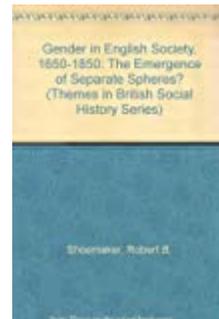


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Robert B. Shoemaker. *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* London and New York: Longman, 1998. ix + 334 pp. \$31.40 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-10315-3; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-10316-0.



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One of the important themes in feminist historiography has stressed the narrowing of acceptable gender roles in the last decades of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. Historians have examined the ways in which domesticity became a new guide to female behavior during this period. The ideology of “separate spheres,” as historians in the 1970s came to characterize it, emphasized that men and women were to occupy distinct arenas: women remained within the private domestic sphere of the home, concerning themselves with reproduction and the moral upbringing of their children, while men (as both citizen and head of household) occupied the public sphere of politics, business, and law. These evolving notions of domesticity, of public and private, and of separate spheres, it was contended, were well-suited to the values of the ascending middle classes of Europe and North America. Indeed, as historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argued in their influential work *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750-1850* (1987), the ideology of separate spheres became central to the creation of a distinct middle-class identity.

Although they differ on interpretations of the significance of separate spheres for women in different times and places, many scholars interested in gender history have implicitly or explicitly adopted “separate spheres”

as a metaphor for characterizing gender difference. The use of the ubiquitous metaphor, however, has not gone unchallenged. In *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850*, Robert B. Shoemaker adds his voice to the growing chorus of dissent that contests the suitability of the use of separate spheres for interpreting women’s past. Shoemaker draws on the wealth of secondary literature on gender and sexuality to argue that there were more continuities in gender roles in England between 1650 and 1850 than most historians have acknowledged. While highlighting the continuities in this period, however, Shoemaker attempts to depart from the earlier acerbic critique launched by Amanda Vickery in her article “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History.”[1] Where Vickery saw few significant changes in either ideology or social practice in England before and during industrialization, Shoemaker notes that “prevailing ideas about gender difference were more sharply divided at the end of our period than the beginning, and there were also fundamental changes in ways of thinking of the body and sexuality” (p. 10). Shoemaker’s study is one that emphasizes continuities without denying change, and herein lies the strength of his work.

Shoemaker begins his study by reexamining the conduct books and literature that served as the foundation

for the separate spheres framework. After a brief discussion of the problems posed by this type of prescriptive literature, Shoemaker analyzes the views of femininity and masculinity set out by writers and how these became increasingly class specific by the late eighteenth century. For all classes, however, there was a variety of models for gender available in popular literature. Shoemaker notes that this literature “nonetheless tended to reinforce some fundamental sexual stereotypes” (p. 38). More significant than the reinforcing of stereotypes, according to Shoemaker, is the extent to which the range of ideas regarding gender roles expanded during this period. Alternative visions of gender roles offered the readers of popular literature (however limited that readership may have been) exposure to a broader debate about the proper role of women, particularly middle-class women, in the changing social and political order.

The debate about gender roles and the construction of gender difference was intimately tied to shifting notions about the body and sexuality. Historians have emphasized the ways in which sex and sexual difference came to be part of a new cultural paradigm that polarized the sexes and made a sharp differentiation between them. This new paradigm not only narrowed gender roles for men and women but also narrowed the range of sexual opportunities by emphasizing heterosexuality. True to his emphasis on continuity, Shoemaker questions whether the focus on heterosexual sex as normative behavior was a departure from earlier periods. More importantly, he argues that historians should be cautious not to exaggerate the effect that these kinds of attitudes had on sexual practice. While much work remains to be done on sex and sexuality, it is refreshing to see Shoemaker boldly attempt to incorporate current research with a critical eye.

Throughout his work, Shoemaker repeats his refrain of cautioning historians and stressing continuity. Whether looking at sexuality, courtship, family and home life, work, or public life, Shoemaker’s reasoning for this position is fundamentally the same: the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres sets up a conceptual dualism—already in evidence two centuries earlier—that did not readily translate into actual practice. Shoemaker highlights the variety of private experience throughout the period for both women and men, a variety that has been obscured by the metaphor of separate spheres. The

metaphor, he concludes, fails to capture the complexity of patterns of gender difference in England during a critical period of change. Yet, always with a note of caution, Shoemaker reminds his readers that he does not want to jettison the notion of separate spheres altogether. He calls for a new conception of separate spheres “as a loose division of responsibilities between men and women within both public life and private life” at the same time recognizing that “the impact of ideological prescriptions on day-to-day practice was limited” (p. 318).

Shoemaker’s conclusions are neither startling nor entirely novel; after all, his work is based mainly on previous monographs that have explored these issues in much greater detail. As Shoemaker himself notes, historians interested in gender history in Europe and North America have been moving away from the separate spheres construct in recent years. In this way, it is difficult to know where to place *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850* within the historical literature. For those familiar with the works that form the core of Shoemaker’s study, there is little reason to read his general summary. Even for those interested in new perspectives on British history for teaching purposes, this work has severe limitations. The paucity of footnotes and the very cursory bibliography make this book inadequate for those interested in becoming more familiar with the literature. The text might be useful in courses on British history or women in Western culture. In many cases, however, the student reader would be better served by returning to the original articles or monographs from which the author draws his conclusions.

Despite these shortcomings, the work is well written, with the author’s enthusiasm for his subject evident on every page. Scholars will undoubtedly welcome further study on the issues raised by Shoemaker.

Note

[1]. “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *The Historical Journal*, 36, 2 (1993): 383-414.

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