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## Economic Women

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# Marriage, Celibacy, or Emigration?

DEBATING THE COSTS OF FAMILY LIFE IN  
MID-VICTORIAN ENGLAND



ERIKA RAPPAPORT

“How shall men marry in these expensive days, when incomes diminish and outgoings increase?”<sup>1</sup> This was a question on many men and women’s minds in the 1860s, or so it would seem to a reader of the liberal newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*. In the summer of 1868, this journal published nearly three hundred letters from readers, which the paper framed as a debate: “Marriage or Celibacy?”<sup>2</sup> For several weeks the correspondence pages became a public forum for discussing the intimate costs of the burgeoning consumer society of mid-Victorian England. While initially correspondents speculated about the causes of growing domestic expenditure, the latter weeks examined solutions, the most popular of which was emigration. Those who contemplated leaving England fantasized about a life where fashionable dress, expensive furnishings, and lavish entertain-

<sup>1</sup> “A Single Man,” *Daily Telegraph*, 3 July 1868, 2.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy: The Daily Telegraph on a Victorian Dilemma* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). Robson describes the debate’s narrative structure and its relationship to other contemporary discussions of marriage. He also analyzes the correspondents’ rhetorical styles and literary influences. Judith Knelman has argued that the debate was the beginning of a trend rejecting marriage. See “She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not: Trends in the Victorian Marriage Market,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 18.1 (Winter 1994): 80–94.

ments were not necessary to establish one's respectability and middle-class status. Most did not seek to leave England in order to afford a luxurious lifestyle but saw in emigration a way to opt out of England's increasingly consumer-oriented society and thereby afford a family. Collectively, these letters reveal how average middle-class men and women recognized that marriage and parenthood brought a shift in consumer choices and practices as well as new constraints and anxieties.

As personal as these letters were, stories about families devastated by wives' reckless spending or husbands' financial failures ran through much nineteenth-century literature, as did painful scenes of young people balancing the ideal of romance and the reality of economy when choosing a spouse.<sup>3</sup> Such problems were not merely the stuff of fiction. Household guides and women's magazines found a ready market of cash-strapped readers interested in learning how to maintain appearances on limited means. Middle-class diaries, too, exposed the pleasures and struggles of families living in an increasingly commercial age. For example, on the day she married, the middle-class diarist Beryl Lee Booker remembered feeling a new freedom to buy what she wanted and to wander into London's less than respectable shopping streets. Only a few hours after her wedding, she drove to one of London's more famous bookstores and bought "a hitherto forbidden novel." She then walked up and down the notorious Burlington Arcade, because, as she put it, "I was a married woman."<sup>4</sup> Although prostitutes plied their trade and gamblers won and lost vast sums of money in the floors above the Arcade's aristocratic shops, Booker felt that marriage had afforded her access to this consumer culture, which she had not known as a single woman. However, such freedom also became a source of great tension between Booker and her new husband.

The *Daily Telegraph* letters tell essentially the same story as men and women discussed the ethics and consequences of consumerism, the definition of luxuries, the appropriateness of male and female shopping, and its impact on their ability to wed and have children. The debate, however, frequently fell along gender lines, as both sexes blamed the unbridled spending of the other for raising the stakes of bourgeois status. Single women often targeted young men's failure to forgo immature, individualistic, and

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<sup>3</sup> A classic example is George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, which first appeared in publication just three years after the *Daily Telegraph* debate. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–72; London: Penguin, 1994). For a recent analysis of some of the themes of marriage, money, and fraud, see Rebecca Stern, *Home Economics: Domestic Fraud in Victorian England* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Beryl Lee Booker, *Yesterday's Child, 1890–1909* (London: John Long, 1937), 256.

pleasure-seeking forms of consumption in order to purchase a family. Male correspondents responded that cigars, fine clothing, theater tickets, and prostitutes were but poor substitutes for the family they could not afford in any case. One "Bachelor" who acknowledged himself as an unemployed clerk explained, for example, that though he admired girls' "sweet faces," he could not "afford the luxury of possessing one."<sup>5</sup> Answering a similar charge of extravagance, female correspondents frequently delineated how thrifty housekeeping could stretch modest resources, implying that even in bourgeois homes their domestic labor had financial repercussions.<sup>6</sup> An "English wife," for example, explained how she saved money by not "con-signing" her children to the "constant care of a maid," and once they were about nine or ten, she even had them make "some part of their own under-clothing" or "dust drawing-rooms and bedrooms."<sup>7</sup> This solution, though, posed a threat to a key fiction of bourgeois culture—that women and children did not engage in the hard work of maintaining a home. As a result, a good many correspondents began to consider how emigration would allow them to marry, have children, and maintain their class position on a small budget. They conceived of the empire as a domestic space that hearkened back to an imagined rural and precapitalist past free from the social and material pressures of the modern age.

In the past few decades, scholars have documented how a spectacular culture of exhibitions and department stores, advertising and mass-market publications, restaurants and theaters addressed women as consumers and encouraged their participation in metropolitan spaces in much of Europe and North America.<sup>8</sup> Such changes transformed material expectations and

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>6</sup> The role of women's domestic labor and class reproduction has primarily been studied among the working classes and not those above them. For the most well-known study, see Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of this correspondent's resources, see Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy*, 73, 131, and 300. Lower-middle- and middle-class men were perceived as not having attained their adulthood or their social station until they married and had children. See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 321–35; John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 108; and Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhardt Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe, 1780–1914: Enterprise, Family, and Independence* (London: Routledge, 1995), 87–99.

<sup>8</sup> This is a large and ever-growing body of literature. For Victorian England, see Erika D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996); Rachel Bowlby,

led to a rising cost of living, keenly felt by the British middle classes in the 1860s.<sup>9</sup> They also encouraged this class to delay marriage and to limit the size of their families, but there were other, less measurable domestic reverberations of this emergent consumer culture.<sup>10</sup> Both sexes indulged in new, expensive consumer habits, altering gender dynamics and power relations within the bourgeois family.<sup>11</sup>

The *Telegraph* debate posited that men's and women's excessive consumerism had made the prospects of marriage more expensive and, for men at least, less appealing. Consumerism had in effect produced what became known as the redundant female: single middle-class women who had failed to find a spouse. Feminists, political economists, and popular writers were all invested in the causes of and solutions to the surplus-women problem in these years. After the census of 1851 asked about marital status for the first time, the English discovered that they had approximately half a million more women than men, and the popular press transformed these single

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*Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (London: Methuen, 1985); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Lara Kriegel, *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire and the Museum in Victorian England* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Lori Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Mica Nava, "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City, and the Department Store," in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, ed. Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), 38–76; Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shop Girl* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006); and Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning among the Victorian Middle Classes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

<sup>10</sup> American historians have done more than the British to consider the relationship between the history of consumer culture and that of the family. See, especially, Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 162–82. For a broad comparative approach to this topic, see John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> This debate thus speaks to a growing concern that focusing on the history of female consumerism has inadvertently neglected how men have been commodified in modern culture. Recently, however, this imbalance has begun to be rectified. See, for example, Justin Bengry, "Courting the Pink Pound: *Men Only* and the Queer Consumer, 1935–39," *History Workshop Journal* 68.1 (2009): 122–48; Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life, 1860–1914* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999); Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Brent A. Shannon, *The Cut of His Coat: Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860–1914* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

women into a pressing social problem. It became an especially compelling issue after William Rathbone Greg asked "Why are Women Redundant?" in an essay he published in the *National Review* in 1862.<sup>12</sup> Thereafter, many tried to rectify this gender imbalance through emigration schemes or by reforming middle-class female education and expanding women's limited labor market.<sup>13</sup>

The mid-Victorians believed that it was harder than ever for a middle-class woman to find a husband, but they also recognized that the nature of middle-class marriage was changing in ways that seemed to be weakening patriarchal authority. As Esther Godfrey's essay in this volume discusses, divorce was being liberalized, and feminists and others were advocating for, but had not yet achieved, the right of married women to retain their property after marriage. Changes in credit and debt law were also rewriting the economic power of husbands and wives in ways that gave women new, if still limited, access to their husband's resources when they went shopping. It seemed ever harder for men to control their family budget.<sup>14</sup>

Correspondents transformed such concerns about single women and powerless men into a critique of unbounded materialism. By the 1880s and 1890s, popular writers such as George Gissing and George Grossmith turned domestic power struggles over money and commodities into social satire and especially targeted the lower middle classes for their degraded tastes and inability to resist the allure of mass culture.<sup>15</sup> The *Telegraph's*

<sup>12</sup> This was also published as a book in 1869. William Rathbone Greg, *Why Are Women Redundant?* (London: Trübner, 1869).

<sup>13</sup> For a recent discussion of this issue, see Kathrin Levitan, "Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' Problem and the British Census, 1851–1861," *Women's History Review* 17.3 (July 2008): 359–76. Also see A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830–1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), see especially chapters 1, 4, and 5; Rita S. Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: Contested Subjects* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); and Diana C. Archibald, *Domesticity, Imperialism, and Emigration in the Victorian Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002). For an analysis of how unmarried women created communities, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 48–73.

<sup>15</sup> The "suburban" lower middle classes were key participants in the culture of consumption in late Victorian and Edwardian England. See, for example, A. James Hammerton, Simon Gunn, and Christopher Hosgood's chapters in *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain, 1800–1940*, ed. Alan Kidd and David Nicholls (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999). Also see A. James Hammerton, "Pooterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870–1920," *Journal of British Studies* 38 (July 1999): 291–321; Peter Bailey, "White Collars, Gray Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited," *Journal of British Studies* 38 (July 1999): 273–90; and "Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday: The Comic Press in the 1880s," *History Workshop Journal* 16 (Autumn 1983): 4–31.

correspondents, however, tell a tragic rather than a satirical story that conveys a pervasive feeling of being “outside” of modern culture.<sup>16</sup> These writers imagined consumerism as engendering loss—of one’s social status, of the ability to marry and have children, and of one’s national identity.<sup>17</sup> Correspondents saw themselves as falling out of the middle class precisely because others seemed to be rising in prosperity and social expectations.<sup>18</sup>

Whether real, fictional, or the product of the *Telegraph’s* editor, the letters collectively drew upon a similar mixture of romanticism, evangelicalism, and political economy to frame their analysis of consumerism, marriage, and family life.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the *Telegraph* summarized the series of letters as “CUPID versus PRUDENCE, POLITICAL ECONOMY, and others.”<sup>20</sup> Male and female, single and married, nearly all those who wrote to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* believed that society’s growing desire to consume goods and entertainment, coupled with strong support for the male breadwinner as the family’s sole earner, had placed tremendous strains on the ability to marry or to manage the family economy after marriage. Nearly all the writers criticized rampant consumerism but maintained the notion of the family as an economic unit, which needed a healthy balance of assets and liabilities.

Three-quarters of the letters were written by married and single men, but this was not only a venue for men to complain about the costs of mar-

<sup>16</sup> Fears of falling, a pervasive sense of marginality, and status anxieties seemed almost to be the defining aspect of lower-middle-class identity. Geoffrey Crossick, “The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion,” in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain, 1870–1914*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 23, 30–32.

<sup>17</sup> Hammerton has argued that satirical criticisms of the lower middle class blamed an emasculated lower-middle-class husband and father and a “selfish and consumerist wife” for numerous problems associated with modernity, including national decline. A. James Hammerton, “The English Weakness? Gender, Satire and ‘Moral Manliness’ in the Lower Middle Class, 1870–1920,” *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*, 171. Certainly, the economic and emotional strains discussed by the *Telegraph’s* letter writers contributed to antagonism between couples. Ginger S. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1995); Erika D. Rappaport, “A Husband and His Wife’s Dresses: Consumer Credit and the Debtor Family in England, 1864–1914,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 163–87; and A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood*. A typical example of this type of literature is “Middle-Class Housekeeping,” *Tinsley’s Magazine* 1 (August 1867–January 1868): 734–42.

<sup>19</sup> Political economy thus shaped both public and private discussions of class identity. On its public influences, see Geoffrey Crossick, “From Gentlemen to the Residuum: Languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain,” in *Language, History and Class*, ed. Penelope J. Corfield (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 154.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1868, 4.

riage, since dozens of women responded to men characterizing them as expensive commodities.<sup>21</sup> Women reacted to their commodification in several ways. First they denied the charge that they liked to shop more than men and argued that consumerism was a plague of youth in general. Furthermore, some women insisted that their family's economic stability and comfort depended as much on their private domestic labor—such as doing their own washing or mending—as it did on the size of their husband's income. This debate therefore was a rare moment in which average women spelled out the economics of bourgeois domesticity and rejected the culture's portrayal of them as passionate consumers or leisured ladies.

Participants typically defined themselves by gender, income, age, occupation, marital status, and household size,<sup>22</sup> often using monikers to establish identities and attitudes. So, for example, we have letters from "An English Girl,"<sup>23</sup> "A Matron,"<sup>24</sup> and "A Happy Nine Years' Wife."<sup>25</sup> Some indicated attitudes toward consumerism by calling themselves "A Plain Girl,"<sup>26</sup> "A Simple Country Girl,"<sup>27</sup> or "Home Made Bread."<sup>28</sup> Male correspondents, such as "One Who Looks before He Leaps"<sup>29</sup> and "A Prudent Bachelor,"<sup>30</sup> tended to incorporate their attitude toward marriage when they named themselves. The majority admitted to being—or being supported by—clerks, civil servants, tradesmen, clergymen, accountants, or simply "professionals." A wealthy correspondent labeled this group "lower middle class,"<sup>31</sup> and one even called himself "Nobody in Particular."<sup>32</sup> Most in this vaguely defined group saw themselves as descending from the middle rather than rising out of the working class.

<sup>21</sup> About seventy-five percent were from male correspondents. Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy*, 271. Robson identifies the correspondents' gender, age, and occupational background, but he tends to take these as self-evident rather than as sites in which people constructed these identities (269–87).

<sup>22</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 1 July 1868, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3 July 1868, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 1868, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1868, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 16 July 1868, 2. This sense of being a "nobody" was picked up by one of the most famous portrayals of lower-middle-class life, George Grossmith and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*, first published in *Punch* in 1888 (1892; reprint: London, 1965). For the problems associated with labeling such a heterogeneous group, see Crossick and Gerhard-Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe*, 2–8.



Key political, economic, and cultural changes had begun to give such “nobodies” a public voice and shaped the issues and assumptions embedded in the debate. The expansion of newspaper publishing, travel by rail, and the emergence of the spectacular culture associated with the Great Exhibition had begun to shape this group into a public of consumers.<sup>33</sup> Politics, too, defined the lower middle class in new ways. The 1867 Reform Act, for example, had just enfranchised many of the male *Telegraph* correspondents. One specifically welcomed his impending franchise, noting that he “shall undoubtedly have a vote under the new lodger franchise.”<sup>34</sup> However, as we will see, the right to vote did not necessarily bolster these men’s sense of inclusion in the nation, since some felt quite literally priced out of the marriage market. Indeed, their gender privilege was far from secure—especially in the late sixties, a time when women anticipated gaining the vote.<sup>35</sup> The passage of two of the three Contagious Diseases Acts, the liberalization of divorce, and the early stirrings of the Woman’s Movement had brought “private” issues such as sexuality and family life into the public sphere of politics and the press. The legal and public wrangling over the CD Acts had further highlighted not only the extent of prostitution but how the bourgeois practice of delayed marriage had turned bachelors into a willing market for this illicit commodity.

The correspondence began in mid-June 1868 after the *Telegraph* published an article exposing the prevalence of prostitution in London’s West End.<sup>36</sup> It quickly shifted when “A Barrister” suggested that there were so many prostitutes because there were so many aging middle-class bachelors in need of inexpensive female company. “The principle root of the evil,” he surmised, “lies in the exaggerated notions of luxury that pervade our social system, and put an almost impassable bar upon early marriage, in

<sup>33</sup> Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 26 June 1868, 7.

<sup>35</sup> One female correspondent wondered “while waiting for womanhood suffrage are we to pine away in desolation?” *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2. See Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On the politics of prostitution in the 1860s, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On the public discussion of marriage and gender surrounding the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), chap. 3.

<sup>36</sup> The paper’s wide circulation had in part been built on sensational reporting. Lord Burnham, *Peterborough Court: The Story of the “Daily Telegraph”* (London: Cassell & Company, 1955), 75–89.

the middle and wealthier classes." He believed that during the previous half-century a custom had developed that newly married young couples were expected, "if they mean to maintain their social *status*, to live in almost the same style as their parents and the circle in which their parents move." If they married too early, newlyweds could "just keep a modest little cottage in some suburb; but they could not afford to dress for dinner parties and balls, and, if they could, they certainly could not give balls in return." The end result would be social ostracism, as this couple would soon "find that they must drop society of their own class, or that society would drop away from them."<sup>37</sup> Men delayed or avoided matrimony, then, because they feared social decline and a reduction in their material comforts. This "barrister" saw men as sexual beings rationally choosing prostitution as a cheaper means than marriage for satisfying a necessity. This comment was part of the discussion raging in the 1860s surrounding the morality and ethics of prostitution and its regulation. As politicians, reformers, and others considered whether and how the Great Social Evil could and should be regulated, some argued that male sexuality was natural and that unmarried men needed safe and healthy outlets, which the state could ensure through passage of the CD Acts. The entire marriage debate was built upon a similar set of assumptions about the economics of marriage and sexuality. Prostitutes were the quintessential symbol of women's commodification in a capitalist society, but correspondents quickly turned to the perils of the commodified bourgeois family.<sup>38</sup>

The *Telegraph's* correspondents all felt that social, economic, and cultural changes over the previous decades had turned bourgeois domesticity and respectable sexuality into overpriced commodities. Both male and female correspondents spilled much ink over pinpointing the source of rampant consumerism, blaming "society," women's nature, courtship practices, and youthful offenders of both sexes. Most, but not all, singled out the middle classes for indulging in an extravagant culture of appearances. "A Would be Reformer" complained of the "extravagant style of living and habits of luxury, which prevail amongst the middle and upper class." This reformer blamed parents for bringing up their children "in an expensive lifestyle," and for giving little importance to such attributes as "character, conduct, [and] principles."<sup>39</sup> "A Rural Bachelor" similarly believed that "an expensive style of living has taken the place of the old and charming simplicity," and that "many, very many, of the middle class have got into

<sup>37</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1868, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

a shamefully expensive way of living.”<sup>40</sup> “A Country Girl” also explained that to her “country eyes one cause of the evil appears to lie in the attempt I see everyone around me making to outshine their neighbours. This makes it difficult for young people to live comfortably and enter into any middle class society on so limited income as £200 a year.”<sup>41</sup> An “English Girl” complained of “everyone trying to outdo their neighbours in dress and everything” and blamed men for only flirting with “those dressed in the height of fashion; therefore, what can men expect but expensive wives.”<sup>42</sup> Others assumed that luxurious tastes were seeping into all ranks, contributing to the volatility of social status. “Plain Truth” bemoaned that “in the present day the great evil is that each grade of society expects to vie with the one above it.”<sup>43</sup>

The idea that consumerism was caused by people’s attempts to “vie” with the class above their own had already become something of a cliché by the 1860s.<sup>44</sup> However, the *Telegraph’s* correspondents also attacked the young for aping their parents’ lifestyle. Modern girls, who apparently spent all their time “dressing themselves up, reading trashy novels, and appearing at every place of amusement,”<sup>45</sup> infected society with their extravagant tastes. A male civil servant opined that modern girls improperly used “amusement, dress, and social intercourse” to show off. “Attendance at concerts, [and] theatres,” he suggested, has

almost ceased to be a matter of hearing, and how many regard it other than as a means of seeing and being seen? The same with what should be the healthful walk, which is taken, not in the healthiest of localities, but in some fashionable promenade. . . . Dress has come to be . . . a mere adjunct to beauty . . . wholly a matter of show . . . and social intercourse is mixed with an unhealthy amount of rivalry which plays the bear with moderate incomes.<sup>46</sup>

This description of modern girls was a direct response to Eliza Lynn Linton’s already famous portrait of the pleasure-seeking, consumer-

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1868, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 1868, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy*, 172.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>44</sup> This idea dates back at least to the 1690s. See Neil McKendrick, “The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England,” in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

<sup>45</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2. Also see “Jane’s” comments on the subject, 8 July 1868.

<sup>46</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 July 1868, 2.

oriented "Girl of the Period," which she had published anonymously in the *Saturday Review* in March 1868, just a few months before the *Daily Telegraph* launched its similar discussion of modern girls and their consumer habits.<sup>47</sup> Many writers felt that the modern girl was no hapless victim of fancy window-dressing, advertising, and other retailer seductions.<sup>48</sup> Rather she was a product of family upbringing, male tastes, and misguided notions of domesticity.<sup>49</sup> One young man, for example, surmised that the system of courtship in which parents, especially the much-maligned "Belgravian mamma," purchased "things" and gave "parties or balls, etc . . . to make their daughters more attractive to get them married," created "extravagant ideas in their daughters' minds . . . and render[ed] them unfit wives of men with small incomes."<sup>50</sup> Of course, many also commented that young men adored such showy girls.<sup>51</sup> "A Simple Country Girl" asked why young men did not look for wives "by the domestic hearth" instead of "at balls, parties, [and] concerts."<sup>52</sup> Another concluded that the Girl of the Period "is a creature of the men's own seeking; their folly has called her into existence; she is a deformity and a libel upon her sex."<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that correspondents did not blame retailers for igniting consumer passions. Rather, they all assumed that such desires were driven by misguided family and gender relations.

A good many female writers denied any likeness at all to the Girl of the Period and professed that they were thoroughly domesticated, thrifty helpmeets, not spendthrifts. They wore only simple, dark fabrics, did not go out to the theater or indulge in other public amusements, and did a

<sup>47</sup> "The Girl of the Period," *Saturday Review*, 14 March 1868, 339–40. Some correspondents directly took issue with Linton's GOP. See, for example, the letter from "A Few Girls of the Period," *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868; "A London Girl," *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868; and \*\*\* *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1868. For a discussion of the GOP as a popular icon of female consumerism, see Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 32; Knelman, "She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not," 85; and Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy*, 151–54.

<sup>48</sup> This understanding of female consumption was present in the 1860s, but it was by no means a dominant one. In fact, many of the letter writers and the newspaper's readers were retailers who more often portrayed themselves as victims of predatory female consumers than as their seducers. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, chaps. 1 and 2. In a later series of letters on marriage in the *Telegraph* in 1888, drapers were sometimes blamed for igniting individuals' desires. For an example, see *Is Marriage a Failure?* ed. Harry Quilter (1888; reprint, New York: Garland, 1984), 220–21.

<sup>49</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2. The analogy that women were brought up to be expensive household furnishings was quite common. One writer noted that they were like "drawing room ornaments." *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 1868, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 2 July 1868, 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1868, 2.

good deal of their own housework.<sup>54</sup> One London girl who was still single advertised herself as being able to “make a pudding, darn my father’s hose . . . and play a piece of music or sing a song. I very seldom go to theatres or operas. . . . I think a good wife finds her pleasure and amusement in the well ordering of her husband’s house.”<sup>55</sup> “A Happy Nine Years’ Wife” who had been “brought up in absolute luxury” but had married an Irishman earning only £100 a year preached that “if a girl is happy in the man she marries, love makes up for all such necessities as bouquets, silk dresses, rides in the Park, [and] eau-de-cologne.”<sup>56</sup>

“Charlie’s Wife” only learned this self-denying lesson over time. This once-wealthy girl had married a music teacher with an income of £120 a year. Early in their marriage the couple had indulged in “wine and servants” and had even “put their clothes out to wash.” The bills and babies came fast, and so did the “bitterness of poverty.” Charlie’s wife admitted that she had not been “taught to work,” and would “have blushed had any of my lady friends caught me with a duster in my white hand.” The family was, of course, plunged into debt as they struggled to keep “up appearances.” They were not only poor but also lonely since, as Charlie’s wife explained, “not even finally my own parents suspected how terribly poor we were.” Eventually, however, this family’s fortunes turned when they “got rid of their servants,” and Charlie’s wife was transformed into “the happiest wife and mother in England.”<sup>57</sup> Like many of the correspondents, this wife had initially seen domestic servants as necessities but soon found them unaffordable luxuries. By agreeing to perform their own household labor, such women were redefining prevailing ideals of middle-class womanhood. In a sense they were interpreting domesticity in ways that would make themselves desirable to men with modest incomes.<sup>58</sup> Even as separate-spheres ideologues rendered women’s labor invisible in bourgeois homes, “Charlie’s Wife” hearkened back to a time when female domestic labor was valued. In the twentieth century, the needs of wartime and postwar economies would make the servantless home a reality for much of the lower middle and middle classes, but in the 1860s this idea was decidedly out of step with the cultural and social norms of the English middle

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, “Matrafamilias,” *Daily Telegraph*, 30 June 1868, 8; and the letter from “An English Wife,” 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 1868, 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1868, 2.

<sup>58</sup> These women’s self-presentation as “cheap” and domestic may have also been a result of the prevailing perception that women outnumbered men. See Knelman, “She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not,” 81–83.

classes. Servants were very much a part of the paraphernalia of bourgeois domesticity in the mid-Victorian years, though some women openly admitted that they would rather live without them than give up their chances of marriage altogether.

This fantasy wife who did her own housework, shopped little, and expected to find her pleasures at home was invented, or at least gained force, as a kind of foil to the Girl of the Period. The Angel in the House thus took on a particular meaning in the mid-Victorian era in opposition to a new image of public, self-indulgent womanhood. Separate spheres ideology had played havoc with the lower-middle-class domestic economy, since this group could not afford both leisured wives and domestic servants. Yet some correspondents hoped that a kind of authentic domesticity in which women still did housework and domesticated men would solve their class's economic difficulties.<sup>59</sup> Several of the *Telegraph's* unmarried female correspondents were engaged in paid labor, but they implied that they would quit their jobs upon marriage. One married lady who called herself "Matrafamilias" explained how she had given up her £80 income upon marriage because her "husband considered it a wife's province to stay at home." She saw it as her Christian duty to stay at home and thereby show her "trust in God, our love, and his [her husband's] manliness."<sup>60</sup>

Quite a few correspondents insisted that the young of both sexes had acquired expensive habits and that young men indulged in fine fashions as much as their sisters and would-be wives did.<sup>61</sup> "A Draper" observed that Britain's "sons and daughters" equally launched into "a great deal of unnecessary extravagance . . . [and would] squander any amount of money which, if saved, would be very valuable in establishing for them a comfortable home."<sup>62</sup> Another believed that consumerism was part and parcel of youthful rebellion or, as he put it, "children . . . anxious to throw aside the yoke of their parents." In particular, "young men entering banks [and] counting-houses" seemed to have contracted "fast habits."<sup>63</sup> The so-called Young Men of the Period gambled "away money enough to keep

<sup>59</sup> Crossick and Gerhard-Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie*, 87–99. It is possible that the next generation attempted to solve this problem by maintaining a dual-income family. Dina Copelman examined this sort of lower-middle-class family in her study *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class and Feminism, 1870–1930* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 176–95.

<sup>60</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 30 June 1868, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 1868, 2; Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy*, 154–58.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July 1868, 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2.

even an expensive wife” and were “too selfish to give up such amusements, and appropriate their surplus money in establishing a comfortable home.”<sup>64</sup> “Two Plain English Girls” asked the British Bachelor, “Is it at the billiard table, the gambling house, [and] the theater, &c that you find ‘happiness?’”<sup>65</sup> “A Wife and Mother” also believed that “drink, pleasure (so-called), [and] dice” were the “temptations” that led “young men away from home circles.”<sup>66</sup> A consensus had developed that bachelors spent a great deal on the wrong things: wine, loose women, and expensive clothes. Though many bachelors pleaded that they simply could not afford to marry at all, both male and female correspondents emphasized that bachelors in fact spent a great deal, but on prostitutes and other indulgences. The problem was that young men spent on themselves rather than saving for a family. Especially those who lived at home seemed to have “plenty of money to spend on their individual pleasures” such as “a good coat, fashionable gloves; a decent cigar, dinners out at Richmond and other pleasure resorts, and an occasional stall in the theatre.”<sup>67</sup> Men of the Period evidently had a particular liking for lavender kid gloves, patent-leather shoes, and silk stockings.<sup>68</sup>

Men, many assumed, delayed marriage not because they feared their young wives would overspend but because they treasured the material goods and amusements they could afford only as bachelors.<sup>69</sup> A bachelor clergyman counseled others, and reminded himself, that upon marriage one must “cease to think so much of our own comfort and ease.” Giving up such things as cigars and new suits, he suggested, will “no longer [be] painful; and the seducing and debasing exhibition of ballet girls dressed in tights will give place to the pure and hallowed joy of intellectual conversation with a loving, if not lovely wife.” Though he favored early marriage, this clergyman also implied that it entailed a material and social loss in which young men were cut off from a well-established bachelor consumer subculture.<sup>70</sup> Though condemning his single friends’ behavior, this young clergyman was clearly reluctant to depart from the company of his old “college chums,” whom he described as “exhaling the fumes of the weed,” “running up a heavy bill in New Bond-Street,” and “leering at every well-dressed girl in the boxes.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>65</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 16 July 1868, 2.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1868, 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 and 10 July 1868, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 108–10 mentions certain aspects of bachelor subculture. Also see Breward, *The Hidden Consumer*, 170–85.

<sup>71</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 July 1868, 2.

Just as thrifty, domesticated girls and wives were constructed in opposition to the Girl of the Period, a sober, prudent man was also called up in response to the Young Man of the Period. Prudence was a highly debatable term, however. For some, a watchful control over one's domestic economy was the wise choice, while for others, delayed marriage was rational and prudent. Several patriarchs published detailed domestic budgets, implying that precise knowledge of their family's expenses had kept them above water.<sup>72</sup> Others narrated their domestic spending and proudly economized by walking to work, eating plainly, and finding their amusements "at home."<sup>73</sup> Such economies allowed these men to marry early and beget large families. Indeed, many appeared to be religiously inspired to procreate. One, for example, concluded his letter with this advice for unmarried men: "It is better to marry than burn; don't be afraid—trust in God."<sup>74</sup>

Not everyone, however, felt that penny-pinching and careful budgeting would protect a family from debt and unhappiness. Perhaps the most convincing exposure of this fiction was a letter written by a middle-aged clergyman. He, too, published his detailed budgets, but he did so to show that with four children and two servants, his salary of two hundred a year was never enough to cover his expenses. He survived only by taking on extra employment and borrowing and receiving gifts from "kind-hearted relatives."<sup>75</sup> No doubt, a letter such as this would have had added currency for the readership of the *Telegraph*, since the newspaper routinely published letters from concerned citizens pleading for financial aid for respectable families that had fallen into "distress." Indeed, the "Marriage or Celibacy?" debate only crystallized themes already present throughout the newspaper. Bankruptcy, illness, marital infidelity, and other problems were daily reading in the correspondence pages and the legal sections of the paper long before readers began to talk directly to one another about these issues in June and July of 1868.<sup>76</sup>

A good many correspondents, most of whom identified themselves as followers of political economy, responded to the portrait of prudent patriarchy by charging that procreation itself was a form of conspicuous consumption. "Solon Smiff," for example, humorously remarked, "I never go

<sup>72</sup> Robson has republished these budgets in his appendix. See Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy*, 293–98.

<sup>73</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 1868, 2.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, the stories of infidelity among the lower middle class reported in the divorce proceedings of *Lloyd v. Lloyd* and *Everard v. Everard and Hardy*, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 June 1868, 3. See also the narrative of lower-middle-class domestic failure documented in the letter "A Family in Distress," *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1868, 5.



without his [Mill's] 'Principles of Political Economy' in my pocket." Mill's text had convinced this thirty-two-year-old bachelor that "in a highly-civilized State, a happy marriage—that is, a marriage free from the mean dread of absolute want—is an impossibility for all but the rich." Poor Smiff, however, had recently fallen in love, and his determination was rapidly fading, though he made "frantic efforts" to steady himself by "the light of cool reason."<sup>77</sup> Several others mentioned "Parson Malthus," believing that his equation of population with poverty adequately described their own and the nation's condition.<sup>78</sup> Still others employed a Darwinian vision of society as overcrowded and competitive, arguing that men with modest incomes were losing out to wealthier men in a kind of Darwinian struggle.<sup>79</sup> "Society is fiercely competitive, and every child born is a new competitor," wrote Benedick, a prolific writer but firm believer in small families. Later in the same letter he took a swipe at the Reformation for convincing English men that a large family was "something truly Protestant." As he saw it, "If every Englishman in England . . . married early and begot six or perhaps sixteen children, England in the next generation would be a poorer country than it is now."<sup>80</sup>

Benedick and others who shared his views thus drew upon Malthus, Mill, and Darwin to assert an intimate connection between sexuality, family, class, and national health. These correspondents steered the discussion from issues related to consumption, vanity, the costs of living, and the ideals of domesticity toward an assessment of the middle- and lower-middle-class labor market and emigration. They hoped that emigration to Australia, Canada, South America, and the western United States could solve their personal, as well as national, problems. Such ideas had been popular since at least the 1830s, when pro-empire propagandists had promised men that by leaving England they might make enough money to afford a wife and family. In fact, men had found nonwhite or mixed-race families in the empire, but the practice was increasingly frowned upon, and socially it became necessary to find a legal "European" wife.<sup>81</sup> This

<sup>77</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 30 June 1868, 8. Also see E.F.G.'s letter on 4 July 1868, 2, and "A Plain Man," 11 July 1868, 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July 1868, 2. Also see the letter by J.A.C.V. the same day.

<sup>79</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 July 1868, 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 1868, 2.

<sup>81</sup> For an excellent analysis of race and changing colonial family structures, see Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Also see Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For imperial family economies, see Erika Rappaport, "'The Bombay Debt': Letter Writing, Domestic Economies and Family Conflict

may have been difficult in practice since there were as yet a limited number of single white women on the frontier, but the Victorians imagined this as simply a problem of supply and demand and thus set up various schemes to send single women to the empire to find husbands. For these correspondents, the desire to set up house on the frontier seemed less a flight from domesticity, as John Tosh has recently suggested, than a flight to domesticity.<sup>82</sup> Over the long run emigration created new consumer cultures on the frontier.<sup>83</sup> However, many settlers were trying to escape the costs of consumerism. The *Telegraph's* readers imagined that if they left England they would find work, marry, and set up a cozy if not extravagant home. Some writers urged others to "go to the far West or to some parts of South America, where land can be had for asking almost."<sup>84</sup>

Promises of free land excited readers, to be sure. However, many were simply looking for a place where they could escape England's materialistic social requirements; as Gordon Bigelow argues in this volume, consumer tastes were often produced by the very markets they were thought to drive. "Colonista," for example, had enjoyed living in British Columbia because, she claimed, "you may, if your income be small, live in a tiny house without scandalizing your nearest and dearest; and . . . should you answer your own door with a broom in your hand, society will actually survive the blow." "In England," she concluded, "half your income at least is spent upon that dreadful bugbear 'society'; you have to go through that dreary grind of 'keeping up appearances.'"<sup>85</sup> "A Minister of Religion" who was about to emigrate to Canada with his family similarly believed that by leaving England and turning back to the land he would find, as he put it, "a remedy for our modern ills."<sup>86</sup>

Colonial domesticity was an especially compelling issue during the midcentury, a time when popular writers, philanthropists, and domestic economists reached out to the "genteel female emigrant" by describing the simpler pleasures of colonial domesticity. The *Colonial Magazine and East*

in Colonial India," *Gender and History* 16.2 (August 2004): 233–60.

<sup>82</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 170–94.

<sup>83</sup> James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Gary B. Magee and Andrew Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010).

<sup>84</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 1868, 2. Several mentioned the western United States, and one in particular noted the recent United States Homestead Act, which he believed would give 160 acres of land to settler families in the west. "An Anxious Father," 14 July 1868.

<sup>85</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1868, 2.

<sup>86</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 21 July 1868, 2.

*India Review*, for example, explained how “hundreds of young ladies who once figured as belles in crowded ball-rooms, are now the happy, industrious and prosperous wives of Colonists, and mothers of healthy children.”<sup>87</sup> A similar story appeared in nearly every issue of the weekly periodical the *Domestic Economist Advisor*, a journal that also linked domestic economy to themes of emigration and empire. Like many similar texts, this journal had countless articles about how to live a modest and respectable middle-class lifestyle that was in “good taste” but that “eschewed extravagance” and “expensive habits.”<sup>88</sup> It also frequently included letters from colonists who described how they had achieved this balance by leaving England. Emigration did not imply abandoning one’s Britishness, since establishing a home and family was cast as a key pillar of national identity. In an article published in January 1850, the author made this point explicitly:

Our homes! Our British homes! What simple words these are. . . . How truly English is the name—the bare idea of home! It is a word no other language can express, and few other nations understand—none, perhaps as we understand it. . . . “Home” . . . it is one of the foundation-stones of our happiness as a people; and whatever tends to increase the comfort—the peace—the enjoyment of our homes . . . strengthens our national framework—adds stability to the beautiful structure of our constitution—and tends to purify the moral atmosphere we breathe.<sup>89</sup>

Emigrants thus had to consider whether moving abroad to build a home and family was more in keeping with their national character than was staying single in England. Numerous failure narratives written by former emigrants went some way, however, toward shattering this fantasy of colonial domesticity. These letters warned other clerks that they were as redundant overseas as they were at home.<sup>90</sup> “A Mariner,” for example, explained that “the colonies, like England, are overrun with clerks.”<sup>91</sup> Others implied that urban clerks were not manly or strong enough to endure colonial life. “N.Z.” bluntly stated that for “a man who has been brought up to the desk, unaccustomed to, and perhaps incapable of, severe manual

<sup>87</sup> *Colonial Magazine and East India Review* 21 (April 1851): 344, quoted in A. James Hamerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, 93.

<sup>88</sup> “Thoughts upon Dress and Good Taste,” *Domestic Economist and Advisor in Every Branch of the Family Establishment*, 10 January 1850, 14.

<sup>89</sup> “Our Homes,” *Domestic Economist*, 3 January 1850, 2.

<sup>90</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 1868, 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 1868, 2.

labour, to emigrate is simply an absurdity."<sup>92</sup> Though many promoted emigration and imperialism as a remedy to the problems of bourgeois society, letters such as these told male and female readers alike that there was no escaping their problems.

In the end, the "Marriage or Celibacy?" debate became an expression of bourgeois dislocation and displacement in which neither England nor frontier spaces provided a place for the lower middle classes to achieve their domestic ideals. Correspondents imagined that poor parenting, the demands of the marriage market, and youthful rebellion all contributed to a competitive and materialistic social system and helped create a self-indulgent culture that infected both men and women. The private sphere was both cause and victim, then, of the Victorian culture of consumption. The nearly three hundred men and women who felt compelled to expose their domestic struggles in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* were all anxious about what they perceived as a new, competitive, and unhealthy culture. They sought shelter in an imagined past of material simplicity, in vigilance over personal and familial spending, and, most tellingly, in far-away places in which they could be productive and free from consumer and social pressures. Of course, the very terms of debate in which family and marriage were discussed as commodities suggest that whether they liked it or not, the participants in this debate were already deeply embedded in a consumer society.

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<sup>92</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 1868, 2.