life, and a drastic diminution of women's stature. It was not merely a relative decline. Pre-capitalist woman was not simply relatively eclipsed by the great leap forward of the male achiever; she suffered rather an absolute setback.86

Echoing nineteenth-century preoccupations, scholars of English literature have tried to chart the construction of domesticated femininity, although there is a certain confusion as to whether the new domestic woman was the epitome of bourgeois personality, or was an ornament shared by the middling ranks and the landed. But whatever her social background, it is agreed that the sweet domesticate was created 'in and by print'. Kathryn Shevelow's study of early eighteenth-century periodicals leads her to conclude that 'during the eighteenth century, as upper and middle-class Englishwomen increasingly began to participate in the public realm of print culture, the representational practices of that print culture were steadily enclosing them within the private sphere of the home.'87 But for all the stress on the constitutive power of language in the emergence of homely virtue, most of the literary studies take on trust the prior existence of an entirely new breed of bored, housebound, cultural consumers created at a particular historical moment by capitalism.88 Therefore, whether informed by Foucault, Lacan or Greenblatt, recent feminist literary criticism still depends ultimately on a narrative of social and economic change which has barely changed since 1919.

So on what basis did Alice Clark found her original argument? In fact, her evidence for change over time was remarkably slight. She used diaries, letters and depositions to establish the courage and capability of ladies in the late sixteenth century and early to mid-seventeenth-century, but to demonstrate that 'their contact with affairs became less habitual as the century wore away' she relied on a different order of source

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She cited unflattering comparisons of the inadequate English lady with her sober Dutch counterpart, Mary Astell's sorrowful criticisms of the 'Ladies of Quality', the stock characters of restoration drama, and the fact that Samuel Pepys was surprised and pleased to hear a friend's wife talk like a merchant. (In addition to such commentary, she cited the declining number of women who were named as sole executrix of their husband's will as proof of a withering of female ability. However, whether it is possible to detect a single pattern of testamentary practice over the centuries and to attribute any change in practice to a growing perception of feminine inconsequence remains a very open question.) But it is undeniably the case that the late seventeenth century saw a steady increase in texts grumbling about unemployed womanhood, a muttering which grew to a clamour from the 1690s. A new character graced the pages of plays, commentaries and complaint literature, the London woman who scorned productive labour for the sake of consumerism and pleasure. Most critical and subsequently most quoted was Daniel Defoe: 'As ladies now manage' he remarked, they 'scorn to be seen in the compting house, much less behind the counter; despise the knowledge of their husband’s business, and act as if they were ashamed of being tradesmen’s wives, and never intended to be tradesmen’s widows.' Instead she will 'sit above in the parlour, receive visits, drink tea and entertain her neighbours, or take a coach and go abroad'. However, the redundant woman of the Augustan period, languishing on her sofa, may not have been as novel a creature as the indictments suggest. Perhaps it was her flamboyant habits that were new and public, rather than her actual lack of occupation. It could even be argued that such criticism was merely another symptom of the general moral panic in the late seventeenth century about the decline of spartan virtue and the rise of luxurious corruption, rather than evidence of any new social group or practice. After all, in their fears about the vicious consequences of wealth, writers fell back upon stereotypical images of devouring, unreasonable womanhood, images that were as old as Eve herself—something which suggests we might better view such accusations as testimony to the persistence of male anxieties, rather than a simple guide to female behaviour. And of course, scholars of print might suggest that the rising tide of complaint and conduct literature owes far more to the relaxation of censorship after the failure to renew the licensing act in 1695 than it does to the outbreak of a new disease called female parasitism.

But if this flowering of public discussion was not necessarily a simple reaction to the mass female abandonment of active enterprise, was it subsequently responsible for the creation of an entirely new model of feminine behaviour? Did the grand peur about female ostentation and publicity lead to the inscription of a new pattern of virtuous, domesticated womanhood? To be sure, many scholars have detected a growing
emphasis on women’s innate moral superiority and a declining preoccupation with uncontrollable female sexuality in Augustan literature. Backed by an impressive survey of courtesy literature written between 1670 and 1750, Fenela Childs argues that cloying idealization set in from 1700, although she stresses the obvious but important point that visions of female nature had for centuries oscillated between impossibly pure and irredeemably depraved. Similarly, Marlene Legates suggests that we should not overestimate the novelty of eighteenth-century views of women. She argues that chastity and obedience were ancient pre-requisites of the ideal woman, that a belief in woman as redeemer was as old as courtly love, that positive views of marriage had coexisted with explicit misogyny in classical and humanist thought, and that even the sentimental themes of love, marriage and virtue under siege had a long pedigree. Legates concludes that the eighteenth century saw not so much a dramatic break with past assumptions about the good woman, as a compelling dramatization of her traditional predicament. Evidently, eighteenth-century literature contained much that nineteenth-century historians might identify as ‘domestic ideology’, yet these themes were far from revolutionary. Moreover, periodicals, novels, sermons and conduct books undoubtedly contained many other ideological messages besides and were probably subject to multiple and/or selective readings. Indeed, as this essay has frequently implied, we should not presume without evidence that women (or men) mindlessly absorbed a particular didactic lesson like so many pieces of blotting paper.

In any case, research on the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century economy raises doubts about the conviction that female enterprise decayed substantially between 1700 and 1850. Firstly, it is clear that the explanatory power given to the notion of the separation of the home and workplace is unwarranted. Of course, if industrial change had involved a simple linear transition from family workshop to factory this process could have had a devastating impact across the board. But as D. C. Coleman remarked in another context, there were many key early modern enterprises which simply could not be performed in a cottage by husband, wife and children. In mining, ship-building, iron smelting, pottery firing, glass blowing, paper making, soap boiling, fulling wool and so on, the place of work was of necessity divorced from bed and board from the very inception of the industry. Moreover, the factory was far from being the normal unit of production in the mid-nineteenth century. Economic change followed many roads and did not arrive at a single destination. And secondly when we consider those businesses that women pursued in

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their own right, continuity is more apparent than change. Peter Earle's study of late seventeenth-century London reveals women already clustered in the so-called feminine trades: petty retail, food and drink, and textiles. (In fact, women's businesses in York were concentrated in petty retail, food and drink, and textiles as far back as the fifteenth century.) Widows had long been unwilling to pursue their late husband's business if it was an un congenial trade. They tended either to remarry a journeyman, or sell up. Moreover, single women were prominent in the London rental and investment market, as they were in rural money lending, suggesting that the economic choices of wealthier women were already biased against active, risky business. It was probably considerably easier for an heiress to operate as a landlady, money-lender, rentier, or investor than to run a male business in a male world. Indeed, it could be argued that a female withdrawal from active enterprise was essentially a function of increasing wealth. Therefore any study of an expanding business, be it in fourteenth-century York, seventeenth-century London, or nineteenth-century Birmingham, would be likely to show a reduction over three generations in the formal participation of female members of the owning family. In determining the incidence of female withdrawal from business over the long term, what may be crucial is not the growth of capitalism as such, but increases in the number of businesses generating sufficient wealth to allow such withdrawal. What we need are careful comparisons across time and space of the role of women in enterprises of a similar scale. Yet even at this early stage of research, it is already clear that many centres of commerce and manufacturing had boasted a select population of non-earning ladies long before the flowering of literature advocating domestic womanhood – a fact which must be taken on board when making large statements about causation and chronology in the lives of wealthier women.

However, if women in commercial, professional and gentry families did not formally share in income generation, this did not mean that they made no informal contribution or that they performed no work of their own. My own late eighteenth-century evidence demonstrates the extent to which the complexities of women's work are obscured by a literature which defines labour solely in terms of market-orientated production. Among the wealthy, both mercantile and landed, women's work was essentially organizational and administrative. Letter writing was a key component of female business. Their letters sustained relations with the cousinhod, garnered 'friends' or sponsors for their children, gathered information about business and apprenticeship opportunities for them, kept a finger on the pulse of the local labour market for servants, helped provision the household and were the means by which many of its choicest artifacts were acquired. But these ladies did more than wield the pen, they were interventionist house-managers not hothouse blooms. Rare was the employer who could boast of reliable servants capable of assuming responsibility for the smooth running of the

97 See Earle, 'Female labour market' and Goldberg, 'Marriage and economic opportunity'. Earle, however, assumes that there was a time when women were numerous in masculine trades. He also takes the 'no smoke without fire' attitude to the plethora of pamphlets complaining about wealthy, unemployed womanhood. Dubious circumstantial evidence is found in the growth of the silk industry; but a woman need not be idle all day to wear a silk dress all evening.


99 Vickery, 'Thesis', pp. 175–219. In fact, the female contribution is remarkably similar to those female activities described by Davidoff and Hall as the 'hidden investment' in nineteenth-century enterprises: Family fortunes, pp. 271–320.
household. Maids were unlikely to acquire the requisite expertise since they moved on so frequently. Merchant’s wife Elizabeth Shackleton of Alkincoats, saw 29 maids pass through her household in a single year, 1772. Fourteen of these women were theoretically employed on a permanent basis, yet ten of them worked for less than thirty days. Judging by available diaries and account books, Mrs Shackleton was not unusually plagued by transient personnel. At this social level, few women were at liberty to languish on their couches due to the pressing responsibilities of management. Elite women might not have spun cloth or made butter, but neither did their husbands plough fields, dig ditches, or carry cloth on their backs to the local piece hall. Ladies, like gentlemen, had a working knowledge of the processes under their supervision, but instructed their inferiors to carry out the necessary manual labour. 100

Of course, such women’s lives were also structured by their maternal responsibilities, although they always described their mothering role in terms of natural fulfilment and inescapable duty, never in terms of work. Nevertheless in rural Lancashire and Yorkshire, motherhood knocked out 10–15 years of women’s social lives. During this period, the number of letters written to friends declined markedly, matrons tended to stay closer to home than they had as girls, and as a result their public profile was often lowered until they re-emerged post menopause in the role of chaperon. The sheer pressures of pregnancy, nursing and mothering infants limited a wealthy woman’s freedom of manoeuvre in my period, as doubtless if had done for centuries. So could we describe these women as ‘domestic women’? Certainly, a celebration of the pleasures of home life emerges from eighteenth-century letters. But there is no proof that the fostering of cosy sentimentality constrained these women any more than they were already by the sheer practicalities of maternity. 101

Consider the letters a Charterhouse schoolmaster wrote to his landed cousin in the 1760s and 70s. Reverend William Ramsden waxes poetical when he contemplated his robust wife and first born, writing:

From the arm of my wife’s easy chair, a situation I wo’d not change with the king of Prussia: no, nor (with a man a million more times to be envyd) with George the 3rd king of Britain: my good woman at the same time with glee in her eye contemplating her little boy who also in his turn seems as happy as this world can make him only with his leather bottle. Pardon this gossip Madam but the air of a nursery is infecting. 108

And he was never more at peace with the world than when anticipating the arrival of the family meal:

Here comes supper (Dinr I should say) smelts at top, ’sparagus at bottom, a smiling wife, who’d be a king? 108

His wife Bessy Ramsden, was also well versed in the language of cosy intimacy and artless pleasure. ‘Tomorrow three weeks we break up again for a month. Deary is looking for some snug country box to carry me and my lambkins to grass.’ 104 Yet, she


103 L.R.O., DDB/72/236 (1770), B. Ramsden, Charterhouse to E. Shackleton, Alkincoats.

104 L.R.O., DDB/72/75 (30.7.n.y.), B. Ramsden, Charterhouse to E. Shackleton, Alkincoats.
herself was no stay-at-home; at every available opportunity she swept out to visit, play cards, gossip and shop, and to attend public trials, pleasure gardens, assemblies and the theatre. Almost invariably, she set out alone, or in the company of other ladies, leaving her schoolmaster behind to guard the domestic hearth. Witness three typical reports:

The baggage...is frolicked away to the play. (May, 1769)

I say no more of Madam, than that she has been gambling out every night this week, leaving her good man at home to dry nurse. (December, 1770)

My Duchess in her heart is a rake; this evening she is out making bridal visits about St James Square. (December, 1773)

A successful housewife and an incurable street-wife, Bessy Ramsden saw no inconsistency in enjoying sentimental domesticity at one time of day and independent socializing at another. All of which serves to remind us that although the language of domesticity implied privacy, it was not necessarily synonymous with female seclusion and confinement. A typical day in the life of Bessy Ramsden, incorporating as it did work, domesticity, idleness and pleasure also raises problems for the historiography of women's work, which has insisted on seeing labour and leisure as two consecutive stages in the evolution of bourgeois women. Finally, this testimony from the 1760s and 1770s should remind us that self-conscious domesticity was neither the invention nor the sole property of evangelical businessmen.

The wives of the merchants and manufacturers I have studied were definitely not idle, but it cannot be said that they enjoyed extensive commercial opportunities which their Victorian equivalents subsequently lost. Nor should the eighteenth century be seen as a golden age of female public life. And this point takes us back to my earlier discussion of separate spheres. In no century before the twentieth did women enjoy the public powers which nineteenth-century feminists sought — the full rights of citizenship. Public life for the gentlemen I have studied invariably incorporated some form of office, but there was no formal place for their wives in the machinery of local administration. Customarily, a wealthy woman wielded power as a mother, kinswoman, housekeeper, consumer, hostess and arbiter of polite sociability. If all this adds up to a separation of the public sphere of male power and the private sphere of female influence, then this separation was an ancient phenomenon which certainly predated the misogyny of the 1690s, evangelicalism, the French revolution and the factory.

The public/private dichotomy may, therefore, serve as a loose description of a very long-standing difference between the lives of women and men. What is extremely difficult to sustain, however, is the argument that sometime between 1650 and 1850 the


106 Witness a summary of the woman's day in an exalted professional family, from the pen of a London diarist: Huntington Library, HM 31201, Diary of Anna Margareta Larpent, vol. 1, 1790-5, unfoliated. See entry for 1 Jan. 1790: 'In the course of this day I read about two hours... I spent about an hour in the morning in household arrangements and family accounts. About two more in teaching my two boys... I walked for an hour. In the evening I worked part of a neck cloth for Mr Larpent, and play'd two rubbers at whist. I saw no company today.' H.L., HM 31201, vol. 1, 1790-5, entry for 13 Jan. 1790: 'I pray'd morning and evening. I heard Seymour read for about an hour in Voltaire's Histoire de Pierre Le Grand. I was employed an hour in settling ye weeks bills: and busy the rest of the morning in looking over my linen and clothes, selecting the bad, giving some to mend & c. I walked out for an hour — the evening I worked at the chair; & play'd a rubber at whist. I saw no company.' (I am grateful to John Brewer who first drew my attention to the existence of this source.)
public/private distinction was constituted or radically reconstituted in a way that transformed relations between the sexes. The shortcomings of the public/private dichotomy as an analytical framework are many, but most obviously there is little unanimity among historians as to what public and private should be held to mean in this context. Current interpretations of ‘the public’ vary enormously. In a historian’s hands, a public role can mean access to anything from politics, public office, formal employment, opinion, print, clubs, assembly, company, the neighbourhood, the streets, or simply the world outside the front door. However, we should take care to discover whether our interpretation of public and private marries with that of historical actors themselves. Take again the excellently documented experience of Elizabeth Shackleton of Alkincoats. She resorted often to the ‘publick papers’, perpetuated her dead husband’s ‘publick spirit’ by selling his famous rabies medicine at an affordable price, witnessed her second husband’s ‘publick humiliation’ in the house of a tenant, and saw her own kitchen become ‘very publick’ with a stream of unexpected visitors. Doubtless, the likes of Mrs Shackleton figured in that ‘publick’ addressed by both the Ladies Magazine and the Leeds Intelligencer.¹⁰⁷ Most of her labour took place within the house, yet from her medicine room she traded with men throughout the north, and from her writing desk wrote business letters to a national network. Evidently, her public and private cannot be mapped on to the physical home and the external world. The ‘publick’ for Elizabeth Shackleton was inextricably bound up with company, opinion and information. She had access to all of these. For the aforementioned Betty Ramsden going out ‘in publick’ in the 1760s and 1770s meant a visit to the theatre, the assembly, the pleasure garden or a trial. Another wife of a London professional, the diarist Anna Larpent, listed all ‘the publick places and private entertainments’ she visited and enjoyed between 1773 and 1787. Public places listed in 1773 included the play, the opera, Richmond assembly and Ranelagh – all venues which could be penetrated for the price of a ticket and where visitors could see and be seen. Private entertainments were exclusive gatherings entered by invitation only.¹⁰⁸ So, while women such as Elizabeth Shackleton, Bessie Ramsden and Anna Larpent were obviously severely disabled when it came to institutional power, they did not lack access to the public sphere, as they understood it. It seems likely that eighteenth-century conceptions of publicity were different from those of nineteenth-century feminists and twentieth-century historians. All of which underlines the deficiencies in our knowledge of the distinctions between public and private in language, never mind as social practice.

III

This then, is the contradictory inheritance of seventeenth- and nineteenth-century women’s history. In essence, the rise of the new domestic woman (whether in her seventeenth or nineteenth-century guise), the separation of the spheres, and the construction of the public and private are all different ways of characterizing what is essentially the same phenomenon: the marginalization of middle-class women. Like the insidious rise of capitalism, the collapse of community, the nascent consumer society and the ever-emerging middle class, it can be found in almost any century we care to look. When confronted with the numerous precedents, nineteenth-century historians of

¹⁰⁸ Huntington Library, HM 31207, Methodized Journal of Anna Margareta Larpent, unfoliated. See entries for 1773.
this phenomenon may claim that early modern developments represent only the germ
of what was to come on a grand scale for the Victorian middle class. But the obvious
problems of periodization which result cannot be brushed aside with the explanatory
catch-all of ‘uneven development’. The problem is exemplified if we try to reconcile
Susan Amussen’s work on early-modern Norfolk and Leonore Davidoff’s on nineteenth-
century Suffolk. Are we to believe that women were driven out of a public sphere
of production and power in one district in the seventeenth century, while just over the
county border the same development was delayed by well over a hundred years? Surely
uneven development of this magnitude would have raised some contemporary
comment, or at the very least female migration.

As a conceptual device, separate spheres has also proved inadequate. The economic
chronologies upon which the accounts of women’s exclusion from work and their
incarceration in domesticity depend are deeply flawed. At a very general level,
eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women were associated with home and
children, while men controlled public institutions, but then this rough division could
be applied to almost any century or any culture – a fact which robs the distinction
of analytical purchase. If, loosely speaking, there have always been separate spheres of
gender power, and perhaps there still are, then ‘separate spheres’ cannot be used to
explain social and political developments in a particular century, least of all to account
for Victorian class formation.

To conclude, this paper suggests that the orthodox categories of both seventeenth-
century and nineteenth-century women’s history must be jettisoned if a defensible
chronology is to be constructed. Of course, such a renunciation carries a cost. A belief
in the wholesome transformation wrought by capitalism on the economic role of
women has provided early-modern women’s history with an alluring big picture.
Without that faith, we must accept a less heroic and more provisional chronology.
Nevertheless, the notion of separate spheres in particular has done modern women’s
history a great service. With this conceptual framework women’s history moved
beyond a whiggish celebration of the rise of feminism, or a virtuous rediscovery of those
previously hidden from history. In asserting the instrumental role of the ideology of
separate spheres in modern class formation, historians asserted the wider historical
significance of gender. Thereby the interpretation offered powerful justification for the
study of women when the field was embattled. Yet strategic concerns do not in
themselves justify the deployment of an artificial and unwieldy conceptual vocabulary.
In the attempt to map the breadth and boundaries of female experience, new categories
and concepts must be generated, and this must be done with more sensitivity to
women’s own manuscripts.

The burden of this piece has not been to argue that the discourses of femininity and
masculinity, space and authority, found in printed literature are not important. Yet
their power to shape female language and behaviour needs to be demonstrated not
taken as read. Otherwise virtually any printed text we come across can be deemed

109 Here I am indebted to Tim Wales, who first pointed out this discrepancy to me.
110 See M. Z. Rosaldo, ‘The use and abuse of anthropology: reflections on feminism and cross-
pp. 18–19.
111 It goes without saying that we can only try to assess the ‘realities’ of women’s lives through
texts. No one would deny that a manuscript diary, deposition, account book or will is as
‘constructed’ a document as a published conduct book or novel. Nevertheless, in my opinion,
it is crucial for women’s historians to retain a sense of the important differences between texts; not
least because some are more useful than others for particular projects. For instance, an
to have ideological potency regardless of the form of the publication, its popularity with the readers, or the currency of the ideas contained within it. In short, ‘intertextuality’ must be researched, not simply asserted in the abstract. Case studies are needed of the economic roles, social lives, institutional opportunities and personal preoccupations of women from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In parallel, we need a long span, but integrated, history of the full range of debates about women’s proper role covering the same period. (For too long it has been assumed that domestic ideology hogged the discursive stage unchallenged.) All this needs to be undertaken with especial sensitivity to changes in the range of language and categories employed. Only then will we establish with any precision the extent to which women accepted, negotiated, contested or simply ignored, the much quoted precepts of proper female behaviour in past time. Only then will we establish whether the rhetoric of domesticity and private spheres contributed to female containment, or instead was simply a defensive and impotent reaction to public freedoms already won.

unpublished account book kept by a woman in eighteenth-century Lancashire surely tells us more about the language, preoccupations and activities of Lancashire women than does a published diatribe written by a male author living in London. Indeed it is particularly vital for feminists to cast their nets wider than the over-used didactic sources if they are to approach a history of women’s lives, not simply to reproduce a catalogue of male anxieties. Ideally, a historian would use as many different sources as possible, for it is often in the discrepancies between different accounts that interesting conclusions are drawn. Of course, some scholars informed by the new literary criticism may read this statement as proof of my naive belief in a phantom of ‘real’ history living in the Lancashire Record Office, yet even those who assert that nothing exists outside language usually have non-linguistic phenomena and convenient supporting ‘facts’ lurking in their footnotes – most popular in my experience being capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, the consumer society, international trade, the rising middle class, the companionate marriage, rural poverty and ruling class hegemony.