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Lisa J. Shaver. *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. 184 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-6169-7.

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Voicing Concern: Silence Says Something

Lisa Shaver examines and reveals rhetorical spaces (church publications) and voices (women's) that have been overlooked. She focuses her analysis on mentions of women in antebellum Methodist periodicals. Past research has examined women as religious activists or offered a historical look at presses led by women, yet overlooked the subtle influence of the everyday woman's involvement. The chapters in Shaver's book outline how women's work at the church and allusions to women in Methodist publications both supported and circumscribed women's roles. Along the way, Shaver problematizes many assumptions about women's voices in public and private spheres. Her focus on the church allows an entry point into this examination.

Shaver explains the unique nature of the church as a spaceneither fully private nor fully public, unlike many other spaces. The blurring of these boundaries removed certain limitations to the range of acceptable activities for women. The church recognized that women's influence extended beyond the home, especially when it came to their power to convert and offer salvation to their husbands and children. Shaver emphasizes that no one doubted women's value in society, but that value was only viewed as being valuable in certain settings, such as the church.

As she explores references to women in the Methodist publications she, perhaps unintentionally, reveals the limiting nature of the commentary. The most common mentions were those illustrating deathbed settings, often used as a way to exemplify pious women. Also, most of the content for the publications came from women's memoirs. Given that the conventions of memoir writing often attempt to present the subject as an iconic figure, this limited how women were represented. The content about women was also literally limited in space, when it was placed in a ladies' section. This meant that the readers of the content were probably only women. Although women were given a place to make their voices heard, they would only be heard by part of the population. According to Shaver, much of the content in these sections of the publication "subtly, yet repeatedly advised women to detect their husband's needs" (p. 64).

Regardless of what was communicated, by presenting these women's voices, Shaver provides a more accurate idea of women's influence at this point in antebellum history. She uses Beth Daniell's term "little narratives" to describe how she wanted to uncover and share these "brief everyday descriptions of women's activities on pages of church periodicals" (p. 9).

Simultaneously, Shaver continually explores the negotiation about whether domestic ideology (that is, assumptions positing women's place is in the home) was or was not confining. Some scholars, such as Betty Friedan and Barbara Welter, see the ideology as being oppressive, while others claim that it is limiting, yet empowering within that domestic setting.[1] It's a question that she engages but doesn't answer for the reader, offering us the opportunity challenge our own assumptions about the concepts.

Shaver isn't the first to problematize the idea of the women's private sphere, and likely won't be the last, but she does it deftly and in a way that allows a reader to ask his or her own questions. For example, did allowing women a voice in the church make it seem more acceptable to silence them in larger, potentially more influential, public spheres? Perhaps the relative freedom in a semi-public setting allowed women to accept the limitations they faced in other realms of society.

Note

[1]. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963); and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174.

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