Schute on Molloy, 'Single, White, Slaveholding Women in the Nineteenth-Century American South'

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Female singleness in the nineteenth-century American South remains a relatively overlooked topic within the study of southern womanhood. Consequently, historians have assumed that unmarried women lived on the margins of the family unit and were not interested in economic gains. In *Single, White, Slaveholding Women in the Nineteenth-Century American South*, Marie S. Molloy provides a different understanding of the roles unmarried women fulfilled in southern societies. She argues that, despite the restrictions placed upon them, female singleness also served as a pathway to greater social and economic independence.

Molloy tells the story of how more than three hundred single women in the American South were able to find value in their families and communities despite not being married. She uses extensive primary source material, ranging from letters and diaries to local court records. The group she focuses on are particularly elite white women who were either nonmarried, widowed, separated, or divorced. While in the Old South, unmarried and motherless women were often considered to be the failures of southern communities, Molloy counteracts this idea. Building on the works of Lee Chambers-Schiller and Zsusza Berend, she adds a new perspective to the debate on the roles that single women fulfilled by demonstrating that they not only stood at the forefront of the family unit but were also—despite their upper-class positions—actively "driven by economic need" (p. 13).[1]

The book is divided into five chapters. In order to focus on the key facets that signal constraint and autonomy in single women’s lives, Molloy chose a thematic rather than chronological organization. After introducing what life was like for southern women in the first chapter, Molloy focuses on the family, work life, and female friendship respectively in the chapters that follow, using these topics as examples to substantiate her main argument. The final chapter explores a positive change in the legal system for southern women from the antebellum era to reconstruction.

In her construction of the historical background, Molloy details that the Cult of True Womanhood formed the traditional framework in the antebellum South in which southern women operated. True Womanhood, which can be understood as a social construct, consisted of the four virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. It contained the idea that southern women could not have useful roles outside of marriage. They were expected to marry, have children, and run the household. Those who were not married were stereotyped as failures, where their roles within the community...
and the family were considered redundant. While the Cult of True Womanhood formed the overarching framework in the early eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, this slowly began to change when the Cult of Single Blessedness emerged at the end of the antebellum era, which removed “the stigma of remaining single” (p. 25). Building on the work of Anne Firor Scott and Jennifer Lynn Gross, Molloy suggests that the Civil War “further accelerated a growing social acceptance of unmarried women,” allowing them to become important contributors to society (p. 34).[2] Single Blessedness as a new ideal rapidly developed during the Civil War and in the postwar era.

This gradual change from the Cult of True Womanhood to the Cult of Single Blessedness is broadly demonstrated in the second chapter, which focuses on the southern family. Single women could provide help to their family by serving as a “family helpmeet, maiden aunt, surrogate mother and devoted sibling” (p. 72). These roles allowed them to be acknowledged for their “duty and usefulness” within their families (p. 41). Especially during and after the Civil War, when many married women suddenly became widows, most of them had no other choice than to fulfill the role of deputy husband by becoming the head of the household. Despite the tragedy of losing their loved ones and being forced into this new role, it provided a way for widowed women to prove their usefulness to the family unit. Molloy describes this as a pragmatic act. These women were “simply acting in the best interest of the family, rather than openly challenging gender norms” (p. 72). As long as single women were not threatening to the patriarchal order and demonstrated their dutiful behavior, this secured their acceptance as valuable contributors to southern communities.

As chapter 3 demonstrates, one important social change also led to another. Becoming head of the household also forced these women into other significant roles, such as plantation manager. Additionally, due to the increasing demand for women’s labor coming from the Confederacy, single women also ended up in wartime working positions as nurses and teachers. As unmarried women were more flexible than their married counterparts, it was easier for them to accept these jobs. Although these professions were often challenging, as the women had to work overtime and for low wages, it not only allowed them to become financially independent but also to challenge traditional gender roles. Overall, plantation managing, nursing, and teaching were all roles that had “their origins firmly rooted in the family” (p. 108).

While the Civil War paved the way toward more opportunities for unmarried women, it also restricted them in other areas, such as female friendship. Southern women actually achieved a limited degree of independence in the antebellum period, since they were often considered to be non-sexual beings. However, due to the rise of sexology and medical science from the 1870s onward, together with an increase in economic independence, the postwar period created a space in which the nature of female friendship was more easily questioned. Molloy shows how, for example, when Alice Baldy and Josephine Varner wanted to buy a home together and establish an all-female household, their plan was blocked for personal, financial, and familial reasons. Two women living together in the same house was “beyond the realms of what was acceptable in nineteenth-century southern society” (p. 112).

Building on local petitions taken from southern county courts in the period 1777-1867, the last chapter is certainly a great addition to Molloy’s main argument, as she demonstrates that the legal arena was an area where southern women experienced both constraint and liberation. The Civil War

accelerated legal reform and the status of single women became more easily accepted. For married women, this resulted in a significant rise in divorce rates, and never-married and widowed women experienced a gain in property rights. While the reform of the legal system can be regarded as a positive change, the most important message of this chapter is southern women's understanding that they had to fulfill the tenets of true womanhood to be more successful in getting their petition granted. From the antebellum to the post-Civil War period, women in court paradoxically had to demonstrate that they were “submissive to a higher (male) authority”—which was a constraint—in order to accomplish “the ideal of single blessedness”—a form of personal autonomy (p. 33).

Molloy broadly illustrates what lives were like for single women in the American South. Her work is clearly written and easily understood, containing strong analyses of the original and insightful primary source material. The book contains two small shortcomings. The first is that Molloy does not focus as much on slavery as the title suggests, such that the dynamics of “slaveholding” do not come forward extensively in her work. Although the short section on unmarried women as plantation managers as part of chapter 3 is informative and insightful, the reader could have benefited from more substantial information on the relationship between female plantation managers and the enslaved. Secondly, the book is occasionally repetitive, which somewhatWeakens its overall coherence. Nonetheless, despite these minor drawbacks, Molloy’s marvelous work forms an important new perspective not only on female singleness in the pre- and post-Civil War period in general, but also on friends-and-family relationships and how southern women used the legal system to their advantage. Given the variety of topics and the strong argument this book advances, Single, White, Slaveholding Women most certainly earns a spot on the bookshelf of any historian broadly interested in the lives of nineteenth-century southern women.

Notes


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