

Gender roles in the 19th century

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From marriage and sexuality to education and rights, Professor Kathryn Hughes looks at attitudes towards gender in 19th-century Britain.

During the Victorian period men and women's roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history. In earlier centuries it had been usual for women to work alongside husbands and brothers in the family business. Living 'over the shop' made it easy for women to help out by serving customers or keeping accounts while also attending to their domestic duties. As the 19th century progressed men increasingly commuted to their place of work – the factory, shop or office. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties that were increasingly carried out by servants. From the 1830s, women started to adopt the crinoline, a huge bell-shaped skirt that made it virtually impossible to clean a grate or sweep the stairs without tumbling over.

'Separate spheres'

The two sexes now inhabited what Victorians thought of as 'separate spheres', only coming together at breakfast and again at dinner.

The ideology of Separate Spheres rested on a definition of the 'natural' characteristics of women and men. Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands laboured all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote.

Educating women

Women did, though, require a new kind of education to prepare them for this role of 'Angel in the House'. Rather than attracting a husband through their domestic abilities, middle-class girls were coached in what were known as 'accomplishments'. These would be learned either at boarding school or from a resident governess. In [Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*](#) the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages ... ; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions ... (ch. 8)