For most Victorians the traditional conception of what constituted a “true” woman and what she should be was probably distilled most recognizably and definitively in a very famous two-volume book-length poem by Coventry Patmore called “The Angel in the House” (1854–56). The poem basically crystalized a mythology defining what had been and would continue to be the Victorian “Feminine Ideal.” It must be remembered that in the nineteenth century, as in much of the twentieth, physical and cultural concepts like “man” and “woman,” “identity” and “destiny,” were held to be largely a function of “natural law”; being defined by “essential” and “permanent” qualities, they were shaped primarily by Nature, and only secondarily and not fundamentally by society, culture, or ideology. The idea that one’s gender or identity was a social or ideological construct—a “relative” construction—was thought to be absurd, such an idea being the reflection of an “unnatural,” irrational, or even “diseased” mind. Facts were facts, truth was truth, and not a matter of opinion or politics. So for Victorians the appropriate question really was, “What is the nature of woman?” And, as it happened, medical science—the traditional last authority on facts and Nature (as well as disease)—had, along with the developing health-related disciplines of psychology and sociology, produced for Victorians reams of data, illustrative studies, and other “science” to confirm, definitively and under Darwinian logic, that women, though enormously valuable members of society in many respects, represented a less evolved stage of human development. Compared with men, they were physically weaker, more impulsive, more neurologically sensitive thus more emotionally volatile, less capable of high-level philosophical thought and less inclined to rational argument (having brains that were literally 5 oz. smaller). On the plus side, however, women were more spiritual, more nurturing, more intuitively moral, and gentler than men.

These “scientific facts” were in many respects a logical reinforcement of the centuries-old social contract in Britain, under which marriage was a way to stabilize and protect wealth (as were the property laws of primogeniture and entail) and at the same time safeguard mothers-to-be, who were a part of the “weaker sex” and in need of protection but essential to the reproductive preservation of the race and the nurturing maintenance of the sons that were required to sustain British imperialistic power. Women were “dependents”—in both theory and fact—having almost no legal rights or even status as individuals (although such position was mitigated over time by somewhat progressive legislation like the Divorce Law of 1857 and various mid- and late-nineteenth-century marriage and property laws). In Victorian England, as before, the marriage contract was as much business as romance, in effect a transfer of property, which included the prospective baby-maker: daughters started out protected and supported by their fathers,
then those responsibilities were shifted to their husbands. All of a woman’s property (customarily materialized as her “dowry”) became the legal and sovereign property of the husband, who in exchange took over the duty—both financial and social—to support and protect her. She, in turn, had the duty and responsibility to create and sustain a home and family. As a consequence, a woman’s “place” and destiny truly was in the home, and, conversely, a man’s “place” and destiny resided in the “outside” world. Men and women were both very important but fundamentally different; therefore, by nature (“natural” law), they performed—and were divinely destined to perform—in “separate spheres.” The doctrine of “separate spheres” became, in fact, not only a biological imperative, but also a foundational keystone of Victorian society and culture.

It would be hard to overestimate the degree to which a Victorian woman’s identity and meaning was associated with “place”—both as destiny and as physical location. The Victorian mind tended to conceive the world as fundamentally bifurcated, organized in terms of binaries, and was equally conditioned by the views of Darwin (and his predecessors), who conceived existence as a rapacious struggle and the “survival of the fittest.” These two factors served the doctrine of “separate spheres” beautifully: just as Man represented physical and mental strength whereas Woman represented gentleness and demure nurturing, so the peaceful and restorative Home was made the converse (albeit complementary) pole of what lay “Outside,” namely, the competitive, predatory, discordant place of business, commerce, war, politics, and all those other activities that were the “natural” province of Man. The respective binaries that applied to this central polarity—Home versus Outside—were indeed relentless and relentlessly reinforcing of mainstream Victorian ideology. The home, sphere of the “Feminine Ideal” of the “Angel in the House,” was represented as (and aspirationally embodied) all things harmonious and healing, as opposed to all things scary and discomforting on the “outside”: order as opposed to chaos, safety as opposed to danger, serenity as opposed to turmoil, restorative comfort as opposed to unending anxiety, refinement as opposed to vulgarity, unity as opposed to alienation, family as opposed to individual isolation, private as opposed to public, unthreatening sexual acceptance (passivity) as opposed to “castrating” sexual aggression, mother as opposed to whore, “Madonna” as opposed to femme fatale, and, not least, purity as opposed to corruption and contamination.

It was perforce the “angelic” woman’s natural (that is, divinely ordained) duty and mission to comfort and restore to full strength, both physically and spiritually, the man who was certain to be bedeviled and depleted by the brutal, dog-eat-dog “outside” world. On the other hand, and even more vital to understand: if a woman should stray from her proper “place”—try to define herself, instead, in the public, outside world—she would invariably and unavoidably suffer the pain and contamination that the “outside” world is designed and only too ready to inflict upon her. In the process she would be corrupted and destroyed, likely physically but surely spiritually—the mother-angel becoming a
harpy-whore—as she inevitably absorbed and exhibited those dangerous opposite traits so “unnatural” and so subversive of her identity and soul. It was a fate proven by the obvious examples of “fallen” gutter women, but also by various strains of the New Woman, who by both appearance and aggressive demeanor was becoming more and more “like a man,” erasing the “natural,” orderly, and socially crucial line defining and differentiating “man” from “woman.” Needless to say, and not coincidentally, there were developed any number of corollary axioms or shibboleths that were consistent with the separate-spheres and feminine-ideal ideology and that underscored keynote Victorian patriarchal ideas, such as a woman being “property” whose natural-law destiny was to become a wife and mother (and not, God forbidding, a “sterile” spinster). A well-known, if wily and acerbic axiom went: “if a woman belongs to no man, then she belongs to every man”—neatly identifying virtue with the homebound, worshipful, and feminine wife and mother, as opposed to the unvirtuous (potentially “whore-ish”) harridan, an example of which was the New Woman, whose center of activity was the outside world and who was brazen, rebellious, “masculinely” hardened, and certainly not devoted to a husband and children. In short, such a woman’s fall represented not merely sin and ruin, but divinely preordained retribution and damnation—it was the “natural” and ultimately inescapable result of forsaking her “place.”

It is easy from our historical distance to marvel how the vast majority of these presumably intelligent and enormously capable Victorians, who built and ruled over the largest empire in history, could so easily, and for the most part unquestioningly, embrace—women no less than men—a belief system that now seems transparently patriarchal, condescending, and reactionary, yet prevailed and dominated the culture even during a period of countless technological and intellectual innovations. (Perhaps even more astonishing is the fact that a great many people in the United States as well as Britain, at least in some respects and in some quarters, still hold this Victorian cultural mythology to be “truth” even today.) It is testimony to how enormously tenacious cultural mythologies can be. They are especially tenacious when—as in the case of the Victorian “Angel in the House”/“separate-spheres” mythology—their different elements are made so internally coherent, interdependent, seamless, and mutually reinforcing that it becomes extremely difficult to even throw them into question successfully, much less overturn them.