

David W Fletcher, April 2002

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NANCY F. COTT'S *THE BONDS OF WOMANHOOD:*
"WOMAN'S SPHERE" IN NEW ENGLAND, 1780-1835

Nancy Cott's *Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*¹ uses women's personal documents, such as diaries and letters, as well as published works and a host of ministers' sermons to illustrate what she calls the duality of the cult of domesticity that arose during the early 1800s in New England. She limits her reconstruction, or "deconstruction" on the basis of a Foucaultian model, to the social history of middle-class women in New England between 1780 and 1835. She acknowledges the limitations of this type approach, essential but not sufficient to the antebellum development of both the binding and the bonding of women, yet of existential value for moderns in the social consciousness and discourse analysis movements of the 1970s (xv, xvi, 18). Domesticity and the idea of true womanhood worked together to form a type of social ethic whereby women's roles as wives, mothers, and household mistresses proved necessary to "the transmission of culture, the maintenance of social stability, and the pursuit of happiness" (2). With the overthrow of "Victorian" culture and the consequent adaptation to a "Revolutionary" type culture, women acted to shape their own experiences. They were "neither victims of social change—passive receivers of changing definitions of themselves—nor totally mistresses of their destinies" (4). Their progress embraced two apparently contradictory ideas of women's role in society: first, the domestic view which placed women in the home in "sex-

¹1977; 2nd edition, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997, 225 pages, with preface to the 2nd edition, bibliography, index.

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specific” roles; and second, the feminist view which removed “sex-specific” roles to maximize women’s opportunities (5). The takeoff of the industrial revolution, especially in the formulation of societies to address issues of reform, provided the dynamic context for the evolution of the propagation (through mass literature) and practice of the middle-class domesticity that Cott so ably illuminates.

Cott shows the change in women’s work from traditional agrarian roots to its new industrial foundation—a change from domestic chores to household manufacture to the possibilities of work outside the home like school teaching and factory work (i.e., in the growing textile industries). The realities of social change that accompanied industrial growth and the expansion of nonagricultural occupations drove a permanent wedge between “home” and “work.” The task-orientation of women’s sphere or “home” continued mostly unchanged except for increased intensity and responsibility. But the time-orientation of man’s world or “work” (under the forces of industrial capitalism, according to E. P. Thompson’s construct), though important for the role of men as “bread-winner” or “supporter,” could be left in retreat for the domestic sphere that was made a place of happiness and repose by their women.

Cott also surveys five types of literature that promulgated the cult of domesticity in the 1820s and 1830s with its central convention of “contrast between the home and the world” (63-64). Language itself supported the practice of leaving women out of the worlds of business, industry, labor, and politics and their subsequent entrenchment in the domestic sphere. But there were notable exceptions like domestic-type industrial labor and the education of children.

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Women themselves aided this process by glorifying and institutionalizing their roles. In this, they were mostly influenced and helped by Protestant ministers who were anxious to stabilize their denominational support by inoculating the family against moral erosion from massive cultural cross-currents. To do this, they championed women as possessing the greatest of vocations in preserving and redeeming the world through their domestic role. This binding of all women to the home sphere in a “sex-specific” identity ironically bonded them all together in the same class of “womanhood” or “sisterhood”—a sort of solidarity with their sex. And, this gave rise to various expressions of solidarity in religious circles, social reform organizations, and political action groups.

Cott gives particular attention to two areas where women made important gains during the early 1800s—education and religion. But both domains still relegated women to the domestic sphere and subordinated their contributions to the interests of male domination. For example, “the successful rationale for improving women’s minds thus was founded on, not opposed to, women’s domestic occupation and maternal destiny” (125). In the case of evangelicalism, while accorded a certain measure of freedom both within and without the religious communities, women nonetheless remained in “a limited, clerically defined role” and were accorded “pious self-expression, sex-specific duties, and subjection to men” (154, 159). But “by promoting women in activities deemed appropriate for their sex and ‘sphere’ evangelical religion nourished the formation of a female community that served them as both a resource and a resort outside the family. And it endowed women with vital identity and purpose that could be confirmed among

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their peers” (159). The canon of domesticity, as a result, became “the prism through which all expectations of and prescriptions for women were refracted,” and its promulgation through women’s education as well as its alteration by evangelical Christianity’s exaltation of spirit over flesh resulted in the implication of women’s moral superiority that created a proud solidarity among women (189).

By way of context for her work, Cott offers a historiographical analysis of “women’s sphere” and feminism as it looked in the 1970s when she first wrote *Bonds of Womanhood* (see her conclusion, 197-206), and as it now looks in retrospect from the 1990s (see her preface to the second edition, xi-xxviii). In this reviewer’s opinion, Cott clearly demonstrates the duality of the cult of domesticity for middle-class women of New England during the Early Republic and the Jacksonian Era.