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"The Female Appendage": Feminine Life-Styles in America, 1820-1860

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"THE FEMALE APPENDAGE": Feminine Life-Styles in America, 1820 1860 Ronald W. Hogeland Various keen commentators such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller and Simone de Beauvoir who have directed their attention to the history of femininity have correctly observed that men have consistently usurped the initiative in defining the life-styles of the "second sex."¹For this reason it appears futile to attempt to approach the subject of women—in any age—either by way of a "pots and pans" pseudocultural inquiry, -or by means of merely studying atypical women. In the former instance one falls prey to an inclination, which many historians have not avoided, of devaluating the nature of femininity by making women invisible in a sea of domesticity. It is just because of this attitude that a score of female critics of the American scene have

concluded that women have always been "a class outside of history."³ In the other instance, it appears ineffectual to trace accurately the evolution of the 1 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London, 1792); Margaret Fuller [Ossoli], *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, 1845); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (New York, 1949). Also consult Ernest R. Groves, *The American Woman: the Feminine Side of the Masculine Civilization* (New York, 1942); Edna G. Rostow, "The Best of Both Worlds: Feminism and Femininity," *Yale Review* (Spring, 1962), 384-399; and Betty Friedan's highly popular volume, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963). The most accessible and scholarly recent bibliographical treatment of the subject of femininity in America is to be teased-out of Andrew Sinclair's *The Emancipation of the American Woman* (New York, 1965), which traces its theme from the colonial period to the present. ² See David B. Davis' very suggestive "Some Recent Directions in American Cultural History," *American Historical Review* (Feb., 1968), 696-707. I must admit I find myself attracted to "the third level" of investigation which the author notes "is still the most neglected." (704-705). ³ This assertion was underscored afresh by the works of Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York, 1968); Caroline Bird with Sara Welles Briller, *Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down* (New York, 1968); and Aileen S. Kraditor, who has edited an impressive selection of writings about women, *Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago, 1968). In the past decade there have been numerous books and articles written about women as a distinctive class. Most of them dealing with American women are broad in their scope and polemical in nature. Hence, they fail to delimit their inquiry historically as both James R. McGovern and Anne F. Scott have illustrated recently can be done successfully: "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," *Journal of American History* (Sept., 1968), 315-333; "The 'New Woman' in the New South," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Autumn, 1962), 473-483. For the most successful current historiographical treatment of the subject consult Gerda Lerner's "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," *Journal of Social History*, (Fall, 1969), 53-62.

101 102 CIVIL WAR HISTORY American women by alluding to nonconventional or "radical" women such as Anne Hutchinson, Mother Ann Lee, Frances Wright, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Here the student of history fails to avoid another trap, despite his good intention, of simply underscoring a few women's unconventional practices which are identified (often mistakenly) with feminism. This often subtle (or unconscious) form of ridiculing the atypical woman only reinforces the age-old masculine disposition not to take women seriously. In either case—by writing as if women were invisible or absurd—the historian has not substantially come to grips with the nature of femininity. To do this, one must try to relate women as fully human agents who have the capacity to choose meaningful life-styles, to concentrations of power—and hence to men. For what is evident in the American experience, from the colonial period to the present, is that "the male attitude" has been responsible for defining the dimensions of femininity and the roles which the members of the...

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