

Afterword

*. . . Women as you are,
Mere Women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and chaste wives,¹
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!*
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh 44)

Judith Lowder Newton writes that in the Victorian period, the “valorization of women’s influence . . . was aimed at devaluing actions and capacities which we can only call other forms of power, and in this way, the peddling of women’s influence, in a sort of ideological marketplace, functioned to sustain unequal power relations between middle-class women and middle-class men” (4). There can be no doubt that the ideology of the domestic angel reinforces patriarchy. Women, though morally superior, must always look to men for ‘protection’ from their abject natures. In this way, women are doubly contained within the restrictive limitations of the ideology and again within a masculine curriculum of desire and need. The laws of England reinforced patriarchal control; Myra Stark explains that

husbands had total economic power over their wives. Unless protected by private agreements, a wife’s assets—her money, her property, even her children and her own body—were legally her husband’s to dispose of. Thus the law completed what social and cultural tradition prescribed. (4)

In this study I have attempted to contextualize the domestic angel within a third field of containment: imperialism. Though these five novels rarely refer to the events of empire, the fundamental importance of the domestic angel to the imperial project intensified the mechanisms of hegemonic control which deployed the domestic angel ideal. The prevalent nationalist doctrine articulating England as the angel ministering to 'her' colonies had its basis in the middle class family with the domestic angel at its nucleus. The imperial agenda relied on the preservation of the family structure which in turn depended on women adhering to the limits of her domestic sphere. These novels, though in some respects resistant to the restrictions entailed on women, reinforce the domestic angel ideology to their readers. The women characters held up for admiration and whom readers are encouraged to emulate conform to the tenets of true femininity. By reinforcing this code of femininity, these novels assist in the hegemonic project of conserving family and community and, by implication, empire.

I began this study with Florence Nightingale and so let us return to her once more. In a strangely contradictory situation, both feminists and advocates of true womanhood² viewed Florence Nightingale as representative of their particular causes. In her introduction to "Cassandra," Myra Stark says that Nightingale "was worshiped as the ideal image of the tender, nurturing female—an image which still clings to her, as well as to the profession which she created" (1). Yet Stark goes onto say that

One cannot exactly say that Nightingale was, in modern terms, a feminist. She refused to give wholehearted support to the main feminist causes of her day—suffrage and equal educational rights for women—and was

critical of those who did. Indeed, she frequently expressed contempt for the lives and characters of most women. (15)

Nightingale embodies the contradictions of the domestic angel ideology. Like Lucilla Marjoribanks, her masculine qualities of organization, leadership and sense of purpose allow her to fulfill her domestic angel role. The irony of this paradox ruptures the Victorian culture's ontological acceptance of the domestic angel ideology. In many respects, these novels in fact shore up the ideology, recontaining women within a larger set of ideological boundaries which acknowledge the futility of obtaining the status of 'true domestic angel,' but which depend on the unbending middle-class sense of duty and morality in convincing women to cooperate, along the same heading as 'lay back, close your eyes and think of England.' Culturally, there was a hegemonically certified ontological presumption the empire would collapse without the domestic angel foundation. Thus the outward appearance of the compliance to the domestic angel becomes paramount, as well as the performance of those social duties associated with true womanhood, no matter how they come to be accomplished. Indeed Florence Nightengale, celebrated as a both domestic angel and feminist, was correct when she wrote:

Verily the world is full of the strangest & saddest contradictions
(Selected Letters 424)

Notes

¹ A variation of this line reads, “You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives.”

² Though women who supported the ideal of the domestic angel perceived themselves to be feminist in so much that they felt their position to be superior and necessary. To abandon their position as domestic angels would result not only in cultural chaos and moral decay, but also in a loss of personal power—particularly the power of influence, as Sarah Stickney Ellis argues in her books.