Florence Nightingale: A Critical Look At A Legend

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Florence Nightingale was a nineteenth-century woman who has been largely misunderstood by contemporary society. Today, the name of Florence Nightingale conjures the image of the saintly lady of the lamp; a nurturing and compassionate woman who patiently cared for ailing and lonely soldiers. Although this image has substance, Florence Nightingale was passionate, driven, ambitious, and egocentric. In many ways, she fully realized her sister's accusation that she was more like a man of her time than any woman of her era.[1] She was, however, marked undoubtedly by the puritanical Victorian model of womanhood. Very much a product of her class and her upbringing, she forged ahead, primarily striving to improve the plight of the soldier, but also the general welfare of the common person's sickbed.

She was intensely active from the time of her early thirties, leaving her little time or interest in anything else. In many ways, Nightingale exemplified the altruist, yet she was also terribly self-centered and concerned with her reputation. Her fields of interest ranged widely and evolved throughout her life. She was initially inspired by the plight of women as depicted in her first essay Cassandra, but after casting off the fetters of her childhood, she held less and less regard for the plight of the common woman. She regarded nursing as her personal vocation, and thought that God had spoken to her and called her to his service. She was intensely spiritual and contributed in her own way to the Anglican reforms of the mid-nineteenth century. Florence Nightingale profoundly affected nineteenth-century British history, not only by her nursing reforms, but also by providing political leadership, for both the government and the women of England. [2]

[1] Margaret Forster, Significant Sisters, The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1839-1939 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 117.

[2] Elspeth Huxley, Florence Nightingale (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 16.

Born in 1820, the second daughter of a wealthy and politically well-connected family, Florence was named after the city of her birth. Her father, William Edward Shore, changed his name to Nightingale in order to inherit his Uncle Peter's estate, Leahurst in Derbyshire. Her mother, Fanny Smith, came from a remarkable family. Fanny's grandfather and father were both known for their championing of humanitarian causes. Her father, William Smith, was a member of the House of Commons for forty-six years, and fought diligently for the factory workers, Jews, and virtually any unpopular, oppressed group of people. Florence and her sister, Parthenope[3], were home-schooled by their father in Greek, Latin, French, Italian, German, history and philosophy. Parth, as she was known, became her mother's companion in the drawing room, while Florence preferred her father's lessons in the library. Few girls received such extensive educations during this time period, and Florence was determined to use her advantages to her own ends. Despite her bluestocking training, she "came out" in both London and international society and was an instant success. Because of her intelligence, vivacity and good looks, she was self-assured and initially enjoyed her success.[4] Florence, however, became quickly bored with the coquetry and inanity required of Victorian debutantes and dreamed of turning herself to more serious pursuits. She excelled at dancing, but considered such prowess "worthless." She later wrote of the plight of the Victorian woman: "Women's life is spent in pastime, men's in business. Women's business is supposed to be to find something to 'pass' the 'time'."[5]

Even as a young woman, Nightingale could not conform to the lifestyle expected of her and inevitably became almost suicidal when she could see no escape. "Free-free Oh! . . . Welcome beautiful death . . . . I believe in God." This quotation, taken from the last lines of her essay, Cassandra, is autobiographical because she often referred to herself as Cassandra. Cassandra was the name of a mythical prophet

[3]Parthenope, Nightingale's older sister, was also named for the city in which she was born. Naples was called Parthenope by the Greeks. The Nightingales honeymooned for nearly three years on an extended trip to Italy. See Huxley, 11; and Cecil Woodham-Smith, Florence Nightingale 1820-1910 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1951), 1-2.

[4] Florence Nightingale, Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought, Mary Poovy, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1992), viii. Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 129. Forster, 98.

[5] Forster, 98; Nightingale, Cassandra and Other Selections, 131.

cursed by Apollo who was doomed to see and speak the truth but never be believed.[6]

Marriage was another issue that plagued Florence. Her mother wanted a brilliant match for her, but she rightly envisaged the life awaiting her at the end of that path. She resisted marriage because she believed that by marrying, she signed off her rights as an individual; his wants became hers, thereby thwarting Florence of fulfilling her ambitions. She absolutely detested the prospect of a life replete with flower arrangements and china patterns. In 1849, Nightingale forever put the idea of marriage behind her. Robert Mockton-Milnes, a wealthy and respectable young man, asked Florence to marry him. She refused him and in her private notes she explains why; "I know that I could not bear his life. That to be nailed to a continuation, an exaggeration of my present life . . . would be intolerable to me--that voluntarily to put it out of my power . . . to seize the chance of forming for myself a true and rich life would seem to me like suicide. "[7]

In her early to middle twenties, she turned to new scholarships to "pass" her "time". She attempted to study mathematics, but her parents adamantly refused to grant their permission for a tutor, as this was considered a most unladylike subject which they thought could do nothing but confuse Florence's ideas about her future. She then turned to the more socially acceptable work of visiting the poor and ailing who lived in the cottages surrounding the estates in which she lived. Her interest in philanthropic work was piqued and her family had no objection to her being such an honorable and thoughtful young lady.

The more Nightingale saw of the plight of the poor, however, the more interested she became in both the care for the ill and the godlessness of the masses. Her fascination grew and she kept her newly discovered seedling vocation secret from her family. She continued to use charitable work as a way to dig herself into a useful trade. Visiting the poor and ailing provided more than just hands-on rudimentary nursing, it also allowed her to escape from impending familial marriage pressures.[8]

In 1844, Florence was twenty-four. She decided to ask permission to study nursing formally. Her parents were horrified. They rebelled against the thought that their well-brought-up daughter would willingly associate herself with the type of women who nurse, a profession

[6]Florence Nightingale, Cassandra, Introduction by Myra Stark (New York: Feminist Press, 1979), 55; 22-23.

[7] Forster, 100-104.

[8] Ibid., 100-104.

characterized by Charles Dickens as slatternish poor women whose only purpose lay in camp following.[9]

Over the next six years, Florence agonized over her obligations to her family and their suffocating attempts to transform her into their idea of what she should be. During those years, however, Florence was not as idle as her parents believed her to be. She continued to study, in a new area. Up at dawn every morning so as not to disrupt her routine as the dutiful daughter, Florence scrutinized government Blue Books on social statistics. By 1849, she had become an expert of statistics whose opinion was sought by Sidney Herbert, secretary of war.[10]

At the age of thirty-one, still bound by filial obligation, Florence waited for her parent's permission. In 1851, they finally allowed her to go to Germany to study at Kaiserworth, Institute of Deaconesses and then to Paris with the Catholic Sisters of Charity. In 1853, she was offered a position in London as superintendent of the Institute for Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances. Her parents finally realized her seriousness, and her father granted her an allowance of £500 per annum.[11] She was finally independent and the thrust of her life was to begin.

Nightingale's religion shaped not only her early years, but was perhaps her most overriding personality trait. Nightingale's philosophy of nursing was concentrated around her belief in God. Because she believed that God had personally called her to His service she was driven to share her brand of religion with others. She grew up Anglican but both parents leaned toward the more liberal Unitarian faith. Possibly because of this flexibility in her formative years, Nightingale consistently questioned the constructs of organized religion. Additionally, she was affected by the Oxford movement[12] which revamped the approach of the Anglican Church. She was also inspired by her perception of the godless plight of the poor and working classes. She had gained this perception from her philanthropic work.

[9]Elizabeth K. Helsinger, et al., The Woman Question, volume II (New York: Garland, 1983), 142.

[10]Forster, 103.

[11]Ibid., 105-107.

[12]The Oxford movement refers to the reforms within the Anglican Church during the nineteenth century. These reforms were motivated by large numbers of British people who had left the church because of its close linkage with the British government. Additionally, many people felt that their spiritual needs were not being met within the church. Other faiths, Methodism and Catholicism, especially, were finding many new converts within the ranks of the British population.

Both her own sense of inadequacies within organized religion and her empathy for the poor prompted her to write, Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers after Truth Among the Artisans of England.[13]

In Suggestions and in Cassandra, Nightingale asserts some radical and even heretical observations on the subject of Christianity: "Christ, if he had been a woman, might have been nothing but a great complainer . . . The next Christ perhaps will be a female Christ." "As long as the church of England enforced herself by hanging people who did not belong to her. . . she did very well." She wrote these words with the godless in mind and intended the work to be the theological and philosophical answer to their predicament. She published Suggestions in 1860 in spite of reputable counsel that she should do some revision.[14]

Certainly she meant well, but it would have been only the most avidly driven and studious of artisans that would have waded through her lengthy and not very well organized philosophies. Nightingale was possessed of a brilliant and educated mind, but her opinion on the subject of organized religion was not written on the level of the average artisan. Additionally, her arguments were sometimes blasphemous and always less than clear. She does, however, make valid observations about church shortcomings in meeting the needs of the people, but does little to offer a solution, except her own rather convoluted spirituality.

Nightingale's moments of clarity in Suggestions do make it an interesting if somewhat tedious read. What is perhaps most telling about Nightingale's Suggestions is that it provides intriguing clues as to how she dealt with her personal dilemmas. Always somewhat timid when initially confronting the establishment, Nightingale consistently sought approval from it before venturing into unexplored territory. Suggestions contains literally pages of searing diatribe on the theological constructs of the Anglican Church, yet she remained a member to her death, although she obviously detested much for which it stood.[15]

This same unwillingness to relinquish what she felt to be inherently unjust is also illustrated by her relationship with her parents. Although she should have broken free of her parents' control easily a decade sooner, she was reluctant to disobey the wishes of her family and face

[13] Huxley, 194.

[14] Nightingale, Cassandra and Other Selections, 230, 101. Huxley, 192-95.

[15] Nightingale, Cassandra and Other Selections, xvii.

their derision. While she did finally break free, she never relinquished her relationship, although she attacks the very nature of the family repeatedly in volume II of Suggestions.

This animosity toward families in general, and presumably her own in particular, is underscored throughout Suggestions and Cassandra: "The prison which is called a family . . . especially to the woman.[16] "But do children owe their parents no duty, no love, no gratitude for all that they have done for them?. . . But they can't be grateful to people for making slaves of them."[17] These quotations encapsulate the entirety of Nightingale's cohesive arguments concerning families. Her arguments concerning families, however, are deeply integrated with her concerns for the wasted intellects and talents of women. "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity . . . a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?"[18] Despite her early writings championing equal intellectual treatment for women, Nightingale's attitude toward her own sex devolved into something much closer to disdain through the course of her life. She was by the strictest modern terms, a feminist, but of the most confused sort. She refused to sign petitions for suffrage, and even called women "too ignorant of politics" to vote.[19] Yet this woman was, before she broke free of familial pressures, and perhaps even after that, a champion for women. In her letters to her family written from a holiday in Egypt, Nightingale describes the deplorable effects of polygamy on Egyptian women.[20]

Nightingale's disdain for women was acquired early in her life. She complained "that her mother was one such perfect lady who could have organized an army but preferred to do nothing."[21] Florence's contempt for her mother and sister ran deep, probably because of years of their suffocating insistence that she conform to their standards of womanhood. Her later derision for women can be attributed to her disappointment in the relatively small number of women who followed

[16]Ibid., 119.

[17] Ibid., 67.

[18] Nightingale, Cassandra, 25.

[19] F. B. Smith, Florence Nightingale, Reputation and Power (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 190; Joan Perkin, Victorian Women (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 212.

[20]Florence Nightingale, Letters From Egypt, A Journey on the Nile (New York: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1987), 139.

[21]Perkin, 87.

her into her newly opened field of nursing. Her own indomitable, indefatigable drive also alienated her from these women because they were unwilling to delete their personal lives to join her in work. She was insistent that others work as tirelessly as she did, and felt no sympathy for those who did not have her energy. Later in life, she referred to herself as a "man of action" and claimed that only men had helped her in her struggles. She viewed women not only as unhelpful but hostile. This attitude of antipathy for her own sex is further exemplified in her choice of critics to whom she sent her essays for comment. She sent Suggestions to two men, John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Jowett. She asked for frank criticisms, and Mill wrote, "I have seldom felt less inclined to criticize than in reading this book." He did, however, suggest revision as did Jowett. Although Mill was not particularly impressed with Nightingale's religious philosophy, he was inspired by her writings about her family enough to subtly allude to her in his book, The Subjection of Women, which he began soon after having reviewed Nightingale's Suggestions: "Many women have spent the best years of their youth in attempting to qualify themselves for the pursuits in which they deserve to engage."[22]

Nightingale's political impact on Victorian England, though, was certainly not limited to her effect on the nineteenth century feminist movement. Best known for her pioneering work in nursing, Nightingale's reputation has been corrupted nearly to the extreme of saintliness. Although certainly not a candidate for a hagiography, she was absolutely a formidable force in changing the inadequacies within the medical profession. Her impact on the reformation of the medical profession should not be understated. She not only addressed important issues like the importance of good sanitation, she went further, setting unprecedented standards for the care of the ailing.

In 1854, Nightingale was appointed by Sidney Herbert, Secretary of War, to form a corps of nurses to tend the wounded at Scutari, an Army hospital, in the Crimea. Nightingale hurriedly recruited thirty-eight nurses, twenty-four of them nuns or Anglican sisters, to accompany her. Nightingale found conditions at the Crimean hospital horrifying. She found that diseases like typhus, cholera and dysentery were responsible for most of the hospital deaths. Only one-sixth of the mortality rate was battle related. She and her nurses were not

[22] John Stuart Mill, On Liberty with The Subjection of Women and Chapters on Socialism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 215; Huxley, 194; Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, A History of Their Own, Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present, volume II (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 168-169.

welcomed by the army doctors, but because of Nightingale's political connections, they felt they could do little to keep her out.[23]

By the time she left the Crimea, Nightingale had shown the world how a military hospital should be run. When she returned to England she had become a national heroine who had done more to change the way both the public and the military viewed soldiers. Nightingale contended that soldiers were not disposable and that with good nursing and hygiene, the mortality rate among soldiers need not be so staggering.[24]

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were so impressed with Nightingale that the queen said, "I wish we had her at the War Office." Prince Albert wrote in his diary, "she put before us all the defects of our present military hospital system, and the reforms that we needed. We are much pleased with her; She is extremely modest."[25]

The English public was so delighted with her accomplishments that they raised money in her name so that she might open a school to train nurses. The Nightingale fund was utilized in 1860, establishing the Nightingale Training School for Nurses at St. Thomas' Hospital and a school devoted to training midwives at King's College Hospital. The grand opening of the school was immediately preceded by the publication of Nightingale's Notes on Nursing which became exceedingly popular with everyone from Queen Victoria to the average working woman. In this book, Nightingale dispelled dangerous myths about caring for the sick. It was replete with practical advise dedicated to "women who have personal charge of the health of others."[26] This book, because of its practicality, was perhaps the most significant of Nightingale's published works. Using what would be considered common sense today, Nightingale describes in minute detail the issues important to maintaining and improving the health of the patient. She advised her reader on everything from the necessity of clean chamber pots to the importance of clean linen and walls, light, fresh air and

[23] Vern L. Bullough, et al., eds., Florence Nightingale and her Era: A Collection of New Scholarship (New York: Garland, 1990), 5; Perkin, 166.

[24] Olive Anderson, A Liberal State at War English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War (New York: St. Martin's, 1967), 117.

[25] Florence Nightingale, Ever Yours, Florence Nightingale; Selected Letters, Martha Vicinus and Bea Nergaard, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 162.

[26] Florence Nightingale, Notes on Nursing (New York: D. Appleton Century, 1946), xiii; Huxley, 191; Woodham-Smith, 304.

good diet. This book was revolutionary for its time, and precisely because it made good sense, the care for the sick began to improve.

Nightingale's nurses had a rocky time adapting to the strict regime that her school demanded. Nightingale's attitude toward nursing was that it was a vocation, not a career. She did not accept married women, and she lost many good potential nurses because they dropped out to get married. She felt especially betrayed by these women as she could see no happy combination of marriage and nursing. She imposed strict regulations. The nurses were only allowed to leave the school in pairs and were even accused of flirting if they were caught making eye contact with men.[27] Under such strict and regimented supervision it is no wonder that many women were unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices to become 'Nightingale Nurses'.

After her triumphant return from the Crimea, Nightingale became bedridden and was expected by many to die. Her illness was controversial, as some say that she was a "psycho-neurotic who lusted for power and fame"[28]who used her illness to garner even more power. This view of her illness is probably too harsh since she was diagnosed with at least four serious illnesses during her life, including Crimean fever, sciatica, rheumatism, and dilation of the heart. While it is true that Nightingale committed herself to invalidism for the rest of her life, she lived until she was ninety and continued to work from her sickbed. Because of the length of her convalescence, it has been noted that her illnesses might indeed have been exaggerated to shield her from the world. One argument suggests that she closeted herself upon her return from the Crimea to avoid reentering a close relationship with her mother and sister. She only admitted visitors by appointment, thereby shielding herself from society so that she could devote herself completely to work.[29]

During her confinement, Nightingale worked furiously. "It used to be said that people gave their blood to their country. Now they give their ink."[30] She certainly gave her fair share of ink. She kept busy with workhouse reform, public health and sanitation in India, reorganizing the India Office and even with an inquiry into the incidence of deaths in childbirth from puerperal fever. She constantly compiled statistics and was an avid correspondent with many political

[27]Forster, 116.

[28]Bullough, 75.

[29] Ibid., 76. Nightingale, Ever Yours, 4.

[30]Huxley, 219.

leaders of the day. Specifically during the next twenty years, she worked on the problems confronting the British in India. In 1875 she wrote Lord Salisbury regarding irrigation returns, asking that he appoint a commission to compile statistics. She outlined the issues that need to be addressed and apologized for the "length of these notes meant to help to show the direction the inquiry should take."[31] In 1867, at the request of Sir Stafford Northcote, Secretary for India, Nightingale prepared a digest which outlined the instructions for the Indian Sanitary Commission. Although Nightingale was responsible for originating the report, drafting the questions, analyzing the replies, and preparing the instructions, she was not a member of the committee, nor did she qualify as a witness, because of her gender. Instead she was officially invited to submit remarks, "Observations by Miss Nightingale," which were included in the final commission report.[32]

The truth is that Nightingale became so influential that she lost touch with her own humility. It is not surprising that she became arrogant because many influential people flattered her enormously. Benjamin Jowett, a longtime correspondent, wrote in 1879: "Nobody knows how many lives are saved by your nurses . . . how many thousand soldiers . . . are now alive owing to your forethought and diligence."[33] Lord Edward Stanley, the secretary of state for India wrote Nightingale in 1864: "Every day convinces me more of two things, first the vast influence on the public mind of the sanitary commissions of the last few years . . . and next that all of this has been due to you and to you almost alone."[34] It is no wonder indeed that Nightingale changed her opinion on the vote for women--she had her own brand of influence, and trusted her judgment better than that of a collective women's voice. During the debates for the Second Reform Act in 1867, she boasted to John Stuart Mill that "irrespective of the size of the male electorate," she had "more political power than if I had been a borough returning two M.P.'s."[35] Indeed she was more influential than most men and probably all women, excepting the Queen.

[31]Nightingale, Ever Yours, 357-360; Huxley 219.

[32]Woodham-Smith, 271.

[33] Benjamin Jowett, Dear Miss Nightingale A Selection of Benjamin Jowett's Letters to Florence Nightingale, Vincent Quinn and John Priest, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 280.

[34] Woodham-Smith, 280.

[35]Smith, 188.

She became involved in other reform movements, too. Nightingale was definitely a politician. She had a knack for winning moral approval while avoiding controversy. In 1864 England had adopted the first system of state licensed prostitution, but in 1886 it was abolished, largely due to the work of Josephine Butler and Florence Nightingale.[36] This movement was also connected with the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, on which she wrote an anonymous paper, *Notes on the Supposed Protection Afforded Against Venereal Disease, by Recognizing Prostitution and Putting It Under Police Regulation.* She also actively campaigned on other issues such as the Midwifery Act.[37]

Although Nightingale's interests ranged widely, it is important to note the thread that runs through her life's work. Florence Nightingale loved mankind, but had trouble when faced with the reality of individuality. This happened especially with women. Obviously she worked for women as shown by her work with women's issues like prostitution, puerperal fever, and midwifery, but she also worked for state issues and it was to these she devoted the most of her work. She was consistently driven by her spiritual faith and deeply held belief that God was on her side. But Florence Nightingale worked for more than mankind and God. She also worked for her own ambition and self-glorification. Judging from the connotation of the lady of mercy that her name evokes over a century later, it is safe to assume that she was successful.

Nightingale's feminism was of a contorted variety. She did not like women much, nor did she ever concentrate her abundant energies exclusively to a woman's cause. Yet she did, undoubtedly, help the career prospects of women everywhere. She truly believed that women had only to reach out and seize their future--just as she had. Her years of success had evidently dulled the memory of her early years of torment waiting for that parental approval. She lost faith in women when they did not break down the gates of her school, thanking her for her gift of a dignified field. For Nightingale, nursing was a vocation so intrinsically linked with her spirituality that she could not understand why women wanted merely to nurse as a profession--not a vocation.

Nightingale's vast influence on political and social reform, however, cannot be overstated. Her nurses and her leadership led England into a new era of medical practice. Her reforms on sanitation and foreign affairs within the British Empire had far-reaching effects on many

[36] Ibid., 193.

[37] Ibid., 194-195. Nightingale, Ever Yours, 404.

thousands of people, yet she never insisted on taking the credit. Florence Nightingale was a woman driven to succeed, and for her time, she was a huge success. She managed to stay within the public eye without attracting a surfeit of enemies, which was a considerable achievement for a man or a woman. Nightingale's impact on nineteenth century British history was substantial, and a fascinating study of a woman in control behind the scenes.