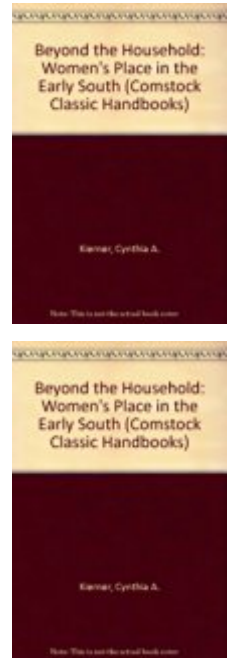


Cynthia A. Kierner. *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835.* Ithaca, N.Y and London: Cornell University Press, 1998. xi + 295 pp

Cynthia A. Kierner. *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835.* Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1998. xii + 295 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-8462-9.



Reviewed by Joan Marie Johnson

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Cynthia Kierner's *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835*, contributes to recent work rethinking the separation of spheres in the antebellum South, notably by historians such as Elizabeth Varon.[1] In this well-written and researched account, Kierner focuses primarily on elite white Southern women and how their interactions with the public sphere changed over time. Kierner used diaries, letters, newspapers and other published writings to explore the experiences of women in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina from 1700-1835 to determine whether there was a decline in women's participation in the public sphere from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.

Like other feminist scholars, Kierner finds that Jurgen Habermas' vision of the public sphere privileges male citizens. Therefore, she "define[s] the public sphere as the site of actual or figurative exchanges on extradomestic ideas or issues and envision[s] the affairs of the public sphere as embracing not only formal participation but also informal civic and sociable life, the world of letters, certain business and market transactions, and religious and benevolent activities." (p.2) This broad definition allows Kierner to argue that women were involved in the public sphere from 1700 to 1835, in a variety of roles ranging from genteel hostesses to Revolutionary boycotters to benevolent churchwomen. She contends that these roles,

although based on assumptions of women's domesticity, did not limit women to their domicile.

The first two chapters focus on the pre-Revolutionary period, and are the most creative and persuasive in the book. Here, while she acknowledges the expanding ability of non-elite women to work for wages outside the home, Kierner argues that a growing emphasis on gentility allowed elite white women a public role because of their innate virtue, piety, chastity, and sensibility. Kierner therefore locates the celebration of this feminine ideal in the mid-1700s, rather than the early 1800s, decades before other historians. She examines the rise of a genteel elite culture which established itself in balls, banquets, and teas, all with women present. Women contributed to an aura of gentility through their fine fashions, dancing, and hostessing of elegant dining affairs as these rituals replaced a male-centered culture of drinking, gambling, and other vices. Kierner concludes that this role for women was perhaps most beneficial in increasing opportunities for education, which included dancing, music, and other ornamental subjects, as well as academics designed to improve their companionship with men. At the same time, she does a wonderful job intertwining gender analysis with class formation.

The Revolution, however, promoted a more democratic social ethos, effectively eliminating elite women's access to the public sphere through genteel culture. While women could no longer signify gentility through their wearing of the finest silk fashions, they could, and did, wear homespun dresses to represent their patriotism. Thus access to the public sphere became more political during the war, as women showed their support for the cause in a variety of ways. Primarily, however, the writers who Kierner examines emphasized that women needed to support men's attempts to preserve liberty; in other words, distinctions between men's and women's political roles remained firm.

While after the war women retained a public presence, notably through petitions filed, Kierner contends that men embraced a specifically masculine ideal of the citizen-soldier which excluded women, and that their hostility to politically-minded women only grew during the French Revolution. Thus, male writers appealed to the patriarchal family to establish order. Here, Kierner shows that the Southern press did not embrace the Republican Mother, whose political and patriotic duty was to educate her sons to be moral and virtuous citizens. They instead focused on her domestic role, portrayed women as politically apathetic and frivolous, and in fact, ridiculed women who were perceived as too political. This is an interesting comparison between North and South, and the study overall could have been improved with a stronger regional comparison. In fact, although she notes that the South was more rural, less industrial, and more influenced by evangelical religion, Kierner seems to minimize differences between North and South until the early nineteenth century. This leaves questions concerning eighteenth century Northern women and their participation in the making of a genteel culture, as well as why the Republican Mother model did not hold up in the 1790s South. A stronger attention to slavery and the effect of race relations on gender formation may have helped.

Beginning in the 1800s, Southern men and women began to stress a stricter separation of the spheres, confining women to the domestic sphere. Despite this, Kierner maintains that women continued to access the public sphere -- now through religious-based benevolent work. Thus she concludes that despite prevailing ideas of women's domesticity, virtue, and the separation of spheres, women continuously found ways to enter the public sphere, even as these ways changed dramatically from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. A fundamental difference between her work and that of Elizabeth Varon is that Kierner focuses on the "public" sphere, while Varon argues that women not only entered public, but

they also entered political, even partisan discourse through the 1800s in Virginia, including the anti-slavery debates. Kierner's inclusion of "extradomestic" discourse may locate women in public, but it does not challenge the separation of spheres as fundamentally as women's political and economic presence does.

Women's historians have been critiquing and expanding the idea of separate spheres, as well as sisterhood, particularly because of their basis on the experience of white middle class and elite women. Those who study women of color and working class women have clearly demonstrated that these norms often did not apply to their subjects. Kierner however, asks us to reconsider the applicability of separate spheres even for those white elite women. As flawed and unreal as this prescription for women's roles was, its continuing hold on historians perhaps indicates its ability to engage Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries even as it was being stretched, negotiated, and sometimes ignored. Kierner makes an important contribution to the debate, and *Beyond the Household* should be read by historians of women's and Southern history as well those interested in class formation in the colonial and early national periods.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

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