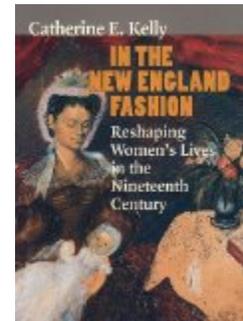


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catherine E. Kelly. *In The New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. 258 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3076-3.

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## Rethinking the Rural Transition to Capitalism

### Rethinking the Rural Transition to Capitalism

Given the enormous attention that bourgeois domesticity in the nineteenth-century northeast has received among both women's and social historians in the last quarter century, it may be hard to imagine that there is anything left to be said on the subject. Catherine Kelly's *In The New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* suggests that there is. Examining domesticity in the context of the erosion of the household economy and the capitalist transformation of the countryside, Kelly invokes narratives of gender, culture, and class, to trace the emergence of a provincial middle class in western New England. Decentering traditional historical understanding on all of these fronts, Kelly's analysis helps us to better understand the transition to capitalism as it was experienced in the towns and villages of New England, with special attention to the communities in Massachusetts and Vermont's Connecticut River Valley.

The book is in large part driven by a series of dichotomies—city and country, men and women, strangers and friends, production and consumption, market society and household economy, change and continuity—which the author alternately offers, accepts, and dissects. Having surveyed developments in family life; the household economy; love and marriage; public and private sociability; and the consumption of fashion from the end of the eighteenth century to the eve of the Civil War, Kelly finds the greatest change occurring be-

tween the 1820s and the 1840s, as the household economy gave way to local, regional and national pressures. In each case, provincial women sought to reconcile the old with the new. In the end, their efforts “initially worked to resist, then to complicate, and finally to mask the encroachments of a market society” (p. 11). By 1840, the “traditional” household economy existed more in memory than in practice. As men and women struggled to bring traditional values into concert with new roles and interests, familiar personal and community rituals became uncertain sites of conflict. In the end, the provincial middle class smoothed capitalism's path by reconstructing itself in a familiar opposition to it; the desire for independence from market forces present in the household economy was recast in the antebellum period as the notion of the home as refuge. This “convergence,” as Kelly terms it, proved crucial, allowing New England's provincial middle class to appropriate for themselves traditional virtues associated with an imagined yeoman past, and in so doing to position themselves apart from both their urban counterparts and their less fortunate rural neighbors.

In offering this analysis, Kelly hopes to contribute to a growing synthesis of the arguments advanced by “market” and “social” historians over the past two decades. If historians now in large part agree that the northern countryside cultivated commercial impulses cautiously at best, reshaping relations within rural communities only gradually, far more energy has been devoted to understanding the ways in which those changes were experienced by men and women of the working classes. The

formation of the rural middle class has not garnered close attention, Kelly suggests, in part because it confounds dichotomies—like class-based neighborhoods and “separate spheres”—associated with their urban counterparts. In order to understand the complex ways in which shifting constructions of gender, class and culture both reflected and facilitated the rural transition to capitalism, Kelly suggests one must take a more holistic view. By grounding her study in the many worlds of provincial New Englanders, Kelly aims to show how “the transformation of the countryside was not simply an economic or social process but a cultural and intellectual one as well” (p. 16).

That assertion reflects a subtler agenda in Kelly’s work, which seeks to blur traditional distinctions between social history, cultural history and intellectual history. Kelly hopes to harness her sources—diaries and letters, commonplace and friendship books, and the other typical stuff of social history—in order to “offer an intellectual history of people who were not intellectuals in any canonical sense” (p. 7). She wants to “appropriate” the term “for historical subjects who are typically excluded from the ranks of thinkers” (p. 6). Kelly’s desire to define these women’s writings solidly within the intellectual history of the age is refreshing, further undermining artificial taxonomies that too often operate to exclude women. In a text firmly grounded in the social contexts and material realities of women’s lives, Kelly considers both “provincial women’s lives and the stories they told about their lives.” In doing so, she tracks the patterns of ideas, perceptions, conventions and beliefs that comprised the thought of the age, shedding light on the particular intellectual challenges antebellum northerners confronted as they struggled to define themselves amid new social, economic and cultural contexts.

For specialists in New England’s history in the first half of the nineteenth century, Kelly’s book, which is loaded with rich detail about men and women living small town lives in the decades before the Civil War (as well as leads to a wide variety of sources whose potential has too long gone untapped), will in some ways simply be a 250-page treat, like going to a party and meeting a whole group of people you hadn’t known before, but with whom you immediately find so much in common. The book should certainly be considered carefully by specialists concerned with capitalism’s career in the rural United States, the formation of the middle class, and Anglo-American gender relations in the first half of the nineteenth century.

But the book will be of interest to generalists as well. An outgrowth of Kelly’s 1992 doctoral dissertation, it offers a sweeping synthesis of the relevant historical literatures of the past three decades. That fact, coupled with a pleasing writing style that strikes a nice balance between anecdote and analysis, make it an especially useful text for historians who are not specialists in the fields addressed. The text should also be accessible to undergraduates in upper-level seminars in U.S. women’s history and in antebellum U.S. history more generally.

In other words, historians of domesticity, gender relations, class formation, and the rural transition to capitalism should brace their groaning bookshelves and make way for one more volume; *In the New England Fashion* is a valuable addition to our understanding of all of those subjects, and to the larger study of social, economic and cultural change in the first half of the nineteenth century.

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