

“Fulfilling the Essentials of Woman’s Being”

How the 1851 British Census Legitimized Victorian Misogyny

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Abstract

In its 1851 census, England recorded for the first time the marital status of its citizens. The result produced statistical “proof” that women not only outnumbered men by 500,000, but that two million of them were unmarried. Although some had previously expressed concern over the declining marriage rate, the census used concrete numbers to create what most Victorians automatically accepted as a new state of reality. “Superfluous women” suddenly became a problem of such magnitude that debate over what to do with them continued on into the next century, with many supporting their emigration to the colonies. This extreme reaction was justified by the commonly accepted belief that middle class single women were unproductive drains on society, as their class and mode of education were not conducive to earning a living. In this paper I will argue that this belief was not only problematic on a purely logistical level, but that those who argued for the women’s exile on economic grounds were merely using the census as an empirical means to legitimize the deep misogyny that pervaded every level of British Victorian life. For instance, instead of eliminating the problem by simply providing single women with educational and professional opportunities, British feminists ended up creating emigration societies out of “sheer despair” of convincing anyone that women could contribute if given a chance. This was especially galling given that Britain was importing significant numbers of foreigners at the time to fulfill the constant demand for labor. Emigration societies continued to tell single women that they were desperately needed in the colonies, even though it became clear within a very short time that the colonists had no place for upper class women who refused to get their hands dirty. Little to no attention was paid to the corresponding number of unmarried men, many of whom were admired for leading lives of leisure, with only nominal professions and often contracting great amounts of debt. Working class women were not considered redundant because, in the words of a contemporary commentator, “they fulfill both essentials of woman’s being; *they are supported by, and they minister to, men.*” With these and other points, I intend to argue that the 1851 census created a cultural map by which the boundaries of Englishness were redefined for single women. Thus, the census can be seen as both a facilitator and the creator of a renegotiated identity for all English women, which eventually led to monumental changes in both their lives and the lives of colonial women.

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*"They belong nowhere, they are no man's possession, like fruit dropped from a sunny garden wall on to the highway beyond. Every passer-by has a right to them, and may devour them as he travels..."*¹

The year 1851 was a great one for England. At the zenith of its industrial and international power, the country reveled in its rapidly expanding economy and burgeoning scientific dominance. In its growing obsession to conquer and control everything within its purview, the country embarked on a seminal undertaking to gather more information about more people than had ever before been attempted. The resulting census produced statistical "proof" that women outnumbered men in England by 500,000, two million of whom were unmarried. Although there had been some concern over the declining marriage rate, the census used concrete numbers to create what most Victorians automatically accepted as a new state of reality. "Redundant women" suddenly became a problem of such magnitude that a debate erupted over what to do with them, continuing on well into the next century. One of the most popular solutions proposed was that these women leave England for the colonies – South Africa, Canada, Australia – it didn't really matter, so long as they were *there* and not *here*. What we might see today as an extreme reaction was justified by the belief that single women of the middle class were not only a strain on the economy, but a blight on the English family, and a threat to the ideal of morality in the English family, which was revered as a symbol and source of English superiority to their colonies and the world. I argue that those who advocated exile on economic grounds were merely using the census as an ostensibly empirical means to legitimize the misogyny that pervaded every level of British Victorian life. This, of course, works against the popular "angel in the house" stereotype often associated with the era. The irony is that one of the first censuses to recognize women simultaneously negated their national identity by creating a new cultural map whose boundaries refused to include them.

Britain's first modern census was conducted in 1801. As a map of the country's priorities for the new century, the census's questions reflected not only what the government wanted to know about its people, but through that knowledge, the control it sought to impose. It established two main facts: 1) how many able-bodied men were available to fight Napoleon, and 2) a generic headcount of the general population to

¹ Anna Lepine, "Strange and Rare Visitants": Spinsters and Domestic Space in Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 32, no. 2 (2010): 121.

determine the ability of agricultural output.² Kathrin Levitan has argued that these objectives revealed the two main competing interests for the government at the time: 1) the desire to have a large enough population to fight off invaders, and 2) the desire to have a small enough population to avoid the chaos resulting from famine, as had been witnessed during the horrors of the French Revolution.³ As was expressed in Parliament during the passage of the Census Act in 1800, "Although we may find that an increased population adds to our strength in war, it is evident that it requires a vigilant attention to the means of supporting it."⁴

The complete lack of interest the census showed in the role of country women reveals how the English woman's identity was constructed at the beginning of the 19th century. Not only was her marital status a complete non-issue, but her sex excluded her from any sense of national identity recognized by her own government. It would obviously go too far to conclude that the British government placed no value on its women, but as a map that created power through recognition, it is clear that the 1801 census allowed no space for the English woman within its own boundaries of identity.

Similar censuses were administered every 10 years until 1841, when the questions changed significantly. Coming in at the tail end of the first industrial revolution, the 1841 census acknowledged not only the women of Britain, but also the children, along with the ages, occupations, and places of birth for each person per household.⁵ It was no coincidence that as the need increased for more laborers to sustain the frenetic pace of industrial production, the government became intensely interested in who they had available to do the job. This census also serves as a vivid illustration of the growing Victorian obsession with dominance through knowledge. The government's need to label, quantify, and categorize every object extended even to their people.

² Kathrin Levitan, "Redundancy, the 'Surplus Women' Problem, and the British Census, 1851-1861," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 3 (2008): 361.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 35, 601, cited by Levitan: 361.

⁵ Analysis of the 1841 census, available at:
<http://www.ukcensonline.com/census/1841.php>.

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As a result, the British did not wait another 40 years before conducting their next detailed census. The government had recognized the power of information about their people, and so made plans to issue another set of questionnaires in March 1851. It was a good year to re-evaluate and assess their progress, and they spared no expense to broadcast to the world their self-satisfaction. The Great Exhibition was one of the more lavish displays of nineteenth century British hubris, with a display of over 13,000 exhibits showing off the country's many accomplishments in everything from technology to architecture. Britain meant for the exhibition to make it "clear to the world its role as [an] industrial leader."⁶ As the Exhibit showed its six million visitors what it meant to be English, the English turned a more critical eye inward to make sure that anyone who didn't fit in the boundaries of Englishness was identified and treated accordingly.

The 1851 census was conducted in March of that year, with the results being made public by June. The government organized its survey first by city or borough and then by township or parish. Each person had to provide eight pieces of information: address, sex, age, marital status, rank, profession, or occupation, place of birth, the name of each person at their residence and their relation to the head of the household, and whether they were blind, deaf, or dumb.⁷ All of these questions operated to create, in the public mind, boundaries that did not necessarily exist before the questions were articulated. Far from ignoring females, the 1851 census distinguished on each page of the census the total number of females and males for each household indicated by a division marked at the bottom of each page (Figure 1). For the first time, an official statistical boundary was created to distinguish between those who were married and those who were not, simply by including that one question on the census. Significantly, the accuracy and importance of this information was taken for granted by the British public. As was observed in a letter to *The London Times* after the publication of the census results in June 1851,

⁶ Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary, and Patrica O'Brien, *Civilization in the West*, vol. C (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008). 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Parish of <i>St. George</i>		Ecclesiastical District of <i>St. George</i>		Poor Law Borough of <i>Manchester</i>		Town of <i>Manchester</i>		Village of	
No. of Street, Place, or No. of House	Name and Surname of each Person who abode in the house, on the Night of the 30th March, 1851	Relation to Head of Family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born	Whether Blind or Deaf and Dumb	
				Males	Females				
<i>117</i>	<i>Robert Jackson</i>	<i>Head</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>5</i>		<i>Milk House</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Jane do</i>	<i>Wife</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>2</i>			<i>do</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Elizabeth Jackson</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>2</i>			<i>do</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Robert do</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>2 1/2</i>			<i>do</i>		
<i>77</i>	<i>John E. May</i>	<i>Head</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>35</i>		<i>Black printer</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Ann do</i>	<i>Wife</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>30</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Elizabeth do</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>5</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>John do</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>4</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>John Widdowson</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>24</i>		<i>Printer Maker</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>David Piggott</i>	<i>Wife</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>24</i>		<i>Working Lohammer</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Ann Widdowson</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>30</i>		<i>Book Keeper</i>	<i>do</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>John Widdowson</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>30</i>		<i>Blacksmith</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Elizabeth do</i>	<i>Wife</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>29</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Agnes do</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>4</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>John do</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>4</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>78</i>	<i>Robert Bennett</i>	<i>Head</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>21</i>		<i>Cross Maker</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Margaret do</i>	<i>Wife</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>23</i>		<i>Cross Maker</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>Elizabeth do</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>6 1/2</i>			<i>Manchester</i>		
<i>"</i>	<i>John Bennett</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>2 1/2</i>		<i>Cross Maker</i>	<i>Manchester</i>		
				Total of Persons		<i>77</i>			

Figure 1. A Page from the 1851 UK Census

*“A thoughtful man who is not afraid of losing himself in the maze of numbers through which he is invited to travel, may, by the careful study of this document, obtain information respecting our social and economical relations which, for extent and accuracy, must greatly exceed anything he could learn from general description or from any observations which it may be in his own power to make.”*⁸

⁸ "The Census," *The London Times*, 12 August 1851.

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Judging from similar responses in *The Times*,⁹ the general reaction to the census seems to have been overwhelmingly positive. Some compared their country's data gathering methods to those used in the United States and France, with Britain's invariably coming out as the best.¹⁰ One writer described the census as "a sort of arithmetical map" of the country, which, instead of providing a view of British topography, created a "bird's eye view" of its people.¹¹ The limits of using millions of handwritten forms and relying on untrained and even illiterate people to create an accurate group of data are obvious, but seem to have been largely ignored by those who were the immediate beneficiaries. Human error, through negligence or malice, missing documents, miscalculations, misreading, or missing people – all contributed to the extraordinarily large margin for error that must be taken into account when analyzing the record.

Despite its inevitable errors, the census was accepted as fact and acted on as truth from which real policies and laws were formed. This demonstrates the great hold that map making had over the Victorian psyche at the time. Although starting with the 1841 census, "curiosities," or satirical jokes that played on census responses to questions such as age were common,¹² the census was still seen as the closest to the truth about England's population that one could get.¹³ This could also be attributed to the special nature of censuses in their involvement of the lay person in their creation. It is a much more democratic form of map making, as the

⁹ Newspapers exercised an enormous amount of power and influence in Britain during this time period. Unlike many other countries, the British government imposed relatively little regulation of the press, and only started using it for propaganda purposes near the end of the First World War. *The Times* in particular has been one of the most influential and widely read newspapers in Great Britain since its founding in the late 18th century. Its national mass circulation offers an adequately representative snapshot of national opinion and perspective. That being said, the paper has traditionally been seen as "the voice of the governing class." But since this paper mainly deals with the middle and upper classes, the bias is perhaps more acceptable. Stephen Badsey, "Mass Politics and the Western Front," (BBC History, 2011).

¹⁰ "Census," *The London Times*, 17 June 1851.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Even in *The Times*, it was reported that, "Enumerators have strange tales to tell of ladies of a certain age who would rather lose a tooth – a loss they could ill afford – than admit they were a year older than when the census was taken in 1841." *Ibid.*

¹³ Paul Dobraszcyk, "Curiosities of the Victorian census," Rag-picking History, <http://ragpickinghistory.co.uk/2012/04/25/comedy-and-the-victorian-census/>.

most common citizen shares a portion of the decision making power in how he will be represented. In essence, the census is the citizen's map of himself. It can be seen as an acknowledgement of his own existence and belonging in his community, as well as representative of his part of the whole. Of course, this power is still merely derivative of the government's initial decision of whether or not they will give him the chance to be acknowledged.

The census and the reactions to it revealed an active imperialism being carried out on certain groups of people who did not happen to fit into the homogenous mold Victorians valued so highly. Simon Gikandi has argued that "colonial culture" was partly to blame for this marginalization of their own English people.¹⁴ The rapidly changing social order that characterized Britain at the time created a "crisis of community," as class lines blurred and mass amounts of people started moving away from agricultural villages into urban centers.¹⁵ Compounding this unrest, colonialism "called prior relationships into question and generated the split that took place between 'knowable relationships and an unknown, unknowable, overwhelming society.'"¹⁶ Coming into contact with other ethnicities caused the British to start questioning what it was that distinguished themselves from those they ruled. Without a clear definition it would be too easy to lose the otherness found in the colonial subject, which would then undermine the premise upon which the whole empire was justified.

Women were the natural choice to help define what it meant to be English. This is especially telling in the affronts on female suffragists in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, where adversaries of the movement most often chose to attack the two main pillars of a Victorian woman's credibility – her femininity and her Englishness.¹⁷ Feminists were accused of being "too American or too French," and "constantly had to assert their Englishness."¹⁸ With the 1851 census, however, those criticisms started to extend to all women, feminists or not, as long as they were unmarried and in the middle class. If anyone created wrinkles in the smooth ideology of Victorian domestic life, it was the spinster: "Existing

¹⁴ Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (Columbia University Press, 1996). 120. Gikandi, Simon, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*, Columbia University Press (1996). p. 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994). 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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in the social and spatial margins of society, a perpetual visitor to the paternal home and a wanderer on the highway of life... the Victorian spinster threatened the strict division of the separate spheres by ignoring their boundaries and wandering in the interspaces."¹⁹

There were two main issues unmarried middle class women faced: first, they were seen as an “unproductive group,” who merely consumed without giving back to society.²⁰ Even feminists conceded this point.²¹ Leading up to 1851, Victorians were heavily influenced by population theorist Robert Malthus, who argued that the food supply would always lag behind the rate of population increase, therefore making the ideal population proportionate to those who were able to sustain it.²² A sufficient number of contributors therefore, came to be regarded as not only an economic imperative, but crucial to social stability.²³ The census shows that this sentiment was still prescient in 1851: “[T]he idle who will not work, the unskillful who cannot work, and the criminal classes who cannot be trusted, are... whether numerous or few, always redundant.”²⁴ It is ironic that single women were seen as such drains on society compared to married women, who, by having children, at the very least doubled the amount of consumption without contributing anything in return. On the contrary, however, women's roles were so exclusively connected to child bearing – which was greatly increased by the colonial need for more British children to maintain the empire – that feminists had an extremely difficult time convincing people that the best solution for redundant women was to improve their educational and professional opportunities at home instead of shipping them off to the colonies. It was commonly believed and feared that allowing women to work would flood the labor pool. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that these concerns were, as Randa Kranidis describes it, “dubious at best,” since the mid-19th century saw one of the largest influx of immigrants in England's history, many of whom were purposely imported to fill labor needs.²⁵ The idea of surplus women therefore, “was a deeply ideological notion” and turned single women into “problematic gendered subjects.”²⁶ Nevertheless,

¹⁹ Lepine, "Strange and Rare Visitants," 6.

²⁰ Levitan, "Redundancy," 359.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 368.

²² *Ibid.*, 361.

²³ *Ibid.*, 362.

²⁴ *Parliamentary Papers and House of Commons and Command*, Vol. 53, Part 1 (1863), 26.

²⁵ Rita Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: Contested Subjects* (St. Martin's Press, 1999). 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

feminists who saw the conversation as a catalyst for change were so completely unsuccessful in their efforts that they were forced to resort to emigration as the only option causing activists like Margaret Rye to establish her emigration society out of “sheer despair.”²⁷

Single, middle class women were extremely problematic, as William Greg explained in his 1862 article because they amounted to an “unwholesome social state, and [are] both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong.”²⁸ He was one of the first to advocate sending these “redundant” women “to where they are wanted,” which he made very clear, was not in England.²⁹ Greg’s essay shows how the census had created a new space of identity in which, through numbers, certain women suddenly did not belong in their own country. A population that before had been considered part of the respectable middle class was now being equated with cultural criminals, such that Greg did not balk at suggesting that it was worth the expense to gather the 10,000 ships necessary to carry the 500,000 excess women out of the space in which the census proved they did not belong.³⁰ Shipping people to the colonies had been a solution to rid the country of criminals and other undesirables for years. Both groups were regarded as economic and moral drains on society. Neither fit into the space of behavior or moral boundaries to which they were assigned by cultural maps, and so in response the government and English society simply transferred them to a different space in which they would perhaps fit better. Of course who the English chose to populate their colonies also revealed how they really felt about the colonies and those who lived there. The idea of the “undesirable” colonist, therefore, effectively undermined the constant stream of propaganda fed to the masses on both ends about the noble civilizing mission the British wished to conduct throughout their empire. It seems difficult to civilize an inferior population by using one’s own most inferior subjects to do the job. Of course, this could just be a reflection of how superior the British felt themselves to be over their colonial subjects, since their most undesirable populations were still high enough to have a moralizing influence on anyone who wasn’t English.

²⁷ Julia Bush, “The Right Sort of Woman’: female emigrators and emigration to the British Empire, 1890-1910,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 3 (1994): 389.

²⁸ William Greg, “Why are Women Redundant?,” in *Literary and Social Judgments* (London: Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1877), 44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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This immoral imbalance that single women thrust onto English domesticity was not just a result of numbers, but also the power structure through which marriage was constructed both culturally and legally. Men could choose to marry or not and were not worse off for either choice. Moreover, as living standards for the middle class improved through the mid-19th century, many men made the excuse that taking on a wife and family was simply too expensive.³¹ Because middle class women could only contribute to society as mothers, their value was entirely dependent on their sexual desirability to men and men's desire to marry, thereby leaving their identity almost completely in male hands.

This kind of value system was only exacerbated by the country's imperialist agenda. As the British became more entangled in other countries their nationalistic fervor grew, and it quickly became clear to the male leaders that pure British stock was necessary to help control the natives. This view was not only a product of racism but also the deeply engrained belief in the moral superiority of the British institutions of marriage and domesticity.³² Almost every international success Britain achieved was at least partially credited to the purity and moral stability of the British home. The ideal British family was supposed to consist of a father, a mother, children, and servants.³³ The British looked down on the more fluid definitions of family practiced on the continent and elsewhere where a random assortment of various extended family members and other distant relations hung around the family home in an unhealthy and unstructured way. This was not considered proper or British.³⁴ Every person belonged in a certain place in a specific structure which created the order that was so essential to British success at home and abroad. As soon as women came of age it was thus natural to regard them as a burden and no longer a part of the family in the same way she had been as a child. Her place in the house suddenly became problematic as, without her own home to move on to, she faced a lifetime of being "relegated to the spare rooms of the world."³⁵ As a result, women saw their space in society shrinking with each passing year as no marriage prospects presented themselves. This phenomenon did not go unobserved by their contemporaries:

³¹ Levitan, "Redundancy," 364.

³² *Ibid.*, 365.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁵ Lepine, "Strange and Rare Visitants," 124.

*"It would be curious, if it were not so touching, to watch the woman of 'no particular age'...studiously obliterating herself from the busy foreground of life, taking up less and less room in the world, and seeming to apologize to it for even the little space she occupies."*³⁶

The census numbers made even that small space seem like too much. One man said of unmarried women, there are "too many for their own peace—too many for the preservation of a sound social and moral state."³⁷ This can be seen in the way single women of the middle class were viewed compared to their working class counterparts. Although the working class woman's life was certainly much more physically and materially challenging, in some ways it presented more options than a woman of higher birth. The working class woman, as Levitan points out, "had always worked," and her services were in even higher demand with the Industrial Revolution.³⁸ This advantage also liberated her from rejection on grounds of unproductivity. Moreover, the working class woman's ability to work helped her to fill her moral role as a woman, *even if she never married*. As Greg explained,

*"[Working class women] are in no sense redundant...they do not follow an obligatory independent [status?] and therefore for their sex an unnatural career; on the contrary, they are attached to others, and are connected with other existences which they embellish, facilitate, and serve...they fulfill both essentials of woman's being; they are supported by, and they minister to, men."*³⁹

Greg's justification for the disparity between the two groups reveals the ideological and moral space that single women occupied in the minds of colonial Britain and helps to explain the impossibility of the spinster fitting into the rigid hegemony of Victorian culture. Implicit in Greg's essay is the belief that if a woman was not "supported by" or "ministered to men," she went not only against nature, but also her divine decree. Therefore, a single woman was unnatural and actively in rebellion against her own "womanly" identity.

This antipathy towards single women was not just associated with their lack of proper space, but also in some cases, their actual bodies. Just as a

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *North British Review*, (1855), 409, cited in Levitan, "Redundancy," 366.

³⁸ Ibid., 364.

³⁹ Greg, "Why are Women Redundant?," 46.

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young woman “came out” as a message to men that she was ready and able to produce children, so the aging, barren bodies of spinsters were expected to withdraw.⁴⁰ Compared to “overripe fruit,”⁴¹ they were regarded as unsightly and inappropriately on display if seen in public without a husband caretaker.⁴² Charlotte Yong discusses this in her 1877 book *Womankind* observing that “there is generally no going in for a happy wife, so long as her husband lives and holds his place, nor for the mother of daughters who is needed to be their chaperon.”⁴³ Thus, the single woman was at once too much herself without others from whom she derived the purpose of her existence, and simultaneously *not* enough of a woman without such supports. Woman, therefore, was and always would be a derivative of man, which English society thought it should be, given the method and purpose of her creation.⁴⁴

Therefore, the redundant woman was not simply an economic black hole, but a moral one as well. Since the economic stability of the nation was inextricably intertwined with the social and moral order, “the ‘superfluous’ woman[s] removal...came to be considered essential not only for her own well-being but for England’s as well.”⁴⁵ This belief fueled the movement to move women out of England into the colonies. A variety of groups sprang up to help middle class women make the voyage overseas with a significant portion funded by the government. By 1858, women made up 40% of emigrants to the most popular colony destinations in North America and Australia.⁴⁶ Despite their stigma, one has to wonder what it was that could have persuaded middle class women to leave the relative comfort of England and everything they knew for a life of risk and isolation from family and friends. Much of the pressure came from the belief that women had a better chance at finding employment and a spouse in the colonies. There had also been much argument about whether this resulted in women finding more freedom once they left

⁴⁰ Lepine, "Strange and Rare Visitants," 122.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 126.

⁴³ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁴ I allude here to the Christian version of creation, recounted as follows from the King James version of the Bible: “...for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Genesis 2:20-23).

⁴⁵ Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration*: 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

behind the rigid confines of class and gender expectations in England. Gikandi argues that women were faced with a dual “threat and possibility: it was a threat because it was a patriarchal affair in which women were excluded in the name of a stifling domestic ideology; it was an opportunity because it destabilized the very categories in which this ideology was formulated.”⁴⁷

This ideology often cut across class lines that suddenly became problematic once the women left England. On the one hand, there was generally a better chance at improving one’s station outside of England, but that also meant that middle class women often had to assume certain tasks and lifestyles that would have been degrading at home.⁴⁸ In other words, they had to leave home because they were too valuable in the social strata to perform domestic labor, but to be valuable in the colonies they had to stoop to the level of those working women who were allowed to stay at home in the first place. Not all women dealt with this paradox effectively and despite the widespread belief that women were needed in the colonies, the reality was quite different. The colonial societies did not want women who refused to get their hands dirty, and these societies quickly expressed their aversion to playing the role of England’s human dumping ground.⁴⁹

Some women did adapt to the new lifestyle and thrived. One woman wrote home to encourage women to emigrate to South Africa:

*“A colonial woman might become her husband’s comrade and friend, his true partner, sharing his real life. Such a life offered ‘endless opportunity for the enormous numbers of girls here in England who are leading aimless, useless lives: unhappy, restless and discontented because they have not enough to occupy their time and exercise their talents...To all such girls I would say go to South Africa, where women are not superfluous; or to one of our other colonies, and live, even if you have to work hard and long. It is a thousand times better than stagnating.”*⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁸ Levitan, "Redundancy," 368.

⁴⁹ Ibid. For example, in an 1862 article, the author criticized the emigration societies for promoting a plan that made the colonies “the outfall sewer of any community of the Old World,” and claimed that the colonists were “tired of becoming customers for the goods which can find no sale in England – chipped statuettes, spoiled engravings, and old maids.” See “The Export Wife-Trade,” *Saturday Review*, 6 Sept. 1862, p. 276.

⁵⁰ Bush, "The Right Sort of Woman," 395.

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Many women still held out hope that they would find a husband in the colonies. Emigration societies tended to report the rate of emigrant marriages with "evident satisfaction," although that had also come under question.⁵¹ Actual opportunities for employment were also less abundant than the societies let on as colonies' demand for domestic and physical labor increased, thereby rendering the "ladies in distress" just as unfit to fill the available positions as they were in England. The emigration societies bristled at demands for more domestic workers, both because they feared a depletion of their own labor force and, as the president of the British Women's Emigration Association said to the emigration association in Canada, the colonies needed to instead find more jobs for "ladies," which, she explained, was the "class of women we can best spare."⁵²

In conclusion one of the great ironies of the British census of 1851 was that in the very act of finally recognizing women as citizens it actually negated the authenticity of many of them by giving legs to a social problem whose effects had somehow never been felt prior to that point. Marginalization of sub-groups in history is common enough to make it seem not only likely, but inevitable, for all communities. Though never justifiable, some are more understandable than others. "We don't want you" is essentially the equivalent of "you are not like us." But these were women from the middle and upper classes of English society. These women were respected, respectable, educated, and in many cases, relatively well-off. They looked and acted like everyone else; their behavior in every way conformed to what was expected of them. And yet, the antipathy of their peers was so strong as to wish them out of the country altogether.

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⁵¹ Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration*: 45.

⁵² Bush, "The Right Sort of Woman," 391.

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