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In the late 1980s and 1990s, there was Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful category of Historical Analysis" and Elsa Barkley Brown's "Womanist Consciousness"; before that, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual"; and in the beginning, Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood." (1) These articles were quoted, cited, paraphrased, summarized, and critiqued with such regularity that their titles became stock phrases in feminist scholarship. Gradually, they began to be used without quotation marks, then without citation, and increasingly without any reference to the original articles. This has been especially true of the cult of true womanhood, a phrase often used as though the concept offered a transparent window into nineteenth-century (white, urban, middle-class) women's experience.

Despite scholars' efforts to treat the idea critically, generations of undergraduate students simply memorized the mantra--piety, purity, domesticity, submissiveness. Textbook authors incorporated the term into gender-sensitive treatments of antebellum American society. Although many linked the ideal's construction to larger economic and political changes, the dominant image remains that of a middle-class housewife happily trading in agricultural labor alongside men for the joys of urban domesticity and childrearing. Meanwhile, graduate students, who chafe at the naive assumption that any ideal could capture the diverse histories of American women, often lump the cult of true womanhood into that single paragraph recounting the bad old days when the lives of white northern ladies formed the centerpiece of women's history. Through all these processes, differences among white women have been submerged, the economic and social upheavals that marked the early to mid-nineteenth century have been muted, and, perhaps most significantly, the treacherous dynamics of "true womanhood" that Welter so clearly illuminated have been obscured.

It was the coercive aspects of this nineteenth-century "feminine mystique" that drove Welter's analysis. (2) I was introduced to the cult's constraints and to American women's history more generally by Barbara Welter herself. She taught for one semester at the University of Pennsylvania when I was a first-year graduate student there. Only later did I realize how generous she was in agreeing, as a visiting professor, to direct my independent research project. It was under her guidance that I tested my first (unsuccessful) dissertation topic--an analysis of Emma Goldman's contributions to second-wave feminist thought. Fortunately, Welter taught me about the equally fascinating world of antebellum women's activism, which ultimately became the focus of my work. She helped me frame one of the key questions for my dissertation: how was it that white, middle-class, antebellum women, who most fully imbibed the cult of true womanhood, also launched a series of social movements, including campaigns against slavery and for woman's rights? The answer seemed to lie in the contradictory impulses--between order and change, progress and stability, materialism and religiosity--that the ideal sought to resolve.

Welter made clear in the opening paragraph of her article the power relations that inhered in the cult's construction: "The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forebears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt that he had turned this new land, this temple of the chosen people, into one vast countinghouse. But he could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage, not only to fortune, but to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly. Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood ... was the hostage in the home." (3) The ideals Welter uncovered in her analysis of nineteenth-century prescriptive literature, novels, diaries, and correspondence did not simply codify modern notions of women's place. Rather, in response to dramatic economic and political upheavals, they constructed white, middle-class "true women" as the gladiators at the gate, fending off the evils that accompanied the pursuit of wealth and power by bourgeois men and the expansion of cities, factories, and plantations that fed their success. Yet this was a warrior without armor taking her stand behind a white picket fence. As Welter noted, the nineteenth-century true woman had "to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand." (4)

It was the darker side of this cult--the sense that women's retreat to domesticity and submissiveness marked her defeat at the hands of the Jacksonian era's aggressive and virile "true man"--that first intrigued me. It was precisely those women with the greatest access to education, economic resources, and public authority who were most constrained by the cult's precepts, yet it was also these women who most often embraced them. Should self-policing fail, Welter reminds us, "anyone, male or female" who challenged the dominant ideal "was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization, and of the Republic." (5) Still, not only did such individual women as Frances Wright and Margaret Fuller rebel against the new feminine virtues, but many more women manipulated the ideals as a means of expanding their sphere and their influence. Welter noted the virulence with which proponents of the new femininity denounced Fourierism, socialism, agrarian radicalism, abolitionism, dress reform, and other forms of "fanaticism" in sermons, magazines, and advice literature intended for the middle class, suggesting the difficulties they faced in imposing their standards even among the most likely candidates for true womanhood. Equally telling were the subtler clues in this literature that showed women conversing intelligently, if deferentially, with preachers, professors, and politicians and discoursing on a variety of subjects supposedly too delicate for feminine minds. If pious and domesticated ladies were hostages, they were not passively awaiting their liberator, but were instead cultivating the seeds of destruction that the cult of true womanhood itself had sown. (6)

Far from a paean to true womanhood or a mere excavation of its component parts, Welter offered a powerful critique of the patriarchal relations that required and produced the cult. She analyzed as well the consequences for middle-class white women who embraced its axioms, noting both the leverage women gained by wielding their piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness and the price they paid for achieving influence through

adherence to its dictates. She was well aware, too, that the cult circumscribed the activities of women more broadly, by establishing the inferiority of those unable to abide by its tenets and by punishing those who challenged them. Moreover, the ideals of true womanhood limited the intellectual and educational experiences available to all women, suggesting that among the so-called weaker sex "intellect was geared to her hymen, not her brain." (7)

In Welter's hands, then, the cult of true womanhood illuminated the complex gender dynamics through which nineteenth-century middle-class society was constructed. Although the impetus for the cult's establishment came from upwardly mobile men seeking to stave off the chaos that their materialistic pursuits presaged, women were implicated as well. Many accepted the promise of domestic happiness and the circumscribed authority that supposedly inhered in piety, purity, and submissiveness. Some worked diligently to disseminate and enforce these ideals among their sisters. Others used their piety and purity to gain access to public influence and authority. A few directly challenged the cult, for which they were excommunicated from polite society and relegated to the "lower orders" occupied by "fallen women," female laborers, immigrants, and slaves. By the end of the century, Welter claims, the cult's inherent contradictions, apparent in these diverse responses, combined with larger social forces to transform women's roles and enlarge the scope of their activities. The hostage, though often wracked with guilt and uncertainty, was liberated in part through her own actions and in part through the changes wrought by westward migration, industrialization, urbanization, evangelicalism, war, and the abolition of slavery.

If the nineteenth-century true woman gained her emancipation by the turn of the twentieth century, it is appropriate at the turn of the twenty-first to free the cult of true womanhood itself. Barbara Welter's article has too long been held hostage by its descriptive power and by the shifting landscape of American and women's history. Published just as the field was being born, it became a touchstone for dozens of younger scholars and a standard citation for those outside the field who felt some pressure to demonstrate their awareness of it. The cult of true womanhood continues to appear in textbooks and surveys of American as well as women's history, often serving as a shorthand description for antebellum women's lives. Written in the mid-1960s, the article was less attentive to racial and regional differences than studies published in more recent decades, a critique now made about much early work in the field. Thus, Welter's work--transformed, and distorted, into merely descriptive form--is still widely cited and, at the same time, as part of a larger body of work on white, northern, middle-class women, widely criticized.

Caught in the crossfire between acceptance in a simplified form and reproof for its seemingly narrow focus, Welter's work is rarely appreciated today for its critical contributions to the larger field of American women's history. "The Cult of True Womanhood" is a model of research and analysis. Welter incorporated evidence from a vast array of magazines, sermons, cookbooks, gift books, and novels that circulated throughout the Northeast, Midwest, and much of the South. It was predicated on a material analysis of cultural phenomenon that took into account the rapid economic changes of the early to mid-nineteenth century. And it recognized that culture was both internally dynamic and constantly interacting with the surrounding economy and society. Welter's formulation thus served as a foundation for such later works as Gerda Lerner's "The Lady and the Mill Girl" (1969), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's "The Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman" (1971), Nancy Cott's *Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), Mary Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981), my own *Women's Activism and Social Change* (1984), and Linda Kerber's "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place" (1988). (8)

Welter did focus primarily on the experiences of northern white women, although by spotlighting a dominant ideal, she illuminated a much wider landscape. She also provided a point of departure for later critiques. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, true womanhood and its practitioners served as foils against which diverse and competing histories of American women were written. Compelling studies of respectability among African American women, for instance, were rooted in black women's complex relations to the ideals that defined white women's experiences. In much the same way, debates over women's lives and women's culture among workers and immigrants in the North and women from all backgrounds in the South and West were often cast against a static image of northern, white, middle-class womanhood. (9) As the true woman became the set piece with which and against which other women's histories were defined, the subtleties of Welter's analysis were obscured. At the same time, among historians of northern women, the true woman replaced her cult as the focus of scholarly analysis. In the process, the patriarchal power relations in which Welter embedded the ideal retreated to the shadows, and the once pious and domesticated lady became an active agent. In most cases, she gained autonomy and power, either by cleverly manipulating her virtues in pursuit of social reform or by exerting her values and resources over those less fortunate. Fractures within the ideal were glossed over; and even those who rebelled against its strictures, such as pioneer woman's rights advocates, became enmeshed in its web. Native-born northern white women became an increasingly undifferentiated category, all middle-class adherents of a dominant ideal. As work on women who stood outside the cult's reach multiplied, then, true womanhood lost its contested, dynamic character and became hostage to all the retrograde values that affluent white womanhood marked in a field newly focused on difference and conflict.

As one of those historians who proclaimed difference as critical to our enterprise, I feel especially obligated to reclaim the conflicted character of northern white womanhood. I say this not to recenter the field on middle-class white women, but rather to incorporate them into the narratives of diversity and contestation that have so enriched the study of American women more broadly. We can begin this process by relocating the nineteenth-century true woman in the wider world that Welter created for her. Between 1966 and 1976, Welter developed a rich and sweeping portrait of middle-class white women in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American world. She explored girls' history, using diaries, autobiographies, and prescriptive literature to trace new concepts and experiences of adolescence in the mid-nineteenth century. She tracked the feminization of religion and women novelists' engagement with religious controversies, addressing a broad range of spiritual traditions from evangelical Protestantism to Catholicism and utopian communalism. She used the life of Caroline Healey Dali and the larger patterns of anti-intellectualism in American life to illuminate the ambiguities and contradictions regarding commerce, education, and success during the century. She analyzed medical complaints and mystery novels as ways of excavating popular notions of women's roles and rights. In these essays, gathered together in *Dimity Convictions*, Welter was always cognizant of dominant ideals as double-edged swords for women; and she usually gave the negative side the sharper edge. Yet she also offered vivid portraits of individual women, such as mystery writer Anna Katherine Green and feminist intellectual Margaret Fuller, who both manipulated and challenged cultural conventions to open up new possibilities for future generations. (10)

Some of the paths Welter laid out in this pioneering work have now been more fully explored; others still demand attention. As a whole, they suggest the competing forces that shaped northern white women's lives throughout the nineteenth century and the myriad responses available to them. Still, these studies emphasize the constraints faced by even the most privileged women, resulting from both men's pursuit of materialism and the patriarchal power relations that defined the larger society. Grounded in close readings of voluminous and varied primary sources and marked by wit as well as wisdom, Welter's essays warrant rereading today. "The Cult of True Womanhood," especially, has served too long as a "hostage in the home" for American women's historians. We acknowledge the concept's importance, but relegate it to a past that we, like Jacksonian men before us, have supposedly moved beyond. Yet for all the changes we have seen in the field of feminist scholarship and in women's lives, the relations among economic transformations, cultural values, social hierarchies, and women's place remain deeply contested in our work, our daily

experiences, and our society. Rereading Welter allows us not only to trace the roots of our current condition, particularly the conservative resurgence, but also to refocus on the contradictions inherent in dominant ideals that create the possibility for their overthrow. And given the knowledge we now have of the diverse and competing experiences of American women, we can carry Welter's work in new and provocative directions.

NOTES

(1) Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (October 1986): 1053-75; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke," *Signs* 14 (spring 1989): 610-33; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (autumn 1975): 1-29; and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (summer 1966): 151-74, reprinted in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21-41. Quotations in this article are from *Dimity Convictions*.

(2) published in 1966, just three years after Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, Welter notes the connections between this concept and the cult of true womanhood in her final footnote. Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," 211, n. 117.

(3) Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," 21.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *Ibid.*

(6) On the cult of true womanhood containing "the seeds of its own destruction," see *ibid.*, 41.

(7) *Ibid.*, 25.

(8) Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," in *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 15-30; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, The Beast, and the Militant Woman: A Case Study of Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly* 23 (winter 1971): 562-74; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1780-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); and 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.

(9) See, for instance, on African American women's respectability, James Oliver Horton, "Freedom's Yoke: Gender Conventions among Antebellum Free Blacks" *Feminist Studies* 12 (spring 1986): 51-76; and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). On working-class and immigrant women, see Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). On southern and western women, see Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984); and John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). There are many other examples I could use, but these focus most directly on the period covered by Barbara Welter's work, and most were written at a time when her article was still being widely cited.

(10) The nine articles briefly described here are found in Welter, *Dimity Convictions*.

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