Jane Austen, 19th Century Author
Unequal and Unethical: The Campaign Against Woman’s Suffrage in 19th Century Great Britain

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During the nineteenth century, several female authors, such as the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen, stepped forward and began writing about the misery and suffering of the Victorian woman. These authors, as part of the feminist movement in nineteenth century Britain, fought against the Victorian view of women and men belonging in different spheres, and feminists across Britain pushed Parliament to draft a law to give women Parliamentary suffrage. Many Victorians, men and women alike, still held the view of separate gender spheres and fought the feminists in order to keep the status quo. However, even though anti-suffragists, whether male or female, tried to articulate their arguments against women’s enfranchisement through well-reasoned logic, all of these arguments stemmed from their acceptance of common preconceptions about women, which they then exaggerated into a “worst-case” scenario.

The idea that men and women were born into separate, unequal spheres, or realms of influence, defined the anti-suffrage prejudice. Men
belonged in the social realm of politics, whereas women “were primarily responsible for home and family.”¹ Not only did men and women belong to these different, natural spheres, anti-suffragists considered it an unethical, unnatural act for women to try to work outside of their given sphere. Only men should work in certain departments of national life because the work was too laborious and strenuous for women.² According to the many male anti-suffragists, “women’s direct participation [was] made impossible either by the disabilities of sex, or by strong formations of custom and habit resting ultimately upon physical difference, against which it [was] useless to contend.”³ Victorians perceived the natural spheres of men and women as if created by a natural law. This natural law was equivalent to the Law of Gravity, and it was useless for women to contend against nature and the universe. Because of this natural law, women’s “direct interest in [political] matters [could] never equal that of men, whose whole energy of mind and body [was] daily and hourly risked in them.”⁴ Women could not deal with the realm of men, due to lacking physical or mental endurance, creating the rationale for their existence in a different sphere.

⁴ Ibid., 2.
Because it was unnatural for a woman to leave her sphere, anti-suffragists believed that society simply worked better when both genders remained in their natural spheres, particularly in the realm of politics. Indeed, many men believed that the very qualities that made women excellent human beings, such as “the quickness to feel [and] the willingness to lay aside prudential considerations in a right cause,” were the very same qualities that made them unsuited for politics, and that with their participation “the risks of politics would be enormously increased.” 5 The very characteristics that made women a “blessing” to mankind might easily become a “disaster” for the country because those characteristics were not suitable for politics.

Anti-suffragists predicted another dangerous result: that giving the franchise to women would destroy the family. One anti-suffragist wrote that, “in the absence of constraint,” anarchy occurred within marriage and women began defying their husbands. 6 Defying the natural order, where women are subservient to men, brought anarchy and lawlessness to the family, destroying an institution ordained by both God and nature.

But not only women became immoral when the spheres were broken, but also the men. For example, many liberal politicians believed that some conservative politicians only temporarily supported women’s

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5 Ibid., 4-5.
suffrage, a political ploy to gain support for their party.\textsuperscript{7} Any pledges by politicians that supported suffrage were “hastily given in the hopes of strengthening existing political parties by the female vote.”\textsuperscript{8}

Anti-suffragists also argued that women’s suffrage went against the tenets of Christianity, because it was sinful or unethical for women to leave their natural sphere. It went against Christian morals for women to be made equal with men and given the ability to vote, as “it is part of the divine will…that the wife should live in a state of obedience to her husband.”\textsuperscript{9} Because the woman existed in a lower state than the husband, she could never be equal; therefore she could never vote. God created woman for man, not woman for herself or, as a level above her husband or the individual man, her country. Women could not vote because man owned them, and they did not have individual rights; one anti-suffragist, Heber L. Hart, argued that the expression ‘to take a wife’ occurs “repeatedly…clearly referring to the woman as one – the most valuable, doubtless – of man’s possessions.”\textsuperscript{10} Also, Christianity did not make women equal, it merely raised their sphere to a higher status. The same anti-suffragist argued that “the effect of Christianity upon the position of woman [was] not her emancipation from a position of natural subjection,

\textsuperscript{7} “The movement has nevertheless obtained considerable advance...[from] the twofold support it receives...[from]...practical Conservatives...[and]...from...visionary Radicals.” Frederick Augustus Maxse, “Reasons for Opposing Woman Suffrage” (London: Manchester Selected Pamphlets, 1884), i.
\textsuperscript{9} Hart, “Women’s Suffrage,” 93.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 5.
but the amelioration of that position by virtue of the government of the husband.”\textsuperscript{11} Christianity never raised the status of woman, but through man raised “the wife from a servile condition, where it has existed, but to restrain her from equality.”\textsuperscript{12} This, of course, ignored that women died in childbirth and men often found themselves in the “lowly” maternal position of caring for their children. Furthermore, equality of gender went against the teachings of Paul, because it incited rebellion of the wife against the husband. “We are told that St. Paul said, ‘Wives obey your husbands’ but he also said, ‘Slaves, obey your masters.’ It was not St. Paul’s business, nor was it consistent with his object…to incite any one to rebellion against existing laws.”\textsuperscript{13} Christianity, according to the anti-suffragists, did not incite rebellion against laws because it did not question the established laws. Therefore, women should not question their inability to vote. The Bible, after all, says that God anoints the government and its laws.\textsuperscript{14} The righteous woman stayed in her natural sphere, rather than disrupting and corrupting the natural order.

The Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Act of 1892 provided the anti-suffragists with another argument. In order to be registered or entitled to registration for voting in a town or city council, the woman

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{13} Hart, “Women’s Suffrage,” 103.
\textsuperscript{14} Romans 13:1.
had to own property. This meant that married women, whose husbands owned the property, and female servants, or lodgers, were ineligible for registration, and therefore ineligible for the parliamentary vote. Widows and property owning, single women, however, were eligible. When discussing the narrowness of the women’s enfranchisement bill, William Gladstone stated,

The Bill is a narrow Bill, inasmuch as it excludes from its operation the entire body of married women; who are not less reflective, intelligent, and virtuous, than their unmarried sisters, and who must I think be superior in another great element of fitness, namely the lifelong habit of responsible action.

Anti-suffragist Lady Emily Maud Simon, wife of Sir Robert M. Simon, said,

Women of property would naturally resent the disfranchisement that marriage would bring with it, and women lodgers would be in the same predicament. It is unnecessary to point out the confusion that would arise if...wives and daughters in all classes of society could qualify themselves for the vote by money payments for rooms to their respective husbands and fathers.

For Lady Simon, this inequality in the proposed law introduced unnecessary complications to the legal system.

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15 “Every woman...in Great Britain is registered or entitled to be registered as an elector for any town council or county council...shall be entitled to be registered as a parliamentary elector, and when registered to vote at any parliamentary election for the county, borough, or division wherein the qualifying property is situate.” “Debate, 1892, in the House of Commons on Women’s Suffrage: Special Report, The” (London: The Central National Society for Women’s Suffrage, 1892).


17 Lady Emily Maud Simon, “Women’s Suffrage; Some Sociological reasons for opposing the movement” (Birmingham: Cornish Bros. Ltd., 1907), 9-10.
Besides the fact that the bill itself established inequality between single and married women, many anti-suffragists, men and women alike, worried about the lifestyles of single women and the effects of those lifestyles on national policy:

If votes be given to unmarried women on the same terms as they are given to men, large numbers of women leading immoral lives will be enfranchised…while married women who…have passed through more of the practical experiences of life than the unmarried, will be excluded.\(^\text{18}\)

According to the anti-suffragists, single women had lost their morals, their sense of duty, their proper way of life, and “the sanctity of the private household [was] being exchanged for the scrambling life of public restaurants and hotels.”\(^\text{19}\)

For many of the anti-suffragists, the campaign for women’s rights signified that women were becoming corrupt. The novelist Marie Corelli wrote that “the art of good manners [was] all being forgotten under an avalanche of loose conduct and coarse speech.”\(^\text{20}\) Men in Victorian Britain saw women as pure, and many anti-suffragists believed that their involvement in politics might damage women’s moral fiber:

We believe that [moral influence] depends largely on qualities, which the natural position and functions of women as they are at present tend to develop, and which might be seriously impaired

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20 Ibid., 4.
by their admission to the turmoil of active political life. These qualities are, above all, sympathy and disinterestedness.Emily Maud Simon had a very radical “use it or lose it” perspective on women’s roles in politics, saying that “given the opportunity…to play a full part with men in the rough-and-tumble game of party politics in England…the majority of thinking women might develop the fitness for this new departure in their activities,” but at the cost of their moral character. They no longer employed their morals in their day-to-day lives. This further emphasized the idea that trespassing into another’s sphere, such as women trespassing into men’s, brought about unethical behavior capable of ruining society. The strength of the Victorian woman’s moral character is a paradox. Victorian society placed women on a pedestal as perfect beings, yet, according to Lady Simon, politics easily degrade them and plunge women into moral depravity. It is unlikely that women might forget their morals in such an absent-minded manner as Lady Simon suggested.

The Victorians’ ideal woman, in contrast, thought of women’s duties rather than women’s rights. Queen Victoria, as the ideal woman and ruler, “governed in a woman’s way, by effacing herself, by putting her husband forward…by keeping herself aloof from all parties and fixing

22 Lady Simon, 13.
her gaze steadfastly on the highest good of her people.”23 Also, because women belonged in a different sphere from the men, the ideal woman “[was] not meant to shine, except as the ‘light behind,’ which [illuminated] the whole.”24

The ideal woman can only be defined by the prejudices of the anti-suffragists against the ‘flawed’ and ‘corrupt’ women. Anti-suffragists held a prejudice against women’s lack of education and intelligence, which made them unfit to vote on national policies. Women did not possess the mental capabilities to participate in politics. One anti-suffragist writer, the novelist Marie Corelli, said that she found

most [women] deeply interested, if not altogether absorbed in the study of apparel...[and] are not fit to deal with politics. Any woman who passes a whole morning with her modiste, cannot possibly have the brain to understand even the smallest part of a political question, much less the whole of it.25

Corelli then goes on to explain why the suffragettes were wrong and what the educated, clever woman was like:

The Suffragette seeks to be what Woman naturally is not. She is unable to see that Woman, as pure womanly, has the whole game of life in her own hands, without ‘suffrage.’ She loses sight of the fact that if it be true that Man is her master, Woman has trained him into that position.26

According to Corelli, woman raised her children to rely on their mothers and then later their wives, so woman had only herself to blame for her

25 Ibid., 37.
26 Ibid., 4.
“lowly” position; it made no sense to try and undo the place that woman naturally created for herself.

Corelli painted the unlikely picture that clever women only had to conquer men and hold them in subservience. According to Corelli, “clever women have always done it [and] it is only stupid women who cannot command men.”

Furthermore, clever women did not need to vote because they could get others to vote for the candidate of their choice, and those votes would add up to many more votes than a woman by herself could give. This language describing the clever, educated woman illustrates Corelli’s view that woman’s sphere or realm of influence, while still in a place unequal to man’s, actually existed on a higher level than man’s. Corelli did not want the vote because the very desire for a vote on the part of a woman [was] an open confession of weakness, - a proof that she [had] lost ground, and [was] not sure of herself. For if she [was] a real Woman, - if she [had] the natural heritage of her sex, which [was] the mystic power to persuade, enthrall and subjugate man, she [had] no need to come down from her throne and mingle in any of his political frays, inasmuch as she [was] already the very head and front of the Government.

Corelli’s views are the very personification of illogical. She argued that women did not need the vote because they could get more votes by controlling men. However, if women had the ability to control men so easily, they surely would not have been kept in check by the anti-

27 Ibid., 27.
28 Ibid., 13.
29 Ibid., 14-15.
suffragists, a group comprised of women and men, for so long. Corelli believed that the suffragists degraded themselves by acting like men, and for that reason men did not support them; a “masculine woman is nothing more than a libelous caricature of an effeminate man.”

Woman had created man’s place as well as her own. Corelli stated, “Man is what Woman makes him. She bears him and rears him. She is his supreme ruler…[and] woman alone is in fault for his war against her. It is she who has taught him to fight for everything he wants.” Thus, woman should not complain about her place in the world, for she alone bears responsibility for her status. Corelli felt so strongly against suffrage that she did not even hold herself back from insulting her own sex, saying that “every lad in his teens knows what a simpering noodle a woman can be if she wants his attention or courts his admiration, and he generally starts life by answering the noodle according to her noodleism. Such early impressions die hard.” Whether in rearing their children, courtship during adolescence, or even in marriage, women defined their own sphere of influence and their own inequality. However, because women defined their own status, they could put themselves in a position over man.

For other female anti-suffragists, such as the novelists Eliza Lynn Linton and Mary Ward, prejudice came from aspects of their own

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30 Ibid., 17-18.
31 Ibid., 16.
32 Ibid., 21.
personal lives. Eliza Lynn Linton’s own views against women’s rights came partially from the absence of her own mother, who died giving birth to Eliza. An uncaring father augmented the difficulty of her childhood, because he left his children to their own devices, rather than teaching them or giving them any kind of guidance. Some of Eliza’s difficulties growing up also came from her own unfeminine features. However, though Eliza herself had more masculine attributes and even prided herself on these more masculine features, she “accepted the prevalent Victorian view of women as weak, irrational, and superficial,” so that she looked down on other women in her time period. Strength, intelligence, and especially Eliza’s independence were all traits that the people of the Victorian era saw as masculine. Linton accepted the idea of separate spheres, insisting that men should be men, and “women, sharply, unmistakably defined…not an ambiguous sex which is neither one nor the other.” Linton committed herself to preventing other children from losing their mothers as a result of women trying to act out a role in which they did not belong.

Similar to Linton, Mary Ward’s beliefs originated from a less-than-ideal childhood. While her mother was still alive during Mary’s childhood, she spent most of her time growing up attending boarding

34 Ibid., 12.
35 Ibid., 12
schools. Because she received such a lack of maternal affection, Ward developed a "strong sense of family duty, and a commitment to the welfare of neglected children." 36 Both Ward and Linton committed themselves to preventing the misfortunes of their own childhoods in the lives of others.

Louise Creighton, like Ward and Linton, was also a "maternal" anti-suffragist. Creighton was the firstborn of thirteen children. Her childhood differed from both Linton’s and Ward’s, however, in that her mother took an active role in educating her children. 37 Her mother’s dependability strengthened Creighton’s ideal of the mother’s role as the caretaker of her children. Creighton knew of the large role her mother played in her own adolescence and education, and, much like Eliza Linton and Mary Ward, she feared that women might neglect their children if they became engrossed in national politics; if women got the parliamentary vote, it would be “a dangerous diversion from more suitable work close at hand.” 38 Also like Linton and Ward, she believed that while women should further their education, they should reconcile “womanly and motherly roles with women’s own intellectual development.” 39 Creighton believed that, while the political arena was no place for women, they could still further society’s progress through

36 Ibid., 29.
37 Bush, Women Against the Vote, 30.
38 Ibid., 26.
39 Ibid., 31.
social intervention and learning.\textsuperscript{40} As illustrated by Creighton’s childhood, Victorians believed that “mothers were at the heart of the Victorian home, as educators, moral guardians, and care-givers, and over the decades which followed, the domestic roles of women were increasingly defined in relation to a spiritual mission of wifehood and maternity.”\textsuperscript{41} Victorians viewed mothers as indispensable figures for society, serving as the means for improving and modernizing Britain. If mothers neglected their duty in order to gain the vote, they doomed society to its own malfeasance.

The Victorian preconceptions of separate, unequal spheres, and the idea that it was unethical for women to leave that natural sphere, defined the foundations for the anti-suffragists’ bias. Mary Ward, Eliza Lynn Linton and Louise Creighton, all “maternal” reformers, formed their prejudice against woman’s ability to multitask; to take care of their family and still be politically active, and that prejudice motivated their fight against women’s suffrage. This prejudice was certainly more positive in nature than those of their male contemporaries, who believed women as too lowly, unintelligent and therefore unfit to participate in the political arena, but with the prejudices of the male and female anti-

\textsuperscript{40} Louise Creighton later recanted her anti-suffrage beliefs, but never stopped advocating the advancement of women’s education or encouraging their increased activity in social programs. Mary Ward and Linton, however, both joined the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League as executive members at the beginning of the Twentieth Century (“The Appeal,” Bush 27-28).

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 24.
suffragists combined, the anti-suffrage movement succeeded in preventing women’s enfranchisement into the twentieth century, when suffragists began a more militant campaign.