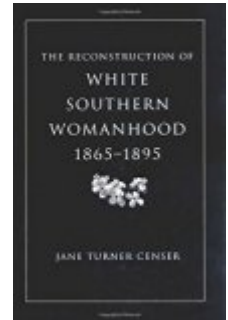


Jane Turner Censer. *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. xv + 280 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2907-4.



Reviewed by Kim Schreck

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Jane Turner Censer's newest book, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895*, focuses on elite white women in the upper South, specifically Craven and New Hanover counties in North Carolina and Fauquier County in Virginia. According to Censer, these women reconfigured what it meant to be a southern belle in the years following the Civil War. An important contribution to the social history of women in the New South, the book is notable both for the questions it seeks to answer and those it raises. It will be of particular interest to readers fascinated by the Civil War's influence on gender roles.

Censer focuses on the most privileged white women in the upper South because "their education and status gave them chances denied to others" (pp. 3-4). She creatively culls from a multitude of rich sources, including land transactions and estate files, personal correspondence, memoirs, diaries, census records, and a plethora of literary monographs written by post-bellum southern women. Drawing on these sources, Censer re-

constructs southern women's history in ways that challenge many aspects of the current literature.

According to Censer, the seemingly ubiquitous icon of the southern belle in fact has a distinct history. "Over time," Censer explains, "both men and women altered their definition of the belle's charm and style as surely as they did their notions of fashion and beauty" (p. 10). The ante-bellum ideal of the belle as modest, slightly coquettish, and ultimately committed to her search for the perfect marriage partner was replaced in the post-bellum years by what Censer terms "an ethic that emphasized 'nondependence' in domestic or other roles." Censer's research reveals that the New South's new women operated under an ideal which celebrated "self-reliance and female capability" (pp. 6-7).

To demarcate the boundaries between "belledom" in the ante-bellum and post-bellum eras, Censer divides her subjects along generational lines: those who were born before 1820; those who were born between 1820 and 1849; and those who were born between 1850 and 1869. This approach, which allows Censer to take into consider-

ation women's age and marital status at the end of the war, enables her to address effectively the debate over the war's significance for women. The older women, according to Censer, were more likely to experience continuity in their lives, whereas the younger two generations altered women's sphere after the war, often challenging the very core of ante-bellum "belledom." In alignment with the argument first set forth by Anne Firor Scott, Censer contends that the Civil War unleashed numerous opportunities for elite white women, expanded their public influence, and led to a redefinition of the demure, dependent southern woman.[1]

Through an examination of women's domestic rituals and private relationships, Censer argues that women not only met new challenges with dignity but demonstrated their aplomb in shaping their worlds amid radically altered conditions. According to Censer, one manifestation of women's ability to redefine themselves and the meaning of southern womanhood was their reconfiguration of domestic space after slavery was abolished. The new free labor system initially left many white women feeling abandoned by their slaves and encumbered by a heavy workload. Censer finds that to ease this new burden of heavy household work, southern women embraced technology and, apparently, reduced the size of their households by having fewer children.

Although she does not use the term "separate spheres," Censer suggests it is possible that some elite southern women were adopting aspects of that ideology, which was popular among women in the North. Whereas northern women used widely held beliefs about women's domestic virtue as an entry point into the public world, married southern women remained focused on the difficult changes in their own domestic lives. Their single sisters, however, more closely resembled northern women in that they channeled cultural beliefs about women's moral rectitude into

economic and political activities outside their homes.

The war's devastation in the South uniquely affected women. In addition to a reduction in the number of marriageable men, other exigencies of war, such as poverty and a new reliance upon women's economic value in the household, suggest that the belle of the post-bellum years was not formed out of an ante-bellum mold but constructed out of an entirely new one. This is argued persuasively by Censer, especially in the book's early chapters that address women's marital choices and other aspects of women's domestic lives.

Insofar as Censer examines women's relationships with their family members in the post-bellum years, she centers her analysis on issues involving property. The expansion of southern women's property rights in the post-bellum years was a manifestation of altered kinship networks. Husbands increasingly entrusted their wives to serve as executors of their estates, and parents increasingly "uncoupled" their daughters' inheritance from the institution of marriage. Post-bellum women were thus able to forestall marriage, to remain single if widowed, and even to reject marriage altogether. Those women who had not yet entered into marriage prior to the war were those most likely to delay marriage after it.

Censer regards women's participation in activities outside of their homes, both paid and voluntary involvement, as responsible for the most profound changes in their lives. In the latter chapters of her book, Censer examines women's teaching and writing careers as evidence of their ability to expand their public influence without threatening gender roles. Women earned wages and thereby became more economically independent, increasingly sought and earned college educations, and grew ever more comfortable in their roles as co-remodelers of the war-torn South.

It is always delightful, as well as inspiring, to read a book that generates new questions even as

it clarifies others. *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* raises a number of important questions to be addressed by future historians. Perhaps foremost among them relates to the degree to which the lives of white women of the New South paralleled those of their northern counterparts. Can and should the "separate spheres" paradigm accurately be applied in the South, and did it offer southern women a similar basis upon which to expand their domestic roles into public contexts?

Another question, which transcends the literature on southern women's history to include all of women's history, relates to historians' propensity to locate women's greatest accomplishments in the public domain. While it is important to recognize the degree to which post-war women's options were expanded over those of their ante-bellum forebears, particularly in their ability to avoid the economic and social dependence that had long accompanied marriage, it is perhaps problematic to separate public and private in the same manner we might separate change and continuity. Because marriage and motherhood (even if delayed) remained the life course for most women, does it not behoove historians to place greater emphasis on the private, rather than public, lives of women when attempting to locate women's most salient forms of agency?

Moreover, when discussing women who have expanded their influence, either in public or private, have we too long focused our attention on the subject of women's lives outside of their relationships with the men in their lives, regarding those relationships more as oppositional rather than relational? Should more emphasis be placed upon how men interact with and respond to the women with whom they share their lives?

Related to the previous discussion is another most intriguing question: Could there possibly be a strong correlation between shifting gender roles among elite white women and men and the increasingly virulent racial climate at the turn of

the twentieth century? Censer argues that by the 1890s white women writers had succumbed to the myth of the black male beast and acquiesced in a cult of patriarchy that became white men's justification for elevated hostility towards black men. Was the hyperexpansion of white male authority at the dawn of the new century more a reflection of relations between white women and men than it was a reflection of relations between white and black men or between white women and black men?

Can the so-called "race problem" be fully understood without a consideration of shifting gender relations, and not merely those that threatened to redefine manliness across racial lines, but also those that threatened to redefine manliness within the confines of white families, communities, and individual homes? Did white men turn the biggest threat to their manliness—their own women—into victims, and did those women acquiesce because their men's justification made the public world seem a more daunting and dangerous place, to the utter detriment of black men?

Jane Censer's *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* will be a touchstone for work on gender in the post-Civil War South for years to come.

[1]. Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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