University of Nevada, Reno

Breaking Domesticity and Privacy Norms: An Analysis of Queen Victoria’s Portraits

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History and the Honors Program

by

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May, 2017
We recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by

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entitled

Breaking Domesticity and Privacy Norms: An Analysis of Queen Victoria’s Portraits

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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May, 2017
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Introduction

Ruling from 1837-1901, Queen Victoria gave her name to the Victorian age and its distinctions of morality and domesticity. Yet she herself did not always fulfill the female role assigned to her by Victorian values. Portraits of her represented her as blurring the lines between the personal and political boundaries that defined Victorianism. While men were allowed to have both public appearances and private feelings, women were supposed to keep their emotions, thoughts, and other private matters away from public eye. Even though Victoria was often under public scrutiny due to her position as queen, she and her administration chose to portray her with some level of emotion and personal detail in painting and photograph portraits. She was both represented as the head of state and doting wife and devoted mother.

Depending on the events of Victoria’s lifetime, the amount of personal and political influence on portraits of her varies. I have chronologically divided her life into five sections where major shifts within Victoria’s personal trajectory and the effect on her portraiture can be noted. I used a combination of overall historical context research, biographical information on Victoria, Victoria’s journal entries, and my own analyses of portraits in order to come to these conclusions and this method of organization.

Changes within the combination of these aspects are prominent in five different stages within royal portraits. The first stage (1819-1837), stemming from Victoria’s childhood, revolves around how her mother raised her regarding lack of socialization and steady increase in education. The second stage (1837-1840) focuses on Victoria’s ascension to the throne and how she wanted to be remembered as a strong, young queen in her first few years, even though she was grappling with her new responsibilities. The third stage (1840-1861) shows the beginning of her journey as a dutiful wife to Prince Consort Albert and as a doting mother to their children,
while simultaneously performing her duties as monarch. The fourth stage (1861-mid 1870s) looks at Victoria’s mourning period of the death of her husband and her decline in public appearances and meeting responsibilities due to these sorrows. The fifth and final stage (late 1870s-1901) shows the rehabilitation of Victoria through her re-involvement in politics and her family, such as her titling as the Empress of India, the celebration of her Golden and Diamond Jubilees, and the birth of her many grandchildren and great grandchildren.

There is some difficulty in distinguishing between Victoria the woman and Victoria the monarch. History views her as the Queen of Britain during the peak of the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of the British Empire, and the emergence of new political philosophies. She was the first female monarch to have served since the sixteenth century and reminded the British population that a queen can serve just as effectively as a king can, even if she also plays roles as a mother and a wife. Her portraits provide a deeper insight into the more emotional, individual, and personal aspects of Victoria’s lifetime. They display Victoria as being more than a figurehead, as being more than the glue of the kingdom. These portraits show what Victoria’s personal life was like and how she responded to different milestones within it.
I. Delicate Heiress

In 1819, the daughter of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn, and Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld and Duchess of Kent, was christened as Alexandrina Victoria. Upon her birth, the British monarchy was experiencing a large shift from the long-reigned yet mentally unstable King George III to Prince Regent George IV in early 1820. Within the same year, Victoria’s active and cautious father abruptly caught pneumonia and passed away before her first birthday. All of a sudden the little Princess Victoria was already third in line for the throne, just after her two uncles Prince Frederick and William IV.¹

Victoria’s birth was important due to the lack of legitimate children within the royal family and she was to be protected and raised well at all costs. Her mother had not originally intended on raising her daughter all by herself, let alone having to prepare her to potentially take the throne. The Duchess chose to relocate to Kensington in order to raise her daughter in Great Britain, even though personally she would have been much more comfortable in Germany where she had grown up. Victoria began to be raised in a very cloistered environment. She was surrounded exclusively by her nurses and her mother’s ladies, with very little interaction from other relatives besides her eldest sister Feodora and occasionally her mother’s brother Leopold.² Although Victoria later resented her mother for her cloistered childhood, the Duchess of Kent’s intentions were to prevent Victoria from having unnecessary foreign influence that may have disrupted her childhood. The Duchess had a lot of resentment towards Victoria’s paternal uncles due to what she had heard from her late husband about their irresponsibility and did want their corruption to impinge upon the Princess’ growing character.³

² Lytton Strachey, Queen Victoria (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 30-33.
³ Dorothy Thompson, Queen Victoria: The Woman, the Monarchy, and the People (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 17-18.
Even though Victoria had a lack of social interaction with those outside of Kensington Palace, she was raised with an exceptional education. She quickly mastered English, German, and some Italian and some French. She had five hours of lessons six days a week in a plethora of subjects that upper-class girls of the time period were expected to learn.\(^4\) In 1827 when Victoria became heir presumptive, she received an additional £6,000 per year from Parliament in order to further fund her education.\(^5\) The Duchess gained the acquaintance of Sir John Conroy, who began to lead Victoria on expeditions throughout the countryside in order to become more acquainted with the kingdom and its constituents. In theory the plan was a good idea, however, the King was extremely frustrated and claimed Victoria to be a nuisance and immediately declared that the travels come to a cease.\(^6\) Except for these short ventures over one summer the Princess remained at Kensington Palace with the Duchess and her ladies.

All of these aforementioned aspects of Victoria’s upbringing can be seen within the portraits from her childhood years. The earliest portraits from when she was a small child display the Duchess’ protection of and closeness with her daughter. As she grew older, elements of Victoria’s dedication to education and desire for independence became present. Because of Victoria’s age, she was likely uninvolved with the decision-making process regarding her portraits even though she was the main subject. Therefore, the Duchess in conjunction with the artist would have made the decisions on how to present Princess Victoria within these works.

One of the earliest portraits of Queen Victoria is from 1821, painted by Emanuel Thomas Peter (Figure 1). Although none of the elements in this portrait point towards Victoria’s place within British royalty, her position as a child in a wealthy family is distinct through the level of

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\(^6\) Strachey, *Queen Victoria*, 55-56.
quality of her clothing and the furniture around her. The Duchess could have included symbols of royalty, such as St. George’s Cross, within the work, but instead she chose to portray Victoria as a delicate child rather than as a princess and heir.

Details regarding Victoria within the portrait display her as a perfect, innocent child who is free from any connections to the monarchy. Victoria is seated in a plush chair with a blank background, dressed in a white silk gown with puffed sleeves and tied with a pale blue ribbon. She clutches with her right hand at a simple beaded necklace while looking away in the distance. Her blonde hair curls slightly at the ends, and her skin is an alabaster so light it almost blends in with the white of her dress. Her facial features are gentle, with pink lips, slightly rosy cheeks, round and attentive brown eyes, and a small upturned nose. The flawlessness of her skin along with these features present a porcelain and doll-like appearance. The lack of royal significance and the pristineness of her appearance within the portrait represents the Duchess of Kent’s protection over Princess Victoria. Rather than portraying and exposing Victoria as the eventual heiress, the details in the portrait are kept simple with muted colors and details. Her doll-like features display only the beginning of her cloistered upbringing; Victoria did not often get the chance to play with other children and spent a lot of time with her books. She was unaffected by the hardships going on in the outside world, and had little stress in her simple lifestyle.

Another portrait created in the same year titled “Victoria, Duchess of Kent, with Princess Victoria” by Sir William Beechey (Figure 2) emphasizes Victoria’s relationship with her mother. The Princess appears similar in this portrait compared to the last. Her round face and rosy cheeks are prominent elements, and she wears a similar white gown with pale blue ribbon accents. The largest difference in this portrait in comparison to the last is the addition of the Duchess’ presence. Victoria stands on a red couch that her mother is seated on, and she leans against her
mother’s shoulder, holding on to balance herself. Her mother’s arm snakes around her waist to hold Victoria closer to her. This painting could have been created with much less physical touch between the mother and daughter, but instead Beechey chose to display the strong relationship that was present at the time. The Duchess would have also wanted herself and her daughter to appear this way. When Victoria was young she was closer with her mother and did not begin to resent her until adulthood when she realized how cloistered her childhood had been. Because of this eventual estrangement, there are very few portraits of Victoria and the Duchess of Kent together after Victoria’s coronation in 1838. Once Victoria had gained a level of independence and taken control of her own life, she chose to not be painted with her mother in future commissioned works.

As Victoria grew older her education increased, but her secluded upbringing remained the same. Painted when she was eleven years old in 1830, “Queen Victoria when a Girl” by Richard Westall (Figure 3) places emphasis on Victoria’s expansion as an individual on both physical and mental levels. She is depicted once more in an all-white dress, which is a symbol of her purity, perched on top of some rocks alongside a riverbank. She carries herself pristinely, with the same curled hair and flawless skin, but this time she is in a more rustic environment. Although this is the first portrait of Princess Victoria outside, the sculpture in the top left corner of the background signifies that she is in garden, and likely not very far from home and the Duchess’ eye. She sits at the edge of the river with an open book and pencil in hand to perhaps practice her writing or sketching. Her sun hat is flopped on the ground beside her, indicating the Princess has no qualms in letting the sunlight reach her skin. The final detail is a dog companion at her side, whose likely dirty paws are pressed up against the Princess’ dress.
Westall’s portrait adds many new elements that have become present in Victoria’s life at the time. He represents Victoria as having partial independence, since she has been granted the freedom of the outdoors but within the restraint of the Kensington property. She now has other aspects to entertain and absorb herself with, such as her dog and her literature, but as she stares wistfully off into the distance the artists portrays how Victoria is beginning to feel the constraints her mother has placed on her and how different her life as the heiress apparent is going to become.

One of the last few portraits before Princess Victoria shifted from the heir presumptive to the heir apparent is “Queen Victoria when Princess” by Sir George Hayter in 1833 (Figure 4). Hayter was originally commissioned by Victoria’s uncle, Prince Leopold, but Hayter and Victoria maintained a connection after she took the throne and eventually he became her principal painter in ordinary, an award given to the favorite royal portraitists. This portrait is one of the first Hayter made of Victoria, when she was around fourteen years old. At this point in time Victoria had begun to grow into a well-rounded young lady, and within the next few years the Duchess of Kent and Prince Leopold would be looking for appropriate suitors to marry her. Victoria’s growth into a proper woman is indicated within this portrait through her straight posture, neat up-do, delicate fingers, and sparkled jewelry. Her face has matured and lost some of its previous, childish round-ness, but maintained its delicate softness. Details in the background also display how her education has broadened, with eight books being stacked and scattered across the table along with the addition of blank papers and a globe.

Because the Duchess of Kent tried her absolute best to remove Victoria from the public eye and from social context, all of the portraits from Victoria’s childhood largely reflect her own

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life and emotions rather than incorporating the British cultural politics of the time. Deliberate symbols regarding her remote pristineness, gradual increase in education, and awareness of her mother’s guardianship are present in all of the aforementioned portraits through backgrounds, facial expressions, skin tone, dress, hand placement, and insertion of items. However, within the next few years Victoria would become the British monarch, and the eyes of the outside world resting on her would prove to be a great influence in her personal life and this influence would be represented in later portraiture of her.
II. Strong Feminine Monarch

On June 20, 1837, the Princess was awakened to discover that her uncle King William IV had passed away while she was asleep. Although Victoria knew that she was young and inexperienced, she was very determined to be a queen that Britain would be proud of. In a diary entry from this day, Victoria wrote: “I shall do my utmost to fulfil my duty towards my country…I am sure, that very few have more real good will and real desire to do what is fit and right than I have.” Victoria’s eagerness and resolve to prove herself greatly helped to diminish the fact that she was only an eighteen year old woman who had spent her life thus far largely unheard of.

Taking over the British throne with such little experience and direct preparation was a beyond immense task for Victoria. The monarchy juggles a fine line of remaining some level of distance from the throng of politics whilst also being the head of British society. Politics and government had always been some of the most prominent topics in British culture. Since the medieval ages, all aspects of society had been about the sovereign, and even though all political power had since shifted to the hands of the Prime Minister, House of Commons, and House of Lords since the reign of King George III, the monarch still served as the metaphorical “glue” that kept the kingdom together.

Even though Victoria may have been intimidated by her new position, she could not let the British people see her as weak or as unfit to be their sovereign. One of her first actions was to move into Buckingham Palace, and give her mother and her ladies their own suites within the palace, rather than sleeping in the same bedroom as the Duchess which she had done for past

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9 Ibid, 115.
eighteen years. Although this process may seem small, for Victoria finally breaking free from her mother’s grasp and gaining a level of independence was of importance. Victoria relished this freedom, and throughout the summer of 1837 she attended as many of the ceremonial receptions, dinner parties, theatre performances, and other events as she possibly could in order to branch out and introduce herself to the kingdom she was to lead.

This boost in confidence and pride that Victoria took on in order to meet her responsibilities is greatly exemplified throughout the various portraits made during her first few years as monarch. In comparison to portraits from her youth, there are less symbols hinting at playfulness and an increase in symbolism pertaining to royalty, sternness, and solidity as an individual. These portraits displayed Victoria’s shift from a secluded, little girl to a strong, determined monarch in order to express her growth and capability to succeed in her position.

Five years after completing his initial series of portraits of Victoria, Sir George Hayter was commissioned to paint the Queen’s official coronation portrait in 1838 (Figure 5). The public viewed Victoria’s coronation as “modest, almost casual.” Some people admired this quality, since most of the Queen’s predecessors were lavish spenders and had created an immense royal debt. Other commentators, such as the magazine *Figaro in London*, called the event “a shabby coronation” at best along with a condescending political cartoon. Even though there ended being a negative review from some, over 400,000 people had traveled by various means of transportation, including the newly built railroad systems, to line up and watch the coronation procession. Because Victoria was new to the throne, she wanted to present herself

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10 Arnstein, *Queen Victoria*, 32.
11 Ibid, 33.
13 Arnstein, *Queen Victoria*, 42.
to be remembered as a headstrong individual even though in all reality she may have had some fear.

In this painting, Victoria is depicted as an independent ruler through her clothing and accessories. A jeweled crown larger than her own face sits gracefully atop her head, and she holds a royal staff in her right hand. Her gaze lingers on the end of her staff, almost in awe of the royal symbols now surrounding her. The base of her outfit is still the same white gown, but now it is adorned with a thick, golden, and red robe signifying her new position of power. This alteration to her dress symbolizes how underneath all of her new responsibilities, Victoria was still the same woman she had always been. It can be difficult to remember that Queen Victoria is still an individual and a woman as much as anyone else and not just a symbol of Britain.

There are also elements of depth that create a contrast between whether the viewer should be paying more attention to the Queen or her new embellishments. Victoria appears tall in comparison to her chair and the drapery around her, even though she barely reached five feet. Hayter may have slightly changed the proportions of the objects and background in order to make Victoria seem taller than she actually was, and thus stronger and more confident. Hayter did not want Victoria to be completely swallowed by the rest of the painting around her. The overpowering color and depth of the drapery cause them to greatly stand out amongst the Queen’s pale skin and dress. The viewer may have a difficult time switching focus between Victoria’s solidified figure and the scarlet curtains. As Victoria began to grow into her position as Queen of England, it became unclear whether Victoria the individual or Victoria the monarch was going to overshadow the other.

Now that Victoria was participating in many more public functions than she had been previously, her portrait artists found it suiting to create paintings that depicted some of her most
frequent activities. Some examples of these instances took from her political life and others from her personal life. “Queen Victoria on Horseback” was painted by Sir Francis Grant in 1839 (Figure 6), and depicts Victoria sitting sidesaddle riding out of the palace grounds with a small entourage of gentlemen behind her. In the right of the painting in a large top hat rides Lord Melbourne, Prime Minister from 1834 to 1841, and one of Victoria’s biggest supports during the beginning of her reign. Victoria gained a lot of influence from Melbourne’s Whig political philosophies, but she was reminded to remain aware of the influence of the Tory party within the Houses as well. Melbourne had been widowed and lost his only son years before Victoria’s reign, and therefore “possessed both the time and the inclination to serve for several years...as the Queen’s prime minister, private secretary, riding companion at mid-day, and often her dinner and after-dinner companion in the evening.” Therefore, he is pictured in this portrait because he accompanied Victoria in her daily activities.

In front of the horses two dogs playfully run ahead of the group, eager for the outing. In contrast, Victoria looks behind her and back into the Buckingham Palace grounds. Due to the arched stone gateway it is assumed that the group has just stepped off the property. Victoria looking behind her rather than at the ride ahead signifies the residual effects of living a secluded childhood. Even though Victoria remarks in many of her journal entries how excited and grateful she was to have her own freedoms and responsibilities, there is still inevitably some fear as she becomes accustomed to being the monarch. However, Grant’s portrait of Victoria riding outside of the Buckingham grounds shows that she did this activity frequently enough for it to be permanently observed through a formal painting. These types of paintings are not predominant in Victoria’s childhood because they were not common activities that she partook in.

14 Ibid, 39.
Along with making more public appearances Victoria also began to participate more politically. She attended council meetings with the House of Lords and House of Commons, aided by Lord Melbourne, in order to continue to learn about the political situations of her kingdom and provide her with help when necessary. Sir David Wilkie painted “The First Council of Queen Victoria” in 1838 (Figure 7), depicting one of the first times she had presented herself in front of the council to speak. At this meeting it was described that the audience was stunned by the new queen because, “her perceptions were quick, her decisions were sensible, her language was discreet; she performed her royal duties with extraordinary facility.” Many of the members present at this council meeting were appalled by the stark personality contrast between Victoria and her uncles, and they enjoyed the shift in leadership.

Within Wilkie’s portrait, Queen Victoria is seated in a main chair at the head of the table and almost every set of eyes in the room is on her. Some of the stares and facial expressions seem wary, while others are more stern and confident. These men were painted with varying expressions in order to show how individuals had different receptions of Victoria’s ascension. Some council members felt as though they had yet to be impressed by what Victoria had to offer as a young, female monarch. To try and appease this uneasiness, Victoria sits with a confident posture. She stares boldly ahead, and sits at the front of her chair in order to display her interest in the matter at hand.

Her bright, pure, white dress stands out prominently against the dark outfits of the men and the shadowy background of the room. Every council member is a middle-aged male, and before them sits an eighteen-year-old female monarch attempting to assert herself into an unfamiliar political sphere. She sticks out like a flower in the mud, and the color selection within

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15 Strachey, *Queen Victoria*, 72.
this portrait truly emphasizes that idea. The only other elements within the painting that stand out as much as Victoria are the faces of the men and the documents sprawled on the table. Similar to how books were presented in the background of earlier portraits to represent Victoria’s education, the documents indicate political productivity. Considering the darkness of the room, the light on these items appears unnatural. Wilkie is distinctly making the Queen, the council’s expressions, and the documents the most important pieces of the work.

The portraits of Victoria from this time period largely focus on her new political life, with only small touches from her personal world. The purpose of these paintings is to portray Victoria’s strength and attention regarding her new position, despite her youth and inexperience. Through attending meetings, reading books, and being with Lord Melbourne the Queen spent most of her time attempting to catch up with everything that was going on in the British atmosphere and understanding the purpose of her duties. In this sense, Victoria’s personal life in the first few years of her ascension as queen was mostly political. These were some of the most politically active years of Victoria’s life for decades to come, as she would soon meet Albert, and become enwrapped in her love for him and the raising of her children.
III. Mother of Europe

Even before Victoria had become the queen, there had been discussion of who she should wed. Different princes were occasionally brought to interact with her, and Victoria was simply delighted to socialize with other people besides those at Kensington. However, the search was put on a temporary halt as focus shifted towards the coronation and getting Victoria up to speed with British politics. The conversation of her marriage began to resurface in 1839, and Lord Melbourne began hinting that her cousins Prince Ernest and Prince Albert were the best options. The two visited within the year and during their time in London Victoria decided that she wanted to marry Albert. Victoria proposed to him and after his agreement she proclaimed in her journal: “Oh! To feel I was, and am, loved by such an Angel as Albert was too great delight to describe! He is perfection; perfection in every way…I really felt it was the happiest brightest moment in my life, which made up for all I had suffered and endured.”

The pair were married on February 10, 1840 and began their journey together with their own struggles. Victoria had become accustomed to answering to only herself over the course of the past two years and Albert had difficulty adjusting to life in London in comparison to his German homelands. He also had to figure out how to insert himself into politics without overstepping any boundaries as Prince Consort and not the monarch himself. Despite these issues, Victoria and Albert’s adoration for one another was quite clear. The two often differed in opinion as they were both headstrong, passionate individuals, but these qualms began to fade away once they had children. The Princess Royal Victoria “Pussy” was born in the end of 1840, followed a year later by Albert Edward “Bertie”. Upon the birth of their children, Albert even

16 Hibbert, Queen Victoria Journals, 57.
17 Strachey, Queen Victoria, 149-152.
helped Victoria form some sort of reconciliation with her mother, who had been an outcast from her life for the past three years.\(^{18}\)

Although Victoria despised pregnancy and childbirth and considered them to be “a cost of sex”, she enjoyed raising children and seeing herself and Albert in them.\(^{19}\) Portraits of Victoria began to include her children alongside her, while she and her husband looked adoringly on. The commissioning of so many family-centered portraits displaying emotion was a new concept for the monarchy. While the previous kings had posed for a family portrait or two, everyone is standing or sitting stiffly and staring straight ahead. The last queen that had reigned had been Queen Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century and since she was childless there was never the opportunity to express maternal sentiments through portraiture.

One of the first of these family portraits is “Windsor Castle in Modern Times; Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and Victoria, Princess Royal” by Sir Edwin Landseer, painted in 1842 (Figure 8). The Queen, Prince, and their first daughter are seated in an adorned room with some of their hunting dogs and the catches of the day. The first focusing point of the portrait is Victoria standing and Albert sitting on the right side of the room. A shift occurs here, as Albert is the center of attention while Victoria stands diligently at his side. Victoria is now being portrayed as the loyal wife to her husband like so many other women, rather than as the Queen of England. The two are locked in a loving gaze with soft, relaxed facial expressions, in comparison to some of the solidity from portraits earlier on in her reign. Albert is dressed in a riding outfit as though he had only just returned from a hunting trip with the dogs. Victoria holds a small bouquet of flowers as if Albert had gifted this to her upon his return from the excursion. This

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 170-171.

\(^{19}\) Thompson, Queen Victoria, 43; Hibbert, Queen Victoria Journals, 93.
portrait displays how the couple are still very enthralled with one another a few years after their marriage and even after the birth of a child.

The hunting dogs and duck prey scattered across the floor and ottomans seem haphazard, but Landseer used this chaos to draw attention to the masculinity being portrayed in the work. Hunting was the ideal man’s sport of the time. The emphasis of different aspects of hunting within this portrait further pulls the attention towards Albert. The Princess Royal stands off on the left side of the portrait, playing curiously with some of the smaller birds that lay on the ottoman. While Queen Victoria’s portraits as a child display her as a precious doll, the Princess Royal is already displayed as being involved in outdoor activities and being encouraged to fulfill her curiosities, which differs greatly from Victoria’s upbringing.

Another large aspect of the portrait is the open window providing a beautiful view of a partly cloudy sky and the trimmed gardens outside with far-away figures dotting the landscape. This serves as a continual symbol of the monarchy’s relationship with the outside world. Victoria and her husband greatly enjoyed traveling to Scotland and pursuing other outdoor activities. Even with the birth of their children and the continuation of their royal duties, the couple was still able to treasure their time together and pursue their own hobbies. The window also serves as a symbol for Albert’s hunting expeditions out in the woodlands and countryside of England.

Victoria became more preoccupied with motherhood as she continued to have children. Over the course of 17 years she would, in total, have five girls and four boys, spread out with two to three years in between each of them. She frequently remarks in aspects of her journals about her adoration for different qualities of her children as they grew older. Victoria was very
proud of all of her children and grew to have close relationships with them despite her amount of responsibilities.20

Another portrait by Sir Edwin Landseer from 1842 is “Queen Victoria with the Princess Royal and the Prince of Wales” (Figure 9). In comparison to “Victoria, Duchess of Kent, with Princess Victoria” by Sir William Beechey from 1821, Victoria has her arm protectively wrapped around her newborn son but not her year-old daughter. While the Duchess of Kent held Victoria tightly, Victoria lets the Princess Royal lean on her shoulder while she tells her something. Victoria’s index finger is out as though she is explaining something or making a point to the little girl. This symbolizes how Victoria is taking a different approach than her mother in her tactics for raising children. She wants to teach them and raise them thoughtfully rather than shutting them away to protect them.

Victoria’s maternal sentiments became very well-known within the United Kingdom and throughout the rest of Europe. “The Promenade of the Royal Family” painted by William Spooner in 1844 (Figure 10) displays the Queen, Prince Consort, and three of their children venturing out on a sunny day with a few other attendants. Public appearances such as these were important in order to maintain Victoria’s image of generosity and motherhood. She served as an ideal model for middle-class and upper-class people throughout Britain and the rest of Europe.

This period in Victoria’s lifetime was mostly focused on her personal life and devoting herself to her husband and children. She found that it would be most productive to serve as a personable, relatable individual that the subjects of Britain could look up to, rather than meddling with politics. Victoria did attempt to reconcile Britain’s relationships with other nations, such as Spain and France, by traveling there occasionally and hosting their reciprocating visits.21

20 Hibbert, *Queen Victoria Journals*, 92-121.
However, these ventures were only a very small portion of Victoria’s life. As the portraits from this time period accurately display, Queen Victoria was raising her children as she viewed fit, in opposition of her own childhood, and doting on her loving husband.
IV. Widow of Windsor

Queen Victoria’s life was mostly picture perfect for the next two decades. She gave birth to seven more healthy children after the Princess Royal and Prince of Wales and continued to have a thriving relationship with Albert. The Prince Consort had “acted as her private secretary, her political, adviser, and co-director of her family and household” until his abrupt death in December of 1961. Albert had maintained a healthy and fit lifestyle during most of his time in London, but towards the end of the 1850s it was noticed that his behavior “sometimes seemed to be depressed and overworked.” While Albert had previously presented himself with an air of vitality, he was wearing himself out in service of the country and the monarchy. He began to frequently deal with minor ailments and aged much more quickly in comparison to his wife.

While Victoria was fretting over her husband’s declining health, early in 1861 the Duchess of Kent passed away. Although Victoria and her mother had reconciled somewhat due to Albert’s persistence, the Queen had never fully forgiven the Duchess and they had never maintained a steady relationship. Her death was the first major experience Victoria had with a close and personal loss and it sent her into a deep grievance. She completely threw aside all disagreements of the past and wished that she had treasured her mother more while she was still alive.

Towards the end of 1861 Albert suffered from rheumatism, sleeplessness, and continued to look and feel unwell. Despite his complaints he continued to work on writing political drafts and helping raise his children. Even when Albert became bedridden Victoria was assured that he would recover while everyone else was very doubtful. Despite this, on the morning of December

22 Thompson, Queen Victoria, 50.
23 Strachey, Queen Victoria, 288.
24 Ibid, 291.
Victoria went to his bedside and held his hand during his last breath. The Prince Consort was only 42 years old.

Victoria’s entire life changed upon his death. The energy and spirit that she had previously brought to her public duties was completely veiled over by her mourning. Windsor Castle was draped in black crepe for a long time and numerous statues and memorials dedicated to Albert were unveiled all over Europe. Although Victoria’s emotional outbursts over her husband’s death began to decrease over time, the gloom that settled over her hardly ever retreated. She rarely visited “the capital, refusing to take any part in the ceremonies of state, shutting herself off from the slight intercourse with society, she became almost…unknown to her subjects.” Due to this seclusion, Britain saw a rise in activism of the republican movement and a level of cynicism and suspicion of the monarchy that had not be evident previously in her reign.

Despite her deep and seemingly irrevocable mourning, the commissioning of portraits still continued. One of the biggest technological advancements of the time was the introduction of photography, which began to be used as a primary source of royal portraiture in the early 1860s. There are a few photographic portraits of Victoria and Albert together a couple months before his death, but the interest in photography did not began to rise until afterwards. The implementation of photography created a significant change in the audience of royal portraits. While the oil canvas paintings were meant to be seen by the eyes of royals and advisors, photographs could be printed and distributed to the people of Great Britain and beyond. The photographers working for Victoria along with her administration had to ensure that the images

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27 Strachey, 305-306.
28 Thompson, *Queen Victoria*, 55.
being published portrayed her in a way that was going to be taken well by the public. One other issue with using photography more frequently than paintings is that many of the photographs of Victoria have an unknown photographer and were not as carefully preserved, as shown in the next example.

Figure 11 is a photograph plainly titled “Queen Victoria” by an unknown photographer and estimated to have been taken sometime in the 1860s. The photograph has sustained some minor water damage, but its image is still clear. Victoria sits leaning in a chair, dressed in a black, mourning dress. Even when she began making public appearances again, Victoria would continue wearing black for the rest of her life. She rests her head thoughtfully on her left hand while she holds a small notebook in her lap with her right. This notebook could be a journal because Victoria often took solace in writing down her sorrows during this period of mourning. Her eyes are cast sadly downward. Although Victoria takes up majority of the photograph, the most dominant aspect is the looming portrait of Albert above. It is as though Albert is haunting Victoria, and she is unable to shake his death and the gaping hole in her life.

The loss of Albert is continuously reflected through using pieces of art to stand in the place where he ought to be. John Jabez Edwin Mayall captured a photo of most of the family in 1863 in “Group at Windsor, after the wedding of the Prince of Wales” (Figure 12). After the wedding of Victoria’s eldest son who was named after his father Albert, members of the now joined families posed together for what could have been a celebratory portrait. However, the occasion is more depressing than monumental. Victoria’s three youngest children are huddled near her and she holds one in her arms while another looks expectantly up at her. Although the facial details are vague due to the quality of the picture, it can be inferred that a bust of Albert sits in the middle of the group. Including Albert in the family portrait shows how, two years after
his death, Victoria is still in a deep mourning period and Albert remains a central figure within the family despite the fact that he has passed. It also indicates Victoria’s devotion “to the material ways in which Prince Albert was to be remembered.”

During this time period it was the custom for widows to retire into their mourning for a year or more. Many women would wear black for the rest of their lives, have lavish memorials if they could afford them, and preserve various relics of their lost loved one. Most widows in the upper and middle class did not have a job beyond raising their children. A lot of the public began condemning Victoria not because as a woman and wife she was retiring, but because she was not maintaining her role as their monarch and queen. Victoria’s own emotions were taking precedence over her primary purpose as Britain’s monarch and she was having great difficulty in separating her personal life from her duties as queen. This expression of personal over political is reflected within the portraits of this time period. For example, the Prince of Wales’ marriage to Alexandra of Denmark was purely political, yet this portrait from the celebration overwhelmingly reflect on the death of Albert rather than the unification of Victoria’s son and his new wife.

Victoria’s mourning for Albert would never completely end. Nevertheless, she eventually became more public and involved in her monarchial duties with the help of some new people in her life. One of these people was John Brown, a man who technically took on the role of her closest servant but also took on the role of emotional, and potentially sexual, support of a lover. Some historians argue that Victoria had always been the center of someone’s life. Growing up she was the apple of the Duchess of Kent’s eye, as a young queen she was Lord Melbourne’s pride and joy, and then upon her marriage she was subject to Albert’s devotion. Now that both

29 Arnstein, Queen Victoria, 110.
30 Thompson, Queen Victoria, 59.
had passed in the same year, there was no one close to Victoria who truly put her first above all else.  

John Brown helped to fulfill this role, which undoubtedly comforted Victoria during his years of service.

The rise of a new prominent politician also helped stir the Queen out of her sorrows. Benjamin Disraeli, who would eventually serve two terms as Prime Minister, caught Victoria’s attention when he generously supported the planning and construction of Albert’s official memorial. With the support and encouragement of Brown, Victoria began attending more meetings and public appearances and got to know Disraeli and other new politicians better. Her mood began to lift, and this is shown within portraits about a decade after Albert’s death.

“Princess Beatrice of Battenburg; Queen Victoria” has no known artist (Figure 13), but was estimated to have been painted in the early 1870s. The piece depicts Victoria sitting with her youngest child, Beatrice, kneeling at her side. There is an open book on the Queen’s lap, but she distinctly holds onto her daughter with both hands as if trying to pull her closer and treasure her touch. Beatrice, who is now a beautiful young adult with long, flowing hair and a resemblance to both parents, looks expectantly up at her mother. Victoria, whose expression seems much softer than in previous works, looks knowingly and dotingly on her daughter. This portrait shows a glimpse into an intimate moment between mother and daughter and a glimmer of hope and recovery for Victoria’s emotional well-being.

The prominence of Victoria’s personal trajectory within the portraits of this time period is completely overpowering. The after-effects of Albert’s death bled into the Queen’s work as a monarch and Victoria’s relationships with others. Portrait artists were largely unable to separate these mournful emotions from their paid purpose of taking royal photographs. A viewer can look

31 Ibid, Queen Victoria, 63-65.
32 Strachey, Queen Victoria, 328-329.
at these portraits to this day and see the bleak expression on her face, the sadness within her eyes. Only after over a decade was Victoria capable of showing the public that she was beginning the process of moving on through her new, more duty-focused portraits and a gradual increase in public appearances.
V. The Queen’s Rehabilitation

Portraits from the last few decades of Queen Victoria’s life display her gradual reentry into society through public appearances that she been neglecting for many years. She chose to spend more of her time working with her administration and spending time with her family. Aspects of balancing gentle motherhood and determined leadership are displayed, except this time without the support of Albert. Even though she was a widow, because of her position as monarch Victoria knew that she needed to take charge of her family once more, even though domesticity norms of the time allowed a widow to remain in grievance and have other male family members care for her.

As Queen Victoria was emerging from the worst depths of her sorrows, she saw how the British Empire had forged along without her. Ties with nations all over the globe had shifted, but one of the most important of these was Britain’s relationship with India. The official dissolving of the East India Company led to the absorption of India into Britain’s political entity from the Government of India Act in 1858. Victoria had already considered herself to be the Empress of India, even though the title was not deemed official for almost another two decades.33

Disraeli had considered pushing forward granting Victoria the official title of Empress of India for years, but knew there would be inevitable political opposition. The Prince of Wales ended up going on a six-month tour of India in 1875, which was a huge success and helped vindicate the Prince as heir to the throne. Disraeli used these travels as a springboard for the Royal Titles Bill of 1876, while the British population had a good sentiment towards the monarchy’s relationship with India.34

There ended up being a lot of resistance towards the bill, mostly because the term “Empress” was considered un-English, but also because politicians were unsure of how India would react to the legislation.\textsuperscript{35} Victoria and Disraeli were both strong supporters of the bill and eventually got it passed through both the House of Lords and the House of Commons by April of 1877.\textsuperscript{36} Although the bill did not include any changes within the daily lives of Indian or British people, the addition of the title formalized the British Empire’s hold over India and increased the strength of their relationship over them on political terms.

In order to absorb this new title and secure the holds of the British Empire, Victoria needed to exude a strength that had escaped her for the past fifteen years. She needed to gain a stronger public image through having more outside appearances, attending more meetings, and portraying herself as more put together. One of the elements in achieving this goal included having new, personal portraits made that reflected on Victoria’s vigor rather than her weaknesses.

Heinrich von Angeli displayed this message of stability in his work, “Queen Victoria,” from 1875 (Figure 14). The most striking aspect of this portrait is how Victoria stares straight ahead at the viewer. She is facing whatever comes head on, which is a shift from most other portraits where Victoria is sadly leaning her head on something or looking away. Her posture is firm and straight and her thick hands are clasped in front of her. The background provides part of an open window, which reveals a mixture of purple, pink, and yellow hues in the sky that indicate a sunrise or sunset, symbolizing both a beginning and an end. All of these combined elements produce the desired effect of strength and prosperity that needed to be displayed in

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 18.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 21-22.
order to help push along the Royal Titles Bill. Victoria had to portray more of her political presence to the administration, even though personally she may have still been struggling.

In the 1880s and 1890s Victoria was being captured in a lot of photography portraits with her continuously growing family. With the death of her second daughter Alice in 1878 and her youngest son Leopold in 1884, she was beginning to realize how little time there really was in the world. Upon Leopold’s death she hastily wrote in her journal, “Oh! God, in His mercy spare my other dear children!...When I awoke, I cried very much, feeling all pleasure has gone for ever from me.” All 34 of her grandchildren were born before Victoria’s death in 1901, and dozens of her eventual 87 great grandchildren were alive as well. Many commissions for portraits must have been requested by the family, administration, or the public, because there are multiple examples of different portraits sessions with various grandchildren and great grandchildren.

One example of these many family portraits is “Margaret, Crown Princess of Sweden; Queen Victoria,” which demonstrated to the public the continual maternal instincts of Queen Victoria. Shown in Figure 15, this photograph was taken by Alexander Bassano in 1885. Victoria still wears a black dress and lace veil as usual, but has a softer expression to her face than before. In comparison to portraits where Victoria needed to be a stern political leader, she appears much more at ease in works like this. She holds Princess Margaret close to her to express their relationship. Even though Margaret seems uncomfortable, this can be faulted to slow camera technology and the inability of most children to sit still.

Portraits such as these were intended to be on postcards that could make their way to the public for purchase. By seeing photos of Victoria with younger relatives or other family members such as this one, the British population and others could see how family-centered their

37 Hibbert, Queen Victoria Journals, 285.
queen was. The recognition and spreading of this value encouraged others in the Victorian era to take heed. Victoria had portraits similar to Figure 15 taken of her up until the year 1900 when her health declined to the point that she could no longer do so.

Victoria lived to be the longest reigning monarch of her time, as she celebrated her golden jubilee in 1887 and her diamond jubilee in 1897. These massive celebrations included tens of thousands of the British people and helped increase Victoria’s popularity and everlasting image of kindness.\textsuperscript{38} During these ceremonies Victoria became overwhelmed with emotions such as “exultation, affection, gratitude, a profound sense of obligation, an unbounded pride…at last, after so long, happiness.”\textsuperscript{39} It appeared that Victoria was finally feeling more harmonious with her lifestyle and those around her, while the absence of Albert had finally entered the back of her mind.\textsuperscript{40} Distractions from the rest of her family and the multitude of celebrations helped her with this piece of moving on and potential happiness.

There are only a few solo portraits of Queen Victoria during her last few years of life. They are all photographs, as this had become a much quicker, less expensive, and therefore more primary method of capturing portraits. Most of them look very similar, with a stout, aged Victoria sitting on a plush chair with a straight face. She displays much more action and contentment in photographs with other people, showing how she was much happier interacting with her loved ones rather than dwelling on her own.

Victoria’s health steadily declined throughout the end of the nineteenth century, and she was exempt from most of her duties by the end of the year 1900. On January 22, 1901 Queen Victoria passed away with her closest family members surrounding her bedside until the very end.

\textsuperscript{38} Thompson, \textit{Queen Victoria}, 131-133.
\textsuperscript{39} Strachey, \textit{Queen Victoria}, 383.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 385.
end. The nation, having grown a steadily closer bond to their queen over the decades, was devastated by her death. Her remaining children and other descendants also grieved deeply, but most of them knew that she had finally gotten to return to Albert, which had been her desire for over forty years.

The technical last portrait of Queen Victoria is a photograph of her decorated, open casket taken by Sir Hubert von Herkomer (Figure 16). Her body is surrounded with flowers, and within her casket are some of her treasured items such as precious jewelry and her wedding veil. One of the most prominent details of this final portrait is that a similar work of Albert on his deathbed hangs above Victoria’s head. In the background on the left is what appears to be another portrait of Albert, this time from when he was alive. This trend of artwork of Albert being prominent within Victoria’s portraits has continued up until her own end, showing how truly devoted she was to him and how fully she had suffered from her loss of him.

The portraits of Queen Victoria during the last few decades of her life truly show an upturn in her connections, actions, and emotions despite her increasing age. With the help of time, her family, and her close administration, Victoria was able to return back to her duties as monarch while maintaining strong relationships with her loved ones and appreciating them in her daily life. Even though she was a widowed woman, Victoria turned back to her strength to help her during these trying times and to enjoy the end of the nineteenth century.
Conclusion

Victoria could never ignore either of her positions as Queen or mother and be able to choose one over the other in their entirety. However, looking at the large amount of personal and emotional content within Victoria’s portraits that she chose to have displayed, a conclusion can be made that Victoria held her role as a mother and wife more closely to her heart than her role as Queen of the British Empire. Her love and admiration for Albert overpowered many other factors in her life, which is shown through the focus on him in many portraits along with her elongated mourning period.

By juggling both her motherhood and her monarchial duties and expressing them through portraits, Victoria took a completely different turn in comparison to all of the British kings before her. She allowed the world to see her emotions and aspects of her personal life, rather than choosing to solely represent herself as a firm leader. People of both the upper and middle class were able to relate to her in this sense, because many of them had raised a family or suffered the loss of a loved one themselves. Even though Victoria was breaking the norms of a queen by showing some pieces of her private life, this gained her a level of respect. Future royalty, such as Edward VII and Elizabeth II, were now able to display more personal matters to the public with less fear of retaliation due to the openness Victoria had expressed for decades.

The analysis of these portraits has shown almost as much information about Queen Victoria as her biographies and journal entries do. She was not afraid to allow her artists to paint the truth of her life, whether those were her happiest or saddest moments. She did not let her position as a female in society hinder her from doing so. Victoria truly displayed how someone as prominent as a queen can still be an individual and relatable to the rest of society.
Bibliography


