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Review of Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*

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Review of Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*

Abstract

Historian Nancy Cott has produced an important work that explores the dialectic between the women's work and their changing status in reference to the new rhetoric of democracy in the antebellum period. Cott shows us how women perceived themselves and what they said that she expects will lead to a new framework for the interpretation of the concept of womanhood.

Cott, Nancy F. *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

The study of the social and cultural history of the expansion of the women's domain during the early republic steadfastly gains the attention of numerous fields of scholarship. This well-written, sophisticated, and scholarly study explores the ideology of how the expanding middle-class woman's sphere in New England intersected with the economy, religious and social trends, and the shifting experiences of the Yankee family unit between the early 1780s and the mid-1830s. In using over one hundred unpublished diaries, memoirs, and letters written primarily by the literate and well-to-do, along with the assimilation of secondary material, Nancy Cott forms the premises to what united and restricted the developing middle-class women's place through sections on work, domesticity, education, religion, and sisterhood.¹ The advancement of the women's sphere unveiled ideological classifications and definitions of domestic life that is argued by Cott not necessarily to describe women's reality. In exploring the dialectic between the women's work and their changing status in reference to the new rhetoric of democracy in the antebellum period, Cott shows us how women perceived themselves and what they said that she expects will lead to a new framework for the interpretation of the concept of womanhood.²

Her continual focus on women confined and liberated through the "bonds of womanhood," is the central theme borrowed from Sarah M. Grimke's *Letters of the Equality of the Sexes* published in the *Spectator* in Boston in 1838.³ The letters offer a model of subtlety that

¹ Barbara Welter, "Reviewed Works: The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835," *Oxford Journals* 82, no 5 (December, 1977): 1327.

² Mark A. Noll, *A History Of Christianity In The United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eedermans Publishing Company, 1992), 180-181; Gerda Lerner, "Reviewed Works: The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835," *Signs* 4, no 3 (Spring, 1979): 572-574.

³ Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers For Women's Rights And Abolition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 134-139.

Cott uses in her documentation to argue what promoted woman's values in the evaluation of their self-awareness, experiences, and circumstances. In agreement with Barbara Welter, the first section on work is "particularly valuable," in offering a reasonable investigation between work and social identity.⁴ The section on domesticity analyzes the ideas and practices of the middle-class women's life between the home and the world. However, neglecting the working-class women offer an imbalanced perspective for how domesticity as a canonized concept revamped the expansion of the women's sphere. The section on education offers some good evidence for why women wanted to become literate in an analysis of the questions surrounding the traditional popularized social standards at the time. The section on religion offers depth and comprehension due primarily to her focus on evangelical Christianity coalescing with the influences of the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. Following 1790, the New England revivals similar to the Great Awakening brought women to the mainstay of the churches and to the forefront of a participatory democracy that created in the frontier and commercial spaces the perfect conditions for women to raise their status.⁵ In Cott's last section called sisterhood, she traces the bonds formed between middle-class women, though again, ignores their relationship to the working-class sisters. Focusing on the middle-class narrows her framework of how sisterly relations promoted realities on women's position though reasonable documentation of female friendships upholds "the growth and shedding of these bonds."⁶

⁴ Welter, "The Bonds of Womanhood," 1327.

⁵ Noll, *A History Of Christianity In The United States and Canada*, 180-181; Merritt Morgan, "Evangelical Revivalism and the Expanding Women's Domain: The Eastern Half of the Yankee Belt, the 1820s to the 1840s" (Thesis, ProQuest, 2019), 6-7.

⁶ Welter, "The Bonds of Womanhood," 1327.

Covering a crucial time during rising economic and social developments, Cott rewards her readers in this compendious matter of the changing feminization in New England's culture. The New England family life along thick and thinly populated regions is conditioned by reform and religion that intersected with shifting class structures embedded in economic activities. Cott carefully examines the middle-class women's sphere by confronting an elaborate ideology of feminine behavior in her evaluation of the social and economic order in the upper eastern half of the Yankee belt. Cott's work is a vital must-read piece to the history of this intense period and a most valuable contribution to the exploration of the emergence of the private and public role of women in America.

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