

Katie Stoneburner

History 204

Dr. Mark Angelos

7 April 2004

Primary Source Report

The documents entitled “A Modern Housewife” written by Alexis Soyer and “Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management” written by Isabella Beeton will be examined. These two documents are combined to form the one hundred fifth document in Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization edited by Mark A. Kishlansky. One of these documents was written by a women and the other by a man, however their explanations of everyday life of a women is strictly limited to that of the middle to upper classes, white women in Britain.

The intended audience is that of other women especially for the document written by Ms. Isabella Beeton. This document provides tips for other women of similar standing in all countries in Western Europe. Where as Ms. Alexis Soyer’s document was for all literate people. She provides detail of her daily life and along with insight to the relationship that most women of similar standing would have with their children.

In the first part of the document Mr. Soyer interviews a woman and she gives an account of her typical day. She admits that some days she does not

see her children in the evening only if they do not have company¹. She also admits that if she has finished everything done by the early afternoon she would “amuse” herself by reading or visiting with the children in the nursery². Her daily tasks included supervising her servants to make sure that they were following her orders. She also checked in with the chef daily and once a week giving a grocery list. She keeps the food locked in a pantry and only the chef and herself have a key³.

Ms. Beeton gives advice as to how to be the perfect housewife or a mistress of a household, not necessarily a wife. She states that the attitude of the women “affects the happiness, comfort and prosperity of the whole family”⁴. She says that her attitude does not affect only the attitudes of their family but also of her servants. If the household’s mistress were lazy their servants would be lazy as well. Women should not speak of any faults of their husbands, but only speak of events that hold importance. When speaking of such events they should speak only to those people whose opinions will be well received by the

¹ Soyer, Alexis. “Modern Housewife” ed. Mark A. Kishlansky Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization Volume II From 1600 to the Present Fifth Edition. New York: Longman. 2003. 147

² Soyer, 147

³ Soyer, 146

⁴ Beeton, Isabella. “Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management” ed. Mark A. Kishlansky Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization Volume II From 1600 to the Present Fifth Edition. New York: Longman. 2003., 147

family⁵. These women should also value cleanliness and be willing to rise early out of bed to get the household chores started⁶.

Both of these documents were published for public viewing. Ms. Beeton's was an advice manual for other women as to how to be the perfect household mistress. Mr. Soyer's document is in the format of an interview with two women he seems to have had another woman conduct the interview because he is not mentioned in the article.

Many women valued these books because many women of the working class women were striving to be like those of the middle and upper class. After women were not allowed to work any longer outside the home, and those who did were looked down upon by the society as a whole. Women that did hold jobs in the 'public sphere' were often separated from their male counterparts⁷. There was the 'public sphere' where the men had a place and the 'private sphere', where women belonged according to the white, protestant, middle and upper classes. Most of the 'working women' worked in the domestic sphere as servants to the upper and middle class the very people that they were trying to achieve their⁸.

Both of these documents provide insights into the 'private sphere' of society. Household mistresses were to be energetic and always in a good mood. They were not allowed to talk about anything negative but must always

⁵ Beeton, 149

⁶ Beeton, 148

⁷ Scott, Joan W. Louise A Tilly. "Women's work in the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe." Comparative Studies in Society and History 17, 1 (1975). 39

⁸ Scott and Tilly, 40

have a positive attitude and speech. This was not only for the mistress but all women should act this way.

These documents could be believed easily because of the patriarchal society that they were written in. During this time period women had very few rights either politically or legally. Women were not allowed to vote and men believed women's place was in the home and that they should not be hired outside of the 'private sphere'. This document is very informative by providing insight into how to be a "true woman"⁹ and their daily routines. It is also troubling that these women spent very little time with their children but rather relied on a nanny to take care of and raise their children.

⁹ Beeton, 149

Bibliography

- Beeton, Isabella. "Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management" ed. Mark A. Kishlansky Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization Volume II From 1600 to the Present Fifth Edition. New York: Longman. 2003.
- Scott, Joan W. Louise A Tilly. "Women's work in the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe." Comparative Studies in Society and History 17, 1 (1975): 36-64
- Soyer, Alexis. "Modern Housewife" ed. Mark A. Kishlansky Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization Volume II From 1600 to the Present Fifth Edition. New York: Longman. 2003.