

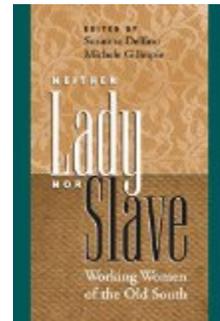
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susanna Delfino, Michele Gillespie, eds. *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. viii + 324 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5410-5; \$65.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2735-2.

Reviewed by Kathleen Blain Roberts (Department of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Published on H-SAWH (March, 2003)



Beyond the Plantation Household

Beyond the Plantation Household

Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie have assembled an exciting collection of essays designed to bolster a truth that has yet to transform the way we look at the antebellum South: many southern women who lived before the Civil War were neither plantation mistresses nor bondswomen. These free, and often poor, working women toiled at a number of tasks in a variety of settings throughout the South. Yet the editors and contributing authors are not simply engaged in an act of historical recovery. On the contrary, as Delfino and Gillespie argue in their introduction, the experiences of working women in the Old South demonstrate that the market revolution and its attendant entrepreneurial spirit were flourishing south of the Mason-Dixon line even before the Civil War. Along with the wage work of southern men, that of southern women was “the key to capitalist transformation” in the antebellum South, a transformation that historians have ignored for too many years (p. 5).[1]

Of course, the coming of the market economy to the South and women’s participation in it, regardless of whether that participation was the product of choice or necessity, inevitably collided with racial, gender, and class norms that supported the southern patriarchy. The tensions that resulted constitute the second focus of these essays. Indeed, implicit throughout this collection is the idea that historians’ myopic interest in the planta-

tion mistress and the slave woman owes much to the nineteenth-century fear caused by the clash of mores between the patriarchy and working women. The threat posed by women working in places and at jobs deemed inappropriate by the antebellum social order required a region-wide denial that women did certain kinds of labor. Thus, as the contributors convincingly demonstrate, one of the main reasons historians have failed to appreciate fully the market revolution in the antebellum South is that contemporaries did such a good job of burying the evidence related to women’s work. A second set of obstacles has stemmed from ideas engendered by the market revolution itself, including the belief that antebellum women operated in a separate sphere of domesticity and the understanding that unpaid labor performed inside the home did not qualify as “work.”

Delfino and Gillespie divide the essay collection into four parts. The first section centers around rural women and how the coming of the market economy shaped the contours of their lives. James Taylor Carson and Sarah H. Hill argue that new forms of economic activity accompanying European contact affected, but did not radically alter, the experiences of native women in the years before removal. Native women managed to hold on to their property rights while engaging in market activity, for example, and never allowed “alien ideas like price and profit” to transform the organization of their culture and thus eliminate their power, according to Carson (p. 18). By examining the trade baskets that Chero-

kee women wove, Hill finds that these women similarly managed to negotiate the uncertain terrain of European contact without abandoning their cultural identity. The baskets Cherokee women made for trade, the designs of which show a blend of native and European traditions, highlight a moment “when the past and present interwove,” or the degree to which native women adapted to the realities of new trading environments (p. 44).

Yeoman women were also actively engaged in the market. Indeed, Stephanie McCurry argues, the independence of the yeoman household in low-country South Carolina hinged on the labor of women. Farm women produced much of what their families needed to survive and, because of their “ability to turn household production to market exchange,” traded for much of the rest (p. 59). No yeoman household existed outside of the market, a truth proven perhaps most poignantly by the fact that yeoman women, contrary to what most white southerners said publicly, did do field work alongside their husbands in their continual efforts to stave off indebtedness and remain independent. The slave South could admit no class differences among white women if its foundations were to remain secure, and so a “collusive silence ... rendered yeoman women’s field labor all but invisible” (p. 62).

The second set of essays looks at wage-earning women in the urban South, examining the factors that determined a woman’s particular employment opportunities. If yeoman women actively produced goods for exchange, women living in cities found their lives touched by the market as well. As historians have documented, the market revolution engendered a new ideology of domesticity that exalted a mother’s unique role as nurturer of children.[2] In her study of children’s nurses in border cities, Stephanie Cole finds that this new emphasis in prescriptive literature ultimately changed not only the attitudes of wealthy white women but also the employment prospects of white and black working women. Whereas before 1850 white families primarily hired slave nurses for their children, after accepting the ideology of domesticity white matrons preferred older, white nurses because they “more closely replicated the role of the children’s own mother” (p. 89).

In his essay on antebellum Savannah, Timothy J. Lockley also invokes the concept of a woman’s “sphere” but argues that historians’ strict equation of this sphere with domesticity is too narrow. Lockley suggests that the idea of a sphere is useful only if we expand it to include women’s work, paid or unpaid, “because it dominated

the normal day-to-day existence for so many women” (p. 103). In Savannah, work was the reality for the vast majority of white and black women, all of whom found their job prospects determined by dynamics largely beyond their control. Race, most obviously, influenced the employment a woman might find, but so did such characteristics as age, nativity, and social status. White women were excluded from trading in the local city market, just as black women could not hope to teach. Older women of both races who had children found seamstressing attractive because they could combine work with child care. Barbara J. Howe turns her attention further north to the white working women in the urban areas of West(ern) Virginia, most of whom toiled in the textile industry. Arguing against historians’ tendency to define urban economies in terms of men’s labor, Howe finds women in all facets of the textile industry, from spinning to seamstressing to dressmaking. Faring better than those who faced unhealthy conditions in factories, some women even managed to own their own dressmaking shops, despite legal obstacles and limited access to credit.

The third section of the collection examines women who were “unacknowledged professionals,” focusing on three lines of work that were open to women in the antebellum South. Two of these, at least, were viable options for women long before the market revolution: prostitution and convent life. E. Susan Barber argues that earlier historians, beholden to cultural narratives that denied interracial sex and exalted the sexual purity of white women, largely ignored the evidence of sexual commerce in the antebellum South. As she reveals in her exhaustive analysis of census records from Richmond, prostitution thrived in the city and could be particularly lucrative for women who owned brothels. The presence of so many soldiers during the Civil War bolstered an already strong industry and, ultimately, with the arrival of Union troops in 1865, increased opportunities for interracial sex in the city’s brothels. While teaching may have provided a more respectable employment alternative, regional ideology nevertheless dictated that white southern women have a compelling reason for stepping down from the proverbial pedestal, according to Emily Bingham and Penny Richards. The experiences of the three Mordecai sisters of North Carolina prove that motivations varied. Some white women taught because their families needed the money. Others, such as the two younger Mordecai girls, did so because they found the patriarchal bargain unattractive and were profoundly fearful of economic dependency. Still others, such as the eldest Mordecai sis-

ter, believed home teaching to be superior. Their experiences suggest that historians need “a broader conception of education that includes other, often unpaid, pedagogical work” (p. 190). In this light, the ranks of teachers were even larger than the official numbers, which reveal that in 1850 a third of paid teachers were women.

Emily Clark and Diane Batts Morrow demonstrate, paradoxically, that real economic independence and secular power may have come most easily to those southern women who chose convent life. Although the Ursulines of New Orleans and the Oblate sisters of Baltimore often struggled to stay solvent—this was particularly difficult for the Oblates who were a sisterhood of free blacks—they successfully escaped the dependency that marked so many southern women’s lives. Emily Clark traces the history of the Ursuline nuns of New Orleans, who pursued a number of economic enterprises in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: they owned slaves, nursed, rented properties, and, most importantly, operated a school for girls. All of these activities insured their independence, as Clark writes, “long before other American women of middling status exploited the opportunities created by reform and benevolence” (p. 213). In addition to hosting paying boarders, sewing, and relying on the lay community for support, the Oblate sisters also ran a school. Like the experience of the Ursulines, the history of the Oblate sisters shatters widely held conceptions about antebellum southern women, for they were able “to validate and legitimate their claim to public recognition and support to an extent unrealizable to individual, secular black women,” according to Morrow (p. 240). Both sisterhoods dispel the notion that women of means only existed outside the reach of the market and were dependent on the labor of men.

Investigations of working women in the industrial South round out *Neither Lady nor Slave*. Gillespie, Delfino, and Bess Beatty all explore the degree to which the market revolution affected traditional ideas about women’s proper roles. Beatty finds that textile-mill owners in the antebellum piedmont easily relinquished the notion that white women should not do industrial labor. Female laborers were critical for a mill to make money. Mill owners were particularly fond of hiring women whose families were dependent on their labor, because the bosses viewed these women as easier to control. According to Beatty, however, women with families were actually better poised to resist male power in the factories. Tension characterized employer-employee relations in piedmont textile mills.

Gillespie looks at female textile workers in Georgia, where a thriving textile industry existed before the Civil War. Echoing Beatty, Gillespie argues that profit-hungry industrialists were more than happy to abandon inherited ideas about what kind of labor white women could and could not do. White women and children dominated a workforce that helped push Georgia above all other southern states in manufacturing output and profits by 1850. To rationalize a system that offered meager wages, mill owners asserted that the creation of a white labor force would alleviate any strain on the public coffers. What apologists failed to acknowledge publicly was that even desperately poor white men and women deliberately avoided mill work (sending young daughters instead) in an effort to retain “manly” independence and “womanly” femininity. According to Gillespie, southern “gendered expectations were such critical markers of social respect and status in the Old South that men and women were willing to forego earning wages, since they intimated weakness, vulnerability, and perhaps even unseemliness” (p. 272). Mill owners could turn a blind eye to convention, but many potential mill workers would not.

As Susanna Delfino shows, cultural dictates about appropriate behavior also influenced antebellum perceptions of the iron and mining industries of the Upper South, though she offers no evidence that men and women deliberately eschewed factory work because of gender conventions. Rather, such ideas profoundly shaped contemporary observers, such as census takers. Even though the iron industry was the most racially integrated of all southern industries, slave women’s participation went virtually unrecorded by census workers. Sources such as wills and newspapers, however, prove that slave women worked in the industry and even labored at highly skilled jobs. Not only did a “strong cultural bias” also prevent the recording of white women’s activities in iron and mining, but it obscured the fact that they did the kinds of strenuous jobs that were seen as slave work (p. 294).

A few of the essays in this collection read more as summaries of data than as pieces with powerful arguments. These less forceful essays no doubt represent the first-ever attempts to recover the experiences of certain groups of southern working women. Moreover, all of the contributors demonstrate that a creative reading of census records, material culture, legal documents, and newspapers can yield evidence about the labor of women who presumably engaged in no labor at all. As Delfino and Gillespie make clear, these initial efforts provide an

important starting point for a larger history of working women in the Old South, as well as for a larger history of the antebellum market economy. Most importantly, perhaps, because of their willingness to dig beneath 150-plus years of rhetoric, the authors remind us that ideology and reality are rarely the same.

Notes

[1]. On the South and the market revolution, see Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); Harry L. Watson, "The Common Rights of Mankind: Subsistence, Shad, and Commerce in the Early Republican South," *Journal of American History* 83 (June 1996): 13-43; and Craig T. Friend, "Merchants and

Markethouses: Reflections on Moral Economy in Early Kentucky," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Winter 1997): 553-574.

[2]. On the ideology of domesticity, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74, and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Women's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). For reassessments of the ideology of domesticity and the idea of "separate spheres," see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39, and Nancy Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980's," *Social History* 10 (1985): 299-321.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

Citation: Kathleen Blain Roberts. Review of Delfino, Susanna; Gillespie, Michele, eds., *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7335>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.