



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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Gender Prescriptions and Realities

Gender Prescriptions and Realities in the “Long Eighteenth Century”

Gender in English Society 1650-1850 is, in many ways, as comprehensive a study as its title suggests. Robert Shoemaker brings together an extraordinarily large body of secondary literature, along with a smaller number of primary sources, in order to examine almost all areas of life in which gender might have played a role in England during the “long eighteenth century.” He surveys the prescriptive literature of the period on gender, and goes on to examine the conditions of men’s and women’s lives in their most private and public aspects: sexuality, at homelife, work, in religion and politics, and in culture and society. In doing so, he brings together for his readers a wide range of ideas and evidence about the nature of gender roles in early modern England.

In addition to this survey of men’s and women’s lives, Shoemaker argues against the emergence of separate spheres for men and women in English society, explicitly rejecting the idea that this period “witnessed an intensification of the ideology of separate spheres, with its attempt to map gender differences onto this growing

distinction between public and private life” (p. 308).

His arguments against the influence of a doctrine of separate spheres fall largely into two categories. First, Shoemaker emphasizes the continuities in men’s and women’s roles between 1650 and 1850. To the extent that men’s and women’s lives were segregated by sex, he sees relatively little change over time that many proponents of the influence of separate spheres have described. Second, he asserts the limitations of what historians can know with certainty in the study of early modern social and cultural history. Shoemaker maintains that it is difficult to know much about the private lives of men and. He acknowledges the development of a large body of prescriptive literature that supports the development of separate spheres, particularly after 1750. But he cautions readers that it is very difficult to know how this material shaped the lives of English men and women at the time. He believes that its influence was minimal.

While Shoemaker contests its reception, he describes the increasing prevalence of the ideology of separate spheres in a wide variety of published works from the mid-eighteenth century onward. It first became popu-

lar in literature aimed at men and women of the middle to upper middle classes, and then, by the early nineteenth century, in literature aimed at lower-class men and women. Such books included Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* of the 1790s and William Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* of 1822, which placed even the wives of working men in a clearly domestic role. Conduct manuals and periodicals promoted the separate roles and standards of conduct.

In the mid-eighteenth century, periodicals aimed at only one sex became common, and women's magazines came to focus on domestic matters such as cooking, needlework, and preserving marital happiness. Along with advice manuals, they promoted women's moral role, as well as notions of femininity that suggested differences between the sexes: woman's greater virtue, her asexuality, her "natural" maternal feeling, and the inappropriateness of women performing hard labor outside the home. Shoemaker traces these changes in prescriptions for women's behavior in part to the influence of the evangelical movement in England, noting "an increasing stress on the moral importance of women's domestic role" from the mid eighteenth century (p. 32).

Although recognizing these trends in the prescriptive literature, Shoemaker questions the ability of historians to know how men and women actually behaved in their sexual lives. Gender roles became more sharply defined, women were seen as less sexually passionless, and women were viewed as more naturally virtuous than men. In the contemporary literature, concern shifted from women's lust and sexual aggressiveness in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to men's lust and predatory sexual nature by the nineteenth century. Shoemaker quotes the work of historians who argue that, over the eighteenth century, "sexual practices became restricted to heterosexual, penetrative, vaginal intercourse, as mutual masturbation and fondling became less common" (p. 60). In combination, these changes resulted in fewer sexual opportunities for both sexes and far greater differences in the behavior expected of men and women.

Within the family and household, Shoemaker sees a great deal of separation of male and female roles but virtually no change over time, and thus, no emergence of separate spheres for men and women. Even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wives and their servants did almost all housework, including cleaning, shopping, and cooking. Men performed few tasks and most of these were outdoor work. In households where both spouses worked, wives did most of the household labor.

By the nineteenth century, these trends had only accentuated the sexual division of labor. Middle-class men increasingly worked away from the home. Even at home, men's work areas, "whether the shop or the study," were separated from such domestic areas of the house as the kitchen (p. 119).

Shoemaker also sees continuity over the centuries in the socialization of children, with boys and girls receiving separate upbringings designed to create very different personalities and behavior in the two sexes. While boys were encouraged to play physical games with hoops or balls, girls played with dolls and miniature work baskets. Boys learned "self control, endurance, striving and athletic prowess" at school, while girls were taught "subservience and to combat vanity and pride" (p. 131). The author also notes the new emphasis on women as maternal creatures in the eighteenth century. Motherhood came increasingly to be seen as a serious responsibility for women, and mothers were expected to form tender and intimate bonds with their children. In contrast, middle-class fathers appear to have conformed to a caring, but increasing emotionally distant model for parents by the nineteenth century.

Throughout the period covered by this book, men did a larger proportion of the income producing work, usually outside of the home, while women did more of the housework. Shoemaker points out that, in addition, most women performed some type of work for pay, but he also notes that this work was consistently more marginal than that of men: it was lower paid and generally unskilled throughout the long eighteenth century, unprotected by the guild system in the cities, and, in the countryside, more quickly eliminated by enclosure. In the recent debate over the evolution of women's work, Shoemaker sides with historians who argue against the idea of a "golden age" of women's work before the Industrial Revolution, when men's and women's work were interchangeable. He sees as most persuasive theories that view changes in women's work as taking a circular rather than a progressive, linear route.

Shoemaker's evidence appears to suggest that the ideology of separate spheres did influence women's work from the mid-eighteenth century. Middle-class women worked less, although the author also notes that, among the upwardly mobile middle classes, both men and women avoided work as a means of social advancement in the eighteenth century. However, when a married couple could only afford to have one spouse "at leisure", it was always the wife who did not work. Nineteenth-

century sources appear to support the influence of separate spheres ideology most clearly. Middle-class women were the most likely to retire to the domestic sphere, but even among the working poor, women, including agricultural workers and colliers' wives, came to see some aspects of work as inappropriate for women. Shoemaker argues that separate spheres ideology did not prevent women from working, but that ideas about the coarsening and defeminizing effects of work did discourage both middle-class and working-class women from engaging in paid employment.

Shoemaker acknowledges a clear divide between public and private life in both religion and politics. Women were excluded from positions of power within the Anglican Church, as well as in most of the non-conformist Protestant religions once they became established. Women had the most influence, and most notably in the Society of Friends and among the Methodists, in the early years of these religious movements, when they were allowed to preach and prophesy in public. Similarly, politics remained dominated by men throughout this period. In the eighteenth century, aristocratic women could exercise influence in high politics, but only cautiously. Canvassing for parliamentary candidates by women was seen as appropriate only if promoting male relations. Women, like Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who campaigned for men outside of her family, were widely criticized.

For the nineteenth century, much of Shoemaker's evidence points to the emergence of separate spheres in political life. In the anti-slavery movement, men and women formed separate societies and, for the most part, opposed the slave trade by engaging in different kinds of activities: men lobbied Parliament, ran the National Anti-Slavery Society, and organized and spoke at public meetings; women wrote anti-slavery tracts and fiction, promoted consumer boycotts of products produced by slave labor, and circulated petitions to be submitted to parliament and the queen.

In the cultural arena, Shoemaker notes that women were able to participate in public life in many ways; women played a public role as actresses and published authors, and English women attended the theater, even if their access to clubs and voluntary societies was more restricted than that of men. However, Shoemaker also acknowledges restrictions on women's participation. Many women wrote anonymously or under a pseudonym, and others prefaced their works with apologies for having

presumed, as women, to write and publish their opinions. Some of these restrictions appear to be rooted firmly in separate spheres ideology: women were sharply criticized when they wrote on "masculine" subjects, such as philosophy or politics, like Catherine Macaulay, and they were most successful when they supported a domestic role for women in their published works, like Hannah More.

In answering the question posed in his title, Robert Shoemaker ultimately offers a mixed answer. He acknowledges some evolution of gender roles and a greater influence of the ideology of separate spheres by the turn of the nineteenth century. At the same time, he asserts that the continuities in men's and women's experiences over this two hundred year period were more important. As Shoemaker notes, we cannot know with certainty what influence prescriptive literature has; nevertheless, the evidence he presents suggests that the doctrine of separate spheres did have a strong effect on English men and women by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Shoemaker's arguments against its influence are persuasive for seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. However, in trying to combine these two periods, he faces too many contradictions in his evidence to make a convincing argument against the importance of separate spheres.

Furthermore, except for its arguments against the importance of the doctrine of separate spheres, this work falls short in its analysis of the abundant primary and secondary sources. Shoemaker makes a focus on facts part of his thesis: since gender roles changed very little between 1650 and 1850, and since the ideology of separate spheres was not as influential as other historians have asserted, he argues that there is relatively little to analyze – and, indeed, that a systematic reporting on women's and men's places in English society is exactly what is called for. Nevertheless, this emphasis leaves the reader wishing for more from this clearly very capable historian – more on-going analysis of this wealth of information, as well as a more coherent and persuasive account of the influence, or lack of influence, of the ideology of separate spheres on the evolution of gender roles in English society.

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