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### The Gender Binary and the Angel in the House

A well known component of the Victorian and Edwardian culture was the ideal of the “angel in the house”; the ideal of women belonging in the domestic sphere, to serve as wives and mothers, supporting the British Empire and carrying out God’s will in doing so. In our research into young adult literature of the era, we’ve found that gender roles are explicitly taught in young adult readings such as the *Boys Own Paper* and the *Girls Own Paper*. This includes the concept of the angel in the house, though the way it was taught differed wildly between the two ends of the gender binary. As we will see, the use of the word “angel” was used much less in the *Boys Own Paper* compared to the *Girls*, and the *Boys* paper focused far more on the possessive aspects of the angel in the house, while the *Girls* paper focused on the aspects of service and humility. Both, however, serve to promote the angel in the house theory to young adults in order to continue its power in the culture of the British Empire.

In the *Boys Own Paper*, never does the phrase “angel in the house” appear. The word “angel” only appears two hundred and thirty two times. A large portion of those appearances are strictly in a religious, Biblical context, or in the case of fishing articles that mention the angel fish. However, there are a select few articles that have to do with women and girls being identified as angels, such as the chapter of a fictional work called “Dog With Bad Name”, written by Talbot Balnes Reed, published in Volume 9, Issue 427 in 1887. The story overall is

about two men living in poverty to hide from a checkered past. In this particular chapter, one of the men is on his deathbed, and while the other goes to work, a young woman appears in their home to tend to him in his illness.

The story exemplifies two aspects of the angel in the house ideal: the role of women as nurses and caretakers, and also the limited number of roles for women in Imperial society. The chapter begins with an illustration showing a well dressed young woman sitting at the sick man's bedside. This illustration is labeled, "A Ministering Angel", (Reed 1887) which identifies the woman by her service, not by her name. Later on, when the sick man tells the other about her visit, he describes her as, "A lady, John, or else an angel." (Reed 1887). These quotes identify the woman as an angel due to her role as a nurse, which was a promoted role for upper class women in the British Empire. It also ascribes her a certain amount of divinity for following through with that role. In a publication meant for young boys, this encourages them to see women who follow their assigned roles as divine, simultaneously expected and placing them on a pedestal, from which there will only be extra shame and ostracization should she fall from this standard of perfection. In addition, this chapter's three women who could be loosely described as characters symbolize the roles women are allowed to have: there is the upper class woman who gives her service as a nurse and raises the spirits of those around her despite never actually appearing or taking up space, the hardworking, faithful lower class wife who, when the sick man dies, applies, "a woman's service where it was most needed" (Reed 1887) and disposes of the body, and her daughter, Anne, who dies of disease as a symbol of innocence even in the face of death. This teaches boys how to sort women into different boxes and what to expect from them,

as well as which ones deserve the term “angel”; the upper class nurse, but not the lower class working woman.

Another fiction piece in the *Boys Own Paper* uses the word “angel” to describe a female character-- “The Silver Whistle”, authored by A.N. Malan and published in Volume 15, Issue 767, in 1893. This particular chapter is actually the end of the story, when everything is being wrapped up nicely for the male protagonist. Part of this happy ending is reuniting with a girl he knew as a child to strike up a romance. The girl, Madeline, is described as, “the angel presence of his earlier youth,” (Malan 1893). This echoes the sentiment seen in many writings from this time period, in which women and girls were able to spread joy and purity wherever they went merely by being present, or even present in someone’s thoughts. Her introduction at the end of the story suggests that she’s part of the protagonist’s “prize” for making it to the end of the story, along with the riches and the reuniting of his family in the form of his father and uncle. This interpretation is supported by another line from the chapter, which says, “taking the little hand and leading his angel towards... the window.” (Malan 1893). In this sentence Madeline is explicitly labeled as *his* angel, belonging to the protagonist. This teaches young boys that the women in their life, especially those they are romantically involved with, are their property.

The idea that women are property isn’t a new one, and it’s an idea that is mirrored in the *Girl’s Own Paper*, where the term “angel” generated over a thousand results, as opposed to the *Boys* two hundred. In the fictional story “Jack’s Angel”, written by Darley Dale for Volume 9, Issue 427, and published in 1888, the male protagonist encounters a woman in the garden. They speak very little and are separated soon after, but despite not knowing her name and only knowing that she was beautiful (another example of “Angel” being used as a term to describe

beauty), the protagonist decides he simply must find her and marry her. The exact words he used were, “There would be no happiness for me until I found my angel and possessed her.” (Dale 1888). Note the term possessed, used directly as a replacement for anything relationship oriented. This story, when aimed at the female audience of the *Girls Own Paper*, romanticizes the idea of possession that we saw being taught in the *Boys Own Paper*. It also introduces the idea that the woman in a relationship is responsible for the happiness of the man, an emphasis on service that we see in stories like “Dog With Bad Name”, where the woman’s role is to serve. In addition, the story also introduces the principle of humility in the line, “I have certainly entertained an angel unawares.” (Dale 1888). The term “angel unawares” is seen several times, and essentially means a beautiful, kind woman who has no idea that she’s so beautiful and kind. In this context, humility is taught to girls as a desirable trait, and in practice means having no understanding of their own self worth. When one has no conception of self worth, they tend to be less confident, and don’t know by what standard they should expect to be treated. Like in “Dog With Bad Name”, a humble girl is less likely to take up space and makes due with the roles she’s given.

Finally, there’s the poem “Household Angels,” published in Volume 2, Issue 64, in 1881. The author is identified only by initials, L.W. This poem also contains the phrase “angel unawares” in a line that reads, “many a sister, many a mother is an angel unawares.” (L.W. 1881). Not only does this continue this idea of humility, it also directly identified mothers and sisters as upholding this ideal. It also lists many roles that these women may occupy, such as nurses, mourners, comforters, listeners, influencers, sympathizers, etc. Notice that all of these are things they can do for other people, disregarding their own needs and desires, and they are all roles that can be played in the household. This connection between the angelic ideal and the

sphere of domesticity is seen in the title itself, “Household Angels”, as well as the list of duties they perform and the identification of mothers and sisters as the mentioned angels. This poem teaches the girls reading it exactly what behaviors are expected of them, and tells them that they will achieve divine status if they do so.

As we have discussed, both the *Boys Own Paper* and the *Girls Own Paper* teaches and upholds the idea of the angel in the house as part of its teaching of the accepted gender roles. The selections from the *Boys* shows that though it was much less emphasized in the boys reading, the idea was still being taught, especially in the context of possession and influence of a beautiful woman. In the *Girls* paper it was taught much more heavily, and spent more time on the connection between divinity and the domestic sphere. However, both teach their respective audiences to expect humility from girls and women, and makes sure both genders understand what a woman’s place is and how she should keep it. All with the long term goal of upholding their culture, and by extension, the British Empire.

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