
True Womanhood Revisited

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Barbara Welter's article, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," arrived in my hands on the headwinds of the feminist seventies. It was in quiet awe, I remember, that I finally shut the covers of her *Dimity Convictions*. The essays in that volume, mostly published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, literally set the agenda for a whole generation of women's historians.¹ In those years, the ability to tick off the four qualities of true womanhood (PIETY, PURITY, DOMESTICITY, AND SUBMISSIVENESS!) became a password for feminist scholars—not unlike the Baltimore catechism for Catholics. Now we are sheepishly forced to admit, we made a cult of that cult. And yet Welter's argument is still thriving even thirty-five years after its debut. Historians continue to agree that "true womanhood" was the centerpiece of nineteenth-century female identity (although in Europe, the cult was more likely to go under the name of "real womanhood" or "the domestic ideal"). In addition, cultural historians now draw widely upon the same innovative sources—magazines, fiction, advice stories—that Welter mustered up to make her case. But if Welter's article still merits a place in the canon, something else must also be said: inevitably, it has come to trail behind the scholarship it once pioneered. Reading "The Cult of True Womanhood" again has made me aware that indeed the year 1966 was not yesterday, or even the day before.

Among other things, rereading Welter made me appreciate something I had never noticed before: the delicate lacing of sarcasm in her analysis. "It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility" she writes of true womanhood, "which the nineteenth-century woman had—to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand."² In turn, Welter's sardonic tone made me aware of a glaring omission: in the absence of a strong analytic framework, Welter resorts to sarcasm in order to position herself critically in relation to the cult. An example of this lack of analytic muscle comes right at the outset, when Welter tries to understand how the cult of true womanhood "fit" with a bustling new capitalist ethic. "The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads," she begins, again mockingly. In his drive for productivity, she continues, he ignored the religious values of his forebears, and was racked with guilt at having transformed the fatherland "into one vast counting house." But, Welter argues, true womanhood allowed our American man to "salve his conscience" by providing a reassuring model of permanence: "one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found."³

Welter sensed that true womanhood served some useful role in capitalist culture, but was only able to link it to the notoriously hyper-active Puritan superego. She failed to understand the cult as an ideology that performed political and cultural "work." Thanks to such scholars as Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, and Mary Poovey, we better appreciate now how the domestic ideal helped consolidate European capitalist power. In Poovey's words, by "linking morality to a figure (rhetorically) immune to the self-interest and competition integral to economic success," the cult "preserved virtue without inhibiting productivity."⁴ Today, we know a great deal more about how the cult of true womanhood structured the worlds of private and public, the home and the workplace, the family and the professions; how it helped to maintain class- and race-based hierarchies of power; and how it justified women's exclusion from participatory democracy.⁵ The very success of Welter's model meant that her work would rapidly become preliminary.

Welter's clumsy attempts to analyze the politics of true womanhood also made me realize how much discourse analysis has sharpened the focus of feminist history. The article was written in 1966, almost two decades before the tidal wave of Foucauldian analysis hit scholarly shores. Welter described the absence of piety in a woman as "unnatural," but she never examined the category of "nature" itself as the authorizing fiction of a newly secular age.⁶ Since then, we have become much more suspicious about the "natural" appearance of gender norms, including the cult of true womanhood. After Joan Scott encouraged us "to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation," we learned to search for contest and conflict, volatility and volubility.⁷ The true woman only appeared to transcend time; in fact, her "trueness" was part of the ideological work she performed.

In short, we began to realize that the domestic ideal was not natural but *naturalized*. In another influential article in *Dimity Convictions*, Welter examined doctors' views of American women, arguing that medicine "served as a conservative influence, supporting the traditional definition of woman's nature and role by the weight of its evidence, against attempts to enlarge or change them."⁸ But without the Foucauldian emphasis on the exercise of power through knowledge, Welter's analysis lacked bite, and remained mostly descriptive. We now understand much better what doctors, scientists, politicians, and political economists (to name just a few) had to gain in inscribing "true womanhood" onto the female body.⁹ Through the notion of maternal instinct, they regulated not only women's behavior, but also an entire system of cultural practices, not least of which were the sexual division of labor and the sexual double standard.

What Foucauldian theory has not much helped us understand is how individual women subjectively understood these regulatory norms of behavior, and more importantly, how they resisted them.¹⁰ In other words, how did change occur? Welter herself was extremely vague on this point. Despite the predominance of the cult, she reassured us that "forces were at work which impelled woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society." On her list was every major movement or event in nineteenth-century American history, including social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, and the Civil War. It was not, in other words, a precise research agenda. She defined resistance in terms of two types of women: "some challenged the standard, some tried to keep the virtues and enlarge the scope of womanhood. Somehow through this mixture of challenge and acceptance, or change and continuity, the True Woman evolved into the New Woman."¹¹

Welter's definition of resistance here as a "mixture of challenge and acceptance" gestured toward the "female culture" model that found such favor among American women's historians in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, for example, the first generation of American "new women" reworked rather than rejected true womanhood, transforming a shared culture as wives and mothers into a vibrant political solidarity. This "uniquely female discourse," in turn, helped the new women both to defend themselves against hostile critics who portrayed them as man-hating viragoes, and to fight for more independent lives.¹² The "female culture" model has been enormously productive in thinking through the process of change. But as we have grown to appreciate the complex operation of language in culture, specifically its constant reappropriation and reiteration in new contexts, it has become increasingly difficult to conceive of something as pristine and reified as a uniquely female culture. Most recently, then, such historians as Christine Stansell have taken a different tack, linking the new woman to "mass" rather than "female" culture. Stansell's new woman is inseparable from turn-of-the-century bohemian New York City, where "proliferating" magazines, novels, and newspapers produced new images of female identity, and thus "a widened spectrum of respectable femininity."¹³

My own research on the new woman also links her to the meteoric rise of mass culture in the late nineteenth century, particularly in the worlds of journalism and theater. Colette, whose early career spanned both the stage and the newsroom, typifies the ease with which European new women moved in and out of these two worlds. Although Colette was primarily known as a novelist, she also made her living in the prewar years as a vaudeville actress, both in Paris and on tour throughout France. In addition, she worked as a reporter for *Le Matin*.¹⁴ Colette's scorn for piety,

purity, domesticity, and submissiveness hardly needs rehearsing here. For her, as for scores of other women, journalism and theater encouraged a kind of subversive subterfuge or "acting up" that allowed them to resist true womanhood. That role-playing was an acceptable form of behavior on the stage goes without saying. But journalism also encouraged a high level of theatricality. In a world of voyeuristic reporters and pseudonymous writers, acting and performing became the norm. The new "eyewitness" method of reportage, for example, encouraged journalists to don disguises, and go undercover to get the inside "dope."

Both journalism and theater, then, gave women access to worlds where they were not subject to the limits imposed on the self by true womanhood. If the new women could fashion themselves so persuasively as men in print (and many of them did), it was a little harder to believe that their "natural" destiny was as women. When in their own columns, female journalists praised motherhood as a woman's highest role, they reiterated domestic ideals in an unlikely, even ironic context, defamiliarizing and implicitly subverting them. Likewise, when an actress such as Sarah Bernhardt performed brilliantly in the role of Hamlet, she undermined the notion of a "true" gendered self, revealing it to be a matter of good acting. And when Bernhardt, a notoriously unvirtuous actress, played "true" women on stage, she called into question "natural" female virtue itself, exposing it as merely performative. In all these ways (and many others), the histrionics required of newsroom and stage threatened the essentialized nature of gender norms. Sometimes such acts were strategic; sometimes they were unintentional. In the latter case, they owed their disruptive power to the instabilities inherent in the domestic ideal.¹⁵

My own research agenda, no less than the preceding generation of women's historians, has been shaped by questions raised by Barbara Welter. Although we no longer have to resort to sarcasm to critique the cult of true womanhood, we are still only beginning to unravel the processes by which the true woman became the new woman. That change, argued Welter, was "a transformation as startling in its way as the abolition of slavery or the coming of the machine age." That was a radical thing to say in 1966, and it remains a radical thing to believe thirty-five years later.

NOTES

¹Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

²Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," in *Dimity Convictions*, 21–41, quotation on 21.

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

⁴Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). See also Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

⁵The literature is voluminous, but a sampling of the most important works would include: Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Bonnie Smith, "The Domestic Sphere in the Victorian Age," in *Changing Lives: Women in European History* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1989), 181–221; Anne Martin-Fugier, *La Bourgeoise* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1983); Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977); and Ute Frevert, *Women in German History*, (London: Berg Publishers, 1989).

⁶Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," 23

⁷Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28–50, quotation on 43.

⁸Welter, "Female Complaints: Medical Views of American Women (1790–1865)," in *Dimity Convictions*, 57–70, quotation on 63.

⁹An important work in this regard was Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁰For attempts to explore how the domestic ideal was negotiated by individual women in nineteenth-century France, see Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹¹Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," 41.

¹²Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870–1936," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 267. She makes the same argument in "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), 245–96. A classic statement of the female culture model is found in Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Spheres" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977).

¹³Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), esp. 29–30.

¹⁴Two recent biographies of Colette are Claude Francis and Fernande

Gontier, *Creating Colette*, Vol. 1, *From Ingenue to Libertine, 1873–1913* (South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth Press, 1998); and Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

¹⁵Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Forthcoming, University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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