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# Victorian Courtship – from Ideal to Real. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and the Rules of Etiquette

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The Victorian era in Britain was characterized by an emphasis on respectability which formed a part of the domesticity ideology that treated the home as a place created for women. Proper, respectable behaviour was a function of belonging to the middle class. A significant number of etiquette guides published contemporaneously informed the reader not only about receiving guests but also about courtship and marriage. The subject of the article is a close reading of these etiquette guides and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* letters section, which frequently addresses issues of courtship and marriage. The analysis of the texts using rigid gender roles as presented in the guides and the comparison of them with the letters section of the magazine shows that young readers expressed their independence and assertiveness in trying to contest these rules.

This article examines a dual perspective on Victorian courtship in two sources: *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and popular etiquette guides. I examine how traditional and slightly progressive ideas on relationships between the sexes are presented. Marriage was the foundation of everyday Victorian life, so everything that led to it was of paramount importance. The article is structured thematically following the traditional steps of courtship as presented in the etiquette guides.

Nineteenth-century Britain was a country in which socioeconomic inequality was widespread amongst women. Feminist scholars have blamed the "rise of capitalism" for discrimination against women.[1] For whatever reason, women's education was essentially different from men's and rudimentary despite the possibilities of schooling.[2] The education received by each of the sexes confirmed their places in society. In accordance with the essence of the division of roles, women inhabited the domestic sphere caring for children and creating homes that were peaceful places for their husbands, who were engaged in their professions. Work and related problems were the domain of men, their sphere of activity.[3]

The division of roles into typically feminine and masculine stemmed from the belief that women were physically and intellectually weak. Yet, an interesting fact was the common belief in Victorian England that women were morally superior to men, and this was connected to the conviction of their physical and intellectual inferiority. No wonder then that the majority of English society shared the belief that it was inappropriate for middle and upper class women to enter public life, in terms of a professional career, political life, or education. The world was seen as dirty, brutal, and often immoral. The home was the opposite, being presented as peaceful and pure.[4] The whole concept was rooted in the middle class since lower class women worked, which was taken for granted.

The Victorian era in Britain was characterized by an emphasis on respectability as a concept, a combination of religious, economic, and cultural elements that made it easier for individuals to arrange their relationships with the world.[5] The concept of respectability was part of a broader domesticity ideology that associated women with the home as their intended place.

The English attached great importance to the rules of etiquette. Following proper etiquette was a hallmark of an individual's place in society.[6] The emphasis

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[1] Thomas, Janet, "Women and Capitalism: Oppression or Emancipation? A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30/3 (1988): 536.

[2] Kathryn Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 2016), 148.

[3] For more on the position of women in marriage, see: Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850–1900* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), 128–151 (chapter Marriage and morality) and Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London: John Murray, 1996), 72–92 (chapter Angels in the House, Marriage and Domestic Life).

[4] Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850–1900* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), 130.

[5] Even Frideric Engels was complaining about the idea of respectability present among English working class. "The most repulsive thing here is the bourgeois 'respectability' which has grown deep into the bones of the workers," https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89_12_07.htm, access: 15.12.2022.

[6] More about etiquette in nineteenth century England see: Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals, and Class in England, 1774–1858* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 1994); Michael Curtin, *Propriety and Position: a Study of Victorian Manners* (New York–London: Garland, 1987).

on the ability to behave well was reflected in a significant number of etiquette books published during the Victorian era.[7] To a large extent, these materials targeted the behaviour of the middle class or the aspiring working class. Having increased in size since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the middle class was becoming stronger and was looking for patterns that would enable it to escape its humble beginnings. As Jennifer Phegley puts it, the etiquette guides "were aimed at helping readers avoid the appearance of vulgarity."[8] The socially insecure middle class needed social education.

Some of the guides were written or claimed to have been written by aristocrats. The information included in them was slightly exotic such as the precedence of people with aristocratic titles or how to conduct oneself at court. The guides presented the ideal of the fashionable lady spending her time socializing and not only domestic living.

The guides were concerned not only with the reception of guests or the management of servants but also with very important issues such as marriage and its earlier stage of courtship.

Despite the large number of etiquette books, many questions focused on courtship in a section of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* called "Cupid's letter bag" and later "Englishwoman's Conversazione" that answered letters from readers.[9]

The magazine was published from 1852 to 1879 as a popular monthly aimed at young middle-class women.[10] Dress patterns and the latest fashions from Paris were available to a wide audience, and correspondence columns were often treated as a platform for expressing opinions and anxieties.

The magazine was priced at two pence and was immensely successful. After the abolition of the Paper Tax in 1860, the price and format were changed, colour plates of fashions were added, and the price increased to six pence.

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[7] For history of guides see: Tabitha Kenlon, *Conduct Books and the History of the Ideal Woman* (London–New York: Anthem Press, 2020).

[8] Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 33.

[9] More about history of the magazine see: Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996); Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000); *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s–1900s. The Victorian Period*, eds. Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Harold Herd, *The March of Journalism: The Story of the British Press from 1622 to the Present Day* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1952); Jeffrey Auerbach, "What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth-Century English Women's Magazines and the Emergence of Consumer Culture," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 30, 2 (1997); Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); R. Ballaster, M. Beetham, E. Frazer, S. Hebron, *Women's Worlds; Ideology, Femininity and the Women's Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public* (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

[10] For a very interesting analysis of women's literacy in Victorian England see: Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader. 1873–1914* (Oxford: A Clarendon Press Publication, 2002).

Within the first year, owner Samuel Beeton claimed that the magazine had a circulation of 25,000 copies. In 1856, this number increased to 37,000, and by 1860 to 50,000.[11] Beeton's wife, the ever famous Isabella Beeton, was one of the editors of the magazine. After her death in 1865, her place was taken by another woman – Myra Browne.

Because of financial difficulties, Samuel Beeton had to sell the magazine to a rival company, but he worked there as the editor until 1875. Without Beeton and his knowledge of the readership, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* finally closed in 1879.

The editors of the magazine understood the necessity of close contact with readers and included a letters section with advice about love problems.[12] Placing a higher value on their own advice, they claim that "books of etiquette are of very little use to those who stand in need of the instruction they are supposed to contain. They contain much that is useless on account of its being so very plain to common sense that not one in a thousand would fall into the blunders to which reference is made."[13]

While my reading is limited to 1852–1879 when *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* was published, the close reading of the letters published in it and their comparison with etiquette books shows an interesting tension and even dichotomy between the rules and the wishes of mostly young women regarding issues of love and courtship.

Victorian guides of etiquette used the terms "lady" and "gentleman." These were the models of social behaviour seen as ideals by the Victorian middle class. Each of the terms changed in meaning over the ages from social position to moral personality. This was not very obvious because some of the authors of Victorian etiquette guides complain that the words lady and gentleman were "abused."[14]

The terms lady and gentleman both had common character traits such as kindness and honesty, but there were also specific virtues attributed separately to men and women. In her *Manners of Modern Society*, Eliza Cheadle states a gentleman is to be generous, wise, and courageous.[15] The mere fact of possessing property did not make a man a gentleman. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* also had

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[11] Kathryn Hughes, *The Short Life & Long Times of Mrs Beeton* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 179.

[12] According to Herd, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* „originated the idea of giving advice to younger readers about their problems of the heart". Herd, *March of Journalism*, 208.

[13] *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (*EDM*), ser. 3, vol. 1, 96.

[14] Eliza Cheadle, *Manners of Modern Society: Being a Book of Etiquette* (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1872), 14.

[15] Cheadle, *Manners*, 17. The Victorian ideal of the gentleman was best portrayed by John Henry Newman and Samuel Smiles: Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1986), 231–244; John Henry Newman, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1852), 327–328. See also: Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the*

a similar opinion about the gentleman as "the educated man incapable of anything low in feelings, actions, manners, or dress."[16]

The term lady also had special qualities. A lady was to be natural without affectation or pretensions. She was expected to be civil and respectful to everybody without haughtiness or pride. Bravery was listed as an appropriate feature but with a warning against being "bold or masculine."[17] A lady had to be feminine in every aspect. "A quiet dignity will pervade all her actions" claimed the author of one book.[18] It was evident that requirements for being a lady were greater than those for being a gentleman.

The Victorians were euphoric about love. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* presented love in sophisticated words: "the greatest pleasure of life is love; the greatest treasure, contentment; the greatest possession, health; the greatest case is sleep; and the greatest medicine, a true friend."[1915] The only cure for love was marriage claimed the magazine.[20]

Love was deemed necessary to a happy marriage both by the etiquette books and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*; yet, it is presented not only as a blind emotion but a strong bond leading to marriage. Guides warn both men and women against "sudden and violent fancies."[21] Mature love required time and reflection. "Love at first sight is, in most cases, idle caprice or foolish infatuation; in all cases it is dangerous and should be avoided" warns the author of the manual.[22] Women are advised to be especially careful as the "female heart is susceptible of first impressions."[23] According to the authors of these guides, it seems that love can be logically motivated and thus induced. "It is of the utmost importance that the character and disposition, as well as the circumstances of the individual, either man or woman, be understood before the affections of the heart become engaged."[24]

Marriage without love was unacceptable. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* published a letter from a girl who has stopped loving her betrothed and has even come to dislike him intensely. The commentary from the magazine is very strongly worded: "nothing, we conceive, can be more awful or more impious to sign

*Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victoria Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

16 *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 8, 62.

17 Cheadle, *Manners*, 18.

18 Cheadle, *Manners*, 19.

19 *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 1, 119.

20 *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 1, 126.

21 *The Hand-book of Etiquette : Being a Complete Guide to the Usages of Polite Society* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1873), 45.

22 *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love, Courtship and Marriage. By a Lady* (London: Thomas Allman, 1853), 15.

23 *Ibidem*, 16.

24 *Ibidem*.

a religious contract under such circumstances."[25] In another case, the editors are also very strongly convinced that it is not worth marrying just for the sake of being married. "Better die an old maid than be yoked to a man whom you do not really love" writes the editor.[26]

Despite warnings in the guides about unrestrained feelings of love, the letters published in the magazine betray less thoughtful behaviour. Quite often, young women profess that they are "desperately in love" without even knowing the gentleman. The reply usually discourages these feelings by stressing the "impropriety of such un-maiden haste" and warning against just falling for good looks.[27] On other occasions, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* seems to understand the complications connected with deep emotions: "everybody who loves is said to fall in love – nobody walks into it, it is plainly unpremeditated."[28] The editors did not approve, but they understood that feelings were stronger than well-studied behaviour.

Victorian love led to marriage through properly conducted courtship. According to etiquette books, courtship was not expected to be very long.[29] *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* criticizes a young woman who was engaged nine years to a man who "adored her," and yet she still had not married him.[30]

Courtship was not meant was to be simple. The guides present advice with a fair amount of admonition for young suitors. Initiating courtship is reserved for men. The man is the causative agent and the woman the passive recipient of his attentions. On his side, there is the possibility of action, while the woman is left to wait for favours. It is not only deemed proper but also the "safest and happiest for woman to leave the matter entirely in his hands."[31]

*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* confirms this opinion repeatedly. There are many letters from desperate young women asking how "to gain the gentleman's affection."[32] The answer is always the same: wait, do nothing or have patience.[33] As encouragement for restraint *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* advises:

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[25] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 1, 155.

[26] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 4, 164.

[27] *EDM*, ser. 2, vol. 6, 240.

[28] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 1, 192.

[29] *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love*, 8. Courtship was relatively short, the engagement itself much longer. It depended on the social class. In the middle class, it was up to three years, and in the lower class it was much longer, which resulted from the quite different material circumstances of lower class life. Ginger Susanne Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 62.

[30] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 1, 28.

[31] *The Etiquette of Modern Society: A Guide to Good Manners in Every Possible Situation; Balls, Dress, Presents, Conversation, Driving, Riding, Correspondence, Funerals, Travelling, Courtship, Introductions, Visiting, Dancing, Marriage, Walking, Dinner Parties, Mourning*, & C, &c. (London: Ward, Lock & Co, 1881), 34.

[32] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 1, 192.

[33] *EDM*, ser. 2, vol. 7, 288; ser. 3, vol. 1, 288.

"ask nineteen out of a score of matrons, and they will affirm the negative. They never courted; they waited to be courted. The silly women– still in the ranks of spinsters, you may be sure – ran after the beaux, tried to gratify and to win them, spread their artful nets, mingled their cunning birdlime, and looked out for those paradise birds they never caught. Shrewd women stopped at home, and the suitors flocked to them."[34]

In the Victorian era, strict etiquette regulated the way one could meet not only a prospective love interest but also simply a person of the opposite sex. The guides describe all the difficulties faced by a young man who sees from a distance a woman who arouses his interest. Victorian etiquette forbade introducing oneself directly because it would expose the woman to gossip. The guides describe complicated steps such as conducting a background interview without mentioning the name of the subject of interest thus not "compromising the name of the lady in the slightest degree."[35]

The next step for a gentleman was to appear in public places where he could meet her, such as a church, a park, or a "place of amusement."[36] The woman was expected to notice the constantly appearing suitor and give him a very discreet sign of approval or ostentatiously ignore him. "The countenance is the faithful mirror of the soul," so a shy blush or a slight smile was taken as encouragement to proceed with courtship.[37]

The guides were very general. Not surprisingly, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* also gave advice on practical matters connected with first meetings. In one situation, a young gentleman smiled at a girl in a church. She made an inquiry about him and learned positive things. She asked the magazine whether she could respond if he spoke to her. The answer was yes if "it be of a trivial and not impertinent nature (and it is pretty sure to be about the weather)."[38]

Some situations were not mentioned in the guides such as a clergyman who "made eyes" at young woman over the pulpit during a service. According to the magazine, he "ought to officiate no more" and the woman is criticized for falling in love with him.[39]

*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* also expected young women to give some sort of encouragement to prospective wooers. The advice given when such a question was asked is that "you must court the man–not vulgarly [...], but just enough to let him see his way. [...] The men come along wonderfully with a little encouragement."[40]

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[34] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 1, 192.

[35] *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony: with a complete guide to the forms of a wedding* (London: George Routledge and Son, 1852), 22.

[36] *The Hand-book of etiquette*, 45.

[37] *Ibidem*, 45.

[38] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 3, 32.

[39] *EDM,* ser. 1, vol. 3, 352.

[40] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 2, 64.

The next step for a prospective wooer was to write to the lady's parents or guardian to introduce himself. He was expected to supply basic information about his financial status as parents would be anxious to see that their daughter's suitor was a man of "adequate means."[41]

The guides strictly forbade secret meetings without parental consent. This rule, so strongly rooted in Victorian society, was sometimes questioned by authors of letters to *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. The situations described were of varying degrees of seriousness, but they involved secret communications against parents' wishes or without the knowledge of the family. In one account, a young woman had corresponded with a man who had not received her parents' approval. He proposed marriage without their consent. The advice given complies with the applicable rules: "reveal the truth, and rest assured that, unless there be some excellent reason for your parents' disapproval, they will, when they find your happiness concerned in the matter, yield their consent."[42] The editor was sure that there was no happiness in a clandestine marriage without the agreement and presence of the parents.

Some cases presented in the letters published in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* were less serious, such as that of a young, seventeen year-old woman who asked about the propriety of "'walking out' with a young gentleman without her parents' knowledge." The gentleman in question was handsome and of the same age. The answer from the magazine is severe stating that the girl acted "improperly" and without prudence or dignity.[43]

Another young woman wanted to accept an offer of marriage without waiting for her father's return. The woman was desperate: "Papa is a long way off, and the adorable–such lips, such hair, such an irresistible moustache!–is anxious for an answer."[44] The response is traditional and recommends waiting for the father's return.

There was also an interesting question from the aptly named Venturesome Female about the possibility of "being married secretly and expeditiously."[45] She knew that marriage in Gretna Green was no longer an option,[46] but the editor took the matter seriously and answers that they cannot teach anybody how to bypass the law.

Appearing at a young woman's home also allowed a gentleman to observe the lady in her domestic conditions. Watching the way she interacted with her family and her attitude towards her friends would confirm or contradict his judgement of her.

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41 *The Hand-book of etiquette*, 46.

42 *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 2, 32.

43 *EDM*, ser. 2, vol. 7, 240.

44 *EDM*, ser. 2, vol. 7, 192.

45 *EDM*, ser. 2, vol 4, 192.

46 The 1754 Marriage Act in England allowed a parent of a person under 21 to object to the marriage. The act did not apply in Scotland, where boys could marry at 14 and girls at 12, with or without parental consent. Gretna Green was the closest village in Scotland from England. Its career ended in 1856 when Scottish law was changed to require a 21-day stay before a wedding.

There were certain traits which, according to the guides, were desirable in a prospective husband or wife. Some of them were the same for both sexes; intelligence was first mentioned as "highly requisite" both in men and women.[47] Apart from this, the lists of expected values differed. A lady was to look for "fixed principles," kindness, good-naturedness, diligence, and "strict morality."[48] A man did not have to be handsome since "personal beauty [...] is not essential to true love."[49]

Close observation of a gentleman's behaviour would provide guidance as to whether or not to accept him as a future husband. "If he speak neither slightingly nor disparagingly of the sex, and be ever ready to honour its virtues and defend its weakness," she should accept him, advises the author of one manual. On the other hand, if he was not punctual, behaved with negligence towards elders, displayed the symptoms of a spendthrift, or avoided going to church, the lady should "eschew that young gentleman's acquaintance."[50]

The list of expected character traits for a lady was shorter and less diverse. Apart from intelligence, the young woman needed to be home-loving, innocent, meek, and tender. A strong woman was not a good choice. She was identified as "capricious" and as such could not be trusted to be a proper wife. A sweet, docile young woman "not always asserting its own independence, and demanding its rights" was deemed best.[51]

A careful admirer also had to look carefully at her behaviour at home. One of the first things mentioned is to observe whether she is "attentive to her duties." Her temper can be judged by the way she expresses patience towards her younger siblings. It was important to notice "if her pleasures and enjoyments be those which centre in home."[52] Religion was an important point for both sexes. A young gentleman is warned to avoid a young woman "if the holiness of religion do not hover like a sanctifying dove ever over her head."[53] Finding egoism, self-love, artificiality, and conceit instead should discourage the wooer from continuing the acquaintance with the woman.

Once the decision was made by the gentleman, he was then ready to propose. It was generally thought to be a difficult conversation that was sometimes referred to as "the dread ordeal."[54] Proposals could be written and letter-writing guides had many examples for different occasions.[55] Yet, most guides preferred a personal

[47] *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love*, 17, 26.
[48] *Ibidem*, 18, 22.
[49] *Ibidem*, 23.
[50] *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony*, 26–27.
[51] *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love,* 27.
[52] *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony*, 27.
[53] *Ibidem*, 28.
[54] Cheadle, *Manners*, 90.
[55] *The Letter Writer of Modern Society, by a Member of Aristocracy* (London: Warne & Co, 1883) has a whole chapter devoted to proposals of marriage.

meeting between a suitor and the father or guardian, claiming that a letter was just "postponement of the inevitable."[56]

If accepted, the gentleman could offer gifts to his fiancée,[57] which was unacceptable before the proposal. Assigned roles did not allow the woman to give gifts; she was only a passive recipient, and she was not to give anything herself. Yet, according to some manuals presents such as "portraits and locks of hair, could be exchanged mutually."[58]

*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* generally supported this rule although with some modification "excepting between relations or engaged lovers, costly presents are inadmissible."[59] Yet, from readers' correspondence, it is obvious that the rule was questioned by young women who were eager to give signs of interests to their prospected wooers. Is there "any harm in sending a present to a gentleman, merely enclosing it in an envelope, without signing my name?" asked one of the magazine's readers. The answer is simple; this would give men more encouragement than necessary as "men are vain creatures, and apt to construe small attentions into great encouragement."[60]

Another letter was written by a young woman who wanted to send a present to a nice gentleman, a friend of her brother's, who professed love. She wanted to show that her heart "is devoted to him."[61] The answer is traditionally negative as the editor cannot see in the behaviour of the gentleman that he would remain faithful to her despite his words of love.

Flowers were also treated as a present. A gentleman visiting a brother of another letter writer was very attentive and asked her to send him a bouquet of forget-me--nots. The young woman asked the magazine for advice. The reply is simple; it is better not to answer this request as it was originally dictated by "vanity."[62]

There were also situations described in which a woman asked about the propriety of accepting a ring as a birthday gift from a man to whom she was not engaged. In this case, the answer is not negative but evasive: "We cannot decide, not knowing the circumstances,"[63] acceptance of the present from the man is viewed as "encouragement."[64]

One interesting aspect of courtship was the possibility of a lawsuit since a man could be sued for breaking a marriage promise. Nineteenth-century newspapers

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[56] Cheadle, *Manners*, 91.

[57] *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony*, 29.

[58] *The Handbook of etiquette : being a complete guide to the usages of polite society* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1873), 49.

[59] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 1, 169

[60] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 1, 154.

[61] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 2, 64.

[62] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 2, 224.

[63] *EDM*, ser. 3, vol. 9, 127.

[64] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 2, 256.

repeatedly wrote about cases in which compensation in various amounts was awarded for moral damage.[65] However, neither the manuals nor *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* mention such a possibility.

There was little room for flirting in the courtship described in the guides. The term "flirt" itself had a negative connotation in the Victorian era. In both the guides and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* this behaviour is not praised. The definition of the word flirt in a dictionary is "to play at courtship, to practice coquetry, to make love without serious intentions."[66]

The aim of courtship was to find a partner for marriage. "Courtship is the running footman of matrimony" claims one of the manuals poetically.[67] Consequently, flirting was an activity that did not aim at marriage, and as such was met with disapproval. Female flirts, also called coquettes, are described as "those ladies who studiously excite the feeling of love without meaning to gratify it."[68] They could only be satisfied when they made a new conquest simply for the sake of the conquest. It was not only women, but also men, referred to as "general lovers," who wanted just to "engage the affection of the opposite sex."[69] Flirting men and women were also called "traitors to love." "Coquettes, jilts, rovers, and men of unmeaning attentions," were a danger for those who were ready for a faithful relationship. "Guard your hearts" warns the manual.[70]

It seems that stronger arguments were made against women than men. At least the punishment for such behaviour was more serious – the impossibility of marriage. "The flirt at length becomes neglected," predicts an author of one manual, as such a woman becomes the ridiculed figure of the coquetting old spinster.[71]

*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* also criticizes flirting, which is called "vanity playing at love." However, there was no wrongdoing in flirting, and sometimes it was acceptable behaviour. When "it is half-recognised on both sides, in a mixed assembly, it becomes a perfect revel of exuberant spirits, into which immodesty should never creep."[72]

When a woman called Laura was scolded by her aunt for flirting with two gentlemen at the same time, she asks the editor whether was it wrong to "laugh and joke with an agreeable young man or two, when you are not engaged?" The answer

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[65] *The Times* (15.12.1862, 11.03.1879, 15.12.1883). In 1878, the plaintiff's family demanded 25,000 pounds and received 2,500. *The Times* (8.06.1878). See Frost, *Promises broken*.

[66] *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles: Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society*, ed. J.A.H. Murray, vol. 4 (Oxford: H. Bradley, 1900), 330.

[67] *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love*, 66.

[68] *Ibidem*, 43.

[69] *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love*, 48.

[70] *The Handbook of etiquette*, 44.

[71] *A Manual of the Etiquette of Love*, 46.

[72] *EDM*, ser. 2, vol. 4, 240.

takes a stand against such "coquetry" advising the young woman to choose one and stay faithful.[73]

The close reading of the manuals and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* letters section offers an interesting perspective on courtship amongst the middle class. Both sources confirm traditional Victorian attitudes to courtship. The guides present the rules of social behaviour as a strict code, while the answers to letters published in the magazine presented practical aspects of the theory. It seems also that the editors of the "Cupid's letter bag" and the "Englishwoman's Conversazione" were less stern regarding slight transgressions of the social rules of courtship.

There is a problem in trying to see the letters as evidence or proof of changes in the social behaviour related to courtship. The authors of the letters are unknown. Readers' reactions to answers are also unknown, and the letters could have been fabricated to increase sales of the magazine to young readers.[74]

Assuming the letters are real, we can conclude that the rigid gender roles presented in the manuals did not sit well with the magazine's young readers. The authors expressed independence and assertiveness in their letters. Over time, the volume of courtship letters diminish in favour of practical advice. The magazine aspired to become a serious news outlet for middle-class women and the enthusiastic letters about young gents and ladies did not fit its image.

The discussion of courtship in the pages of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* reflects the complex process of forming individual opinions on gender relations. Opposing voices, inconsistent answers, or outright avoidance of them indicate the individualization of opinions independent of universally accepted rules.

Regardless of the more or less strict code of behaviour regarding courtship, marriage for most of the young women who wrote letters would prove to be far from the romantic ideal. Male dominance would, in most cases, marginalize the woman's role in the family.

Stephanie Coontz sums it up best when she writes "The rigid separation between men's and women's spheres made it hard for couples to share their innermost dreams, no matter how in love they were. The ideal of intimacy was continually undermined in practice by the reality of the different constraints on men and women, leading to a 'sense of estrangement' between many husbands and wives."[75]

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[73] *EDM*, ser. 1, vol. 1, 154.

[74] Samuel Beeton did not shy away from printing letters that had an undoubtedly erotic subtext like corporal punishment of adolescent girls or tight-lacing. See Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Margaret Beetham, "'Natural but firm': The corset correspondence in the Englishwoman's domestic magazine," *Women: a cultural review* 2, 2 (1991): 163–167.

[75] Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York City: Viking Press, 2005), 188.

Iwona Sakowicz

**Victorian Courtship – from Ideal to Real: *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and the Rule of the Etiquette**

Summary

The Victorian era in Britain was characterized by an emphasis on "respectability" which formed a part of the domesticity ideology that treated the home as a place created for women. Proper, respectable behaviour was a function of belonging to the middle class. A significant number of savoir-vivre guides published contemporaneously informed the reader not only about receiving guests but also about courtship and marriage. The subject of the article is a close reading of these etiquette guides and the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* letter section, which frequently addresses issues of courtship and marriage. The analysis of the texts using rigid gender roles as presented in the guides and the comparison of them with the letter section of the magazine shows that young readers expressed their independence and assertiveness in trying to contest these rules.