

The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" In New England, 1780-1835

Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*.
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The Bonds of Womanhood is a lovely, succinct study which deserves a wide audience. Nancy Cott seeks to understand the Lives of New England middle class women between 1780 and 1835, maintaining that they illuminate the lives of all but Southern women. By 1830 the American Victorian period had begun, preceded by fifty years during which women learned to define their gender identity, their sisterhood; those years followed by solidification of the women's rights movement. In sisterhood, women came to understand the economic and political strictures that bound them, and learned that they might loosen them.

Cott writes from what she calls the "third stage" of women's history; historiographically the book is an important contribution. Women's history first saw women as victims of an ideology which served men, and drew on men's prescriptive writings about women's place. The second, using women's published writings, saw women making use of the ideology of domesticity for their own purposes. Cott, examining the private writings of unknown women, views women's sphere as a subculture that offered women the sisterly support they would need to alter their place. Private feelings became public action.

Five tightly written chapters — Work, Domesticity, Education, Religion, and Sisterhood — explore the meaning of the hundred women's lives who document the period. (Unfortunately, some of the letters antedate and too many follow it.) Work was central. One earns a living, one fills time; but also work "contributes to self-definition and shapes social history" (p. 20). The working women she writes of — and they all worked — are described as middle class. Yet, disappointingly, she offers no precise definition for that term, and often the women's words as well as Cott's suggest class stratification. New England's industrial and commercial economy began to limit the scope of women's work as it moved from home into factory. The home, no longer workshop, became the hearth alone. With the end of cottage industries and given-out work, the household took on the emotional connotations we understand as "home." Married women became "homemakers" while their husbands became alienated workers. The textile industry, which Cott finds so central to the transformation of the New England economy, unwittingly encouraged the home/workplace and work/leisure dichotomies.

The unmarried working woman had more leisure, had a disposable income, had the freedom of distance from home and paternal authority, and had the variety, independence, excitement, and sometimes insecurity of peer associations. Yet all these ended when she became an adult, when she married. The very changes in the marketplace which rendered single women's work varied and mobile reduced the mobility of wives and mothers. ". . . The household diminished in population, kinds of business, and range of contacts" (p. 57). The industrial worker learned to become time-oriented; the woman at home remained task-oriented. Home became woman's sphere. Is it possible that in that sphere people were less alienated from their work, but deeply alienated from social and economic developments of the period? Cott might have explored further the isolation which may have led females to question the thrust of their society and their place in it. Possibly men also learned both to glorify and to denigrate in proportion to their isolation from it those who did not share the marketplace.

And yet female work, especially the work of child care, became strangely more demanding as males worked outside the home. Women were now almost totally responsible for child raising. The burden was doubled and redoubled by the religious ideology of the Second Awakening and by the almost universal acceptance of English psychology which stressed the importance of the early years in character formation. Children's moral standards, and thus the nation's, were female responsibilities. Some women therefore feared to have children, anxiously questioning their capacity to shape the "new souls" to their proper civil and religious roles.

The domestic sphere which was not functionally part of productive society was extolled in prescriptive literature dealing with mothers' responsibilities and women's social role. "The central convention of domesticity was the contrast between the home and the world. Home was . . . where 'disinterested love is ready to sacrifice everything at the altar

of affection'” (p. 64). Morality could reside only in the home. The canon of domesticity “tacitly acknowledged the capacity of modern work to desecrate the human spirit.” As Sara Hale wrote, “Our men are sufficiently money-making. Let us keep our women and children from the contagion as long as possible” (p. 68). The home offered solace for the organization of factory work and the pursuit of wealth; it offered compensatory comfort. Moral women enabled men to pass safely through the cunning, treacherous, competitive marketplace, providing haven-service to *mankind*.

Women in turn were offered romantic fulfillment; some experienced it. Most got a specialized vocation, motherhood. Mothers ministered not only to children, but to angry alienated men as well. Powerless females had power through this arrangement to displace the possible rebellion of frustrated workers. They were given some degree of social control, necessary in a democratic society where money provided the only hierarchic scheme.

Although home, and the women who managed it, were antithetical to commercial values, still the home was in the world and must permit men to live in it. Furthermore, home and women existed not only as abstractions but functionally as one household and one wife. While the canon of domesticity classed women together vocationally Cott understands this to mean structural classification rather than class in a Marxist sense. “Sex, not class, was the basic category,” she writes, arguing that there can be no society without classification (p. 98). The myths of democratic culture rejected all fixed status but sex and race; thus, as white man became increasingly equal in Jacksonian imagery, white women became less so. A problem here: blacks did not enter slavery voluntarily or justify their place in a separate sphere. The sex-race comparison is inadequate, for most women voluntarily accepted their roles.

They were educated to do so by the ideology of domesticity and by school programs designed for them. The same utilitarian educational philosophy designed to serve social needs, not individual aspirations, controlled the education of both sexes. Women would learn to be wives and mothers without threatening the roles reserved to men. The scope of men's lives widened; women's narrowed. Cott places too much emphasis on “Lockean” ideas, for educators objected to “English psychology.” More interesting is her description of contemporary apprehensions that education might make women dissatisfied with their “natural” roles. She beautifully captures the irony of that fear, but fails to see it as part of a larger fear shared by both sexes who saw a familiar society changing at a frightening rate into a structure they no longer recognized. Only home seemed stable. Anxiously, men lived at the mercy of the marketplace. Educators tried to teach women to cope with the vicissitudes of fortune and chance. They must be stabilizers of the rocking houseboat.

Gender identity was intensified by the Protestant crusade of the early nineteenth century. Ministers concluded that woman's nature fitted her to be a Christian, implicitly assuming that the world's values were insufficiently Christian. Since the mid-seventeenth century women had outnumbered men in the congregations. By the early nineteenth century Protestantism had been feminized at all levels but the ministerial. Ministers, the men most alienated from the world and the most feminized of professionals, sought social power and meaning on the backs of women. Their hopes backfired. Women's prayer groups, charitable institutions, missionary societies intensified female peer contact and diverted the passive self-effacing psyches required by domesticity. Christian self-consciousness, ministerial exhortation, and meetings required time and self-examination. Women began looking into their own hearts and found that they were one. They tightened the bonds of sisterhood. Women moved among a welter of evangelical societies. “. . . Associating under the ideological aegis of evangelical Christianity mattered more to them than the specific goals of any one group” (pp. 144-45).

As their spiritual mentors exhorted them to Christian responsibility, female Christians, superior by virtue of their sex, found it necessary to confront the world. Attacking prostitution of women and lust of men through moral reform societies they challenged the presence of women whose activities undermined their own status. Subtly they suggested that lust was the sort of selfish behaviour that characterized all male activities. While women discovered their political power thereby, they continued to know that familial and social order took precedence. To maintain power, women must obey. The ministers who used women — and they were gladly used — to extend their sphere of influence, constrained them too. As Cott observes,

Women's religious associationism cannot be neatly classified either as protofeminist or, on the contrary, as a crypto-conservative phenomenon. It preserved conventional appearances but gave them new direction. Evangelical activity fostered women's emergence as social actors whose roles were based on female responsibilities rather than on human rights. (p. 156)

The formation of a female cohort served women as “a resource and a resort outside of the family” (p. 159). Isolated from the business world, they were cemented to their peers.

Female "feeling," an innate characteristic thought both sexes, could be shared only with other women. In the hierarchy of the world, even language came to evidence sexual difference: Cott brilliantly captures the linguistics of sexual divisions by contrasting men's and women's descriptions of conversion experiences in the Second Awakening with the First.

The religion of the heart created a new secular ideal of female friendship, requiring no subordination of female capacities. Church and school taught women to see their fate as a shared one. Friendship, writes Cott, could cross social and economic barriers. She fails here to exploit the development of the increasingly private person, man or woman, in the Jacksonian commercial world. Peer relationships superseded hierarchical ones as the desired mode; non-hierarchical relations also existed for men, at least rhetorically. Outside of racism, only women's subordination remained as the vestige, albeit the most enduring and best entrenched, of stratification. Women placed increasing value on female friendship.

Among friends they could express a new individuality; there they could break the bonds of family. Whatever the benefits of friendship, it "exaggerated [the] sex-role distinctions [and] may have succeeded in making women uncomfortable with men (and vice versa) . . ." (p. 190). Men could share the "feelings" of women only at peril to their manliness. And yet women must marry, though often without emotional fulfillment. "The best chance to have both worlds was to balance marriage with conscious sisterly relations" (p. 193). "Consciousness of womanhood" emerged. Women became a discrete group, and out of such group consciousness grew the women's rights movement. Cott offers the most exciting and comprehensive analysis to the background of that movement in the historiography. She offers new ways of viewing material that historians are finally coming to perceive as central if we want to understand the lives of men, women, and children.

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