



School of History Assignment Cover Sheet

This coversheet should be completed and form the first page of all assignments.

ITS Username	CB21106		
Module Code:	HST5389	Module Title	ANGELS, SPINSTERS AND WHORES: BRITISH WOMEN AND GENDER FROM VICTORIA TO THE VOTE 2021/22
Seminar Teacher	Amanda Vickery		
Assignment name <i>(e.g. 'Research Essay')</i>	Essay (2500 Words)	Word Count:	2470
Title:	Empire and Gender: Understanding the Inextricability of Gender and British Colonialism		

What aspect of this submission would you most like feedback on?

This could be something you are trying particularly to improve, or want to develop for other assignments on this or other modules in the future.

I feel like so much has been said about this topic, (which is a great thing! it is such a fascinating topic). However, when answering this question, with just slightly more narrow angle than the original prompt, (the original prompt covered three topics: race, empire and gender, this essay covers all three but with an emphasis on empire and gender), I still really struggled to say anything remotely original. Ultimately I felt that within the limit of 2500 words, one can only really begin to answer this question, and in somewhat broad and elementary terms at that.

I have a coversheet from the Disability and Dyslexia Service, and have submitted it alongside this assignment:

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Assignments must conform to the School of History's submission regulations; those that do not, including late assignments, will be subject to a deduction of marks.

Empire and Gender: Understanding the Inextricability of Gender and British Colonialism

This essay primarily examines the extent to which Victorian and Edwardian notions and experiences of empire was entwined with gender. This essay will draw on historians' analyses of both male and female identity within the context of British colonialism, as well as extant theories on the relationship between imperialism and sexuality (which of course, concerns itself with the experience of race and gender). I will also briefly discuss attitudes towards gender as reflected in British immigration policy, which is a consequence, and perhaps one of the few remaining vestiges of British Empire. The goal of this work is to establish the inevitability and inextricability of gender and empire within Britain.

Masculinity and male identity became closely associated with notions of empire due to the beginnings of empire and processes by which empire was established. Although these beginnings do reach into the early years of the 19th century and thus do not technically fall under the Victorian era, ideas of gender and empire from this period are nonetheless important to consider because they directly impacted ideas of gender in the subsequent Victorian and Edwardian eras. A key objective in the formation of empire, especially in the case of British colonialism, was persuading emigration to these newly established colonies: without procuring groups of individuals to leave Britain, there could be no British Empire. Thus, in the early stages of empire the Colonial Office sought to incentivize emigration by guaranteeing work (often in the form of outdoor, manual labor), free outward passage, free (or cheap) land; to many, "the colonies held out economic opportunities which were not only attractive in a material sense, but also carried the prospect of 'independence'" — a notion that was enmeshed with the idea of masculinity.¹ In this fashion, empire more readily appealed to men insofar as the nature of work expected of the emigrants (manual labor, in an unknown and potentially dangerous environment), but also in the embodiment of 'manly' qualities such as mental and physical fortitude, self-reliance, and independence.

In its beginnings, empire did not, at least in an immediate or pre-meditated sense, create new notions of gender or sexuality, but rather the pre-existing notions of gender roles in Britain were extended to

¹ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain : Essays on Gender, Family and Empire*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 237.

imperialism and applied in the creation of colonies. Hence 'gender' within the process of colonization and emigration was mainly a reflection of the 'separate spheres' ideology²: men were fundamentally independent and public, women were the reverse, and thus it was in this manner that, as John Tosh puts it, "[e]mpire-building was man's work; the colonies were a man's world; and manhood might be secured or enhanced by becoming a colonist."³ This last remark reflects a more symbolic aspect of emigration, especially before the 1850s in which the act of emigration was often permanent due to the high cost of unassisted passage⁴, in which emigration could be "a dramatic way for sons to signal their autonomy from paternal authority."⁵ Eventually, however, empire created new questions and issues surrounding gender, whose occurrence and means of resolution further evolved and contributed to notions and experience of gender, especially with regard to race and sexuality.

Towards the end of the Victorian era conflicts within the British Empire in combination with a new sense of competition with other Western nations engaged in imperialism led to anxieties and insecurities based around obtaining and securing empire. In turn, these newfound anxieties of the vulnerability of the British Empire manifested themselves in manliness and masculinity: if colonies and empire had been initiated and created by individuals who sought to enact or establish their masculinity, then the prospect of losing Empire was necessarily quite threatening not only to the men who had given much of their time, energy, and lives to empire's creation, but also to the ideologies that underlie these life choices, as well as to the society that embodied and established these ideologies. John Tosh favors the idea that these insecurities tied to British (racial) superiority and gender manifested themselves in the popularization of the officer cadet corps and team sports within British public schools in the 1880s and 1890s, with the ultimate goal of turning boys into men, or "producing men for imperial service."⁶ In his theory however exists a more subtle but equally compelling reasoning on the relationship between masculinity and the British Empire: while it was true that both foreign and indigenous contestation of British imperial claims may have been threatened, hence the want and creation of more masculine men, "men also needed the empire, as a resource, as a refuge

² Susie Steinbach, "Gender," in *Understanding the Victorians*, 168, accessed 21 January 2022, <https://qmulplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=17052§ion=3#maincontent>.

³ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain : Essays on Gender, Family and Empire*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 250.

⁴ Ibid, 241.

⁵ Ibid, 247.

⁶ Ibid, 266.

and as an object of desire."⁷ In other words, the "need" for more masculine men as required by empire and its complication was also a sublimation of anxieties about masculinity that already existed in Britain.

Emigration and imperialism largely adhered to the understandings of gender and masculinity, yet an interpretation that also arises from migratory behaviors of the late Victorian period is one in which men use empire as a means by which to subvert and escape societal expectations of men, specifically those of monogamy and marriage. To such men, life in the colonies "promised escape from custom and convention, from the chains of matrimony and from respectable pieties about sex," in addition to a sense of camaraderie within the homosocial culture of the colonies, not entirely dissimilar to the public school environment that many of these men had previously experienced⁸. However, this trend or rebellion against stereotypes of domesticity in relation to empire were class specific and applied to men of the upper classes, who had attended the public schools and gentlemen's clubs that fostered a similar homosocial environment to that of the colonies.

Another perhaps obvious consequence of colonialism and emigration was women's emigration to the colonies, which created a different series of gender concerns and issues. British women often emigrated to the colonies with their husbands in order to balance the sex-ratio; in fact, the Colonial office preferred married couples were preferred to single men. Yet although women's success also depended on possessing "qualities traditionally thought of as 'masculine',"⁹ such as courage and perseverance, women's emigration was described and explained by the separate spheres ideology and women's familial instincts; according to William Cobbett these women "valued the ties of family and neighbourhood more highly than their menfolk did."¹⁰ This description of emigrant women attempts to fit their behaviors into the discourse of separate spheres ideology; while it does not directly deny them of possessing qualities thought of at the time as being masculine, his description is not reflective of the indication in Robin F. Haines's work that, "mobile, literate, women may have been prime-movers in the push to seek a livelihood abroad, intent on invigorating their own, and their family's, future prospects."¹¹ In this way, female experience of empire and motivation for

⁷ Ibid, 267.

⁸ Ibid, 269.

⁹ Ibid, 236.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 236-7, 243.

¹¹ Robin F. Haines, *Emigration and the Labouring Poor : Australian Recruitment in Britain and Ireland, 1831-60*, New York (St. Martin's Press: 1997), pp. 256-257.

emigration concerns itself with gender in the different assumptions made about female emigrants within the constraints of the separate spheres philosophy, as well as women's subversion of gender expectations in their decision to participate in imperialism. Women's experience of empire was highlighted in the case of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, during which news outlets focused purposefully on female victims and drew on themes of motherhood, and domesticity in order to elicit greater sympathy and responsive action within the British public.¹²

Empire and its consequences also contributed to discourses on gender and sexuality concerned with race and desire. Sexual relations between male British emigrants and women of color who lived in the various colonized regions, "were frequently written off as an inevitable by-product of normative male sexuality,"¹³ a component of the separate-spheres philosophy in men were, "expected to have sufficient sexual desire that they were driven to have pre- and sometimes extra-marital sex with prostitutes, who served a regrettable but necessary purpose in society by preventing men from being driven to masturbation or sex with other men."¹⁴ These concerns of masturbation or homosexual behavior that already existed in Britain were further embellished by the homosocial environment and frequent lack of unmarried British women in the colonies. However, empire also led to increased romantic and sexual relations between British women and men of color, which was always regarded with more malaise than the reverse,¹⁵ likely due to the threat these relationships posed to the presuppositions of male and female sexualities, and also to ideas of masculinity. Specifically aided by imperialism, the 'other' became "a foil against which proper, ordered, civilised whiteness – in this case, Englishness – could be measured;"¹⁶ a notion further supported in Susan Stewart's ruminations on juxtaposition, "the freak show may seem, at first glance, to be a display of the

¹² Alison Blunt, "Embodying war: British women and domestic defilement in the Indian 'Mutiny', 1857–8," *Journal of Historical Geography* 26 (2000): 403–428, doi:10.1006/jhge.2000.0236.

¹³ Philippa Levine, "Sexuality and Empire" In *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 134, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511802263.006.

¹⁴ Susie Steinbach, "Gender," in *Understanding the Victorians*, 167, accessed 21 January 2022, <https://qmulplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=17052§ion=3#maincontent>.

¹⁵ Philippa Levine, "Sexuality and Empire" In *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 134, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511802263.006.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 128.

grotesque, the distance it invokes makes it instead an inverse display of perfection. Through the freak we derive an image of the normal."¹⁷

These ideas help develop the understanding of the threat posed by relationships between British women and non-white men from the colonies: if empire and territorial conquest were fundamentally tied to conceptualizations of masculinity, and if imperialism was further justified by a sense of British cultural superiority, then these 'taboo' relationships completely disrupted and even reversed this rhetoric. Hence the widespread distaste with which these types of relationships were viewed may represent patriarchal concerns and anxieties of emasculation; not to mention the concern that "mixing with the necessarily inferior subjects of [British] empire would surely dilute British strength and destabilise British imperialism."¹⁸ In addition to the British during this time period, the French were also experiencing similar anxieties pertaining to the sexual relations of white women and men of color from its respective colonies. These anxieties existed to the extent that French theorists and polygenists "asserted the sterility of hybrid unions between black men and white women" and came up with a meticulous classification system, as well as charts and mathematical equations in an act of classification and also a re-exertion of control over the consequences of French Empire.¹⁹

As a potential consequence of the ubiquity of sex and empire, these ideas also entered into the realm of sexual fetish, perhaps best portrayed in the diaries of Arthur Munby and his wife, Hannah Cullwick.²⁰ These diaries detail their sexual fantasies, which encompass a broad range of themes and ideas, including themes of race, gender, and empire; as Anne McClintock puts it, the nature of their sexual acts were "drawn simultaneously from the cult of domesticity and the cult of empire."²¹ The exotic, and at times mysterious nature of empire, a notion which easily positioned itself within the framework of adventure, exploration, power, and discovery, also inevitably lent itself to the world of erotic fantasy and fetish. Empire became

¹⁷ Susan Stewart, "Objects of Desire" In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 132-133.

¹⁸ Philippa Levine, "Sexuality and Empire" In *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 134, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511802263.006.

¹⁹ Marilyn R. Brown, "'Miss La La's' Teeth: Reflections on Degas and 'Race,'" *The Art Bulletin* 89, no. 4 (2007): 750, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067359>.

²⁰ Anne McClintock, "Empire of the Home" In *Imperial Leather : Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 132-81.

²¹ Ibid.

sexualized in this fashion, but also in colonial attitudes towards indigenous peoples, specifically the sexualization of indigenous women of which Philippa Levine provides the example of the Australian legislature's debate on "whether female age of consent laws should mirror those recently passed in Britain, since many believed that the age of menarche came earlier to youngsters raised in warmer climates."²²

Gender is indeed so entwined with empire that it is still reflected in British immigration policy and nationality law. For example for those born abroad before 1983, British citizenship can only be acquired via a British father, who was also married.²³ Similarly, the right to abode, which is less exclusive than citizenship and simply confers the ability to live and work in the United Kingdom without being subject to immigration restrictions, until 1983 only would include "a female Commonwealth citizen who is, or has been, married to a man with the right of abode at any time before 31 December 1982," and not the husband of a woman with the right of abode.²⁴ Though very subtle, these rules reflect the previously discussed higher degree of distaste for the male 'other' than the female 'other'. Although at the relative start of British imperialism, to "prospective emigrants in Britain the process of white conquest was rendered invisible"²⁵ and it is probably the case that the gendered nature of empire began only as a technicality of the existing attitudes, behaviors, and expectations concerning gender, gender has nonetheless become impossible to separate from the experiences and consequences of British empire.

²² Philippa Levine, "Sexuality and Empire" In *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 126, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511802263.006.

²³ "Apply for Citizenship If You Have a British Parent," n.d. gov.uk, accessed 23 January 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/apply-citizenship-british-parent/born-before-1983>.

²⁴ "Nationality: right of abode," 27 November 2019, [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/right-of-abode/print), accessed 23 January 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/right-of-abode/print>

²⁵ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain : Essays on Gender, Family and Empire*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 245.

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