



The Spectacle of Intimacy

Karen Chase, Michael Levenson

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Love of home life, the intimate moments a family peacefully enjoyed in seclusion, had long been considered a hallmark of English character even before the Victorian era. But the Victorians attached unprecedented importance to domesticity, romanticizing the family in every medium from novels to government reports, to the point where actual families felt anxious and the public developed a fierce appetite for scandal. Here Karen Chase and Michael Levenson explore how intimacy became a spectacle and how this paradox energized Victorian culture between 1835 and 1865. They tell a story of a society continually perfecting the forms of private pleasure and yet forever finding its secrets exposed to view. The friction between the two conditions sparks insightful discussions of authority and sentiment, empire and middle-class politics.

The book recovers neglected episodes of this mid-century drama: the adultery trial of Caroline Norton and the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne; the Bedchamber Crisis of the young Queen Victoria; the Bloomer craze of the 1850s; and Robert Kerr's influential treatise, celebrating the ideal of the English Gentleman's House. The literary representation of household life--in Dickens, Tennyson, Ellis, and Oliphant, among others--is placed in relation to such public spectacles as the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill of 1848, the controversy over divorce in the years 1854-1857, and the triumphant return of Florence Nightingale from the Crimea. These colorful incidents create a telling new portrait of Victorian family life, one that demands a fundamental rethinking of the relation between public and private spheres.

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