



# Matrimony and parenthood in the life of Queen Victoria

## Matrymonium i rodzicielstwo w życiu królowej Wiktorii<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Starting a family and caring for your offspring is a task of a paramount importance in the life of every person. This belief is unchangeable since the ages past and was popular also in 19th century, when love was not the most important virtue in marriage and children's mortality rate was maintaining a very substantial number. The person who knew it the best was „the Grandmother of Europe” – Queen Victoria who, together with her husband, prince Albert, fostered nine children, and her descendants to this day reign over some of the thrones of Europe. In this article the mindset of Queen Victoria, in regards to parenthood, will be shown on the basis of journals and her correspondences. Motherhood was a „darker side” of marriage. In that century it was a duty of every woman to fulfill it. High number of pregnancies and problems with properly fostering a family, left a physical and mental mark on Victoria, which is why her view on upbringing may surprise and shock. Relationship of Victoria and Albert was not as harmonious as people thought, because of couple's differences in character. Rashness and short temper of Victoria fought Albert's calmness and mindfulness – that was the picture of their married life for over 20 years. Numerous rows and arguments were a constant element of their life. On the one hand feeling of being intellectually inferior, on the other, low social status, those were the main reasons for disagreements between spouses. During their marriage Albert tried to change Victoria's character. To some extent he succeeded, but the price was his health. The picture of the royal family perceived by their people was different to reality, but warmth and joy of family life, without disagreements and maintaining all moral codes, were supposed to be a trademark of family in Victorian era.

**Keywords:** Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, motherhood, parenthood

**Abstrakt:** Założenie rodziny i wychowanie potomstwa to bardzo ważne zadanie, przed którym stoi każdy człowiek. Taki pogląd jest niezmienny od wieków i był popularny także w XIX stuleciu, kiedy miłość nie zawsze stanowiła najważniejszą wartość w małżeństwie, a śmiertelność wśród dzieci utrzymywała się na bardzo wysokim poziomie. Najlepiej wiedziała o tym „babka Europy” – królowa Wiktoria, która razem ze swoim mężem księciem Albertem doczekała się aż dziewięciorga dzieci, a jej potomkowie do dnia dzisiejszego zasiadają na tronach w Europie. W poniższym artykule na podstawie pamiętników monarchini oraz zachowanej korespondencji zostanie przedstawiony stosunek królowej Wiktorii do kwestii rodzicielstwa. Macierzyństwo dla królowej było „ciemniejszą stroną” małżeństwa. Był to obowiązek, który każda kobieta żyjąca w tych czasach musiała spełnić. Liczne cięższe i problemy wychowawcze odcisnęły na niej emocjonalne oraz fizyczne piętno, dlatego jej pogląd dotyczący wychowania dzieci może dzisiaj zaskakiwać, czy wręcz szokować. Małżeństwo Wiktorii i Alberta nie było wcale tak zgodne, jak wszyscy uważali, ze względu na różnice charakterów. Wybuchowość i porywczosć Wiktorii kontra spokój i opanowanie Alberta – tak wyglądało ich pożycie małżeńskie przez ponad dwadzieścia lat. Liczne sprzeczki i kłótnie były elementem ich codziennego życia. Z jednej strony poczucie niższości intelektualnej, z drugiej poczucie niższości społecznej, to były główne przyczyny kłótni małżonków. Albert przez cały czas starał się dokonać przemiany charakteru Wiktorii. W pewnym stopniu odniósł sukces, jednak wielkim kosztem, ponieważ sam przez to bardzo podupadł na zdrowiu. Obraz rodziny królewskiej, który mieli znać poddani był zupełnie inny niż ten rzeczywisty, ciepło i radość życia rodzinnego, bez kłótni i sprzeczek oraz zachowanie wszelkich zasad moralnych, tak miała wyglądać rodzina w czasach epoki wiktoriańskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** królowa Wiktoria, książę Albert, macierzyństwo, rodzicielstwo

## Introduction

A person entering matrimony is obliged to creating a family and parenthood is the biggest privilege and gift that humanity received. An adult is able to give birth and foster offspring (Kosmala, Krzyszczyk 1996). The process of upbringing is extremely important because it shapes young person and makes them look for model roles in their parents.

Throughout the ages the upbringing model changed. Not only every century but also every age had their own recipe for fostering their offspring. In 19<sup>th</sup> century child mortality rate was very high. Every mother which birthed a child, could not be sure if it would survive its first days. Anxiety related with childbirth and next, with upbringing plagued

<sup>1</sup> Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2022-3-Warown.pdf>

every woman from 19<sup>th</sup> century, even those from higher places in society. Queen Victoria knew it the best as the mother of nine children. It is worth mentioning that her entire offspring survived until maturity, which was a rarity in those times (des Cars, 2014). Queen Victoria, who was called a ‘Grandmother of Europe’, had a very resolute, and even shocking look on maternity. (Misztal, 2010).

In 1837, being only eighteen, Alexandrina Victoria inherited the throne. After years of isolation in Kensington Palace she finally experienced freedom. Throughout her childhood Victoria was under such scrutinous supervision from her mother – duchess of Kent, that none of her subjects really knew her and what to expect from her (Waller, 2017). Their mother-daughter relations was not the best. Duchess of Kent listened to every advice of her advisor John Conroy, who tried to isolate Victoria with every possible method. Queen was known for her stubbornness, did not listen to her mother or her advisor, which caused multiple arguments in the palace. It is unsurprising that her first order was to move her bed from mother’s bedroom, which gave her some long-awaited privacy (Morato, 2018). A few weeks after inheriting the throne, young queen moved to Buckingham Palace. Because of her marital status, she had to take her mother as a chaperone. But still she put her in the rooms farthest from the Queen’s. Duchess of Kent voiced her disapproval of her daughters not finding time to spend with her. In front of the populace, they tried to keep up appearances of warmth but it was well-known that their mother-daughter relations were cold (Waller, 2017).

First months of Victoria’s reign went smoothly. The Queen could enjoy freedom and independence (Warowny, 2019). The problems began in 1839, when Victoria started to show domineering tendencies, and her will power (Greville, 2007). At the beginning of the year, the Queen was involved in two scandals. The first included lady Flora Hastings who was the Duchess of Kent’s lady-in-waiting. The second is called ‘Bedchamber Crisis’. The Queen defended her prime minister from resigning and did not let him leave his duties (Waller, 2017).

## 1. Queen Victoria’s attitude to motherhood

After the events in the court, more people started to say that Queen Victoria is in an appropriate age to marry a suitor. The topic was very controversial. Queen thought of marriage with disdain, because she was afraid of being controlled by her future husband. She preferred to enjoy freedom and independence she already had. What is more, she often expressed her opinion of following Elisabeth I and remain alone (Erickson, 1998).

There was a family agreement that Victoria were to marry her cousin Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. The idea came from her uncle Leopold (des Cars, 2014). Earlier, Victoria and Albert met only once, in spring of 1836. After the meeting, the Queen forgot about her cousin. She kept saying that she was not obliged to marriage with Albert (Escher, 1912). Nevertheless, in autumn of 1839 Albert, together with his brother Ernest, came to London, Victoria’s attitude changed as she saw that Albert changed and looked more handsome. Despite prejudice, he left a very positive impression (Escher, 1912). Only four days later, Victoria decided to marry her cousin. According to court protocol, the Queen had to notify her suitor about marriage plans because Albert as a person of a lower social status could not propose. This duty fallen on Victoria (Babilas, 2012), who wrote about the entire event in her diary: “He came to the Closet where I was alone, and after a few minutes I said to him, that I thought he must be aware why I wished them to come here, and that it would make me too happy if he would consent to what I wished (to marry me). We embraced each other, and he was so kind, so affectionate. I told him I was quite unworthy of him (...) I really felt it was the happiest brightest moment in my life” (Escher, 1912).

The wedding took place on 10 February 1840 in London and grabbed attention of general populace and the press. The scandal with Lady Flora and ‘Bedchamber crisis’ sank into oblivion. Even the outraged voices of the Tories reminding that Albert was German, quieted down. In that moment, only the marriage of current monarch in many years, was of any importance (Bidwell, 2000). Wedding party

took place in Buckingham Palace, then spouses went for “three-day” long honeymoon to Windsor (Misztal, 2010) Victoria, in her diary, admired affectionate words which Albert used after coming to the Castle and also asked God for help in fulfilling her marital obligations (Hibbert, 2000).

Next day, the couple woke up early, which was immediately commented on by malicious observers saying that after such a short wedding night could not bring a successor (Misztal, 2010). The suspicion was baseless as it turned out, because Queen was expecting at the end of March (Bidwell, 2000).

Victoria, after learning of her pregnancy, saddened. Because of her condition, she had to give up her activities like horse riding or dancing until late night. Because of that, she could not find any entertainment and her constant nausea and worsened mood did not improve her already weakened mental state (Erickson, 1998). Pregnancy proceeded without complications. The one exemption was a failed assassination attempt on Queen’s life which only increased her popularity (Greville, 2007).

According to century-old tradition, every birth of a royal child had to proceed in the presence of many ministers and members of secret royal council. Because they were male, Victoria disagreed and when she went into labor, everyone had to leave the room. With her only her husband, doctor and a nurse stayed. (Erickson, 2000).

Queen’s daughter was given to wet nurse immediately after birth because Victoria declined breastfeeding, as it was a tradition in English aristocracy. It is worth mentioning that the Queen herself was breastfed by her mother (Misztal, 2010).

19th century was indeed a period when many social issues changed. Thanks to archived correspondence of the Queen, we now know what drove her to her decisions which also concerned her later children. Her views today could be considered shocking. She claimed for instance that a human has a beautiful and incredible talent of giving life and immortal soul but the role of mother is degraded to an animal. According to her, a breast feeding woman were to feel like a cow (Hibbert, 2000), and maternity would be a “dark side of marriage” (Misztal, 2010).

In a short period of time the Queen was expecting again. The second pregnancy was more troubled than the first and over seventeen hour long delivery heavily strained mother’s health. In November of 1841 long-awaited son was born – Albert Edward, Prince of Wales and later in life King Edward VII who was called Bertie by his family (Strachey, 2022).

After her second pregnancy, Victoria’s health deteriorated and she started suffering from depression which heavily influenced her family life. She mentioned on many occasions that in difficult moments she is grateful to the Providence mostly for her wonderful husband, who was a pillar for her (Hibbert, 2000). In times when no man was concerning himself with pain and suffering of woman during labor, Albert was truly exceptional spouse. He spend a lot of time with his wife during pregnancy and even took her place in some royal duties. Victoria regarded her husband as a role model of every virtue and she criticized men that did not show respect and empathy to women (Misztal, 2010).

Despite determined views on maternity, Victoria knew perfectly well that one of the duties of a woman living in 19th century should be giving birth. As other women knew, the male was responsible for family life. She accepted her role as a mother. She wrote that she was leaving everything to God and if His will is to give her numerous offspring, she would do everything to bring up her children as exemplary and useful for the country (Benson, Esher, 1908).

At first, Victoria and Albert, only when their duties allowed, spent a lot of time with their children. They tried to show the society that despite their obligations and status, they are also parents that play with their children – bobsledding, Christmas dinner, and showing that they are a family with traditions (Misztal, 2010). Albert, as befits a stereotypical father in 19th century, came up with a detailed pedagogical plan for their children. He knew from the beginning that Vicky and Bertie will be very important. Especially Prince of Wales, who one day will be the successor of Victoria. Albert employed governess Lady Lyttelton to take care of the children (Hubbard, 2012). Program written by Albert was effective in case of Vicky, being only two years old, she was a very sensitive and emotional child but

what is more important very intelligent (Wyndham, 1912). The problem was the oldest son who did not show any interest in education (Miształ, 2010). He was very violent and his attitude to siblings was unfriendly and Albert's plan was not effective. Victoria would criticize her oldest son for laziness, and weak character (Erickson, 1998). Bertie would turn out a disappointment for their parents. Carefully selected teachers, strict discipline, complete ban on playing and trying to passing on as much knowledge as possible would make Vicky recipient of more love, than her brother (Marx, 2006).

Parents, trying not to focus on problems from Bertie, decided to focus on other children. Third pregnancy went much smoother than the previous. She was feeling well, did not faint, and what is more in sixth month of pregnancy she was attending new year activities. Being twenty four, Victoria birthed another daughter – Alice (Erickson, 1998) One year later Alfred was born, then Helena and during the Revolutions of 1848 another daughter Louise, then Arthur and Leopold and the last child was Beatrice who was born in 1857. It is worth mentioning that every child lived until adulthood. An average life expectancy in 19th century was 45 years and average of Victoria's children was 75 years (Bidwell, 2000). Reasons for concern was only Leopold who had hemophilia (Waller, 2017).

With one exception of the eldest son, the labor of every Queen's child went without complications. In the times of progressiveness in many subjects, the way of thinking about labor stayed constant and outdated. It was a popular belief that the woman must suffer during childbirth, because it was a punishment for Eve's sin in Eden. When an option for mitigating some pain during labor, the Queen decided to take chloroform (Miształ, 2010). By doing this, she wanted to show that using then modern technology can be beneficial and she encouraged others to follow her example. In contrast on her views on innovativeness, she was also very superstitious, as she wore the same nightgown during every childbirth, making the gown yellowish (Waller, 2017)

Victoria was very interested in her children in the beginning of her motherhood but the interest diminished in time. She was never at ease with

children, the reason probably being the fact that she grew up alone, isolated from her peers. Family happiness was unknown to her and she felt full of life only with Albert (Miształ, 2010). She only saw her children once or twice a day. It does not surprise then, that she did not have a strong connection to them (Hubbard, 2012). Princess Alice ate dinner with her whole family when she was already fourteen (Miształ, 2010). We can say that a role-change occurred. In times when the woman was supposed to take care of upbringing, in royal family, Albert was spending more time with children than with the Queen, which was her grief (Miształ, 2010). It was Albert that cared about royal family's image as a model to others. He tried to make their family life full of love, respect, and devoid of arguments and rows. That was the concept of how the family should look like in Victorian era (Waller, 2017).

Despite the strong-minded and negative view on motherhood, it brought the Queen a lot of popularity. A common image of Victoria was a model mother and wife (Erickson, 1998). Many of her subjects thought that through marriage and parenting, she changed a lot. She became more calm and composed. The people that spend their days with the Queen, not only family but also courtiers and servants had a very different experience (Waller, 2017). Being thirty-eight years old, Victoria had nine children. She fulfilled her duty that was mentioned to her by uncle Leopold – she became a mother of a big family. Motherhood had her attention, but gave her no joy in life (Erickson, 1998).

## 2. Marriage difficulties

Albert, throughout his life was prepared to be wed to Queen Victoria. He was aware that it would not be a care-free undertaking. He knew that there would be difficulties as he was lower in hierarchy than his wife (Strachey, 2022). The problems began right after official marriage proposal. Before the wedding they had to focus on finance and laws of the prince. The Queen tried to force a law that would give Albert a salary of 50 000 pounds. The parliament opposed this notion and gave him only 30 000 mentioning

spitefully that salary is still too high as it was on par with yearly income of duchy of Saxe-Coburg (Waller, 2017).

Another problem was the position of the prince in the court. Albert was expecting recognition and aristocratic title, but the parliament once again vetoed the idea and explained that the prince could interfere in internal dealings of England (Warowny, 2019). In the end Albert was called Prince Consort (Waller, 2017). He was perturbed by the fact that his wife had a crown and is higher in hierarchy, that is why he decided to dominate their relationship (Misztal, 2010). It is worth noting that British society was not happy with choosing a German cousin as husband. For many “hated” House of Hanover was a symbol of a failed monarchy. Victoria tried to improve this image from the beginning but when she agreed to marry a German prince, xenophobic tendencies manifested in society. It is unsurprising that the press was dominated by caricatures and opinions which laughed at Albert and often called him “foreign and a popish intruder” (Bidwell, 2000).

Right after the ceremony, prince consort started home reforms. He wanted his presence to be seen that is why he decided to take care of people having too much influence on the Queen. First to be fired was governess of Victoria – Baroness Lehzen, then following changes in parliament – prime minister Lord Melbourne. Additionally Albert tried to do everything to reconcile the Queen with her mother Duchess of Kent which he managed to do (Morato, 2018).

The biggest challenge of Albert was changing a strong and independent woman to follow his example and change her behavior (Waller, 2017). The prince knew that Victoria was, at times, ruthless woman with explosive temperament. That was why he set a goal of changing her character and strived to make her subservient. At first she tried to resist every method by crying, being in hysterics, and acting offended. Albert stubbornly continued his efforts (Bidwell, 2000). She knew his wife well, so he knew not to talk with her when she was annoyed. He avoided emotional conflicts with Victoria and his way for arguing was writing letters, where he expressed his disapproval for her behavior (Misztal, 2010).

The reason for many rows in their relationship, besides the characters of the spouses, could be complexes. Victoria perceived herself on a lower intellectual level than her husband. She was annoyed that Albert many times avoided explaining complex scientific theories, which she would still not comprehend. The prince on the other hand was aware of his lower social status. He thought that he should hold an office higher, or at least the same as his wife (Misztal, 2010).

When arguments started, Albert often escaped to his work. Research absorbed him and every minute of his life. He loved to give speeches on conferences, meet people of science, read scientific reports. That was why he wanted people to be interested with newest technological achievements and he decided to organize the Great Exhibition in 1851 (Strachey, 2022). Victoria was on the other hand, a complete opposite of her husband as she loved to play cards until late hours of the night or dancing, which was a reason for many conflicts. With those habits, Albert knew how to fight. In short time Victoria became dependent of him to such a degree that instead of asking prime minister Lord Melbourne for every advice, now she was asking Albert. The position of the prince changed, The slow and morose work on Victoria brought desired effect – the wife became fully dependent on her husband (Waller, 2017).

Many admired Albert for his work put into changing and shaping the character of Victoria but it must be noted that the work had its consequences. During their 20 years of marriage, Albert scrupulously fulfilled not only family but also country’s duties. It was common knowledge then that the Great Britain was ruled by a “two-person monarchy”, which was not always unanimous (Bidwell, 2000). A very interesting story about marriage arguments is mentioned by a biographer of the Queen – Lytton Strachey. He wrote that one night an annoyed prince closed himself in a room and irritated Queen Victoria knocked on the door. “Who’s there?” – asked the prince. “Queen of England” answered Victoria. Prince did not do anything. After a while a louder knocking was heard. The same question and answer was exchanged. After a few minutes a softer knocking. Albert once again asked “Who’s there?”. The answer was completely different this time because Victoria said “It’s me Albert, Your wife” and the door immediately opened

(Strachey, 2022, p.146). This scene shows perfectly the situation in their marriage and problems that appeared. Most often a small disagreement would change into full-blown rows. Victoria always had to admit making a mistake and ask husband for forgiveness. Constant fighting had an impact on Albert's health. After twenty years of marriage the prince changed. His posture and character were different. He sometimes was irritating, cold and snippy. He escaped his wife more often, and disappeared in his work which had an impact on his health. Additionally after Vicky left the court he saddened and no other child could fill the void left by his beloved daughter (Erickson, 1998).

In 1861 prince's organism was exhausted, and the face did not resemble it's 20 year predecessor (Strachey, 2022). He was complaining about various ailments, often walked looking sad, dejected and sore. When, at the end of the year, his son's affair came to light Albert decided to act. He took his son for a walk in very cold and windy day to talk. After a few days he showed symptoms of flu and later problems with walking and breathing. Albert died on 14<sup>th</sup> December of 1861 (Miształ, 2010).

Victoria was forty-two on the day of her husband's death. For her, the time stopped. From this moment on she backed off from public life (Marx, 2006). Sadness and grief was only deepened by the anger she felt for her son and successor. She blamed Bertie for Albert's death, despised him. She claimed that the son who inherited the worse traits, took her the one who she truly loved (Erickson, 1998).

Sorrow and grief after Albert's death made Victoria "widow of Windsor" wear black until the end of her own life. For her the marriage was over but the family was still with her and expanding. After the death of Albert she did not forget about her children, she married off four of them. With years passed she was not the most important person in her childrens' lives, most of them had their own families. Victoria tried to interfere in their life but she lacked the authority once possessed by her (Miształ, 2010). Near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century closest family of Victoria had over 70 members and her offspring claimed the thrones of Europe, which is why she gained a moniker of "Grandmother of Europe".

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