

## **“A DANGEROUS KIND”: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE VICTORIAN MIDDLE CLASS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Much attention has been focused on Victorian-era spousal violence among the lower classes. This essay argues that the perceived absence of equivalent abuse among the British middle classes resulted from increased privacy in the home during the period. Furthermore, Victorian definitions of abuse barely considered emotional abuse a problem. By focusing attention on the harsh conditions of urban slums, benevolent members of the Victorian middle class perpetuated the popular image of middle- and upper-class homes as havens of tranquility, associating turmoil and abuse firmly with the lower classes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have argued that, during the Victorian era, the prosperous British middle class increasingly valued the family unit. Consequently, Victorians regarded a loving, secure home as a buffer against the intrusions of the outside world. “The distinction between the public world and the private arena was central,” Davidoff and Hall write. “As time passed, these divisions became embodied in bricks and mortar, in carefully regulated social interaction and rules of etiquette” (319). In an atmosphere placing such a premium on privacy, where home life was obscured not only by codes of behavior but by physical barriers, what can we know about one of the most private of family issues – domestic abuse? Closer examination of middle-class Victorian marital conflict shows that a perceived absence of domestic abuse outside of the lower classes results not from idyllic living conditions, but from the isolation prized by the Victorian middle-class family. Though acceptance in the community and close urban living quarters allowed lower-class spousal abuse to become better-known, domestic violence nonetheless existed at all levels of society. For many Victorian women, the ideal home described by Davidoff and Hall isolated them from society and hid their suffering from the world at large.

### **PERPETUATION IN SOCIETY**

There were few legal avenues through which a battered wife could gain freedom in the Victorian era. The law in England was designed to protect marriage, and made divorce or separation very difficult to obtain. Prior to the 1857 Divorce Act, divorce was contingent on both adultery *and* assault on the husband’s part, while a husband wishing to divorce his wife needed only to prove his wife had committed adultery. Furthermore, divorce was very expensive, putting it beyond the capacity of most members of society (Bodichon). Even in the event of an attainable separation, many wives were reluctant, as single women lacked means to support themselves. Furthermore, as we shall see later, in such cases women could be denied contact with their children. Toward the end of the era, local magistrates made conscious efforts to reconcile quarreling spouses, viewing the preservation of marriage as their main obligation, regardless of the welfare of the individuals involved. “You would find in almost every case,” wrote a Middlesbrough police court missionary proudly, “if some sensible tactful person intervened the man and wife would be reconciled” (Hammerton 40).

Frances Power Cobbe, champion of the rights of working-class women, wrote in 1878: “Wife-beating exists in the upper and middle classes rather more, I fear, than is generally recognized; but it rarely extends to anything beyond an occasional blow or two not of a dangerous kind” (225). While physical violence may have been rarer outside the working class, Cobbe has neglected to consider the emotional abuse that many saw as an inherent product of middle-class gender structure. This is chiefly

because emotional abuse was not considered “abuse” as it is today. As A. James Hammerton has noted, “a woman who chose [her husband] wisely...still had to navigate a treacherous conjugal path, for even the noblest men had faults.” Contemporary authors of prescriptive literature such as Sarah Stickney Ellis “seem to have concluded that for women...the crux of the problem [was] the failure of women to practice the kind of deference that would pacify their selfish husbands” (76). The wisdom of such behavior is born out in the evidence, if we consider the testimony of husbands. Wives’ “extravagant habits,” “disregard of remonstrances thereon” (84), and disagreement with husbands’ executive decisions on important matters such as emigration (90) all served as pretexts for violent punishment. By justifying their actions on alleged lapses by their wives, these men insisted that they were acting within the bounds of their husbandly rights. By administering a “box to the ears” of a wife who had not lived up to her responsibilities, an abusive husband professed to enforce the existing social order.

### **“THE RULE OF MERE FORCE”**

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The idea that domestic strife results when the patriarchal ideal of control and entitlement is taken too far is not unique to modern scholarship; many Victorians, including John Stuart Mill, recognized an indissoluble link between the existing system and its abuses. “We now live,” he wrote, “in a state in which the law of the strongest seems to be abandoned as the regulating principle of the world’s affairs: nobody professes it, and, as regards most of the relations between human beings, nobody is permitted to practice it...This being the ostensible state of things, people flatter themselves that the rule of mere force is ended” (8). In fact, as Mill insisted, it was not; and, in Victorian England, was most visible amongst the urban poor. Cobbe asserts that men of the lower classes were “proverbial for their unparalleled brutality” (223), describing the abuses sustained by victims in shocking detail. This brutality was not, however, uniquely lower-class, but practiced by “respectable” middle-class men as well. Claims that wives provoked attacks by their husbands were common to both classes. Nancy Tomes observes, “Husbands rarely blamed themselves for a beating; they felt that their wives had brought it on themselves” (334). Lower-class reprisals differed perhaps only in their overt brutality and social sanction.

Conflicts between men and wives of the lower classes were often more violent than the average middle-class dispute. Tomes tells us that neighbors would interfere in such quarrels only if it seemed that the wife’s life was in danger, as it frequently could be. Alcohol was a major cause of such disputes; it could heighten tensions directly, by affecting behavior, and indirectly, by depleting precious family funds. Interestingly, wives’ swearing was a major bone of contention, as husbands resented the gendered use of rough language on them. Tomes also describes the “nagging, taunts, insults, and any form of willful behavior on the wife’s part” which roused a husband to show his wife who the real head of the household was. Invoked as evidence before a magistrate, this bad behavior could reflect poorly on a wife, since “using obscenities in front of a social superior constituted insubordination in any situation” (332): as an authority figure, the husband deserved to be addressed with respect.

Cobbe herself recognized the possibility that the average Englishman’s reputation as “exceptionally humane and considerate to women” (223) may have been a result only of social inhibition, suggesting that “in his apparently most ungovernable rage, the gentleman or tradesman somehow manages to bear in mind the disgrace he will incur if his outbreak be betrayed by his wife’s black eye or broken arm” (225). In a society as highly dependent on social approval as that of the Victorian middle and upper classes, all but the most vicious of husbands would be keenly aware of the pretension that wives were husbands’ mates and to be treated with dignity. In the tightly packed lower-class districts, however, where no action was private, a different status quo reigned. “All the evidence we have on domestic violence in this era,” writes Ellen Ross, “suggests that its social meaning was different from today’s...Because men’s and women’s competing desires were an acknowledged part of their culture, it was to be expected that men might use violent means to secure their wives’ obedience” (86). While physical violence was generally accepted and expected among the working class, it had the unexpectedly positive side effect of providing the victim with a built-in support network her social superiors lacked. It was improper for neighbors to intervene in an altercation between husband and wife, which was regarded as a natural part of marriage, but female neighbors tended to a battered wife’s wounds, offering her a safe haven if she saw fit to flee her husband’s temper (Tomes 336).

In calling for an end to violence against working-class women, concerned members of the middle class risked caricaturing victims as suffering innocents, ignoring the distinctive characteristics of lower-class society. Such sentimental distortions are obvious in Dickens's portrayal of working-class violence in *Oliver Twist*. Nancy, a prostitute, is brutally murdered by her domestic partner, Bill Sykes, in a scene of stunning violence. Despite her profession, however, Nancy is characterized by saintly qualities. Her love for Sykes is constant; immediately before he beats her to death, she clings to him, crying, "Let us both leave this dreadful place, and far apart lead better lives, and forget how we have lived, except in prayers....It is never too late to repent" (383). Amidst the squalor, Nancy embraces the middle-class dream described by Davidoff and Hall – perhaps allowing suffering middle-class wives the opportunity to identify with their lower-class equivalents.

The openness of community in working-class neighborhoods and minimum of privacy surely contributed to the greater degree of activism dedicated to eradicating violence among the poorest segments of society. The threat of public embarrassment to which Cobbe attributes the comparative mildness of middle-class abuse could itself become a form of abuse. While the physically abusive husband feared lest his actions should be made public, the psychological abuser could avail himself of the public eye as a tool for humiliating his wife. James Kelly, a minister, forbade his wife, Frances, from visiting a doctor lest she complain about her ill treatment, yet invited his fellow clergymen to their home to lecture his wife on obeying her husband. On another occasion, when Frances left church services early, he "dragged her in the street" back to church, announcing to the congregation that she was "a woman possessed by the Devil...resisting her husband who wished to prevent her going to some low place" (99). Through such public declarations of his wife's incompetence, and by denying her power within the home, James Kelly stripped his wife of the few benefits to which women of her station were entitled.

#### **THE ROLE OF CHILDREN IN DOMESTIC DISPUTES**

In Mill's opinion, the female "slave" lives "in closer intimacy with [her master] than with any of her fellow-subjects; with no means of combining against him, no power of even locally overmastering him" (12). While such was often the case, Mill overlooked vital allies in the abused wife's battle – her children. Isolated from the world at large, mothers could still find a supportive community within their own households. In homes with overbearing or abusive fathers, children often banded together to defend their mothers. Hammerton writes of Charlotte Bostock, mother of eight surviving children, who frequently barricaded herself in the nursery to avoid her husband's temper (86). At times, the children intervened in scuffles between the parents, the eldest sons opposing their father physically when necessary. Even in families generally devoid of internal strife, the father's privileged role as provider could unintentionally alienate him from his dependents, as he was granted choicer portions of meat, a special chair, or respectful, distanced treatment. The creation of rival camps in the family is reflected in Robert Bostock's accusation that Charlotte had "made his home a Rabbit Warren," alleged in her 1848 petition for separation (Hammerton 84). Having fathered 13 children, most of whom survived to become a significant drain on his resources, Robert no doubt resented that they failed to take his side in family disputes. As we see through Charlotte's retreat to the children's nursery, large families could be both a source of, and salve to, conflict.

The case of Caroline Norton, the brilliant society wife known for her flirtatious wit, exemplifies the importance of children in marital struggles. Norton expressed contempt for her boorish husband, though forced by law to endure his violence and public humiliation, including a well-publicized (and false) adultery charge. She refused, however, to accede to his determination to keep her children from her; when unable to reason with Norton, she campaigned to change the law. By persuading influential men with whom she had long maintained contact, she helped bring about the passage in 1839 of the Infant Custody Bill. Married mothers, on paper at least, were now entitled to limited rights to their children under seven years of age – a modest gain, but a gain nonetheless (Huddleston x). Throughout her campaigns, however, Norton never expressed explicitly feminist ideas – in fact, she insisted that "the natural position of woman is inferiority to man. Amen! That is a thing of God's appointing, not of man's devising" (i). She did not seek to radically alter the status quo, but merely to allow mothers their natural rights to their children.

### **GENDER ROLES, POWER, AND INEQUALITY**

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That a man is entitled to reign supreme at home, if nowhere else, is palpable in such accounts. The desire for power is strongest in a situation like marriage, Mill writes, "for everyone who desires power, desires it most over those who are nearest to him, . . . in whom any independence of his authority is oftenest likely to interfere with his individual preferences" (12). It may be a question not so much of *desire* for power being strongest over individuals with whom the connection is closest, but that such a case represents power at its most attainable. This expectation of a wife's obedience in the home is visible at all class levels, as we have seen from husbands' reactions to swearing among lower-class wives to the middle-class James Kelly's humiliation of his wife in a public street.

While it may appear that the emphasis on spousal abuse among the poorer class denies the hardships faced by middle-class wives, activism relating to the former can in itself reveal circumstances of the latter. As Ellen Ross observes, "The endless stories of cruel and abusive husbands that the social explorers tell us in gruesome detail . . . may have functioned as concealed statements about middle-class marriage" (20). By chronicling the harsh physical abuses experienced by their poorer equivalents, abuses formally recognized as such by authorities, volunteers may have found a way to express their own personal anguish at being caught in an often dehumanizing situation given full sanction by the standards of the day. Cobbe's assertion that abuse among the classes differs only in degree reinforces Mill's belief that violence against wives resulted from their inferior position within marriage. Even with the best intentions, it was difficult for husbands and wives to maintain the balance of respect and support envisioned by Victorian domestic pamphleteers. Only through formal, public recognition of women's equality could violence be addressed at its root.

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