WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES, 1880-1920

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Whatever opinions may be held as to the proper sphere of woman, the fact is that, to a considerable extent, woman’s place to-day is no longer in the home. In addition to her social contributions to the preservation and welfare of mankind, the contributions of her sex to economic production in its commercial aspects are of such substantial proportions that not only is it impossible to ignore them as a factor in industrial process, but they are worthy of serious study as an important element in this progress.¹

Barbara Welter’s influential article, “The Cult of True Womanhood”, articulated a disjuncture in women’s roles between the public and private spheres of life, in which women’s lives were presumed to be private while men’s lives were public.² This essay rejects the way this model sets the purportedly public and private spheres in opposition to each other for several reasons. Firstly, the construct could only apply to those families wealthy enough to sustain a wife outside the labor force who did not generate some income, whether by taking in boarders, selling butter and eggs, or doing some remunerated labor.³ Secondly, the terms “public” and “private” have little salience in a society in which the state – itself a form of “public” – increasingly

regulated family matters that were previously private, including children’s education and employment as well as women’s work outside the home. A third reason for rejecting a sharp differentiation between these supposedly separate spheres is that many families’ homes were not private in any meaningful sense. African American women, for example, lived in a world which denied them privacy, most obviously under slavery, but also, still, in a postbellum world in which these women’s employment after marriage largely took place in white people’s homes or farms. Moreover, the sentimental fiction Welter cites depicts the private world of the household as a sanctuary and haven, but that in no way characterized the pre-Civil War slave quarters or postbellum sharecropped farms or urban tenements where everyone could hear their neighbors’ business.

Welter drew upon antebellum ladies’ magazines as her primary source. She described the true woman’s place as being “by her own fireside – as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother”. Her article reflected the world of affluent white women with at least enough education and leisure time to read the newly published women’s magazines of this era. The portrait she drew did not depict women as wage laborers, slaves, immigrants, or subsistence farmers. Instead, it presented a picture of American womanhood that essentialized affluent, small town and urban white women as “true women”, while ignoring the lived realities of most women’s experiences: women of all ages, races, and ethnic groups worked inside and outside the household.

Along with Nancy F. Cott’s Bonds of Womanhood and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “Female world of love and ritual”, Welter’s widely quoted article established the notion of separate spheres, with

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7 Mary Kelley, in her article, “Beyond the Boundaries”, Journal of the Early Republic, XXI/1 (Spring 2001), 73-78, provides an excellent critique of the “Cult of True Womanhood”.