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Of Women and Things

Jacqueline K. Dirks

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

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Elizabeth H. Pleck. *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, 328 pp.; ISBN 0-674-00230-X (cl); 0-674-00279-2 (pb).

The literatures on women's history and the history of consumer culture have greatly expanded in the past decade. Despite this wealth of new scholarship, much of which tries to overturn, or at least complicate, inherited ideas about women as shoppers, spectators and creators of consumer culture, certain assumptions about Western women and their relation to commodities seem to prevail.

Most scholars now sensibly insist that they have gone beyond relegating men to public and women to private spheres, while allowing that prescriptive literature from earlier periods often specified such gender segregation. Yet, all too often, analysts still seem to mistake such ideology for a description of social life, rendering "separate spheres" as physical locations rather than social constructions. Since consumption can be a public or private activity, as well as a bridge between the two, it is crucial to understand the different ways in which goods can figure. The sheer proliferation of commodities, and changing practices of buying, selling, and displaying goods have also altered consciousness and human relationships and transformed structures of meaning and feeling.

Gendered thinking recurs when we try to understand what connections, if any, exist between women's consumer and political behavior. For example, some women, especially in the nineteenth century, were welcomed into such public commercial areas as department stores at a time when women's full participation in the political arena was still restricted. Such changes began to alter subtly the meaning of "public." For some analysts, consumption was for women merely a consolation prize for denial of political [End Page 173] rights, especially the vote and property rights. Yet other scholars claim that participation in consumer culture fostered women's political ambition for full public standing, including feminism.¹

Scrutiny of women and consumption also often assumes Whiggish notions of material progress; modern women's lives are presumed to become better as they can buy rather than make more and cheaper things. With due credit to labor-saving inventions, this assumption begs the question of structural inequalities: despite new products and conveniences, women were (and are still) expected to do the bulk of household labor, maintain kinship networks, and sustain family rituals. Whatever else it is or is not, consumption is work. And, of course, from the nineteenth through the twentieth century, an increasing number of (especially married) women entered the wage labor force, in part to secure goods for the mselves and their families. Wage-earning women sometimes had their own rather than their husband's or father's money to spend; most still performed unwaged house work. Hence, it would seem impossible to discuss the gendered meanings of consumption without defining work, charting production, and noting the significance of cash income.

The three volumes under study demonstrate different degrees of concern with the changing meanings of things and women's labor in purchasing and maintaining them. Likewise, the authors vary in their focus on symbolic and practical politics. Literary scholar Lori Merish is most interested in metaphorical politics as she investigates "cultural representations of an 'ethic' of feminine consumption" present in America by the late eighteenth century, "[p]roviding a prehistory of consumer subjectivity and agency" (2). Social historian

Elizabeth Pleck focuses on family rituals, comparing nineteenth-century and twentieth-century variations to analyze "transformations in how the family is celebrated" (2) and examining women's work along the way. For cultural studies scholars Maggie Andrews and Mary M...

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