

Queen Victoria



Edwin Landseer. *Windsor Castle in Modern Times*, 1841–1845, showing Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at home with their eldest child Princess Victoria.

Queen Victoria 1819–1901

Queen Victoria, who ruled from 1837 to 1901, was the most prominent woman of the age, and during her reign the monarchy came to symbolize the falling power of the British empire. Although she was a capable woman who wielded genuine political influence, she felt uncomfortably thrust into greatness, and often deplored the contradictions of her position. A firm believer in the notion that men and women should occupy separate spheres, the queen regarded advocates for women's rights as "dangerous and unchristian and unparliamentary." The mother of nine children, Victoria was revered as the embodiment of domestic propriety, but her views on maternity were decidedly un sentimental. Her letters to her eldest daughter lament the sufferings of pregnancy, and in the 1850s Queen Victoria pioneered the use of chloroform in childbirth, time-making anesthesia acceptable for other women.

Letters and Journal Entries on the Position of Women *Journal*¹

20 June 1837

I was awake at 6 o'clock by Mamma, who told me that the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Conyngham were here, and wished to see me. I got out of bed and went into my sitting room (only in my dressing gown), and alone, and saw them. Lord Conyngham then acquainted me that my poor Uncle, the King, was no more, and had expired at

¹ *From Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. Christopher Hibbert (1963), pp. 100–101.
² Victoria's mother was the widow of Edward, Duke of

when Victoria was an infant, she was brought up by her mother. She had just turned eighteen when she became queen on the death of her uncle, King William IV.

12 minutes p. 2 this morning, and consequently that I am Queen. Lord Conyngham knelt down and kissed my hand, at the same time delivering to me the official announcement of the poor King's demise. The Archbishop then told me that the Queen³ was desirous that he should come and tell me the details of the last moments of my poor, good Uncle; he said that he had directed his mind to religion and had died in a perfectly happy, quiet state of mind, and was quite prepared for his death. He added that the King's sufferings at the last were not very great but that there was a good deal of uneasiness. Lord Conyngham, who I charged to express my feelings of condolence and sorrow to the poor Queen, returned directly to Windsor. I then went to my room and dressed.

Since it has pleased Providence to place me in this station, I shall do my utmost to fulfil my duty towards my country; I am very young and perhaps in many, though not in all things, inexperienced, but I am sure, that very few have more real good will and more real desire to do what is fit and right than I have. ***

To Princess Frederick William⁴

24 March 1858

That you should feel shy sometimes I can easily understand. I do so very often to this hour. But being married gives one one's position which nothing else can. Think however what it was for me, a girl of 18 all alone, not brought up at court as you were—but very

³ Adelaide, the widow of William IV.

⁴ This and the following letters on marriage and childbirth are from *Dearest Child: Letters between Queen Victoria and the Princess Royal, 1850–1861*, ed. P. G. B. (1964).

(1964). On January 25, 1858, at the age of seventeen, Victoria's eldest daughter had married Prince Frederick [Fritz], later Crown Prince of Prussia. Her mother wrote

humbly at Kensington Palace—with trials and afflictions to endure and be everywhere the first! No, no one knows what a life of afflictions must be—and! How thankful I am that none of you, please God! ever will have that miserable and trying position. Now do enter into this in your letters, you will have that answered and trying position. Now do enter into this in your letters, you will have that answered and trying position.

Now to reply to your observation that you find a married woman has much more liberty than an unmarried one in one word she has, —but what I meant was—in a physical point of view—and if you have hereafter (as I had constantly for the first 2 years of my marriage) —trials and sufferings and miseries and plagues—which you must struggle against and enjoyments etc. to give up—constant precautions to take, you will feel the value of a married woman! Without that—certainly it is unbounded happiness if one has a husband one worships! It is a foretaste of heaven. And you have a husband who adores you, and is, I perceive, ready to meet every wish and desire of your's. I had 9 times for 8 months⁵ to bear with those above-named miseries and real misery (besides many duties) and I own it tried me sorely; one feels so pinned down— one's wings clipped—in fact, at the best (and few were or are better than I was) only half oneself—particularly the first and second time. This I call the "show side" as much as being torn away from one's loved home, parents and brothers and sisters. And therefore—I think our sex a most unenviable one.

26 May 1858

The horrid news contained in Fritz's letter to Papa [that the Princess was pregnant] upset me dreadfully. The more so as I feel certain almost it will all end in nothing.

15 June 1858

What you say of the pride of giving life to an immortal soul is very fine, dear, but I own I cannot enter into that; I think much more of our being like a cow or a dog at such moments; when our poor nature becomes so very animal and unecstatic—but for you, dear, if you are sensible and reasonable not in ecstasy nor spending your day with nurses and wet nurses, which is the ruin of many a refined and intellectual young lady, without adding to her real maternal duties, a child will be a great resource. Above all, dear, do remember never to lose the modesty of a young girl towards others (without being prude); though you are married don't become a matron at once to whom everything can be said, and who minds saying nothing herself—I remained particular to a degree (indeed feel so now) and often feel shocked at the confidences of other married ladies. I fear abroad they are very indelicate about these things.

29 January 1859

God be praised for all his mercies, and for bringing you safely through this awful time!⁶ Our joy, our gratitude knows no bounds.

My precious darling, you suffered much more than I ever did—and how I wish I could have lightened them for you! Poor dear Fritz—how he will have suffered for you! I think and feel much for him; the dear little boy if I could but see him for one minute, give you one kiss. It is hard, very hard. But we are so happy, so grateful! * * * You will and must feel so thankful all is over! But don't be alarmed for the future, it never can be so bad again!

20 April 1859

I really think I shall never let your sisters marry—certainly not to be so constantly away and see so little of their parents—as till now, you have done, contrary to all that I

was originally promised and told. I am so glad to see that you so entirely enter into all my feelings as a mother. Yes, dearest, it is an awful moment to have to give one's innocent child up to a man, be he ever so kind and good—and to think of all that she must go through! I can't say what I suffered, what I felt—what struggles I had to go through—(indeed I have not quite got over it yet) and that last night when we took you to your room, and you cried so much, I said to Papa as we came back "after all, it is like taking a poor lamb to be sacrificed." You now know—what I meant, dear. I know that God has willed it so and that these are the trials which we poor women must go through; no father, no man can feel this! Papa never would enter into it all! As in fact he seldom can in my very violent feelings. It really makes me shudder when I look around at all your sweet, happy, unconscious sisters—and think that I must give them up too—one by one!! Our dear Alice [who was 15], has seen and heard more (of course not what no one ever can know before they marry and before they have had children) than you did, from your marriage—and quite enough to give her a horror rather of marrying.

4 May 1859

Abstractedly, I have no *tendre* for them [babies] till they have become a little human; an ugly baby is a very nasty object—and the prettiest is frightful when undressed—till about four months; in short as long as they have their big body and little limbs and that terrible frog-like action. But from four months, they become prettier and prettier. And I repeat it—your child would delight me at any age.

15 June 1859

Now I must scold you a wee bit for an observation which really seems at variance with your own expressions. You say "how glad" Ada [the Queen's niece] "must be" at being again in that most charming situation, which you yourself very frequently told me last year was so wretched. How can anyone, who has not been married above two years and three quarters, (like Ada) rejoice at being a third time in that condition? I positively think those ladies who are always *enceinte* quite disgusting; it is more like a rabbit or guinea-pig than anything else and really it is not very nice.

16 May 1860

All marriage is such a lottery—the happiness is always an exchange—though it may be a very happy one—still the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband's slave. That always sticks in my throat. When I think of a merry, happy, free young girl—and look at the ailing, aching state a young wife generally is doomed to—which you can't deny is the penalty of marriage.

17 November 1860

My beloved child, these lines are to wish you heartily and warmly joy of your 20th birthday—an important age—though married nearly three years and with two children it seems but of little consequence. Still to bid adieu to one's "teens" is a serious thing!

18 December 1861

What is to become of us all?⁷ Of the unhappy country, of Europe, of all? For you all, the loss of such a father is totally irreparable! I will do all I can to follow out all his wishes—to live for you all and for my duties. But how I, who leant on him for all and everything—without whom I did nothing, moved not a finger, arranged not a print or photograph, didn't put on a gown or bonnet if he didn't approve it shall be able to go

5. Victoria alludes to her nine pregnancies.

6. After a difficult and dangerous labor, Victoria's daughter

future Kaiser Wilhelm II, who led Germany against England in the First World War.

7. Victoria was grief-stricken at the death her husband, Prince Albert, on December 14, 1861; after his death she mourned him obsessively, going into virtual seclusion for many years. Beatrice was her ninth child, born in 1857. This letter is from Queen Victoria to her daughter, Princess Alice, on December 18, 1861.

on, to live, to move, to help myself in difficult moments? How I shall long to ask his advice! Oh! it is too, too weary! The day—the night (above all the night) is too sad and weary. The days never pass! I try to feel and think that I am living on with him, and that his pure and perfect spirit is guiding and leading me and inspiring me!

Sweet little Beatrice comes to lie in my bed every morning which is a comfort. I long so to cling to and clasp a loving being. Oh! how I admired Papa! How in love I was with him! How everything about him was beautiful and precious in my eyes! Oh! how, how I miss all, all! Oh! Oh! the bitterness of this—of this woe!

*To William Gladstone*⁸

6 May 1870

The circumstances respecting the Bill to give women the same position as men with respect to Parliamentary franchise gives her an opportunity to observe that she had for some time past wished to call Mr Gladstone's attention to the mad & utterly demoralizing movement of the present day to place women in the same position as to professions—as men;— & amongst others, in the *Medical Line*.

*** And she is most anxious that it should be known how she not only disapproves but *abhors* the attempts to destroy all propriety & womanly feeling which will inevitably be the result of what has been proposed. The Queen is a woman herself—& knows what an anomaly her own position is:—but that can be reconciled with reason & propriety tho' it is a terribly difficult & trying one. But to tear away all the barriers which surround a woman, & to propose that they should study with men—things which could not be named before them—certainly not in a *mixed* audience—would be to introduce a total disregard of what must be considered as belonging to the rules & principles of morality.

The Queen feels so strongly upon this dangerous & unchristian & unnatural cry & movement of "woman's rights,"—in which she knows Mr Gladstone *agrees*, (as he sent her that excellent Pamphlet by Lady) that she is most anxious that Mr Gladstone & others should take some steps to check this alarming danger & to make whatever use they can of her name. ***

Let woman be what God intended; a helpmate for a man—but with totally different duties & vocations.

*To Sir Theodore Martin*⁹

29 May 1870

The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of "Woman's Rights," with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady—ought to get a *good whipping*.

It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different—then let them remain each in their own position. Tennyson has some beautiful lines on the difference of men and women in *The Princess*.¹ Woman would become the most hateful, heartless, and disgusting of human beings were she allowed to unsex herself; and where would be the protection which man was intended to give the weaker sex? The Queen is sure that Mrs Martin agrees with her.



8. Gladstone (1809–1898) was the prime minister in four Liberal governments (1868–1874, 1880–1885, 1886, 1892–1894). This letter is from *The Queen and Mr. Gladstone* (1933) by Philip Guedalla. The Queen refers to the recurrence of the proposal to give women the vote. *fin*

9. This letter is from *Queen Victoria As I Knew Her* (1908) by Sir Theodore Martin, a lawyer and man of letters.

1. See *The Princess* (page 1213): "For woman is not undevelop'd man, / But diverse: could we make her as the man, / Sweet Love were slain: his dearest bond is