

## Victorian Values and Women in Public and Private

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THE theme of this paper<sup>1</sup> is the Victorian ideological divide between the public sphere (viewed as a masculine domain concerned with paid work and national politics), and the private sphere (viewed as a female domain concerned with home and family). These contrasts were in some respects ancient ones: the political dimension of public masculine persons and private female persons going back at least to Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> Dichotomies of this kind have had varying force in different historical periods. This paper will suggest that both the ideology and its practical application had particular significance during the Victorian period and the years that immediately followed.

A social construction of gender created gendered dualisms of which private and public was but one. Others included personal and political; nature and culture; biology and intellect; work and leisure; intellect and intuition; rationality and emotionality; and morality and power. Do we need these kinds of female / male oppositions? They involve types of shorthand statements of gendered Victorian values that have been taken over by students of the period. But whilst they impose order they may

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<sup>2</sup> J.B. Elshtain, 'A Consideration of the Public-Private Split and its Political Ramifications', *Politics and Society*, 4 (1974), pp. 453–7.

involve conceptual naïvety or empirical over-simplification. An apparently clear and easy stereotyping conceals the fact that such dichotomies are socially constructed and reconstructed according to specific historical circumstances. Indeed they beg as many questions as they answer. Worse, they tend to exclude the kinds of ambiguities that characterise women's lives. Social historians have recently made attempts to get away from dichotomous models towards those involving greater complexity.<sup>3</sup> Social constructions can define in ambivalent, contradictory, even conflicting ways. I will argue, however, that this confusion created a space which empowered some Victorian and Edwardian women.

It has been said that 'The dichotomy between the private and public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle'.<sup>4</sup> I would like to look at what in historical experience appears to be an intermediate or semi-detached area between public and private. I want to call this the borderland, defined in orthodox terms as 'a land or district on or near a border.'<sup>5</sup> This alerts us to the presence of a boundary, frontier, or brink in gender relations. Whilst there is some ambiguity involved in using a geographical for a social concept, its usage was not unknown to the Victorians themselves. Revealingly, the term borderland made its appearance in writing on insanity, and on social degeneration, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In a chapter entitled 'The Borderland' Henry Maudsley wrote that it was not possible to 'draw a hard and fast line, and to declare that all persons who were on one side of it must be sane and all persons who were the other side must be insane.' Rather there needed to be a recognition of 'the existence of intermediate instances' and of 'a borderland between sanity and insanity.' This was peopled by 'doubtful cases' whose 'peculiarities of thought or feeling or character make them objects of remark among their fellows.'<sup>7</sup> Boundaries of gender behaviour were being challenged at this time not just by feminists but also by men who were termed 'decadent males'<sup>8</sup> because of their subversion of established patterns of masculine behaviour – whether

<sup>3</sup> L. Davidoff, 'Adam Spoke First and Named the Orders of the World': Masculine and Feminine Domains in History and Sociology', in H. Corr and L. Jamieson eds, *Politics of Everyday Life. Continuity and Change in Work and Family* (1990), pp. 231, 239.

<sup>4</sup> C. Pateman, *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (1989), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, A. Wynter, *The Borderlands of Insanity* (1875); H. Maudsley, 'The Borderland' in *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (second edn, 1874); T. B. Hyslop, *The Borderland* (1924).

<sup>7</sup> Maudsley, *Mental Disease*, pp. 38–40.

<sup>8</sup> E. Showalter, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (1987), pp. 105–6.

sexual, moral, or economic. A Social Darwinistic framework encouraged psychiatrists of this period to set feminist aspirations – particularly those relating to higher education and entry to the professions – against Britain's imperialistic ambitions.<sup>9</sup>

In 1905 The Senior Physician at Bethlem Royal Hospital, T.B. Hyslop, stated that,

The removal of woman from her natural sphere of domesticity to that of mental labour not only renders her less fit to maintain the virility of the race, but it renders her prone to degenerate, and initiate a downward tendency which gathers impetus in her progeny . . . The departure of woman from her natural sphere to an artificial one involves a brain struggle which is deleterious to the virility of the race . . . it has very direct bearings upon the increase of nervous instability. In fact, the higher women strive to hold the torch of intellect, the dimmer the rays of light for the vision of their progeny.<sup>10</sup>

Writing much later, in 1924, in a book entitled *The Borderland*, Hyslop showed how Maudsley's ideas of fifty years earlier were still influential in psychiatric thinking. He asserted that 'there is no-hard-and-fast line of demarcation between sanity and insanity. Some authorities make the borderland fairly narrow; others however, make it so wide as to include nearly every departure from the conventional modes of thought and conduct.'<sup>11</sup> Such a view had clear professional advantages in dealing with ambiguous behaviour. And within this borderland, where sanity blended imperceptibly with insanity, the diagnosis of moral insanity was an especially useful one since it had always been particularly fluid. The first English writer to develop the diagnosis of moral insanity, James Cowles Prichard, wrote in 1835 that its characteristics included, 'Eccentricity of conduct, singular and absurd habits, a propensity to perform the common actions of life in a different way from that usually practised.'<sup>12</sup> Here one can see strong continuities of thought in almost a century of writing by men esteemed within the psychiatric profession. And these professional diagnoses were ones that could be socially useful

<sup>9</sup> See C. Dyhouse, 'Social Darwinistic ideas and the development of women's education in England, 1880–1920', *History of Education*, 5 (1976), pp. 41–58; S. Delamont and L. Duffin, eds, *The Nineteenth-Century Woman* (1978), chapters 3–4 *passim*; J. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (1980), chapter 5 *passim*; A. Digby, 'Women's Biological Straitjacket', in S. Mendus and J. Rendall, eds, *Sexuality and Subordination. Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century* (1989), pp. 208–14.

<sup>10</sup> T.B. Hyslop, 'A Discussion of Occupation and Environment as Causative Factors of Insanity', *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1905), p. 942.

<sup>11</sup> T. B. Hyslop, *The Borderland. Some of the Problems of Insanity* (Popular edition, 1925), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> J. Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity* (1835), pp. 23–4.

in dealing with non-conforming women. Those who were perceived as rebelling against conservatively drawn gender boundaries might find that others saw them as inhabiting a psychiatric borderland. The label of moral insanity was especially useful in this context,<sup>13</sup> and so too, (as we shall see later in this paper), was that of hysteria.

Whilst contemporary psychiatrists saw the borderland as a highly problematic area, into which women ventured at their peril, I want to suggest that it could also be a positive place for women to colonise. In my analysis the application of the term borderland will be extended from contemporary psychiatric usage to focus on gender boundaries more generally. There were risks for women in establishing frontier posts within this social borderland and these varied according to the behaviour of the colonists. Those who, in demeanour as well as activity, flouted traditional gender conventions might find themselves designated as occupying not only a social borderland, but a psychiatric one also. What both social and psychiatric borderlands had in common, however, was their shadowy, shifting, indeterminate, and ambiguous character.

The extent of this Victorian and Edwardian social borderland was large since it related to different networks and organisations in political, social and economic life. It is interesting to speculate on the function of this social borderland. In a society changing at an unprecedented pace it allowed flexibility. Given major changes in social structure, urbanisation and political organisation it was predictable that the period should witness a challenge to older values. To some extent the borderland also accommodated class differences within female experience. Significantly, it allowed 'official' Victorian values to be silently transgressed – by working-class women working outside the home, or by mainly middle-class women engaging in semi-public activities – but without formal recognition necessarily having to be taken of such 'frontier violations'. Two of the interesting topics that will be explored are: what made crossings over the gender boundary from private to public socially 'visible'; and the related issue of what characterised the social 'invisibility' of so much unofficial female colonisation of the borderland. Put another way, why did this kind of gender Balkans flare up at times into open conflict whilst at other times women successfully occupied, and extended, their space? In attempting to answer this question,

<sup>13</sup> One who was seen as 'wayward', or evincing an improper (i.e. unfeminine) 'desire for the male sex', for example, might find themselves labelled as morally insane in an asylum – as was Lucy F., a patient in the Retreat during the 1840s and 1850s. (A. Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine. A Study of the York Retreat, 1796–1914* [Cambridge, 1985], the appendix gives her case notes in full.)

within the confines of a brief paper, the analysis focuses first on the political, then the economic, and finally the social aspects of Victorian women's lives.

It was during the transitional period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that, according to Catherine Hall, 'gender divisions were reworked' and 'men placed firmly in the newly defined public world of business, commerce, and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family.'<sup>14</sup> Concentrating our attention first on political movements at this time, there were female middle-class activists in anti-slavery campaigns, but they directed much of their efforts to ensure that other women did not consume sugar grown by slaves in their households. And women were essentially perceived as playing a supportive role in the campaigns on the vote during the 1830s, even within female political unions.<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Thompson places a divide in political forms of activity for working-class women rather later in that they, 'seem to have retreated into the home at some time around, or a little before the middle of the century.'<sup>16</sup> The trend, if not its exact timing, was clear; women's skills and interests came to be utilised increasingly on the margins of mainstream political activity, whereas in an earlier tradition of open politics ordinary women had played a notable part. Then there had been an important tradition of female participation in the food riot (with all its obvious linkages to the household and the female role in managing it), and women were also active in anti-New Poor Law demonstrations, but by the 1840s such endeavours were giving way to other forms of political activism.<sup>17</sup> Within Owenite and Saint-Simonian socialism a radical stance on marriage and divorce, and an associated critique of the nuclear family, gave women more space within integrated communities. Even in this radical culture, however, feminist principles had minimal impact on power structures so that there were few women holding executive positions or acting as lecturers and missionaries.<sup>18</sup> In the Chartist movement of the late 1830s and 1840s there was considerable organisation, speaking and demonstrating done by women. However, relatively few concerned themselves with the particular legal, economic or political disabilities of women as a group, although female Chartists

<sup>14</sup> C. Hall, 'Private Persons versus Public Someones: Class, Gender and Politics in England, 1780-1850', in T. Lovell, ed., *British Feminist Thought. A Reader* (1990), p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, 'Private Persons', p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> D. Thompson, 'Women and Nineteenth-Century Radical Politics', in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley, eds, *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (1986), p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> M.I. Thomis and J. Grimmett eds, *Women in Protest 1800-1850* (1982), p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983), pp. 219-21.

frequently reiterated their fundamental devotion to their homes and families.<sup>19</sup>

A cultural sharpening of the gender divide during the mid-nineteenth century involved a narrowing of the criteria for female respectability and meant that the ideology of separate spheres became more prominent in politics. This was evident in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, which enforced medical inspection of female prostitutes in specified garrison and naval towns from the late 1860s to the early 1880s. Whilst the movement was spearheaded by Josephine Butler and had a conspicuous public-speaking and organisational role for women, it was 'couched within the terms of a "separate spheres" ideology' which 'stressed women's purity, moral supremacy, and domestic virtue'.<sup>20</sup> Some localities held separate meetings for men and women because of the perceived delicacy of the subject matter, which was not seen as a suitable topic for mixed company. This had the effect of restricting the public role of women in the campaign.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it is significant in this context that in 1877 Josephine Butler expressed anxiety to the female executive of the Ladies National Association, that women were being squeezed out of the leadership of this crusade. Partly this was because of the 'ease' with which men were said to combine together, and partly because 'women from long habit have quite naturally stood aside and allowed men to work alone, whilst they themselves try very faithfully to exercise that unseen or domestic influence alone which has hitherto been permitted them.'<sup>22</sup>

The strength of this domestic ideology in mid and late Victorian values meant that concepts of female influence in the political process shared some common ground among later suffragists and anti-suffragists. Whilst they most obviously involved women in clearly opposing views on their role in national politics there was – less obviously – some limited agreement on views of citizenship. The idea of a *female citizenship* as a distinctive participative activity was put forward by the anti-suffragists. This was a gendered view of citizenship; women's objective was the good of the community achieved through operating within a locality and not, as with men, within the national state or empire. 'An Appeal against Female Suffrage' of 1889, signed by Mrs. Humphrey Ward and dozens of other women, argued that women's public and political activity should continue to be that which 'rests on thought, conscience and moral influence' and argued against 'their admission to direct power in that State which *does*

<sup>19</sup> D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (1984), pp. 149–50.

<sup>20</sup> J.R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society. Women, class and the state* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 256–7.

<sup>21</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution*, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Walkowitz, *Prostitution*, p. 139.

rest on force'. They thus rejoiced in female participation in such local activities as voting for, or becoming members of, School Boards or Boards of Guardians but not in activity relating to Parliament. Significantly, they made a clear distinction between citizenship and the suffrage, since in their view 'Citizenship lies in the participation of each individual in effort for the good of the community.'<sup>23</sup> In the reasoning, (but not of course in the opposing conclusions), this was surprisingly similar to the view of the leading suffragist, Millicent Garrett Fawcett. She advocated the extension of the suffrage to women, because she wanted:

to see the womanly and domestic side of things weigh more and count for more in all public concerns. Let no one imagine for a moment that we want women to cease to be womanly; we want rather to raise the ideal type of womanhood.<sup>24</sup>

Earlier, philanthropic women had been generally more socially conservative, having a stronger belief in individualistic than collectivist endeavour. Josephine Butler argued in 1869 that parochial charity was 'feminine' in character, whilst large-scale legislative-based welfare systems were 'masculine'.<sup>25</sup> Parochial charity, based on personal ties and moral interaction between donor and recipient, was normatively located in the private sphere, although in practice it involved women in work in the community. Fund-raising for many of these parochial charities was done through a public bazaar. And, as Emily Davies commented,

It is averred that 'public life' is injurious to women: they are meant for the domestic . . . What is meant by it? . . . Fathers who would shake their heads at the idea of taking their daughters into their own counting-houses, allow them to stand behind a stall at a bazaar . . . [these are] far more public scenes where indeed, publicity is essential to success.<sup>26</sup>

The charitable bazaar thus bridged the public and the private, but in what we might call a socially acceptable borderland. The bazaar allowed women to play a more substantial role in the political process too; in the Anti-Corn Law League female expertise, gained in raising money for charitable purposes, was put to good use in running bazaars and fund-raising fairs.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Humphrey Ward *et al.*, 'An Appeal against Female Suffrage', text reproduced in J. Lewis, ed., *Before the Vote Was Won* (1987), pp. 409–11.

<sup>24</sup> Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'Home and Politics', in Lewis, *Before the Vote*, p. 423.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in F. Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse. Philanthropy in Modern Britain* (1988), p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Davies, *Letters to a Daily Paper* (Newcastle, 1860).

<sup>27</sup> Hall, 'Private Persons', p. 64.

Nineteenth-century philanthropy had become 'womanized'<sup>28</sup> This was such a large area that activity within it could be manipulated in radical or conservative ways by the women it involved. Women had made innovative inroads into what was perceived as male political territory in the earlier anti-slavery movement since this lay in a borderland of philanthropy (private sphere) and politics (public sphere). Conversely female social conservatism informed the later voluntary work of Octavia Hill, a pioneer in housing management and in social work. Her tactics give us some clues on the visibility of women's colonisation endeavours in the borderland.

Hill's '*Letters on Housing*' emphasised 'quiet watchings' where 'improvement depends on personal influence' so that there was a strong linkage between the moral qualities of the private woman and the public good that would result. Here the quality of housing management rather than that of the actual buildings was the vital constituent. To achieve this the employment of *ladies* was crucial. 'Ladies must do it for it is detailed work; ladies must do it, for it is household work; it needs too, persistent patience, gentleness and hope', she wrote. Women had a duty, a Christian obligation to give to others. This should be done unobtrusively and Hill's ideal appeared to be that of things 'silently progressing'. Her stress was on the duty of household management being a mutual one as in Chalmer's concept of charity, where both sides were elevated by the interaction. Each activity involved a moralising, face-to-face relationship of private individuals rather than the bureaucratic numbering of public agencies.<sup>29</sup> Whilst Octavia Hill thought that education, and also property rights for women, were reasonable objectives, significantly she was not in favour of the female suffrage. As a philanthropist, who was dependent on women workers to implement her distinctive ideals of housing management, she considered that women in Parliament would be lost to this kind of good works. It would, she considered, be 'fatal . . . for women to be drawn into the political arena'.<sup>30</sup>

Hill's volunteers and workers were usually a generation older than those who became active in local government.<sup>31</sup> How overtly political and public was this activity? In a real sense the civic space became for this later generation an enlargement of the domestic space. Mrs. Fordham, in urging women to become parish councillors (as they were enabled to

<sup>28</sup> F. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980), p. 223.

<sup>29</sup> E. Southwood Ouvry, *Extracts from Octavia Hill's 'Letters to Fellow-Workers' 1864-1911* (1933), Letter of 1889, p. 28; Letter of 1906, p. 60; Letter of 1883, p. 23; Letter of 1872, p. 11; Letter of 1879, p. 20; Letter of 1906, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> G. Darley, *Octavia Hill. A Life* (1990), pp. 58, 318-19

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.



do in 1894), argued that 'The government of the village is but the government of the home, only on a larger scale'.<sup>32</sup> And Mrs. Barker, (a former workhouse visitor, who became one of the very few female chairs of a parish council), urged women to stand as parish councillors:

Women are so much more earnest about small things than men and parish council work deals with matters of seemingly small import. A polluted well, an overcrowded cottage, a barrier across a footpath, are too trivial for men to make a stir about . . . but . . . these trifles if looked into will reveal further defects to remedy.<sup>33</sup>

Women in local government work, as Patricia Hollis has perceptively analysed them, 'preferred to win consent'; 'substituted domestic values for disciplinary ones' in institutions such as workhouses; and worked for 'a womanly version of the built environment' in health committees. Women used so-called 'female' client-centred skills rather than what were then considered 'male' management skills. 'They worked quietly,' and their challenge 'was softened by ladylike clothes and ladylike language'.<sup>34</sup> In relation to our wider enquiry the *complementarity* of the female contribution is striking and so too was the fact that, like Hill's voluntary work, it was *quiet* work by ladies, or those adopting the demeanour of ladies.

This stress on ladylike behaviour in the bourgeois Victorian feminist movement arguably was, 'an acknowledgement of the power of the dominant ideology rather than a demonstration of belief in it'.<sup>35</sup> But whether Victorian leaders of the education or suffrage movement for women adopted tactics from belief or for strategic reasons is highly problematical. Their private correspondence sometimes threw light on the rationale of their actions. A revealing instance of this was when one experienced campaigner advised a fellow-suffragist on the tactics to be adopted when dealing with male anti-suffragists – whom she revealingly termed 'the enemy':

I don't think it quite does to call the arguments on the other side 'foolish'. Of course they *are*, but it does not seem quite polite to say so . . . You see the enemy always maintains that the disabilities inflicted upon women are not penal but solely intended for their good, and I find that nothing irritates men so much as to attribute tyranny to them. I believe many of them really

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. E.O. Fordham, 'Why Women are Needed as Parish Councillors', *Parish Councils Journal*, 1 March 1896.

<sup>33</sup> *Parish Councillor*, 27 December 1895.

<sup>34</sup> P.Hollis, *Ladies Elect. Women in Local Government, 1865-1914* (1987), pp. 391, 463, 466-8, 472.

<sup>35</sup> R. Billington, 'The Dominant Values of Victorian Feminism', in E. Sigsworth ed., *In Search of Victorian Values. Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Thought and Society* (Manchester, 1988), p. 122.

mean well . . . and it seems fair to admit it and to show that their well intentioned efforts are a *mistake*, and not a crime.<sup>36</sup>

The kind of manipulative strategies adopted by women over the suffrage were also used by female councillors. Local government empowered women through colonising the borderlands effectively, but without subverting the dichotomy of public and private too overtly. Women councillors used 'deviousness and diplomacy . . . [and] carefully avoided any threat or challenge to male hegemony.'<sup>37</sup> Their role was essentially ambiguous in emphasising in different contexts and at different times both equality in competence and difference in experience. Women manipulated the language of separate spheres; it could be used radically to claim public space, or conservatively to confirm gender stereotyping.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, 'they occupied and clearly felt comfortable in, a semi-detached sphere of their own.'<sup>39</sup> It was notable that fifty years elapsed between the municipal and parliamentary franchise for women. In between was what may be called the social housekeeping in the community, that anti-suffrage women saw as the vital component in local government work. Women's contribution in local government also contained an interesting paradox since it apparently contributed virtually nothing to the achievement of women's suffrage in 1918.<sup>40</sup>

Turning to another facet of women's lives, that of the economic, we find that politics and paid work were inextricably linked. The suffrage was based in property, and in the Victorian period the extension of the male suffrage was effectively based on men's property in their labour. The working woman, having a property in work, thus implicitly, yet not overtly, posed a challenge to the separate spheres of public and private, not only in paid employment but also in politics.<sup>41</sup>

The threat posed by paid work was, however, largely obscured from view since it was usually regarded as subsidiary to female work in the home. A description of women's work in the pre-industrial economy was that it was 'An economy of expedients',<sup>42</sup> since it was characterised

<sup>36</sup> Emily Davies, Letter to Barbara Bodichon, 14 November 1865 (B. Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College* [1927], p. 108).

<sup>37</sup> Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 390.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463; P. Hollis, 'Women in Council: Separate Spheres, Public Space', in J. Rendall, ed., *Equal or Different. Women's Politics 1800-1914* (1987), p. 210.

<sup>39</sup> Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, pp. 471-2.

<sup>40</sup> Hollis, 'Women in Council', pp. 193-4, pp. 462-3.

<sup>41</sup> Davidoff, 'Adam spoke first', pp. 245-6.

<sup>42</sup> Hufton used this to describe only the work of spinsters and widows, but Hill extended this to married women as well. (B. Hill, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth Century England* (1989), p. 259; O. Hufton, 'Women without men: widows and spinsters in Britain and France in the eighteenth century', *Journal of Family History*, 8 [1984], pp. 355-76).

by low pay and a heavy component of seasonal and part-time work. With industrialisation some features of women's work changed. Women's position in the Victorian labour market has been aptly described as the result of a 'negotiated outcome' between the forces of capitalism and patriarchy.<sup>43</sup> But the outcome was a gendered labour market with working-class women relegated to segregated and low-paid work. Male-dominated trade unions supported the concept of a family wage paid to men, on the assumption that they alone had dependants, including a wife. Henry Broadhurst expressed this view clearly in a speech to the TUC in 1875, where he outlined the main aim of members of a trade union as being to, 'Bring about a condition . . . where their wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for a livelihood against the great and strong men of the world.'<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, an only partial achievement of the family wage then left women in a classic 'Catch 22' position. Since working-class women continued to have to work, in part because many of them had responsibility for dependants, they found themselves as much the victim as the beneficiary of the family wage. The problem of female sweated labour, whether at home or in the workplace was to become notorious. Mary Macarthur, founder of the National Federation of Women Workers (1906–20) commented tartly, 'Don't think of the Empire on which the sun never sets, think of the wage that never rises.'<sup>45</sup>

The family wage, women's work and women's rates were conditioned by values that placed women's responsibilities primarily in the home, in the private sphere. But because, as we have seen, private and public were inter-connected a continuum of sexually segregated work existed in both labour market and household. This might be termed an intermediate zone. Jane Lewis comments incisively that 'women's work is doubly gendered, first being confined to "feminine" tasks, whether paid or unpaid, and second being subordinate to men's work both in the home and in the workplace.'<sup>46</sup> Women's power in the home was influenced, yet not wholly determined by, their command of economic resources. Within the working-class home the stereotypical division of labour was increasingly of the man as provider and the woman as manager, although in practice

<sup>43</sup> S. Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: patriarchal and capitalist relations in employment* (1986), p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> H.A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy. A Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions* (1962), p. 185.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in S. Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (1987), p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> 'Women's Work in Late Nineteenth Century England', in *The Sexual Division of Labour, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Uppsala Papers in Economic History, 7, 1989), p. 89.

both women and children regularly supplemented the male wage.<sup>47</sup> In the middle-class home the man was seen as the provider with the woman as manager of resources and, in more affluent households as consumer of luxuries, as well.<sup>48</sup>

This bourgeois economic ideal of economically-dependant Victorian and Edwardian womanhood was an aspiration rather than a universal reality. Ideologically attractive yet economically unattainable for a sizeable minority, survival strategies were needed to bridge the gap. Numbers of middle-class girls needed to be equipped to earn their living and a growth in educational opportunities was partly a response to that need. Yet these institutions reflected the kind of social ambiguities that had engendered them; they were thus a version of the social borderland and displayed its tensions. A particularly clear instance of this was the nonconformist boarding school. In the mid-nineteenth century its concerns were ambivalently poised between schooling and social finishing for those, 'whose breeding was not in doubt but whose future was open to every doubt', as Clyde Binfield has aptly described them.<sup>49</sup> Ambiguity in the objectives of early reformed girls schools during the mid-Victorian period is shown both by the nature of the curriculum (with its balancing of academic subjects by traditional, feminine accomplishments), and by the equivocating statements of their headmistresses, who needed to conciliate traditionally-minded parents. Some institutions were explicit about the need to equip their pupils to earn a living, as was Mill Mount College which opened its doors in 1873 to the daughters of nonconformist ministers. Here, the first principal was told on her appointment that, 'We wish to . . . train pupils not merely to be accomplished, but useful members of society, with good sense and right apprehensions of womanly obligations . . . our desire is to prepare the pupils to be wives, mothers, teachers and missionaries.'<sup>50</sup> But, in responding to a cultural backlash of Social Darwinistic criticism about the advanced nature of their institutions, later headmistresses

<sup>47</sup> E. Ross, 'Labour and Love: Rediscovering London's Working-Class Mothers, 1870-1914', in J. Lewis, ed., *Labour and Love. Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (1986), pp. 84-8, and E. Roberts, "'Women's Strategies", 1890-1940', in *Labour and Love*, pp. 226-8.

<sup>48</sup> P. Branca, *Silent Sisterhood. Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home* (1975), chapter 2 *passim*; R. Bowlby, *Just Looking. Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (1985), chapter 2, *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> C. Binfield, *Belmont's Portias: Victorian Nonconformists and Middle-Class Education for Girls* (35th Lecture of Friends of Dr. William's Library, 1981), p. 27. I am grateful to Dr. Binfield for drawing the chapel and the nonconformist school to my attention as instances of the social borderland.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

seem to have been more conciliatory than their pioneering forbears in stressing the womanliness of their graduands.<sup>51</sup> In the 1890s the Headmistress of Worcester High School recorded that she wanted the character of her school to be that of 'delicate womanly refinement', whilst in 1911 her counterpart at the Manchester High School commented approvingly that 'greater emphasis is now placed on the special duties of women . . . to the community, . . . the family and the home.'<sup>52</sup>

These complexities in bourgeois female lives and aspirations were at least matched by those of working-class women, although the nature of the pressures and dilemmas differed. The central importance of working-class wives and mothers was pointed out by contemporary observers. Lady Bell's influential Edwardian study, *At the Works*, stated:

The key to the condition of the workman and his family, the clue, the reason for the possibilities and impossibilities of his existence, is the capacity, the temperament, and, above all, the health of the woman who manages his house; into her hands . . . the burden of the family life is thrust.<sup>53</sup>

A recent study by Carl Chinn for the period from 1880 to 1939 has argued that for the lower working-class a 'hidden matriarchy' existed behind 'a facade of male dominance, separation of the sexes and female inferiority'. Here women were 'the driving force', and were not only 'arbiters of their own and their families' lives' but also 'dominant influences within their own communities.'<sup>54</sup> This study of the poor in Birmingham included a telling story of the man who grumbled at his wife's management of the scarce household resources he had provided but found that his sandwiches the next day were filled only with the rent book.<sup>55</sup> The balance of power, as well as division of labour, within a working-class marriage is fittingly illustrated here. In a pioneering use of oral history Elizabeth Roberts focussed on the difference between perceptions and realities in the Lancashire woman's life at this time. She concluded that,

<sup>51</sup> A. Digby and P. Searby eds, *Children, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (1981), pp. 48–52; A. Digby, 'New Schools for the Middle Class Girl', in P. Searby, ed., *Educating the Victorian Middle Class* (History of Education Society, 1982), pp. 13–19

<sup>52</sup> S.A. Burstall and M.A. Douglas, eds, *Public Schools for Girls* (1911), p. 18; M.E. James, *Alice Otley, First Headmistress of the Worcester High School for Girls, 1883–1912* (1914), pp. 98–9

<sup>53</sup> Lady Bell, *At the Works. A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (Nelson edition, 1913), p. 242.

<sup>54</sup> C. Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives. Women of the Urban Poor, 1880–1939* (1988), pp. 13, 16–17.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

'The woman exerted significant power, not so much from legal rights as from moral force . . . [but this] could and did give her considerable economic power'.<sup>56</sup>

Within a rather stark model of Victorian values and gender roles there could thus be greater space for women than an initial view might suggest. Male pride and female deference to a public face of dominant masculinity may have sustained an external public appearance of stereotypical roles even when the internal reality was rather different. This was a situation very similar to that disclosed by anthropological studies of an apparently masculinist Mediterranean culture today. 'There is a marked difference between the public and private behaviour of a man and wife towards each other'; in the seclusion of the home the wife discusses all the affairs of the family, whereas in public she is silent and submissive.<sup>57</sup> Discovering a past dialectic between private experience and the public politics of values in Victorian Britain would be a comparably fascinating exploration.

What were *female* Victorian values as perceived and acted upon? It is necessary here to stress the importance both of the inside and outside, of women's lives.<sup>58</sup> Attempting to understand women's past culture from the inside is obviously as problematic as it is important. Yet when we turn to women's more privatised experience we can see that this included that of being active agents in creating female worlds – both in the private sphere and in what I have termed the social borderland – within a wider patriarchal domain. Women's 'networks' seem to have been as important then – in giving women support and confidence – as they are now. The role of female institutions and communities was, in this context, highly significant.<sup>59</sup> So too was what we know about well-documented friendships of middle-class women, which could embrace an interesting dialogue between female culture and feminism.<sup>60</sup> These institutions and relationships linked private to public worlds – empowering individuals in each sphere. Feminism was

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, *Woman's Place*, p. 110.

<sup>57</sup> J.K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage. A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 151–2. See also, J. du Boulay, *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 101–5 for an interesting discussion of perceptions of the gendered characteristics of men and women.

<sup>58</sup> J. Ribbens, 'Accounting For Our Children. Differing Perspectives On "Family Life" In Middle-income Households' (unpublished PH.D thesis, South Bank Polytechnic and CNA), p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> M. Vicinus, *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women 1850–1920* (1985), p. 289.

<sup>60</sup> J. Rendall, 'Friendship and Politics: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes', in Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, p. 163.

also a force for some working women: Ada Nield Chew, Selina Cooper, and the working-women suffragists of north-western England are relatively well-documented illustrations of this.<sup>61</sup> But, arguably, these ideas had a wider resonance in working women's lives, as research into women autobiographers of the period is revealing. Mary Smith, who had had a hard-working life as a teacher, and was later a suffragist, wrote a poem on Women's Claims, that included the lines "'Women's Rights" are not her's only, they are all the world's besides / And the whole world faints and suffers, while these are scorn'd, denied'. In her autobiography she stated feelingly that, 'The inequality of the sexes in privilege and power, was a great cause of the dreadful hardships which women, especially in the lower classes had to suffer.'<sup>62</sup> And Florence Wright, who had been a cook, reflected that 'with some of the feminist ideas I was, and am in full sympathy. I hated the pocket-money wage, and always have believed it would have paid the men's unions to have admitted qualified women on the same terms as men, that is, equal wages for equal work.'<sup>63</sup>

For the more typical working-class woman who left no written testimony, informal social networks in the community apparently offered more immediate sustenance: these tended to link social with material support. Whilst the masculine version of Victorian self-help often emphasised its individualist character, the working-class women's version of this central Victorian value was more usually informed by a strong element of mutuality, organised in an informal rather than formal way. 'The range of help provided by neighbours was immense: children were minded: the sick and dying were fed and nursed; clothes were passed on; funeral teas prepared for the mourners, the dead laid out; shopping done for the elderly; and companionship and friendship provided for all ages.'<sup>64</sup> Not that all was shared among women. It is intriguing, for example, to see how frequently mothers seem to have been reticent with their daughters about such intimate but fundamental areas of female existence as menstruation, sexual intercourse or childbirth.

<sup>61</sup> Ada Nield Chew, *The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* (1982); J. Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel. Selina Cooper, 1864-1946* (1984); J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us. The Rise of the Woman's Suffrage Movement* (1978).

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in J. Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women* (1985), p. 160. Smith published a two volume autobiography in 1892.

<sup>63</sup> F. White, *A Fire in the Kitchen: the Autobiography of a Cook* (1938), quoted in Swindells, *Victorian Writing*, p. 155. White was 75, and in more affluent circumstances, when her autobiography was published.

<sup>64</sup> E. Roberts, *A Woman's Place. An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (1984), p. 187.

Victorian values as they were publicly depicted were basically masculinist and bourgeois. Their gendered and class view of the separation of functions and spaces was encapsulated in Charlotte Brontë's rueful reflection that men were supposed to do and women to be.<sup>65</sup> Stereotyped Victorian values emphasised a peaceful patriarchy with complementary male and female worlds. One important function of the gender borderlands, I would argue, was to defuse gender tensions, ambiguities and antagonisms. Gender was, and remains, a dynamic category so that changing or competing social constructions of femininities and masculinities could find a space here. Thus an elision could take place where older or outmoded ideas might be transmuted in an evolving society. Middle-class women altered the public world to their own advantage and redefined the public/private boundary in the process of so doing. The semi-detached area of philanthropy, voluntary work, and local government was the main instance of this. For working-class women the intermediate zone of part-time employment was a clear illustration of public/private boundaries being breached. In each case female activity in a borderland was socially largely invisible in the sense of being non-contested, even though each area subverted official Victorian values to a moderate extent.

Here I should like to speculate on the criteria that appear to have operated to define this border at particular points in time. What made certain activities in the borderland zone politically visible in the sense of having to be opposed? It is necessary to distinguish analytically between changes in the activity on the one hand, and changes in the manner in which these activities were performed. I will suggest that women became politically visible in the sense of having to be challenged when both the action, and the conduct which accompanied it, were perceived as an overt challenge to fundamental masculine or patriarchal strongholds.

Some new activities of women in the social borderland appear to have been largely unrecognised as such. Thus, for example, the gradual breakdown of the boundary between private and public achieved by female work in philanthropy, voluntary social work, or even local government, was not perceived as an open challenge to the masculine public domain. Women still appeared to be in an acceptable borderland area because they were using familiar feminine skills in an extended, but not separate, area from their domestic territory. It is significant in my view that women's local government work did not loom large in the final debates on granting the female suffrage; in contemporary perception the two seemed conceptually to be quite distinct. Indeed, it is revealing that the leading female anti-suffragist, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, saw women's local government work

<sup>65</sup> E.C. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), p. 123.



not as a precursor but as an alternative to the vote. She wanted a wider representation of women 'on municipal and other bodies concerned with the domestic and social affairs of the community.'<sup>66</sup> In contrast to female work in the local community, the campaigns for the female suffrage seemed to many anti-suffragists, both men and women, to threaten ideas of social propriety. Natural gender roles would be over-turned; women would neglect their true concerns – the private ones of home and family, and their moral purity would be contaminated by entry to a public, national politics. Anti-suffragists argued that only men had the physical strength to govern the empire or to wage war; only men had the rational, unemotional approach that affairs of state demanded.<sup>67</sup> In this context Liliash Ashworth's comment about her speaking tour for the suffrage was revealing, 'it was evident that the audiences came expecting to see curious masculine objects walking on to the platform'.<sup>68</sup>

The conflation of the personal and the political in other aspects of Victorian feminism resulted in contemporary controversy over female sexuality. Debates over the 'New Woman', and her representation in late Victorian fiction as the challenger of sexual taboos, led Mrs. Fawcett, the moderate suffragist, to stress in 1895 that in her view feminism did *not* include the concept of free love.<sup>69</sup> It is interesting to note that Harriet Martineau (feminist and best-selling author on political economy), had warned against what she saw as the 'Wollstonecraft order' forty years before this. In her *Autobiography* she wrote:

I have no vote at elections, although I am a taxpaying housekeeper and responsible citizen; and I regard the disability as an absurdity, seeing that I have for a long course of years influenced public affairs to an extent not professed or attempted by many men. But I do not see that I could do much good by personal complaints, which always have some suspicion or reality of passion in them. I think the better way is for us all to learn and try to the utmost what we can do, and thus to win for ourselves the consideration which alone can secure us rational treatment. The Wollstonecraft order set to work at the other end, and as I think, do infinite mischief . . . I have never regarded her as a safe example, nor as a successful champion of Woman and her Rights.<sup>70</sup>

What Martineau objected to in the 'Wollstonecraft order' was first,

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in J. Sutherland, *Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Eminent Victorian and Prominent Edwardian* (Oxford, 1990), p. 300.

<sup>67</sup> B. Harrison, *Separate Spheres. The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (1978), chapter 4, *passim*.

<sup>68</sup> Helen Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage* (1902), pp. 110–1.

<sup>69</sup> M. Fawcett's Review of *The Woman Who Did*, in *Contemporary Review*, LXVII (1895), p. 630.

<sup>70</sup> H. Martineau, *Autobiography* (Virago edn, 1983), vol. I, p. 402.

the conflation of individual wrongs with public causes, and secondly, the behaviour that ensued from this, 'violating all good taste by her obtrusiveness in society.'<sup>71</sup>

A more general violation of ladylike norms of behaviour by militant suffragettes resulted after 1905 from feminist frustration at a male-dominated Victorian and Edwardian society's refusal to concede what Martineau had described as a 'rational treatment' of women's political deserts. Emmeline Pankhurst later reflected that, 'We threw away all our conventional notions of what was "ladylike" and "good form"'.<sup>72</sup> A recent study has concluded that 'The suffrage movement had brought women into public visibility in a new and unique way.'<sup>73</sup> The militant campaigns of the suffragettes were indeed an overt and therefore 'visible' challenge to the power distribution of an Edwardian patriarchy. They provoked allegations of unwomanliness, and also of hysteria, a convenient term which bore both a flexible everyday meaning as well as more specialist clinical connotations. *The Times* fulminated in 1908 that 'the more violent partisans of the cause are suffering from hysteria.'<sup>74</sup> The medical profession joined in the public debate. Its most notorious public utterances came from Sir Almoth Wright, who wrote that a doctor contemplating the militant suffragist could not shut his eyes 'to the fact that there is mixed up with the woman's movement much mental disorder; and he cannot conceal from himself the physiological emergencies which lie behind.'<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it was at this time that the government brought psychiatrists to Holloway to see whether hunger-striking suffragette prisoners might be certified as lunatics.<sup>76</sup> The contemporary identification of militant feminism with hysteria was based on perceived similarities: anger, refusal of food, and revolt against the norms of prescribed ladylike behaviour.

Edwardian anti-suffrage cartoons of feminists often contrasted a 'shrieking sisterhood' with an appealing womanliness in its opponents. But the iconography of later anti-suffrage publicity was revealing in its inconsistencies. It portrayed militant women as fitting the categories of a debased and degenerate femininity as it appeared in contemporary psychiatric literature. They were seen both as excessively feminine – and therefore hysterical – and as excessively masculine – and therefore lesbian.<sup>77</sup> These images were in

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.

<sup>72</sup> E. Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (1914), pp. 61–2.

<sup>73</sup> Vicinus, *Independent Women*, p. 281.

<sup>74</sup> *The Times*, 11 December 1908.

<sup>75</sup> *The Times*, 28 March 1912. Wright, a noted anti-feminist, later expanded his views in *The Unexpurgated Case Against Women's Suffrage* (1913).

<sup>76</sup> M.R. Richardson, *Laugh A Defiance* (1953) pp. 152–4.

<sup>77</sup> L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Woman. Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907–1914* (1987), pp. 193, 195, 198–9, and illustrations facing p. 211.

part a response to the very 'visibility' of the challenge that militant feminists posed to traditional gender boundaries. In attempting to move women so openly from the private to the public spheres, militant suffragettes aroused deep-seated psychic anxieties and antagonisms in society. It was thus predictable that they should fail to gain the vote.<sup>78</sup>

This discussion of the militant suffragettes has suggested that it was the activity – seeking to move women into a central area of the public sphere – when linked to the extreme tactics that accompanied it, which created a new visibility for feminist aspirations. Women were seen to be moving out of an acceptable social borderland in an attempt to breach what their opponents regarded as an impermeable gender frontier. Suffragettes' campaigns differed from the 'social housework' of earlier political endeavours, where women's gradualism and careful attention to outward social proprieties effectively disguised the extent to which activists had permeated traditional gender boundaries. This interpretation differs from that of Showalter, who has stated that, 'The hunger strikes of militant women prisoners brilliantly put the symptomology of anorexia nervosa to work in the service of the feminist cause.'<sup>79</sup> In contrast, I would argue that this adoption of behaviour, which contemporaries regarded as indicative of mental illness, helped their political opponents; it reinforced their perception that hunger-striking suffragettes were not only inhabiting a social borderland but a psychiatric one as well.

The extremity of opponents' responses in attempting to brand suffragettes as psychologically unstable also attested to radical feminists' fundamental challenge to a male public sphere. Their response has certain parallels with hostile reactions to women's earlier attempts to pursue secondary and higher education and thence to enter high-status male professions. In each case central features of female physiology were depicted as pathological, so that woman's reproductive functions were held to disqualify her from sustained political or mental effort. Almroth Wright's coded reference in 1912 – which linked suffragettes' mental illness to 'physiological emergencies' – would have been instantly understood by his readers as referring to this discussion. Contemporary theories of Darwinian evolution and of the conservation of energy apparently provided a 'scientific' rationale for continuing controversy over women's educational, professional and political aspirations. But this recurrent

<sup>78</sup> Historians disagree as to whether militancy even raised the position of female suffrage on the political agenda. See, for example, the contrasting assessments of M. Pugh, *Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1867–1928* (Historical Association, 1980), p. 25, and D. Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals. The Politics of Women Suffrage in England* (Oxford, 1975), p. 159.

<sup>79</sup> Showalter, *Female Malady*, p. 162.

debate can only be fully understood if its timing is related to women's attempts to cross the border into the economic and political strongholds of a masculine public space.<sup>80</sup>

Throughout this paper I have pointed to the importance of boundaries within a borderland. In my conclusion I should like to allude both to the rewards and penalties that women faced when entering this shadowy area. Crossing borders too obviously or prematurely could incur social stigma or social costs. An example of the latter was the social prejudice against educated women as potential wives in certain sectors of society, as can be seen in the endless cartoons directed against 'learned ladies' in late-Victorian issues of *Punch*.<sup>81</sup> Is it therefore surprising that many women maintained a preference for more cautious approaches in the borderland between the private and public spheres? However, it is important to emphasise that women were not merely passive recipients of traditionalist values but creatively shaped their destiny. A gradualist approach to new departures, and the adoption of a socially-conservative rather than radical demeanour, had had notable successes in achieving new frontier posts for women. In defending the militant 'shrieking sisterhood' against allegations of unwomanliness Mrs. Pethick-Lawrence argued that 'you see how much need there is for our "shrieking"'. It is the duty of every woman here to come and help us shriek.<sup>82</sup> But many suffragists rejected such tactics as counter-productive, preferring to campaign in a feminine manner for feminist objectives. Moderates appreciated the value of social invisibility within the borderland since, on the one hand this was non-threatening to a public masculinity, and on the other, it allowed women unobtrusively to build up new skills, confidence and identity. This social borderland contained not so much a fixed boundary as a moving frontier – an expanding opportunity for women.

Some of the contradictions and complexities inherent in one aspect of 'Victorian Values' have been highlighted in this paper. The very flexibility of these ideological constraints has meant that they can be resurrected in different contexts; history can be used rather than explicated. Past values are seen in some sense as eternal verities and the nostalgic political appeal of values associated with a 'great' period in our past is only too obvious. But this leaves out of account the extent to which these values were shared. In this paper I have tried to suggest that there was a lack of consensus over the boundary between public and private spheres; Victorian women

<sup>80</sup> Harrison, *Separate Spheres*, chapter 4, *passim*; Digby, 'Women's Biological Straitjacket'; Showalter, *Female Malady*, chapter 6, *passim*.

<sup>81</sup> C. Rover, *The Punch Book of Women's Rights* (1967), pp. 55–72.

<sup>82</sup> Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *The New Crusade* (Womens Social and Political Union, 1907).

were faced with a dominant set of values to which they owed only limited allegiance. Many restrictive dichotomies still retain their power within a gendered world today, so that modern feminists continue to see analytical relevance in the concept of public and private spheres.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, J.B. Elshtain, *Public Man and Private Woman. Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, 1981); J. Siltanen and M. Stanworth, eds, *Women and the Public Sphere. A Critique of Sociology and Politics* (1984); and Pateman, *Disorder of Women* (1989) for recent stimulating discussions on this point.