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► **To cite this version:**

Véronique Molinari. “ “Captives of ignorance”? Women, education and knowledge in the Victorian period ”. La clé des langues, 2024. hal-04924546

HAL Id: hal-04924546

<https://hal.science/hal-04924546v1>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2025

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“Captives of ignorance”? Women, education and knowledge in the Victorian period

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Publié par Marion Coste le 17/11/2023

[Article] This article provides an overview of the different ways in which women were educated in the Victorian period, from home-schooling to private day-schools and boarding schools. While the campaign for educational reform was seen, within the context of the Industrial Revolution and the growing feminist movement, as a key to freedom, improvements in female education were also met with resistance.

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This article is based on a paper given at a conference entitled "Women and Knowledge in 19th century Britain", organised by Virginie Thomas at Lycée Champollion (Grenoble) on the 24th of May 2023. Other presentations included:

- [A voice and a place of one’s own: women, knowledge and empowerment in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* \(Christine Vandamme\)](#)
- [Images of Erudite Femininity: Capturing the learned/knowledgeable woman in the 19th-century visual arts. Part 1: Pre-Raphaelite artists' male perspective \(Virginie Thomas\)](#)
- [Images of Erudite Femininity: Capturing the learned/ knowledgeable woman in the 19th-century visual arts. Part 2: Pre-Raphaelite artists' female perspective \(Agathe Viffray\)](#)

Introduction

In England, as in most European nations, the pursuit of education emerged as one of the first demands that could be characterised as “feminist” [1] and a central concern for those struggling against female oppression well before the establishment of an organised women’s movement in the latter half of the 19th century [2]. As early as 1792, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the education in dependency advocated by Rousseau in *Emile* and demanded that boys and girls be given the same opportunities as regards education and training so that women could have access to the same professions and careers as men. When a

British feminist movement developed, in the second half of the 19th century, demands to gain access to higher education arose from the same motivations as well as from the desire to attain financial independence and freedom within and outside marriage.

To fully comprehend the significance of these later campaigns and the resistance they encountered, it is essential to differentiate between access to education and a more encompassing access to knowledge. The latter extends beyond the realm of education, covering subjects such as sexuality that cannot be acquired solely through formal schooling and may not be readily accessible within the home environment. While education could serve as a means to grant women access to new and higher-paying job opportunities, it also played a crucial role in facilitating access to knowledge at a time when there existed, as far as women were concerned, “a conspiracy of silence”, and was in that respect instrumental in empowering women to assert control over their own bodies.

After providing an overview of the state and limitations of female education in early Victorian England, this paper will situate the campaigns for educational reform in the broader context of both the Industrial Revolution and the growing feminist movement and look into the nature of the resistance that arose in the face of the progress achieved. Although different education systems existed at the time in Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales, the primary focus will be on England, while acknowledging the existence of similarities regarding female education throughout the United Kingdom.

1. Home-schooling

Until World War I, a substantial part of girls’ education, across the country and regardless of their social status, took place within the confines of the home, that is to say a place where a strict division of gender roles existed. A significant proportion of upper middle-class girls never went to school at all, being educated at home under the guidance of an ill-equipped and untrained governess, and those who did attend school were typically enrolled in private institutions over which the state had no control.

Wealthier families, including the aristocracy, typically had separate nurseries and schoolrooms on their upper floors. Girls would transition from the nursery to the schoolroom when deemed appropriate and would be instructed by either resident or visiting governesses. These would teach girls various skills and accomplishments such as etiquette, singing, languages (Italian and French), embroidery, pianoforte, drawing, and deportment. Occasional weekly lessons in arithmetic, literature, or science might be provided by outside teachers, known as visiting masters. If the family cared enough for intellectual accomplishments, these might also provide academic instruction in mathematics, classics, or science to the young girls. That would particularly be the case among wealthy Quaker and Unitarian families (Strachey, 1928, 44). Thus, Florence Nightingale, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon or, a little later, Beatrice Potter Webb, were fortunate enough to have fathers who were invested in their daughters’ intellectual development and provided them with academic instruction in Greek, Latin, French, Italian, history and philosophy in addition to the usual accomplishments. Before their brothers were sent away to school, girls sometimes shared their lessons and acquired rudimentary knowledge of mathematics or classics. However, once their brothers left for school, girls were more likely to be left in the care of French or German governesses as languages were considered a vital component of the curriculum for the affluent middle classes.

Further down the social scale, among the prosperous sections of provincial middle-class society, it was also common for girls up to the First World War to receive a substantial part of their “schooling” at home (Schools Inquiry Commission Report, 1867-68, 558). There, they might be educated alongside their brothers until the age of ten, before attending a local day school for two or three years. In the lower middle-classes, young girls would be left to the care of their mother and sometimes a nursemaid (often a young maid-of-all-work) and would only attend small local day-schools for about four or five years from the age of ten. Finally, for working-class girls, schooling was, until the vote of 1870 Education Act, mostly limited to Sunday schools, which imparted rudimentary reading skills and religious instruction, and could be combined with Dame Schools. These would be run by working class women in their homes without any state control and offered instruction of widely varying quality, encompassing some reading, writing, knitting and sewing. Only the more fortunate could have access to full-time education in charity schools managed by Anglican or Nonconformist groups, (through the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established, founded in 1811, and the Nonconformist British and Foreign Schools Society, founded in 1808) where they were taught Bible-reading, writing and arithmetic and, from the 1840s, geography and history. Despite attempts in the 1880s to introduce compulsory elementary education and extend the period of schooling, girls’ education remained limited due to familial obligations (Dyhouse, 1981, 3). Hannah Mitchell, a socialist, pacifist and suffragette, thus recalls about her childhood years in a poor farming family in Derbyshire in the early 1880s that she was only permitted to attend school for two weeks:

The nearest school was five miles away by the shortest cut over the hill, which made daily attendance impossible. So my parents decided we should attend school in turn as we grew old enough to go into lodgings. The two elder boys went first, living in the school house during the week. They left home early on Monday morning, taking their food with them, and returned on Friday evening

I do not remember how long this lasted, perhaps about two years, but it is quite clear in

my memory that this period brought me also some small measure of education. Finding that the schoolmaster was willing to lend the boys any books they wished to bring home at weekends, I made a bargain with them; I offered to do several small tasks, such as cleaning boots, or gathering firewood, which they were expected to perform at weekends, on the understanding that they brought me home a book each Friday. [...]

I was very happy, for the schoolmaster was so pleased with my proficiency in reading, writing and spelling, and was so kind and patient that I have no doubt he would in time have revealed the mystery of figures to me. But my luck did not last. It was winter and the journey was too long and rough for girls. The school was badly heated and the school house little better. We both fell ill, and were kept at home for the rest of the winter. (Mitchell, 1915, pp. 42-3, 48-49)

After leaving school, between the ages of 13 and 17, the daughters of middle and lower middle-class families were also expected to stay at home and attend social duties. Only the first two categories could expect to obtain some kind of secondary education.

2. Private day-schools & Boarding schools as extensions of the domestic sphere

Middle-class and lower middle-class girls from the age of ten were likely to go to a day school. These establishments, catering to a small number of five to twenty pupils, were administered by women of the upper-middle-class. The atmosphere was family-oriented, reflecting the social background of the girls, and this form of education was very popular with parents, who felt that they were not sending their daughters to school outside the domestic sphere - the school was merely an extension of it. Similarly, attendance was not required as priority was given to domestic chores and duties. Pupils were aged between 10 and 14 and the elementary cycle was supposed to include lessons in reading, spelling, English grammar, history, geography and arithmetic. In reality, this curriculum was rarely adhered to and in these small day schools, as in the home, the knowledge provided to the girls was, in most cases, very inadequate and primarily focused on preparing the girls for their future roles as wives, with little consideration for their potential engagement in professional pursuits.

An alternative available to parents of upper middle-class or aristocratic daughters was to send them to exclusive, fashionable and expensive boarding schools, such as the one attended by Frances Power Cobbe in Brighton in the early 19th century, or Heathfield in the Edwardian period. These institutions, reserved for members of the political, economic and social elite, including Members of Parliament, Lords and large landowners, were located in London or select tourist destinations such as Bath, Brighton or Clifton and received approximately 20 to 30 pupils. The academic curriculum offered drawing, foreign languages, English literature and, irregularly, history and geography. However, the education received by girls from the social elite within these boarding schools often fell far short of the advertised curriculum. According to Barbara Caine, her biographer, Frances Power Cobbe, who was otherwise educated at home, regarded her two-year schooling at Brighton in 1836-8, yet a "repute" establishment which cost £1000, as an interruption to her education and a complete waste of time:

nobody dreamed that any of us could in later life be more or less than an 'Ornament of Society'. That a pupil in that school should ever become an artist or authoress [...] Everything was taught us in the inverse ratio of its true importance. At the bottom of the scale were Morals and Religion, at the top were Music and Dancing; miserably poor music, too, of the Italian school then in vogue, and generally performed in a showy and tasteless manner on harp or piano. (Cobbe, 1894, 63)

The daughters of foremen, wealthy farmers and small traders were also often educated in small boarding schools, although these establishments held less prestige compared to those intended for the elite. As with the day schools, the curriculum encompassed essential subjects such as reading, spelling, history, geography and arithmetic and, after a span of two or three years, additional topics such as mythology and some rudiments of geology. These schools were generally established and run by financially-distressed middle-class women who, since teaching was more or less the only respectable profession they were allowed to practice, often had neither the vocation nor the training necessary for that occupation. The inspectors of the [Taunton Commission on Schools](#), which convened from 1864 to 1868, reported that most of the pupils did not understand what they were reading and wrote very poorly, but could often sew, stand in front of an assembly, sing and draw very well. Once again, only the Unitarian and Nonconformist schools offered girls an education almost identical to that of boys.

3. Higher and university education

The essentially domestic nature of education for girls was justified by its ultimate purpose, namely to mould

young girls into future wives and mothers. However, by the mid-19th century, the limitations of such an education were increasingly questioned. The demographic imbalance revealed by successive censuses from 1841 onwards meant that a large number of women would not be able to marry, and that the wife's relationship of financial dependence on her husband within marriage was increasingly being questioned by the nascent feminist movement. As for the profession of governess, one of the few options available to young middle-class women, it was becoming synonymous with destitution.

In the early Victorian period, traditional universities were a male preserve which provided a professional education for lawyers, doctors, the clergy and secondary teachers, all professions closed to women. The ancient Universities of Oxford (before 1167) and Cambridge (1209) were the only two English universities in existence until the 19th century when University College, London (1827) and King's College, London (1829) combined to form the University of London in 1836. In the north of England, the University of Durham had been founded in 1832. However, none of these universities admitted women as students.

Consequently, women's colleges gradually emerged from the middle of the century as a response to these limitations. The first two women's colleges were opened in the late 1840s in London. The first one, in 1848, was Queen's College, an Anglican institution, which trained nearly 200 students in its first two years; the second one, Ladies College (later known as Bedford College), was established in 1849 and welcomed Non-conformists. However, both institutions admitted girls aged 12 and older, and the education they provided would be more accurately characterised as a "secondary" rather than university level education. The formation of the North of England Council for Promoting Higher Education for Women in 1867, inspired by Anne Clough, was what really started the movement for university lectures for women and led to the creation in the following years of the Women's College, at Hitchin (later renamed Girton College Cambridge and referred to by [George Eliot](#) as "[The Great Scheme](#)") and Newnham College. The 1870s also witnessed substantial efforts to open university degrees to women. London University admitted women to degrees in 1878, and the University of Durham opened its degrees to women in 1895 (Purvis, 1991; Raftery, 1997). By 1897, 9 women's colleges had been founded, but resistance to women's higher education remained strong at Oxford and Cambridge, where women were not admitted to read for degrees until 1920 and 1947 respectively.

4. Campaigning for reform: education and knowledge as a key to freedom

A standard assumption is that the provision of these new kinds of schooling was the achievement of feminists, who wanted to widen opportunities available for women in public and professional life and campaigned for secondary and higher education for women. Yet, committed feminists were very much a minority group in late Victorian Britain and, however vocal they may have been, it was unlikely that they alone would have garnered sufficient support to bring about reforms on the scale of those which took place. Besides, the significance of education as a focal point for those opposing female oppression predates the emergence of an organised women's movement in the latter half of the 19th century and the definition of what it meant to be a "feminist" can be the subject of historical debate. As expressed by Laura Schwartz, "women who declined to see themselves as women's rights advocates often worked to further the interests of their sex alongside others who proudly laid claim to such a political identity" (Schwartz, 2011, 669). [Elizabeth Blackwell](#), the first woman to have her name placed on the British medical register in 1859, thus wrote to her sister in December 1850 about the first National Women's Rights Convention held two months earlier in Worcester, Massachusetts:

I have read through all the proceedings carefully. They show great energy, much right feeling, but not, to my judgment, a great amount of strong, clear thought... I cannot sympathise fully with an anti-man movement. I have had too much kindness, aid, and just recognition from men to make such attitude of women otherwise than painful; and I think the true end of freedom may be gained better in another way. (Blackwell, 1895)

Finally, it is worth noting that the newly established educational institutions, which were often founded, supported and controlled by men, did not exhibit any inclination to challenge existing gender divisions and remained far from radical in their approach. Parents who enrolled their daughters in these schools still held the expectation that they would acquire refined ladylike qualities and ultimately secure a suitable husband.

The history of women's education needs in fact to be understood in relation to economic, social, cultural and ideological factors that extend beyond the realm of education. Specifically, it must be connected to the social transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution. In the 19th century, access to education expanded not only for girls but also for boys, and the nature of education underwent significant changes. Improved standards in secondary schools, and the foundation of women's colleges, must not only be seen as a part of feminist policies, but as part of broader education reform driven by a Liberal elite determined to uphold Britain's competitiveness and foster a more professional and competitive educational ethos as a whole (Schwartz, 2011, 670). Thus, between 1858 and 1864, no less than three Commissions were appointed by the British government to look into the state of education in England and Wales and make recommendations.

That being said, it is important to acknowledge that a majority of feminists actively campaigned for the

standardisation and regulation of girls' schools and, more importantly, for a new focus on academic rigour. Some of them were involved in the creation of schools and colleges (Davies and Bodichon were Girton's founders) and the Taunton Commission might have not undertaken to include girls' schools in their enquiry on secondary education had they not been pressured to address the issue by feminists such as Dorothea Beale, Frances Buss and, here again, Emily Davies (Levine, 1987, 29). Besides the growth of these institutions *did* play a crucial role in the history of the feminist movement and education, bound as it was with broader feminist concerns, notably economic freedom and a reform of marriage, remained a central campaigning issue.

5. "To get knowledge is the only way to get bread"

From the emergence of the feminist movement, through the Ladies of Langham Place in 1855 and the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women in 1869, the campaign for women's education was closely linked to two contemporary causes for concern: gender imbalance and access to a wider range of occupations for middle-class women. Taken together, these issues came to be known under "The Woman's Question".

Elizabeth Wolstenholme, the founder of the Manchester Schoolmistresses Association, thus believed that improvements in education would increase women's economic independence. On the eve of the Forster Act, in 1869, she published an article entitled "The Education of Girls", in which she lamented the state of education and the defects of the education of girls "as carried on at home and in these small schools or quasi-homes" (Wolstenholme, 1869, 295).

Nothing is more plainly to be seen by those who will open their eyes than three things: (1) That a very large proportion of women do not marry. (2) That of those who do marry, a very considerable proportion are not supported by their husbands. (3) That upon a very large number of widows... the burden of self-maintenance and of the maintenance of their children is thrown. It is an absolute necessity of our present social condition that women should have as free admission to professional and industrial training as men. (Wolstenholme, 1869, 319)

In the absence of adequate training or employment, middle-class women were often forced into low-paid positions of drudgery, teaching or working as governesses being the most prevalent choices among the few occupations deemed "respectable." As Josephine Butler put it, "The desire for education which is widely felt by English women ... [sprang] ... from the conviction that for many women to get knowledge [was] the only way to get bread" (Butler, 1868, 7-8). In this respect, although the campaign for further education sprang from a wish to access the professions (law and medicine mostly), and thus concerned primarily middle-class women, Wolstenholme, Butler and others made it clear that it was above all a matter of economic freedom as it was "to the last degree indecent that women should be dependent on marriage for a professional maintenance" (Wolstenholme, 1869, 318). The issue was therefore relevant to women from *all social classes*.

In 1869, Elizabeth Wolstenholme, while also campaigning on a wide range of women's rights issues, including sex education and suffrage, called on "the people of England" to slay the 'cruel tyrant' of enforced ignorance, and 'set free the women who sigh in the dark prison-houses, the captives of ignorance and folly'" (Wolstenholme, 1869, p. 328). The year before, Josephine Butler, who went on to lead a national campaign against the exploitation and legal oppression of prostitutes, had echoed a similar sentiment when she declared that, for women, '[w]orse than bodily privations or pains ... are these aches and pangs of ignorance' (Butler, 1868, p. 7).

That ignorance, many feminists argued through essays, pamphlets or fiction, would not only be remedied through the establishment of schools and colleges, but also through the widening of non-academic knowledge. One key aspect of that knowledge pertained to the body and sexuality. Until marriage, and even once married, Victorian women were expected to remain as ignorant as possible of sexuality. Beside issues such as birth control, which would rarely be referred to by individual feminists or feminist organisations well into the 1950s, this means that they would easily fall victim to venereal disease, the symptoms and modes of transmission of which they were unaware, and around which there existed what was condemned as a "conspiracy of silence". In that respect, while the campaign for women's education cannot exclusively be attributed to feminist efforts, the pursuit of knowledge, and the connection between education and sexual oppression certainly can.

The aim was to put an end to the ignorance in which women were kept until marriage and often beyond by providing them with the knowledge that had been withheld from them until then under the pretext of preserving their "innocence": knowledge of their bodies, of the male body, but also of the various diseases and their mode of transmission. Cicely Hamilton, co-founder of the Women Writers' Suffrage League, decried this state of affairs in 1909:

Man... has always preferred that she should be too ignorant to sit in judgement upon him [...] One of her highest virtues in his eyes was a childish and undeveloped quality about which he threw a halo of romance when he called it by the name of innocence. So far has this insistence on ignorance or innocence in a wife been carried, that even in these days many women who marry young have but a very vague idea of what they are doing; while certain risks attaching to the estate of marriage are, in some ranks of life at any rate,

sedulously concealed from them as things which it is unfit for them to know (Hamilton, 1909, 72)

The damage caused by ignorance was not only exposed in the *English Woman's Journal* (1858-64), one of the first periodicals to campaign on a cross-section of women's rights, including suffrage and the legal position of married women, but also in a number of turn-of-the-century novels featuring New Woman characters. In *The Heavenly Twins*, by Sarah Grant (1893) the protagonist laments having to secretly acquire knowledge that was withheld from young women of her time, all without her parents' awareness: "I would stop the imposition, approved of by custom, connived at by parents, made possible by the state of ignorance in which we are carefully kept —the imposition upon a girl's innocence and inexperience of a disreputable man for a husband" (Grand, 1894, p. 78). In the short story "Virgin Soil", Chavelita Dunne under the pseudonym George Egerton, also has Florence, whose marriage is a complete failure, render her mother responsible for the ignorance in which she has been raised:

I say it is your fault because you reared me a fool, an idiot, ignorant of everything I ought to have known... You gave me not one weapon in my hand to defend myself against the possible attacks of man at his worst. You sent me to fight the biggest battle of a woman's life... with a white gauze —she laughed derisively— of maiden purity as a shield. (Egerton, 1894, 157)

6. Education vs Femininity: Resistance to Progress

Faced with these advances, numerous scientists, particularly those within the medical profession, counter-attacked by warning against the harmful effects of studies for young girls: reports and articles underlined that studies could endanger the health - and even the lives - of young girls. In 1869, *The Saturday Review* called "A learned girl" "one of the most intolerable monsters of creation" (in Purvis, 1991, 112). In 1874, the famous psychiatrist Henry Maudsley warned that intellectual exercise in women could affect their reproductive functions:

It will have to be considered whether [...] women can live laborious days of intellectual exercise and production, without injury to their functions as the conceiver, mothers and nurses of children. For it would be an ill thing, if it should so happen that we got the advantages of a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled and sickly race. In this relation, it must be allowed that women do not and cannot stand on the same level as men. (Maudsley, 1874, 204)

Again in 1887, the President of the British Medical Association declared that, in the interests of social progress and the "progressive improvement of the human race", women should be forbidden to study in order to produce healthy children (Hargreaves, 1994, 45).

At the heart of that resistance lay the issue of femininity. Herbert Spencer's works were widely read during the last quarter of the century, and his views on the social status of women, as expounded in *The Principles of Sociology* in 1876, were based on the assumption that human physiology was governed by a finite amount of energy. According to this theory, what the body expended on one activity had to be compensated for elsewhere. As women dedicated a significant portion of their energy to reproduction, their capacity for intellectual and psychic growth was diminished. Conversely, by studying, women would "overtax" their brains, which would in turn diminish their ability to bear children. This opposition must in fact not only be understood as a response to the threat posed by feminist demands and agitation, but also be related to contemporary fears of racial decline, and the increasing popularity of eugenic theories, which stemmed from growing concerns regarding a declining birth rate and Britain's inability to maintain its position of world leadership (Davin, 1978). At a time when motherhood needed to be prioritised for imperial purposes, women were encouraged "in the name of the race", to save their energy for maternity (Molinari, 2005, 216).

Conclusion

During the 19th century, education for middle-class girls underwent significant transformations, leading to an unprecedented increase in the number of girls receiving academically-oriented and formalised education. This educational shift paralleled that of their male counterparts, enabling some girls to pursue higher education and gain access to previously unattainable careers. Simultaneously, changes in labour laws and education reforms greatly improved access to schooling for working-class girls. These reforms standardised the educational curriculum for girls and allowed them to remain in school for longer durations compared to their early Victorian counterparts.

While schools of all kinds still aimed at raising well-educated wives and mothers, the shift that took place in the mid-Victorian period fundamentally altered the girls' educational course, thus producing a sizeable group of

highly educated young women, and helping to bridge the gap between the male and female spheres. As restrictive as working-class girls' curriculum remained throughout the Victorian period (in 1878, "domestic science" became a compulsory subject for girls in the newly established Board Schools and in 1882 and 1890, government grants were made to schools that taught cooking and laundry), an expanded course of study nevertheless enabled pupils to study subjects traditionally absent from working-class educations, such as grammar, algebra, and literature.

These developments also allowed working-class girls to achieve near-universal literacy by the end of the century and closed a long-standing literacy gap between genders: thus, while in 1800 around 40 percent of males and 60 percent of females in England and Wales were illiterate, by 1900 illiteracy for both sexes had dropped to around 3 percent. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Victorian educational reform set the movement that would award working-class girls a degree of social mobility. Although true advancements for working-class girls, as well as middle-class girls ranging from the lower middle-class to wealthier classes, would have to wait until after the First World War and the 1918 Fisher Act, which mandated compulsory education up to the age of 14, these reforms marked a pivotal moment in the trajectory of educational opportunities for girls.

The acquisition of knowledge pertaining to sexuality, birth control, and the workings of the female (and male) body, would prove a longer process, leaving many young women, well into the 1930s, ignorant of the realities they would encounter within marriage. When writing *Testament of Youth*, an autobiographical account of her war experience, Vera Brittain could write that ministering to men as a nurse was what had released her "from the sex-inhibitions that even to-day –thanks to the Victorian tradition which up to 1914 dictated that a young woman should know nothing of men but their faces and their clothes until marriage pitchforked her into an incompletely visualised and highly disconcerting intimacy– beset many of my female contemporaries, both married and single" (Brittain, 1933, 16).

Notes

[1] The term "feminism" did not come into use in the English language until the 1890s.

[2] The expression "captives of ignorance", which gives its title to this article and which will be explained later, appears in Elizabeth Wolstenholme, *The Education of Girls, its Present and its Future*, p. 328.

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Pour citer cette ressource :

Véronique MOLINARI, "Captives of ignorance"? Women, education and knowledge in the Victorian period, *La Clé des Langues* [en ligne], Lyon, ENS de LYON/DGESCO (ISSN 2107-7029), novembre 2023. Consulté le 08/11/2024.
URL: <https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/civilisation/domaine-britannique/captives-of-ignorance-women-education-and-knowledge-in-the-victorian-period>