

Book Reviews

The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal.
Deborah Gorham. *Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Pp. 223.*

The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal is a welcome addition to the literature on the idealized concept of womanhood which so dominated nineteenth-century thought. However, in her book, Deborah Gorham looks not at women but at girls, specifically the middle-class girls of Victorian England. To do this she divides her study into three parts: the first provides the social context in which the popular image of girls thrived; the second examines the specific advice given to Victorian parents on raising their daughters; and, the third focuses on the actual experience of young women growing up in the Victorian period.

Part One utilizes the copious secondary literature on the ideology of domesticity. As Gorham points out, whereas the concept of separate spheres formed the foundation of that ideology for all women, the concept of status was the particular preserve of middle-class women. All women had the potential to be perfect wives and daughters but not all could achieve middle-class status with its stress on gentility because it was determined by wealth and "certain personal and cultural attributes" (p. 8). Gorham argues that women largely determined the latter through the family and thus she envisions women as significant, active and with power to wield, albeit limited by the economic resources of the family. By linking the family to the economic world, Gorham has overcome the tendency of many historians in this field to view women in a vacuum, in a sphere of their own. Girls did not live in a world apart and as a result experienced tension between the image which existed of

them and the reality of their lives. For example, gentility was the watchword of the middle class but what was meant by that word was determined by the upper middle class. Manual domestic work was not considered genteel, yet within most middle-class homes household work was necessarily done by the women of the family. The challenge for the young girl, then, was to maintain her gentility, which was important to her family's status, and still accomplish the work that had to be done. For the daughters of the lower middle class the predicament was even greater for their families would have been hard pressed to keep up the appearances of gentility in public, let alone in private. Yet these young women were powerless to assist since respectable work for women outside the home, which would have provided the money necessary for gentility, was frowned upon and difficult to find. While this problem did not disappear with adulthood, it did alter somewhat with succeeding generations, for by the end of the century middle-class employment for women was more readily available than it had been and the idealized view of a young woman encompassed a more independent individual provided she maintained the traditional virtues of modesty and selflessness.

Part Two of the book examines Victorian advice literature and continues the themes raised in Part One: the stress on the integration of home and the rest of society; the contradictions and tensions in the world of the young girl; and, the changes that occurred respecting her. While some advice given to parents about raising daughters remained constant, for example the need for 'orderliness,' there were important shifts. In the early decades the clergy wrote most of the advice manuals and they focused on the moral welfare of the young. By the end of the nineteenth century, medical practitioners were writing more of this literature and understandably they were concerned with the physical health of young girls. This change in focus may have reflected the changing reality of girls' lives. Of particular moment to Gorham was education.

Once it had been erratic, designed to teach the domestic role and provided at home. By 1900 it was a major component in a girl's life and had become organized, goal directed and institutionalized. While this meant more girls were better trained it did subject them to new tensions as educators encouraged them both to achieve and to accept the self-sacrificing role of the dutiful daughter. Education also overlapped with puberty, the time when Victorians began in earnest their efforts to socialize girls according to the domestic ideology. Before puberty, parents and educators made few distinctions between the sexes. This seems to surprize Gorham, but it should not. After all, Victorians equated women with maternity or with the potential for that function. Without the potential an individual was not truly female. This accounts for the hostility menopause engendered, a topic which falls outside the parameters of this investigation, but also the lack of concern about the socialization of pre-pubescent girls. The pressure comes with puberty. But what was the reaction of girls to this; how did they cope; and did it make them resent being women? Unfortunately, little indication is given, even in Part Three where the lives of women who lived in the period are examined.

Part Three in a way is the weakest section and at times the most interesting. It is interesting because it looks at individual girls, yet weak because the women chosen are a very select group, those who had achieved enough success to warrant biographies or autobiographies or those who happened to leave diaries or papers behind. Gorham has divided the women into three groups, those who grew up in the early, the mid and the late Victorian period. What emerges is how the increased educational opportunities discussed in Part Two affected them. In the early years ambitious women existed but lacked an outlet for their energies, whereas by the end of the century education provided them with that outlet. Yet all blessings are not without cost. The educational opportunities took time away from

women and they became less introspective and developed an outward focus. However, Gorham feels, probably quite rightly, that the advantages of the one outweighed the loss of the other.

The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal provides us with a glimpse into the private world of the family and women. It brings together a great deal of the secondary literature in the field and applies it to girlhood in Victorian times. And while at times the theoretical underpinnings of the book are not developed enough, some of Gorham's insights will give pause to many and perhaps encourage others to develop them more fully.

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Medieval Woman's Guide to Health: the First English Gynecological Handbook. Beryl Rowland. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981. Pp. 192 & xix.

Medieval Woman's Guide to Health is, among other things, an edition of a gynecological and obstetrical compendium, MS Sloane 2463 of the British Library. More importantly, it is also a translation of that compendium into modern English; the book is likely to find its audience among sociologists, feminists, and students of the history of medicine, as much as among students of Middle English. All of these readers will be interested in Beryl Rowland's Introduction as well, some fifty pages of discussion of the history of women in medicine, both as practitioners and patients. The book also contains several fine illustrations from various manuscripts and early printed texts, mostly of childbirth scenes.

The "handbook," as Rowland's name for it suggests, is not a theoretical treatise, but a practi-