

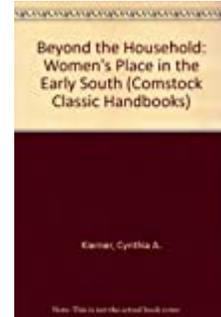
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Cynthia A. Kierner.** *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South 1700-1835.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998. xii + 295 pp.

**Cynthia A. Kierner.** *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835.* Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1998. xii + 295 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3453-2; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8462-9.



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## Rethinking Gender and the American Revolution

Cynthia Kierner's interpretive monograph is part of a new wave of scholarship on women in the revolutionary and early national period that is forcing us to rethink the relationship of gender to ideas of public and private.[1] While carefully delineating gender ideologies and the shifting limitations and opportunities for women during these transitional years, Kierner does not use the idea of patriarchy as the main causal force in a story of women's oppression. This clearly distinguishes her work from that of Kathleen Brown, Jean Friedman, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.[2]

Kierner lays out evidence of a shifting gender ideology in the South (defined as Eastern seaboard areas from Virginia through Georgia). Before the revolution, southern women had access to certain public roles, especially through economic actions and rituals of sociability which required female participation. This pre-revolutionary world blurred lines between public and private. For example, hospitality in one's home was a public demonstra-

tion shaping one's public image, but the setting was private. Women's roles, however, were changing and being redefined in ways that increasingly substituted the symbolic participation of women in a genteel culture for more direct public participation at the courthouse and as economic managers. Deepening racial and class lines were a factor in this shift.

The stresses of the revolutionary era redrew the lines of public and private. Women were excluded from many of the new rituals demarking revolutionary politics, while the small elegances of sociability appeared decadent and wasteful to a virtuous republic, especially during war. As republican ideology developed in ways inclusive of white males by contrasting them to dependent classes of females and slaves, evangelical religion recast the religious landscape with a new emphasis on domestic life as the locus of virtue and piety. Although wartime demands for cloth and other home manufactures initially gave women an important way to participate in

the conflict, these substantial contributions were soon lost from view amidst images of women as dependent petitioners.

Kierner argues that the reshaping of gender ideology to correspond to a public-private dichotomy was the work of a conservative counter-revolution in both political and religious thought. As women's presence in public decreased, however, the new importance assigned to domestic roles resulted in unprecedented growth in opportunities for women's education and a rationale that would let women stretch the boundaries of the private sphere to encompass a growing set of philanthropic activities. Thus the first quarter of the nineteenth century saw southern women, like their northern counterparts, create an impressive array of benevolent societies, Sunday schools, and church societies. *Beyond the Household* places southern white women in the mainstream of trends that women's historians have long associated with the northern experience.

The general outline of Kierner's book is persuasive, but the chapters on the colonial period are more creative than those on the revolutionary and antebellum eras in thinking outside of standard paradigms of public and private. Intent on showing growing domestication, Kierner treats some of women's formal public positions (such as nurse and regimental woman) as informal arrangements or extensions of domesticity. The revolutionary chapters are among the few where more middling women come to the forefront, because it is they who took more active roles in manufacture and in the military. This sets up a logical problem, because Kierner's discussion of the periods before and after the revolution focuses on how the experiences of the elite shaped gender roles for the upper and middling classes. The result is a disconnect between the class of those who shaped gender ideology before and after the revolution, and the class of those whose experiences are supposed to have provided that shaping during the war.

Similarly, Kierner sees post-revolutionary women's growing philanthropy and church work as expansions of a domestic sphere. Her work is a close fit with scholars such as Catherine Clinton and Suzanne Lebsock.<sup>[3]</sup> Such an interpretation allows Kierner to place southern women within the interpretative framework long used by women's historians for northern women. The later chapters of *Beyond the Household* should really be read in tandem with Elizabeth Varon's creative 1998 study *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*. Both historians document women's widespread

work in church organizations. Both see this as an expansion of women's opportunities and cite numerous ways that women were active shapers of their society. Varon, however, documents what Kierner did not find—political roles for women and opposition to slavery (as evidenced in their role in the colonization societies)—and argues, unlike Kierner, that philanthropy was a public/political act.

It is difficult when working with such a sweep of primary and secondary material not to overextend somewhere, and Kierner occasionally misreads her sources. At one point she claims that even the women of middling families had slaves dedicated to household production. As evidence, she cites the David and Elizabeth LeSueur plantation with seventeen slaves, of which she claims three were used full time for cloth production (p. 15). Unfortunately, her source actually only claims that slave women probably worked alongside Elizabeth in such tasks in addition to field work. In another place, Kierner moves Elizabeth Feilde from Kingston Parish, Gloucester County, to York County on the other side of the York River (p. 81).<sup>[4]</sup>

Despite these momentary lapses, this is a good book and one that deserves to be read by women's historians, southern historians, and historians of Early America. This book challenges women's historians to fit southern white women into the paradigms they too often have reserved for northern women alone. When combined with Varon's work, it is an antidote to the assumption that southern white women were too oppressed by the patriarchy to have public roles in the new republic. Finally, *Beyond the Household* continues the recent historiographic emphasis on women's losses as well as gains during the revolution. In total, this is a considerable accomplishment for a work with barely 218 pages of text.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Cynthia Kierner's other recent book, *Southern Women in Revolution, 1776-1800: Personal and Political Narratives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), and Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women: Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997); Joan R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

[2]. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colo-*

*nial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Published by the University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1996); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

[3]. Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984).

[4]. For the correct information (and Kierner's source) on the LeSueur family, see my article, "Black and White Women in a Colonial Virginia Parish," *Journal of Southern History* LII (August, 1986): 369. Elizabeth Feilde was the wife of minister Thomas Field (she spelled the name differently than he), who was Director of Kingston Parish, Gloucester County. Joan R. Gundersen, *The Anglican Ministry in Virginia, 1723-1776: A Study of a Social Class* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), p. 252.

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