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Ruth H. Bloch. *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. x + 225 pp. (e-book), ISBN 978-0-585-46778-8; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23405-5; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23406-2.

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Morality and the American Woman: From Puritan Goodwives to Republican Mothers

Until recently, scholars have, for the most part, ignored women's role in the formation of the United States; women's voices have been absent from historical records and history textbooks. Elisabeth Anthony Dexter's pioneering work on women during the early American period, *Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions in America before1776*, published in 1924, set to make women's contribution to American history visible (a task continued with the publication of her subsequent work, *Career Women of America, 1776-1840* [1950]). Dexter claimed that when it came to professional occupations, colonial women had been significantly better-off than their twentieth-century counterparts. When it was first published, Dexter's book was celebrated as "an important and scholarly contribution to American social history" in dispelling prevailing ideas about colonial women.[1] Dexter's vision of colonial women's active involvement in business led many to believe in a golden age theory of American women's situation that lasted until the early 1970s. In contrast, Mary Beth Norton, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Marilyn Westerkamp, and Ruth H. Bloch, among others, have confirmed that the situation for colonial women was not as favorable as Dexter and her followers claimed.[2]

Bloch's research and writing has been particularly valuable in redefining and exploring women's role in the colonial period. The product of several decades' work, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* dispels the myth of the American past as a golden age. Bloch challenges the pervasive mental image of traditional families characterized by "enduring marriages, parental authority, youthful obedience, paternal financial responsibility, and maternal childcare" (p. 1). Marriage, rather than being a stable institution, at least in its legal aspect, proved to be an ongoing construction that was redefined as seventeenth-century legislation gave way to eighteenth-century civil lawsuits.

In this collection, Bloch has compiled many of her essays, which first appeared in print from 1978 to 1994, with the exception of two previously unpublished writings. The prefaces to each chapter summarize the critical reaction to each piece since their first publication date, setting them in their context; they also explain the changes and developments undergone since then, both in academia and the author's own thought given that some of the essays in the collection overemphasize the materialistic perspective Bloch now counteracts. Distancing herself from others who see materialism as the root of these changes in gender roles, Bloch argues that overemphasizing materialism in the construction of gender misses the human aspect of gender roles.

Though America's pre-republican age is often characterized as a monolithic block under the useful yet sometimes misleading term "colonial period," Bloch shows how the eighteenth century was far from monolithic and stresses its importance in the construction of gender. She identifies the eighteenth century as the moment when the concept of what we now regard as traditional gender and family relations was first formulated, when "the feminine ideals of practical helpmeet and aristocratic refinement both gave way to the idealization of moral manhood" (p. 4). Although these ideas did not appear out of the blue suddenly in this period but had been in the making for a while, she contends that "if the Revolution did not initiate the revised constructions of gender that emerged in the eighteenth century, it at least accelerated their development and imbued them with lasting ideological significance" (p. 6).

In her analysis of the colonial and revolutionary roots of the ideals of traditional families and selfless motherhood, Bloch highlights that gender and the values and

sets of ideas that determine our conceptions of gender are not arbitrary. Rather, the concepts of gender and morality are closely intertwined, the former reflecting larger social views on moral propriety. Not only the construction of gender but also the activities most closely associated with women, family, and childrearing and mothering, regarded as women's "natural" job, reflect society's moral values at a given time. These changes in moral values were, in turn, mirrored in changes in eighteenth-century political conceptions. All in all, through the colonial and revolutionary periods, long-standing and pervasive notions about gender in the United States were forged at the same time that "morality–both in the narrow sense of sexual norms and in the largest sense of obligations to others–was significantly defined along gender lines" (p. 11).

Chapter 1, "A Culturalist Critique of Trends in Feminist Theory," contends that "changes in gender relations need to be understood in relation to the historical evolution of larger cultural constellations of symbols, values, and ideas (including religion, literature, moral philosophy, and politics)" (p. 21). By reviewing other feminist theories, Bloch analyzes the role of culture in gender constructions, often overlooked in favor of greater emphasis on materialism in the construction of gender. The rejection of the biological perspective as the decisive factor in the construction of gender involved a materialist approach, but materialism turned out to be as reductive as the biological explanation. Bloch complains that the role of culture, that "gender is both an aspect and a product of wider cultural system," has been ignored; even the transition from the discourse of women's inequality to women's difference has made no change in this perspective (p. 27). In Bloch's views, both Marxists and feminists have overemphasized materialism, thus failing to acknowledge the fundamental role of culture. She makes the case for the study of culture by pointing out how other theories fail to incorporate it into their discourse, suggesting instead a culturalist approach to the construction of gender.

The following chapter, "Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles: A Survey of Four Centuries of Change," reflects Bloch's previous emphasis on material forces before she developed her current culturalist perspective. This essay offers a wider outlook by providing an overview of Protestant English and American middle classes from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, thus putting American society into a larger context. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the paterfamilias, modeled after the Old Testament patriarchs, gained importance and strength, resulting in a patriarchal society where fathers controlled all aspects of family life, ruling over wife, children, and servants. This vindication of biblical male models was paralleled by the erasure of positive feminine role models given that Protestantism rejected the worship of the Virgin Mary along with (female) saints. All in all, Protestant women were left without models of saintly female behavior to which they could look up. The institution of a patriarchal system was especially true of New England, whereas in other British colonies, particularly in Virginia, an unbalanced sex ratio and a high mortality rate prevented a patriarchal hierarchy to succeed. At the same time that the political scene came to be exclusively reserved for men, "women increasingly gained ascendancy in the sacred, moral, and emotional spheres of life: religious benevolence, sentimental fiction, and the family" (p. 49). The increase in women's participation in church affairs (as evidenced by their growing membership, in some churches even outnumbering men) translated into women's role as transmitters of moral and religious values. Church involvement was a way through which women could intervene in the public sphere.

Chapter 3, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," points to Bloch's ideas at the time (1978) when she "still viewed early industrialism as a pivotal factor in producing a newly idealized image of motherhood." The turn of the century saw "the transition from Puritanism to an uneasy combination of evangelical Protestant and Enlightenment thought" (p. 57). Women were primarily defined as mothers, their role idealized as the transmitters of religious and moral values. This new role was in marked contrast with Puritan ideas that women were just their husbands' helpmeets (a conception that was replaced during the course of the eighteenth century by the idea that women were ornaments) and parenthood was mainly a fatherly affair. Parallel to women's loss of importance in economic matters, the late eighteenth century saw the rise of the role of the moral mother, both to her actual children and her metaphorical children in her position as teacher, charity worker, or sentimental writer. *Pamela* (1740) by Samuel Richardson, a popular reading on both sides of the Atlantic, was the literary embodiment of this new conception of motherhood. Mothers were to fulfill a most important and permanent presence in the education and rearing of their children. Wet nurses and servants were considered not to be adequate for proper rearing of children, and mothers were to be the ones to nurture and educate their offspring. Not only servants lost their functions in teaching children to mothers

but fathers also lost their functions and importance.

In the previously unpublished fourth chapter, "Women and the Law of Courtship in Eighteenth-Century America," Bloch analyzes the multiplicity of lawsuits during the eighteenth century in regard to such a seemingly private matter as courtship. By the eighteenth century, the parental consent requirement prior to marriage was taken less seriously, resulting in more common law marriages and more permissiveness. Eighteenth-century Americans had no qualms in filing lawsuits when they thought betrothals or engagements had been unlawfully broken. Although in England lawsuits concerning breach of promise or seduction were filed by the nobility, in New England common people used them to protect their reputation, not their property. Lawsuits and judicial sentences reflected an evolution in the understanding of women's morality. The new laws of courtship that were passed in the period reflected ongoing changes of "sexual morality and assumptions about gender differences" (p. 79). If in the seventeenth century women were considered as more likely to sin than men, in the eighteenth century women were thought of as inherently innocent; it was men's duty to prove women's guilt in court. Thus, precedents of Victorian views of women and morality can be found in eighteenth-century colonial America.

Bloch examines Jonathan Edwards's and Benjamin Franklin's views on women in a moment when ideas about women and love between the spouses were being redefined, in her fifth chapter, "Women, Love, and Virtue in the Thought of Edwards and Franklin." For Edwards, love of human beings was selfish and love of God was selfless, but he changed his views from considering love between spouses as similar to Christ's love for his spouse, the church, to selfish. For Franklin, seeing one's happiness meant seeking the moral good for others in society, and he maintained that marriage could either bring or prevent both personal happiness and a beneficial social life since wives could help men rise in society or prevent their rise. Edwards's and Franklin's differing and ambiguous views reflect their relations with women (especially with their own wives) and the transition from Puritanism to Enlightenment. The use of Edwards and Franklin makes for an interesting case study because it provides two specific examples of the ongoing developments of ideas about women's role in society explained in the rest of the essays in this collection.

Chapter 6, "Religion, Literary Sentimentalism, and Popular Revolutionary Ideology," explores how public life was heavily influenced by religious and familial values as evidenced by sermons, domestic advice books, and fictional works (both novels and periodicals). This fiction and didactic literature were imbued by revolutionary ideas, such as protagonists being forced into arranged marriages or separated from their lovers by cruel father figures. Even though ministers often attacked the pernicious effects of novels, sermons shared many concerns with eighteenth-century sentimental novels in their common stress of women's moralizing influence on men. In turn, to appeal to common people, revolutionary discourse was also filled with biblical and familial images. Political concepts, such as communitarianism and individualism, taken from classical republicanism and liberalism, respectively, also made their way into fictional works. These seemingly opposite concepts came together in a celebration of individualism within the greater good for society. Therefore, sermons, literature, and revolutionary thought transmitted the same concepts, which were reinforced by their use in different discourses, reaching most (if not all) of the population.

Bloch examines the evolution of the notion of virtue in terms of gender during the revolutionary period in the following chapter, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America." Contrary to later (or even current) ideas of virtue as a feminine characteristic, during the American Revolution, virtue did not mean female chastity but male public spirit. Virtue was always a gendered concept in the American Revolutionary period, evolving from male connotations to female ones. The term "virtue" is derived from the Latin "virtus," the root "vir" meaning "man," and it was supposed to be a characteristic only men could attain; only exceptionally could some extraordinary women aspire to virtue, such as virgins abused by British soldiers or the mothers of sons fighting for the Revolutionary cause. Virtue proved to be a key concept because it was shared by both classical republican thought and Protestantism, thus bridging the gap between Puritanism and Enlightenment. Different from this idea of virtue as (male) public service, progressively virtue came to be interpreted in religious terms (closely connected with grace), as understood by John Locke and the Scottish moral philosophers or as portrayed by literary sentimentalism (that is, as a female trait). Together, these three ideological positions allowed for virtue to be accessible for women. The idea that republican citizens should be virtuous did not disappear despite the change in the gendered conception of virtue, but it changed in that women were made responsible for it.

A strong point of the book is that, in her use of culture, Bloch incorporates popular culture and shows

that it shared similar concerns and issues as the political sphere. Stories illustrating the courtship and seduction of naïve young women were not exclusively intended as a warning for young women but also helped transmit such revolutionary values as antiauthoritarianism, purity, and self-sacrifice. Just like the virtue of heroines was invoked in novels, so was citizens' virtue to encourage people to join the revolutionary cause. All in all, Bloch's book is a compelling read, compulsory for all of those interested in women's situation before the nineteenth century. As an instructor of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American literature at an undergraduate level, I found this book a welcome addition to the study of women. Emphasizing the transition from Puritanism to the Age of Reason, often viewed as separate, somehow unconnected spheres, Bloch's use of literary works, religious texts, and popular culture, and her exploration of the interconnectedness of these spheres is a much needed reassessment of women's role in the colonial period. A compilation of Bloch's work on the topic was most necessary.

Notes

[1]. Willoughby Cyrus Waterman, "Colonial Women in Business and the Professions," review of *Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions in America before1776,* by Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, *Journal of Social Forces* 2, no. 5 (1924): 728-729.

[2]. Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American History Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 593-661.

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