Hidden Passions: An Example of Victorian Courtship through the
Love Letters of Eleanor Sherman and Alexander Thackara

Meagan Schenkelberg
Dr. Karen Kaufman
Women's History
April 20, 2004
The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive.

-Raymond Williams

Victorian America brings to mind many images and concepts from architecture to evolution, but the strongest associations lie within repression. Indeed, sexual repression has become synonymous with Victorianism: the adjective is still used today to describe someone or something prudish. The Victorian era is dismissed as completely oppressive, with relationships between men and women totally dominated by a society which saw sex as wrong and shameful and women as second-class and exploitable beings. Is this true? The answer is not simple because it is partly, but not wholly, true. As Williams is quoted above, dominant views do not reflect the entire – just as contemporary thoughts on Victorianism may not be completely accurate.

Victorian courtship is one area in which both Victorian and modern ideas about male/female relationships breakdown. Courtship was an extremely serious and important part in the lives of a heterosexual couple: and although etiquette was involved, there also was more privacy and intimacy than one would expect. Love letters in particular reveal the true feelings of couples who poured out their hearts to one another time and again. The love letters of Eleanor Mary Sherman (hereafter known as Ellie), daughter of General William Tecumseh Sherman of Civil War fame, to Alexander Montgomery Thackara (Mont) from 1879 to their wedding on May 5, 1880, for example, reveal not only the feelings of one woman, but perhaps suggest that the ideals of intimate relationships among the white middle- and upper-middle classes were shifting as well.

Before launching into Ellie’s letters it is essential to understand the social climate of Ellie’s day as it pertained to marriage. The institutions of marriage and motherhood were still considered to be the highest callings for women to strive: but there were cracks emerging in that ideal. The existence of “spinsters” was not something new at the time, for there had always been unmarried women. However, attitudes toward these particular women began slightly to change. Some women even chose to remain single. Louisa May Alcott celebrated such independence in writing, “busy. useful. independent spinsters . . . for liberty is a better husband than love to many of us.”

Alcott. herself unmarried. revealed a new perspective on the dominant modern, yet currently besieged, idea of the “Cult of Domesticity.” Apparently, not everyone subscribed to its tenets. Indeed some women strove to stay away from it altogether: “Beginning in about 1780, women of the middle and upper classes. the cradle of bourgeois individualism. manifested a dramatic new form of female independence. In increasing numbers, the daughters of northeastern manufacturers, merchants, farmers, and ‘poor professionals’ rejected the ‘tie that binds.’” Not every woman married, even Ellie’s older sister Elizabeth remained single. The reason why Ellie did marry reveals another important shift in Victorian marriage – romantic love.

Love was not a concept created in Victorian times, but the placement of love was new. Puritans had emphasized love within marriage, but they stressed that love would grow within the institution, not the other way around.1 Victorian romance, on the other hand, idealized love and hailed it as the reason for marriage. As one young

3 ibid
Massachusetts woman explained: "marriage could be 'a galling chain. Souls must be
to make the bond silken. All others I call unions of hands, not hearts. I rejoice
[ . . . ] that the knot which binds me was not tied with any mercenary feelings, and that
my heart is under the same subjection as my hand."⁵ Although Victorian marriage may
not have been as blissful for all couples once the vows had actually been exchanged, the
idea that love was the basis for a marriage was becoming increasingly important,
revealing a change in marriage and perhaps even the role of women within American
society.

Ellie’s letters to Mont demonstrate both the old and the new in Victorian love and
marriage. There are two particular areas in which Ellie and her courtship reveal how the
Victorian era may not be quite what modern historians believe: her approach to courtship
etiquette, and Ellie’s decidedly passionate nature toward Mont clashing with the dictates
of dominant culture, which urged proper white middle-class Protestant women to be
restrained. Perhaps the intensity of Ellie’s behavior can partially be explained in that she
did not quite fit the mold of the “ideal and proper” Victorian lady. Indeed, Ellie would
seem to be the “typical” middle-class woman of her day, except for one characteristic –
her religion.

While Ellie’s famous father was raised Presbyterian⁶, her mother, Ellen Ewing
Sherman, was a devout Catholic and held enough sway in their family that she insisted
that their children be raised Catholic as well. Yet, the issue of religion did not prove to

---
⁵ ibid 19
⁶ Sherman, although never formally adopted, was taken in by the Ewings after the death of his father when he was nine. Although Sherman had been baptized as a Presbyterian, the Ewings had him baptized as a Catholic. Finding that Sherman’s first name was Tecumseh, the priest said that a scriptural or saint’s name must be used, and since it was St. William’s day, Tecumseh Sherman became William Tecumseh Sherman. See Stanley Hirschson’s The White Tecumseh. New York: John Wiley, 1997.
be a very divisive factor within the Sherman domestic circle. Likewise, Ellie’s Catholicism did not serve as a stumbling block in her relationship with Mont, who was also a Presbyterian. She felt free to discuss her attendance at mass and her supervision of certain convent girls: yet, she appears not to have felt the need to dwell on her religion. Perhaps she learned to keep such a balance from her mother. The only real reference to Catholicism occurred when Ellie’s mother Ellen was making plans for the wedding: “She [Mama] has dispensation for me to eat meat on Friday which was very kind of her to ask.” Such attention to religious detail on Ellen’s part might indicate religious fervor, but more likely a continuance of tradition.

Ellen Sherman’s marriage and faith reveal an important balance which Ellie herself would use in her own life. Ellen managed not only to keep her Catholic faith within a Protestant society, but to also thrive. For example, Ellen was quite a vocal advocate for the moral superiority of women, a political stance which used Catholic tenets, but also took her outside of tradition: “Both Catholic and non-Catholic reformers were contending that one of the differences between the sexes was moral superiority of women, which obliged them to reform society, an extension of the home.” Ellen was able to use her beliefs to join with Protestant society and negotiate a way to spread her social values. Ellen’s ability to balance her atypical faith with middle-class social norms was an important lesson for Ellie. Growing up within the non-Catholic society would have enabled Ellie to have both her faith and her connections, and she would have

---

7 The one major exception to this was when the oldest son Tom decided to become a priest rather than a lawyer. Sherman was very angered by this and became embittered toward the Catholic Church for “stealing” his son.


learned from her mother and father’s relationship that balance could be achieved. Ellie’s ability to learn from her parents is evidenced most strongly in her marriage to a Protestant and in her courtship. Ellie felt comfortable enough with her faith to marry outside of it, and the importance of balance can be seen throughout Ellie’s courtship as she counterweighted social norms and her passion for Mont. The concept of balance can also be seen within the “proper etiquette” for courtship which required not only respectability but intimacy.

Etiquette pervaded courtship, as it pervaded all aspects of Victorian life, but it may not have been as repressive as once believed. Indeed, quite a bit of the etiquette appears to have been very intimate ways for one half of the pair to make sure of the other. Much of the relationship between a courting couple was even secret: “Lovers shared certain experiences only with each other; witnesses would have contaminated their association, changing the confines of conversation and behavior. Total privacy was the foundation of romantic expression, and romantic relationships were guarded by a deliberate wall of secrecy.”\(^{10}\) The importance of secrecy proves counter to the theory that couples were constantly monitored and that marriages were always arranged. The new freedom of having marriage based upon love, however, brought the responsibility of choosing the right person. In a society that still saw divorce as scandalous, the success or failure of a marriage now rested almost entirely on the young couple’s courtship because although the opinion of parents was still important, their actual role in choosing a child’s spouse was — within the ideal — diminished.

Ellie’s courtship reveals this shift with the surprising amount of intimacy allowed, but also with the control that was still imposed. For example, Ellie constantly mentioned in her letters walks with Mont, either ones they had taken or ones she wished to take: “by the way are you not to take a walk with me at 4 o’clock – We can have one to-morrow too – cant we? [. . .] I am so glad you are going to take a walk with me – I hope you have not forgotten it had you?”\textsuperscript{11} The intimacy of Ellie and Mont’s walks, however, are opposed by the strict control exercised under the eye of Ellie’s mother while in the house. These proverbial parlor visits are part of the Victorian legend, but it is Ellie’s attitude toward them which is telling: “Ah you are as I am myself impatient for [?] days when there will not be a striking clock to announce the fact that it is time for you to leave each evening.”\textsuperscript{12} Ellie was chaffing at the rules; and yet, she still felt the need to follow them. She could not wait to have Mont all to herself, and she often yearned for the time when Mont could call her all his “own.”

Apart from the outward forms of intimacy there was the very precise use of the love letter exchange to bolster Ellie and Mont’s relationship. The gradual use of pet names over formal ones, for example, shows a growing intimacy. The significance of the physical love letters themselves (Lystra even describes them as “sacred”\textsuperscript{13}) is shown in Ellie’s letters: “To-day I put some of your dear letters into the book and the clasp that locked them from all but myself made me think of the full possession you have over every portion of my heart.”\textsuperscript{14} Not only are the letters kept from prying eyes, but they came to symbolize for Ellie their very relationship. Indeed, the importance of the letters

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[12] S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3.March 2, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
\item[13] Lystra 4
\item[14] S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3.April 21, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
themselves is revealed throughout the correspondence not only because of Ellie’s yearning for Mont’s notes and her propensity to write so many, but by the very fact that they are kept: “You ask me if I like your notes, Mont dearest. I dearly love them or why would I treasure each one and reread them as I do?” That Mont even asked her whether she liked his notes at all shows the importance of love letters because each knew how this correspondence demonstrated their intimacy. The pressure to perform well on love letters would even lead Ellie to take actions like destroy her compositions if they were not “good” enough, or even be self-deprecating: “I can feel how very far from what I wish to say is the expression upon the cold white paper – dearest you can “read between the lines” & drink in the intensity of my passion.” Ellie often repeated sentiments of this nature, but it did not stop her from writing, often poetically, of her love for Mont. Perhaps saying how she could not express how much she loved Mont on paper relieved some of the pressure she felt because of the incredible weight placed on her letters. In this way, the exchange of letters itself is a sign of intimacy, one that no one else was supposed to see, and so the emotions and thoughts are all the more genuine.

The most interesting part of Victorian courtship and love letters is, however, the idea of testing. Victorian lovers, particularly women, would often subtly and overtly test each other within their letters in order to make sure of the other’s love: “Middle-class courtship usually featured at least one dramatic emotional crisis, precipitated by the nineteenth-century woman as a test of her potential husband’s professions of love.” The idea of couples testing each other should come as no surprise because the onus of marriage was mostly upon them – divorce was still not acceptable and no one wanted to

---

15 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3. March 10, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.  
16 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3. April 15, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.  
17 Lystra 157
marry the wrong person. Ellie was not immune from these feelings of doubt. She would perform the cursory tests of self-deprecation, even after their engagement: “I fear you do not realize what a good-for-nothing little body you will have for your constant companion [. . .].” 18 Hopefully Ellie did not truly think of herself in that way, especially since she had agreed to marry Mont. so it would seem that she was looking for Mont to disagree with her. Indeed, an early response from Mont would indicate his knowledge of the test: “You speak of ‘trying my patience’ I hope that this will be one of many trials of the same kind.” 19 Even feelings of jealousy were fostered in an attempt to prove love to one another. One strange example of this comes from Ellie: “I want you to see her [Mary Anderson] with her hat off. Am I afraid that you will fall in love with her? Mont dearest [. . .] one cannot resist little feelings of jealousy but that never shows doubt does it Mont.” 20 These acts of testing were an attempt to prove the other’s love to each part of the pair. Although modern relationships may have this flavor of testing about them, it would appear that Victorian couples felt special pressure upon them (particularly the middle class) to choose the right partner. Not only was the ideal of love important, but so too was being able to avoid a later divorce.

Ellie’s letters to Mont demonstrate important aspects of etiquette, but they also show the dilemma Victorian women faced. Although expected to choose a marriage partner for love. Victorian women were also expected to still be respectable – a concept which included the idea of being passionless. Although a complicated notion, passionlessness was described nicely by historian Nancy Cott. Cott “use[d] the term to convey the view that women lacked sexual aggressiveness. that their sexual appetites

18 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.1 December 6, 1879. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
20 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3 March 13, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
contributed a very minor part (if any at all) to their motivations, that lustfulness was simply uncharacteristic.”\textsuperscript{21} As Cott notes, this idea of feminine sexuality was new since women had been considered more sexual than men before this time, but ideas on moral reform and sexual ideology had changed, leading women to be considered almost sexually neutered.\textsuperscript{22} Women like Ellie were caught in between the ideal woman who was passionless and the ideal marriage based upon romantic love. Ellie’s reaction to this dilemma was to reveal passion in her love letters, but to also reveal a traditional concept of marriage.

Ellie’s letters show a strong passion for Mont which she expressed again and again. Every letter was ended with an expression of love such as “lovingly and longingly,” “your own ever your own,” and “your devoted, faithful & loving little Ellie.” Throughout her notes Ellie could lapse into telling Mont how she loved him, and her passion for him was almost palpable. Ellie seemed even a little afraid of her love describing it as “so great that [I] almost fear it is beyond control entirely.”\textsuperscript{23} Ellie’s fear of her own feelings is an interesting insight into women who were told to be passionless, yet also to foster feelings of love for their suitors. Ellie’s passion for Mont is undeniable, however, as many of her notes demonstrate. Indeed, although it does not seem that Ellie and Mont were having sex before their marriage, some of her imagery was definitely sexual: “Ah how I think of my Mont and how dearly, truly and really I love him. When tis happiness to be in his presence, even were I blindfolded, with my hands bound down what bliss is it to look into those love making eyes and feel the warm pressure of those

\textsuperscript{22} ibid 219
\textsuperscript{23} S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3. April 21. 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
kind, good hands." 24 With feelings such as these, it does not seem unlikely that Ellie would feel conflicted about social norms on female behavior. Perhaps Ellie's answer to this particular dilemma was in her attitude toward marriage.

Ellie's letters are filled not only with love for Mont but also with her ideas on her role within the marriage. The best example of this can be seen in the last letter to Mont before their wedding: "I will always try to be dutiful to you, as I am loving - as capable as I am faithful in my devotion, and worthy of your respect and continued fond love as I am desirous of them in fact I will always strive to be all that you would have me for your companion, consoler and helpmate [. . .]." 25 It appears that Ellie subscribed to the belief in separate spheres - to be her husband's helper and to be worthy of his respect. The idea of keeping a happy home was also reflected in an earlier letter in which Ellie stated, "when I am in a bad. ugly humor I shall not allow that shadow to darken your sky which should always be fair & serene." 26 Ellie’s ideas on marriage, while companionate and based on love, also show how she thought her place to be the keeper of the home and the center of calm for her husband. Such a struggle emphasizes once again the importance of balance to Ellie. Her parent’s relationship was instrumental in Ellie’s understanding of negotiation within marriage and even society. For Ellie, this equilibrium would allow her to think that although passion was outside of the social norm, sharing that feeling with her fiancé Mont was both acceptable and healthy. Nevertheless, pressure to conform made striking such a delicate balance difficult, even for a general’s daughter.

24 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.1.November 18, 1879. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
25 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.3.April 28, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
26 S-TC. Villanova University. 5.5.April 21, 1880. Ellie Sherman to A.M. Thackara.
Ellie wrote her thoughts on marriage and relationships in a letter from February 1880. Her extraordinary insights reveal the conflicted emotions she had, whether she realized it or not:

I hope and pray to be to you, my dearest Mont, a faithful, true, good and worthy wife – God grant that I may fill that place wholly and entirely not leaving you one want unsatisfied or a longing for one iota of womanly aid that you cannot find in me. I have often thought that perhaps I am not experienced sufficiently, nor have I seen enough of the world to be the constant companion of a man. Mont does not need a woman to keep him ‘friendly’ with the world – some men do need this – they have to have a woman’s influence to bring them back from their business or their clubs – I am glad you find more pleasure in my company then with “the men.” There are many, even engaged men, who must see some thing each day of “the fellows & the club”.

Although Ellie may have expressed concern about her lack of worldliness, it is evident that she also believed in her importance to Mont. Ellie wanted to be worthy of Mont, but it would appear that she already felt herself to be so because she wrote Mont how much she meant to him. It seems like Ellie was reminding Mont of his feelings for her and laying down the rules of their engagement and marriage. Indeed, Ellie was telling Mont that although it was her responsibility to keep the home and give him “womanly aid,” it was his responsibility to come back to that home and not spend all of his time with other men. In this way, Ellie was taking some authority for herself and the role that she played. It is this clash of passion versus respectability that shows itself in Ellie’s letters to Mont – she was a woman trying to figure out her role within a society with two ideals: one of passionlessness and one of love-based marriage.

Victorian America was not simply a time of repression and stagnation. change also emerged. Marriages came to be viewed as relationships based upon mutual love and
affection rather than mere duty and obligation. This Victorian ideal does not mean that there were not love matches before this time, but this era saw the spread of such a concept. Indeed, the culture became so enraptured with the idea that romantic love became almost repressive itself. The pressure to choose the right person created a courtship which required serious testing on both sides, particularly for women. Women also had to face the social ideal of passionlessness as a basic tenet of their personalities. How could a woman be passionless and look for the love of her life, especially when courtship entailed a deep internal examination to reveal a "true self"?\textsuperscript{28} Such introspection cannot be passionless; yet, that is what was expected of women. Ellie Sherman’s letters reveal a woman who not only played the courtship game, but also one who struggled to discover her place in a rapidly-changing society. She expressed great passion but also a traditional view of her role within marriage. Couched within the professions of love are pleas that Mont return her love and prove that she has made a successful choice. The pressure was daunting, making courtship etiquette incredibly important.

Victorian America was not one solid block of repression as many believe, but had many little loopholes which allowed for expression and feeling. Ideas on marriage demonstrate such openings, but even these changes did not mean that all was made simple. Now that marriages were to be based on love, couples had to be sure that they were marrying the right person because divorce was still not really an option. Social norms managed to create an opening on one end of marriage, but the door out was still firmly closed. Courtship and love letters were the ways to be sure of one another making them integral to understanding Victorian marriage, even if how couples got to their

\textsuperscript{28} Lystra 29
wedding day is often overlooked by historians. Ellie Sherman’s letters to A.M. Thackara show how one woman maneuvered her way through courtship, testing and loving along the way, and how she struggled to find herself amidst the contradictions of late-Victorian America.
Works Referenced


Sherman-Thackara Collection. Villanova University. Falvey Library Special Collections.

