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HIST 110 - Dr. Kravetz

September 25, 2017

Primary Document Analysis

In Alexis Soyer’s *Modern Housewife* and Isabella Beeton’s *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, significant gender alterations during the Industrial Revolution are shown by the representation of women in a more authoritative manner. This authoritative manner is made evident in a woman’s position over her servants and how she speaks to them, her social duty to plan engagements such as dinner parties, and how she presents herself to society concerning demeanor and dress.

Both works were written in the nineteenth century, when servants began completing most of the work around the home, while the actions of the woman in the house, “resemble those of the general of an army or the manager of a great business concern.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Before the Industrial Revolution, women were still expected to work out of the home, but they did more of the housework, such as cleaning, cooking, and raising their children. After, they began to oversee those chores being done by servants they could now afford or worked in factories alongside their husbands and children. As managers of the home, women were inclined to act and speak a certain way around their servants, taking the role of boss, and there were certain behaviors women of the century would not condone: “The two maids, with the exception of Wednesdays, are always ready to attend on us. I never allow the coachmen to defile our carpets with his stable shoes.”[[2]](#footnote-1) House servants often filled the woman’s pre-revolution role in the household. They prepared all meals, completed all cleaning chores, and took care of the children during the day, when the woman of the house could not.

Women who ran their households in this fashion were expected not only to adequately manage their homes and servants, but also their social lives. Many women of the time would organize town functions as well as dinner parties within their homes. While women are encouraged to find their place as manager of the home, they are also inspired to cultivate their social standing: “Busy housewives should be encouraged to find their time in the midst of domestic cares for the recreation and social intercourse which are necessary to the well-being of all.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

When guests are present, a woman’s role alters again as etiquette changes: “...after dinner, should we be alone, we have the children and the governess down; if we have company, we don’t see them; they go to bed at a quarter to eight; the governess comes and passes the rest of the evening with us...”[[4]](#footnote-3) While town functions encompassed the whole community, dinner parties consisted of a more narrow friend group. According to Beeton, “[A lady’s] true and tried friends are treasures never to be lightly lost, but they, and the friends she will make by entering her husband’s circle, and very likely by moving to a new locality, should provide her with ample society.”[[5]](#footnote-4) A woman’s social standing showed how the Industrial Revolution altered her purpose because it made her more independent and also gave her social credibility that was her own and not seen as beneath her husband’s.

Lastly, Beeton goes in depth with how a woman should present herself, both in attire and attitude. As in today’s society, the way one dresses shows how much effort they put (or don’t put) into their persona. In Beeton’s opinion, a woman’s attire should be appropriate for whatever she’s doing at the time. In the same regard, Beeton says, “she [the woman] should also bear in mind that her different costumes have to furnish her with apparel for home wear, outdoor exercise and social functions, and try to allot due relative importance to the claims of each.”[[6]](#footnote-5) Presentation of self is important concerning any gender. With the Industrial Revolution causing a production boom, fashion was also thriving because materials were being produced at a faster rate. If women could afford it, clothing could easily be used to elevate their status in society.

Soyer and Beeton show that there are many ways that the Industrial Revolution shaped and altered a woman’s position in society. A woman’s position over her servants, her social exchanges, and her attire are only a few examples of these changes.

1. Isabella Beeton, “Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management,” 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Alexis Soyer, “Modern Housewife,” 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Beeton, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Soyer, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Beeton, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Beeton, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)