

The Ideal Victorian Housewife: Mrs. Beeton's Challenge to the Traditional Representation of Domesticity in *The Book of Household Management*

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the manner in which the author Isabella Beeton (1836-65) both expresses and contests the tenets of Victorian domesticity through a contextual and historical analysis of her *The Book of Household Management* (1861). By the time Mrs. Panton introduced Isabella's book in *From Kitchen to Garret* (1890) as offering a little "common sense" in household management (18), it had already become a Bible for young housewives of the late nineteenth century. At the same time, with the increasing popularity of *The Book of Household Management*, Mrs. Beeton's name and status had made her a very well-known figure in the world of cookery books.

Nevertheless, it is also true that her life and character as an ideal middle-class housewife were deeply misconstrued; after Isabella's short life ended at age twenty eight, the details of her life story were somehow distorted and misrepresented by her family and biographers.¹ Therefore, *The Book of Household Management* is almost the only accessible and credible material in which Isabella left a few clues through which to gain a pivotal insight into her attitude to women's domestic roles and lives. By examining her accounts of natural history and cooking recipes, this paper aims to illuminate the way in which Isabella represented an ideal middle-class housewife, thus challenging notions of traditional Victorian domesticity.

Although Isabella possessed a traditional class-consciousness, she was not a typical Victorian middle-class housewife. Isabella, who was born into a middle-class family in London, married an English publisher and typical self-made man Samuel Orchart Beeton (1831-77). Following the success of Samuel's periodical *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*,² Mrs. Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* sold over 60,000 copies in its first year (White 282). The book's success

was due in part to the way in which Isabella shifted the image of cooking from drudgery to pleasant, fashionable work with her intelligence and imagination. The most significant aspect was, however, her weaving of historical and anthropological strands into her account in order to create a connection between private cooking and femininity. This approach enabled her to represent a new way of life, not merely as a housewife but also as a writer and advocate for middle-class women.

Since very little is known about her own domestic life, Kathryn Hughes' biography offers new interpretations of Isabella's writing in terms of her family relations.³ In some ways, the relationship between Isabella, who worked as a writer, and Samuel was extremely unusual. Her decision to support Samuel's career, along with her peculiar ideas about the middle-class Victorian woman, undoubtedly affected their marital relationship. Thus, examining Isabella's life and career will not only suggest the ideal figure of a Victorian housewife, but also reveal a very complex side of the Victorian household and its management during the mid-nineteenth century. Additionally, it will help us to understand different aspects of her character as depicted in the book through the globally-celebrated brand of *Mrs. Beeton*.

2. Victorian Middle-Class Housewife

One of the significant reasons that Isabella Beeton came to symbolize the middle-class housewife is her explicit sense of class-consciousness. Her notion of middle-classness was derived from her Victorian middle-class upbringing. Her stepfather Henry Dorling, the principal leaseholder of the Grandstand on Epsom racing course, was a rich and powerful businessman. In *The Book of Household Management*, Isabella's memories of her father's friends encouraged her to illustrate how visitors should be "pleased" by "attentive and respectful" domestics (Beeton 11). Through her correspondence with refined visitors and relatives, she must have learned how to socialize with contemporary upper-middle class intellectuals.

On the other hand, Isabella had grown up to be anything but a typical middle-class woman. We can imagine that her life was somehow uproarious and rough, for she was the eldest of twenty-one children (Hughes 56-59). Even after her marriage, hard work was the norm. According to Sarah Freeman, Isabella woke up very early to help Samuel with his most urgent work while at the same time running her home and instructing the servants on the preparation of meals for him at any time (131). In fact, Isabella insists on the importance of "early rising" as "one of the most essential

qualities which enter into good Household Management” (8). At this point, she was entirely aware of the importance of hard work as the key to success as an ideal mistress of the household, although idleness was characteristic of the middle-class housewife.

Therefore, it is not a surprising coincidence that Samuel Smiles issued *Self-Help* in 1859 when some parts of *The Book of Household Management* appeared.⁴ In the mid-Victorian period, lineage was no longer the essential factor in producing a successful entrepreneur; rather, self-control and hard work became the most important characteristics of an affluent middle-class gentlemen. For Isabella, these virtues were also applicable to women’s domestic duties. What she believed housewives should keep in mind for “the proper management of a Household” was more than thirty items on “the daily regulation of its affairs” (8).⁵ Based on these domestic qualities, the book addresses the importance of “let[ing] each mistress always remember her responsible position” (29).

In *The Book of Household Management*, there are visible reflections of the new ideas and social changes occurring in Victorian society. For instance, Isabella introduced new technology, such as hotplates and roasters with mobile shelves, which represented the most recent developments in cooking. Arguing that this kind of new equipment should be “well-supplied” to “perform her office in a satisfactory manner” (42), she wholeheartedly embraced their adoption by the Victorian family. At the time of industrialization, both cookery books and women’s magazines represent the way in which “metaphors of mechanization and professionalism” were endorsed for housework that required the rational planning of time and money (Liefers 447-71). Isabella recognized the growing number of middle-class women who needed an efficient tool to cope with all the issues of household management.

Isabella’s modern methods of cooking employed technological improvements, which certainly enabled women to save time and money. In fact, the book made better use of practical techniques than most cookery books that had preceded it. A good example is found in her advice:

‘A place for everything, and everything in its place’ must be her role, in order that time may not be wasted in looking for things when they are wanted, and in order that the whole apparatus of cooking may move with the regularity and precision of a well-adjusted machine; — all must go on simultaneously. (61-62)

Here, Isabella suggests that working efficiently and systematically is an essential part

of household management. *The Book of Household Management* thus made women more aware of the real daily situation in their kitchens.

To summarize the above, Isabella's most crucial desire was to address to what extent middle-class women could become wise housewives by improving their home management skills. She knew that those skills were "only attainable by practice and experience" (59). Besides, Isabella's challenge extended to improving the position of women by enhancing their professionalism as housewives. Reflecting social strands and her own lifestyle, she represented a new model of Victorian mistress, which was not *The Angel in the House* but "THE COMMANDER OF AN ARMY" who "performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly" (7). Giving female readers full responsibility over household management, she attempted to show independent and intelligent housewives how to support their husbands in competitive Victorian society.

3. Meat and Vegetable Kingdom

Another aspect that helped make Isabella a symbolic figure of the middle-class kitchen was her extensive knowledge of food and cookery. Her deep interest in presenting British traditional dishes as well as new foreign cuisine attracted numerous household readers. Ten years after the Great Exhibition of 1851, Isabella introduced the French method of serving fish, including *Cod à la Béchamel*, which had become "thoroughly familiar" in dining (104, 585). The publication of *The Book of Household Management* thus coincided with the expansion of global trading that accompanied the prosperity of the British Empire. It familiarized Britain with the international circulation of foodstuffs and menus, followed by an increase in public interest in culinary matters during the Victorian period.

Similarly, the dismal nature of English food was a recurrent topic in periodicals during the 1850s. A weekly magazine *Household Words* (1859) condemned English dining in comparison with French and German, both of which had emphatic models of the quality of the dishes:

We are falsely accused in consequence of over-eating; but the true cause of our ailments is bad cooking. A Frenchman or a German devours much more at one of his own inexhaustible tables-d'hôte than an Englishman consumes at his dining-table. (29)

This article depicts how the bad taste and texture of English food, along with its

consumption, would destroy not only one's health but the whole nation. Isabella agreed with this view, stating that "I have always thought that there is no more fruitful source of family discontent than a housewife's badly-cooked dinners and untidy ways" (3). The discourse of bad English cooking associated with a woman's responsibility in the household led her to stress the importance of learning about cookery.

Although Isabella actually inserted modern foreign cookery into her book, she essentially tried to illustrate her book with various kinds of foodstuff and methods for reconstructing traditional dishes in Britain. In order to do so, she used a distinctive method of representing national identity through her recipes. For instance, meat-eating, which symbolized the development of civilization, was one of the most important dietary factors within Western culture (Braudel 127-35). In fact, the numerous meat dishes in *The Book of Household Management* reinforce the traditional carnivorous British identity in contrast to the relatively few vegetable recipes.⁶ Isabella believed that meat symbolized the uniformity of the nation, rooted in the "cravings of hunger or the parching of thirst" (157). The book thus expresses the traditional notions of Britishness, complete with its sense of uniformity and homogenous meat-eating as potent indicators of ethnicity in Britain.

Most importantly, however, Isabella adopted the positive representation of vegetables, although it has been argued that she simply did not place any importance on them. In *The Book of Household Management*, she admires "The Vegetable Kingdom," which "covers and beautifies the earth with an endless variety of form and colour" (156).⁷ Taking some examples, she introduces the tomato. "The Tomato," she says "is a native of tropical countries, but is now cultivated considerably both in France and England. Its skin is of a brilliant red, and its flavour, which is somewhat sour, has become of immense importance in the culinary art" (253). Although Isabella included only three tomato based dishes in her book, she realized that the vivid color and rich flavor of tomatoes enriched British dishes and could satisfy one's stomach.

Another vegetable for which she provides a detailed explanation is sea-kale, which was "esteemed as one of the most valuable esculents indigenous to Britain" (252). She then goes on to explain that sea-kales grow on the west coast of England and around Dublin, which implies its cross-island spread in daily use. In contrast to this, she did not add any explanation of potatoes, which were symbolically connected with barbarism and starvation among the Irish and correspondingly indicative of ethnic and social inferiority (Bhattacharya 5-6). Nevertheless, in her recipe for Jacket potatoes, Isabella mentions that in Ireland, "the cook of potatoes is better understood than in any

country” (251) to suggest that they were widespread in Britain. To put it briefly, Isabella’s experiment was, like meat-eating, to depict British identity through vegetable consumption. While her primary emphasis was on meat dishes, she observed the general use of vegetables in Britain and accepted it as a marker of wide food circulation.

4. The Connection between Cooking and Femininity

A further point worth mentioning is that Isabella was familiar with natural history. She blurred the boundaries between the vegetable kingdom and the animal kingdom making use of a quotation from classical scholar and naturalist John Hogg:

If our powers of observation were limited to the highest orders of animals and plants . . . we should then be able to with facility define the bounds of the two kingdoms; but as we descend the scale of each, and arrive at the lowest forms of animals, and plants, we there meet with bodies of the simplest structure, sometimes a mere cell, whose organization, modes of development and reproduction, are so anomalous, and partake so much of the character of both. . . (240)

In the following statements, Isabella agreed that “it is thus difficult to determine where the animals begin and the vegetables end” (240). Highlighting the structure of their bodies and the process of growth, she made the differences between vegetables and animals extraordinarily ambiguous. In other words, she regarded them as a benefit of nature and refused to divide them into two distinctive categories. Her concept of the natural world powerfully represents a diverse creation and its interaction in parallel with admiration of their powers of development and reproduction.

The year 1859, when Isabella published some parts of *The Book of Household Management*, is much better remembered for the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin. Commenting on the process of “natural selection,” Darwin asserts that “When we reflect on the vast diversity of the plants and animals which have been cultivated, and which have varied . . . this greater variability is simply due to our domestic productions having been raised . . . under conditions of life not so uniform” (8). Isabella’s notion of cooking is mostly in accordance with the perceived process of cultivation. Her writing demonstrates the considerable impact of materialism on Victorian dining culture:

As in the fine arts, the progress of mankind from barbarism to civilization is marked by a gradual succession of triumphs over the rude materialities of nature, so in the art of cookery is the progress gradual from the earliest and simplest modes, to those of the most complicated and refined. (57)

What Isabella observes in this narrative is that it is cooking that can transform “the simplest modes” of nature into “the most complicated and refined” culture.

Besides this, Isabella attempted to link the role of cooking to femininity. The triangular relationship between nature, women, and cooking has received scholarly attention with increased public interest in dietary culture. For example, the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has examined cultural mythologies that connect cooking with gender from ancient time.⁸ In his *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), he claims that the introduction of cooking was a cultural transformation by women of the raw in nature, which allowed them to be “socialised” and integrated into a community (335). More than one hundred years before the publication of this book, Isabella had already inferred that vegetables and wild animals could be transformed into “the art of cookery” by women’s hands (Beetham 392). Moreover, Vicki Swinbank contends that women’s cooking is a “natural and unconscious extension of their biological capacity to nurture their young, namely breastfeeding” (472). From this viewpoint, one may say that Isabella emphasizes the innate female role in reproduction to associate cooking with women.

5. Women and the Domestic Sphere

The issue of women’s roles is frequently discussed together with their place of work, since cultural divisions often stereotype gender roles, breaking them into separate spheres. The system of food circulation presented by Jack Goody provides a good example.⁹ He stresses the female role of cooking in the system in which the appetites of women as consumers are often concealed. Women, therefore, have been essentially imagined as “the producers” of dishes. As a result, women’s space was limited to the private sphere, where they had full responsibility for its management.

Not long before Isabella embarked on the publication of her book, periodicals and magazines had documented the works of popular club chefs, such as Alexis Soyer of

the Reform Club.¹⁰ In his celebrated book *The Gastronomic Regenerator* (1847), Alexis Soyer presents numerous menus to “grace the Kitchen of the Wealthy,” while aiming to improve “uncomfortably prepared” meals and introduce “the humble one of the cottage” (vi). Here, he discloses the typical notion of separate cookery for the rich and poor as well as for the public and private spheres. In fact, the development of cooking generally followed the separation of professional male cooks from the private cooking of housewives, together with the rapid growth of French Haute Cuisine (Swinbank 469).¹¹ As Isabella observes, “Men are now so well served out of doors — at their clubs, well-ordered taverns and dining houses” (3) that the dominant authority of consumption in the public sphere was indisputably masculine and men were excluded from the duties of household management.

The emergence of *the knowledgeable gourmet*, like Soyer, and the corresponding changes in cookery practices had their equivalent in the emergence of the politician in the bourgeois public world. In his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Jürgen Habermas posits the public, bourgeois world as a place where the “sphere of private people come together as a public” and the participants represent “reason” (27-28). This “reason” is associated with men’s formation of a culture that excluded women from the public community. The growth of the public sphere held an ideological transformation in gender relations; men were identified with “reason” in the public spaces whereas women were identified with “nature” in the domestic world.

Isabella had some awareness of this dualism. By praising and describing food resources as the benefit of the land, she argues in the chapter “THE NATURAL HISTORY OF FISHES” that, in order to protect it from exploitation, nature should not always be accessed by humans:

. . . the ‘great deep’ is crowded with inhabitants of various sizes, and of vastly different constructions. . . . The history of these races, however, must remain forever, more or less, in a state of darkness, since the depths in which they live, are beyond the power of human exploration, and since the illimitable expansion of their domain places them almost entirely out of the reach of human accessibility. (95-96)

The text shows a respect for the mysteriousness of the natural world as a place where humans should not be present; the world is like a domestic sphere, where men cannot exploit women’s authority. Women’s cooking, Isabella says, has a dominant power that can bring a new cultural dimension to their domestic sphere. That is to say, through

cooking, women can transform the condition of the “raw,” which is equivalent to nature, into “culture” in her “great deep” of the domestic sphere. This challenged the hierarchical habits of dining in Britain: female domestic cooking was considered low while the celebrated menus offered in restaurants were regarded as a sophisticated culinary activity for males. By emphasizing women’s responsibility in cooking, it is possible to claim that Isabella attempted to enhance women’s status and power in the domestic sphere.

6. Victorian Marital Partnership

As one of the busiest Victorian housemistresses, Isabella had neither stayed idly at home nor simply focused on domestic work: she herself was stalwartly mindful of being a good wife and being responsible for domestic management. As mentioned in the first section, Isabella worked devotedly for Samuel as mistress of his household, and, conversely, her work was truly supported by his strong affection toward her. In Samuel’s letters before their marriage, his concern for dining and kitchen utensils is made clear when he says, “. . . the Kitchen’s painted and the Grate is properly fixed, so as to be useful in case of much fire being required for our ‘petit-diners’” (*My Beloved Bella* ctd in Montgomery 68). As Deborah Cohen speculates regarding middle-class gentlemen of the 1860s, they required as much of their yearly income as possible for furnishing their homes to reflect their “stability” and “attract a desirable wife” (91-92). This notion could be applied to Samuel, who actively participated in the furnishing of their home to make it comfortably established.

This was intimately connected with the distribution of power between wife and husband. In the course of their marriage, Samuel’s increasing dependence on and affection for Isabella had control over his career. Isabella recognized that he “will have the entire management of me and I can assure you that you will find in me a most docile and willing pupil” (*The Letter of Isabella* ctd in Freeman 111). Lastly, her prospective words proved true when she involved herself enthusiastically in assisting with Samuel’s periodicals. While Isabella’s intellectual curiosity and hatred for boredom stimulated his ideas, her energy undoubtedly spurred Samuel on, which created a complementary relationship between them.

Most importantly, their strong partnership influenced not only their matrimonial relationship, but also Isabella’s professional motivation. This fact is made clearer when we compare her to female journalist and writer Constance Dorothy Evelyn Peel (1868–

1934), who had already earned money through her writing before marriage. Peel's financial independence surprised her parents who thought "it was strange" (Peel 62) that their daughter was able to earn money by herself when women rarely worked to support their families in the late nineteenth century. More surprising is that, despite her relatives' disapproval, she became engaged to an electrical engineer, Charles Steers Peel, who earned little or no money (63). Consequently, she was keen to continue writing articles; her intention was initially to work for a living.

In contrast, Isabella received no payment from Samuel for her writings. Her biographer, Sarah Freeman, assumes that the lack of a salary was never a concern for Isabella, even though she must have been aware of her great contribution to her husband's work (*The Letter of Isabella* ctd in Freeman 134). This reflects the norm in Victorian households whereby middle-class wives were financially dependent on their husbands. Therefore, if Samuel had paid Isabella for her contribution, it would have threatened her identity in a middle-class household. For Victorian women, earning money was seen as an infringement of their dignity and would "declass" them (Peterson 120), a view that occasionally made exiles of middle-class women. While Constance Peel was motivated by her financial situation, Isabella's career was definitely interwoven with her husband's, which maintained their typical middle-class conjugal relations.

For these reasons, it would be true to say that Isabella's motivation to work was maintained by her passion for writing itself and her partnership with Samuel. Therefore, Isabella's acceptance of the ideal notion of Victorian marital femininity represented the new mood of career-oriented women as well as the typical attitudes and values of a working housewife: while Isabella commuted to Samuel's office by train and worked as a writer with him, she was fully responsible for household management and raised her children. As more recent research has revealed, domestic spaces were more flexibly negotiated, with a more complex relationship between men and women than previous historians have recognized.¹² This surely allows us to interpret Victorian professional life in a new way.

According to Sarah Freeman, Isabella's household management was not "quite so perfect." Freeman contends that "her intense interest in the details of the house shows how passionately she had been looking forward to running her own establishment, but for a girl of her intelligence, organizing servants for two people was hardly demanding" (111). *The Book of Household Management* thus reflected the actual needs of household management for Isabella herself. She powerfully represented her life and did

not hesitate to show her ambition to be a working wife. Besides, the relationship between Isabella and Samuel did not encourage the separation of their respective spheres. Their lifestyle was rather unconventional but could be called a new middle-class life in the mid-Victorian period.

7. Conclusion

Describing household management as professional work that demanded high intellect and advanced techniques, Isabella Beeton gave middle-class mistresses the entire managerial responsibility in the domestic sphere. Despite her experiences in a middle-class household, she realized the “necessity of practising economy” for housewives and insisted on “frugality” as a domestic virtue (8). Her extraordinary acquaintance with the anthropology of cookery and history of nature would well explain the manner in which women could be intellectual housewives. In these ways, Isabella encouraged women to become gifted managers and produce a well-managed atmosphere for their husbands at home.

A further point to mention is that Isabella recognized the importance of cooking as a symbol of civilization. Balancing the recipes of traditional British dishes and modern foreign food, her representation of vegetables and meat reminds readers of nature and the creatures of the land. She believed that women were involved in what she saw as the ideological dualism of culture and nature. Admitting that domestic cooking was a woman’s primary work, she empowered women to cultivate nature as professional male chefs did in the public sphere.

The growth of the public sphere in Western countries reduced the time that women had to think about cooking. Although the development of technology seemingly allowed women to reduce their burden of housework, they were actually required to improve other skills, including saving money, labor, and time. By refining the technical methods of cooking, Isabella hoped that women might become fully-fledged working women with the assumption that home management was intrinsic to female nature.

While she began her career as her husband’s assistant, her energy and intelligence stimulated him and encouraged his ambition in the entrepreneurial sphere. Although the separation of home and workplace was compatible with the Victorian patriarchy, Isabella’s notion of the theory blurred the boundaries between them by professionalizing the domestic sphere. As Isabella shows, professional life was not just a man’s task; instead, males and females negotiated with each other to produce a more

complex matrix. *The Book of Household Management* thus made women more aware of their daily work and life with their husbands; in this sense, she made her writing “something more than a Cookery Book” (3).

Notes

*This is a revised version of my master’s thesis, “Victorian Domesticity in Women’s Cookery Books: The Household Management of Mrs. Beeton and Mrs. Peel”, which I submitted to Royal Holloway, University of London in 2014.

- 1 After Isabella died of puerperal fever, bankruptcy forced her husband Samuel to sell his titles to Ward, Locke & Tyler who later concealed her death and continued to publish new titles under her name. Moreover, a recent researcher Kathryn Hughes points out some factual inaccuracies in Isabella’s early biographies by Nancy Spain (12).
- 2 The magazine that Samuel launched for the middle-class housewife in 1852 was a great success when the greater part of the press was occupied with the upper classes. Its circulation jumped from 25,000 at the end of 1852 to 60,000 in 1860 (Freeman 85).
- 3 Hughes’ recent biography, *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton* (2005), presents new facts about Isabella and examines the influence of her book on Victorian culture. Hughes extended her research to include a number of diaries, letters, and writings of Isabella and Samuel, which showed her intention to construct a new career and conjugal life for women.
- 4 It is an interesting fact that Isabella’s half-sister Lucy Dorling married a son of Samuel Smile’s, Willy Smiles. In their private life, the Smiles and Dorlings lived close by in the south of London and had an intimate relationship.
- 5 The “daily regulation” for “good Household Management” starts with the recommendation of “EARLY RISING,” and includes some qualities such as “CLEANNESS,” “FRUGALITY,” and “FRIENDSHIPS.” It extends to practical instructions for household management, such as “MARKETING” to purchase the best food and replying to a letter of “INVITATION FOR DINNER.”
- 6 According to Hughes, Isabella believed meat to be more nutritious than salad or vegetables. Therefore, she gave priority to meat dishes over vegetables, the book starting with “General Directions for Making Soups,” followed by recipes for fish, sauce, meat, poultry, game, and then vegetables. Meat recipes occupied three hundred pages while vegetables occupied only fifty pages (361).
- 7 In *The Book of Household Management*, Isabella divided “the empire of nature” into three

- distinct domains: “The Mineral Kingdom,” “The Vegetable Kingdom,” and “The Animal Kingdom.” (156-57).
- 8 For example, Levi-Strauss investigated ethnic customs in Cambodia, Malaysia, Siam, and some regions of Indonesia where a woman who had just given birth was burned on a slow fire or grill. The ceremony can be interpreted as a transformation of the newborn child and woman from a “raw-person,” who embodies “natural or manufactured objects,” to a “cooked-person” (335-36).
- 9 Jack Goody segmented the area of food circulation into the following four categories: growing (production), allocating (distribution), cooking (preparation), and eating (consumption). In particular, he insists that women generally occupy the third ground of cooking in which “division and stratification of domestic or patrimonial labour exist” (37-38).
- 10 In 1836, the Reform Club was founded in London by the Liberal MPs who had successfully supported the Great Reform Act of 1832. Alexis Soyer was offered a job at the Club where he innovatively collaborated in designing the kitchens and installed many technologies. According to Helen Day, although there were many issues in club life, it became a truly comfortable place for men that provided a traditional “reassuring air of comfort and solidity” (509).
- 11 Haute cuisine, literally “high cooking” in French, is often served at high-class hotels and restaurants. Vicki Swinbank observes that “The emphasis on conspicuous consumption and culinary elaboration was a deliberate attempt to emphasise a culinary hierarchy and a separation between the lives of the ‘common people’ and a wealthy elite” (466).
- 12 Recent scholar Amanda Vickery, for example, challenges the orthodox understanding of segregation of the public and private spheres. In her interpretation, the notion of separate spheres cannot be universally applied to explain the specific period and class formation, which calls for a new understanding of Victorian women’s history (383-414). The research provides a pivotal insight into the Victorian ideology of separate spheres.

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