

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Reshaping Expectations and Emerging Anxieties Ideal Womanhood Receives a Makeover in Twentieth Century America

Tarah Brookfield

Volume 72, automne 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020760ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Brookfield, T. (2013). Reshaping Expectations and Emerging Anxieties: Ideal Womanhood Receives a Makeover in Twentieth Century America. *Labour / Le Travail*, 72, 295–308.

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History,

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Reshaping Expectations and Emerging Anxieties: Ideal Womanhood Receives a Makeover in Twentieth Century America

Tarah Brookfield

Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2012)

Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2010)

Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2009)

PRIOR TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, being a loving mother, a loyal wife, and a skilled homemaker was viewed as the pinnacle of ideal womanhood, a standard set for and often by white, middle class women. Many works in colonial and nineteenth-century American history have analyzed the reverence for women who appeared to embody this trifecta.¹ An equal amount of attention has been given to understanding the consequences for women viewed as not

1. Classic texts on pre-twentieth century American womanhood include Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Mary K. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: the Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Carol Smart, ed. *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Paula A. Treckel, *To Comfort the Heart: Women in Seventeenth-Century America*. (New York: Twayne, 1996); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

Tarah Brookfield, "Reshaping Expectations and Emerging Anxieties: Ideal Womanhood Receives a Makeover in Twentieth Century America," *Labour/Le Travail*, 72 (Fall 2013), 295–308.

living up to this ideal, including those who rejected these identities, as well as those whose race and class excluded opportunities to properly access these roles.² The dogma shifts in the twentieth century, when the very notion of ideal womanhood was deconstructed, critiqued, and remade. Most dramatically, enfranchisement, paid work, and family planning rights came to be seen by many women as critical components of modern womanhood. By the end of the century, increased frequency and acceptability of single parenthood, divorce, and even same sex marriage had radically transformed familial roles and household types. Alongside these changes, conservative voices continued to praise the importance of the traditional mother, wife, and homemaker ideal, while simultaneously tweaking the responsibilities attached to each role. Efforts to understand the origins and meaning behind the shifting gender norms, the subsequent anxieties and tensions caused by them, and their impact on women, families, and society have dominated the historiography of twentieth century American women's and gender history.³

The three books reviewed for this essay add to this discourse with fresh looks at how the conceptions of and qualifications for being a mother, wife, and homemaker evolved over the course of the twentieth century and withstood – some better than others – challenges to their deemed social value and association with ideal womanhood. Although women often held all three identities at once, each book is devoted to examining only one persona. This approach allows readers to appreciate the independent nature of these roles, particularly in regards to public perceptions that separate the images and responsibilities associated with motherhood from wifely and other domestic duties. Despite the different foci, the books share a similar chronology and set

2. Important works that examine rejections of or barriers to ideal womanhood include Donna R. Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820–1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company; revised edition, 1999); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Jean V. Mathews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875–1930* (Lanham: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1869* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983).

3. Here is a brief sampling of texts on shifts in modern womanhood: Sarah Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Seth Koven and Sonya Mitchell, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Molly Ladd Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Molly Ladd Taylor and Lauri Umansky, eds., *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: University Press, 1998); Elaine Taylor May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Joanne Jay Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

of players, including the two world wars, feminist activism, the rising prominence of experts, and the influence of certain texts in the popular press. The books also demonstrate how closely the ideal representations and expectations of what it meant to be an ideal woman were rooted for much, if not all, of the century in middle class values and closely associated with white privilege. Reading these three texts in conjunction allows readers to see how fragmented the values and labour associated with and between mother, wife, and homemaker became over the course of the twentieth century until it was no longer a presumed trifecta of American womanhood.

From Mother to Plain Old Mom

REBECCA JO PLANT'S *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*, the most engaging and creative of the three books, reminds readers that while mothers have occupied an especially sacrosanct status in American culture for most of the nation's history, the twentieth century treated them as a highly contested figure. Plant ascribes this decline in status to the erosion of moral motherhood, which was a "sentimental domesticity" rooted in antebellum and later Victorian ideals that "exalted the mother as the angel of the house," charging her with the moral guardianship of her family, home, and nation by emoting "a love so powerful, enduring and selfless as to border on the divine."⁴ By the interwar period, a new maternal ideal had been born, one founded in a functional biological role devoid of sentiment. Plant argues this departure was prompted by "white, middle-class women's gradual incorporation into the political and economic order as individuals rather than as wives and mothers."⁵ While the New Woman received her share of criticism for abandoning tradition, a less well known critique was directed at the time-honoured mother for her hazardous practice of overindulging in maternal affection. Not only could a mother's excessive love lead to a bevy of psychologically stunted children, particularly sons, psychologists claimed it revealed that rather than self-sacrificing, mothers were in fact "narcissistic, possessive, and pathogenic."⁶ Plant locates this turn as part of a longer history, yet she persuasively argues that "whereas mother-blaming in the past often reinforced the cultural authority of middle-class mothers at the expense of poor or non-white women, mother blaming after World War I tended to the lower the status of mothers across the board."⁷

The man Plant credits as playing a major role in debunking the All-American mother is Philip Wylie, a popular essayist and novelist, who coined the term

4. Plant, *Mom*, 2.

5. Plant, *Mom*, 2.

6. Plant, *Mom*, 8.

7. Plant, *Mom*, 14.

"momism" during his tirade against housewives in his best-selling book *Generation of Vipers* (1942). Each chapter of Wylie's polemic detailed a failing of American society, targeting greed, science, religion, academia, and government. It was the vitriolic chapter about mothers that received the greatest public attention. Wylie "depicted middle-aged and middle class moms as domestic tyrants, voracious consumers, and tiresome meddlers in social and political affairs."⁸ He railed against everything from the sentimentality of Mother's Day, housewives' mindless overconsumption, the useless prattle of women's clubs, and the tasteless sentimentality of female-friendly radio soap operas, the latter two he compared with the habits of Nazis. He saved his more vicious condemnation for the middle aged mother whose child rearing days are long gone, yet who continued to play homemaker, contributing nothing to society, and interfering with her grown sons' lives.

Plant has no doubts that *Generation of Vipers* was a case of remarkable misogyny, be it misinterpreted satire, as Wylie later claimed, or genuine anti-woman hating. Yet Plant stops short as painting *Generation of Vipers* as anti-feminist, at least in 1940s terms, because its critique of mothers is based on the acceptance of the past four decades of rapid changes to women's public status, allowing women the opportunity to hold an identity beyond the maternal. In these terms, the text is almost subversive since it reads as "a damning indictment of traditional gender roles than a call to resurrect them."⁹ In her survey of male and female readers' correspondence to Wylie, Plant find most letter writers overwhelming praised his chapter on momism and agreed it was time to end the tiresome and dangerous reign of the moral mother. Plant notes that this opinion particularly resonated with youth who "perceived Wylie's book as a defiant repudiation of Protestant orthodoxy and Victorian sexual repression, both of which they associated with the cultural idealization of motherhood."¹⁰ Even among respondents who found Wylie's characterization of mothers to be decidedly unfair and mean spirited, there was little argument that the standards used to gauge women's contributions to society had expanded since the time of their own mothers and grandmothers.

Indeed, *Generation of Vipers* represents a eulogy to moral mothers, as the preceding years had already chipped away at two ideals found at the heart of admiration for mothers: their emotional and physical suffering. It is difficult to imagine a situation where the mother of slain soldiers could be cast as villains, but Plant shows how these very women, long held as the reasons for fighting and winning wars, were slandered by the press and other activist groups as self serving, and in some cases, contrary to democratic values. Sparking this controversy were the Gold Star pilgrimages, a legislative program that saw 6,600 American mothers travel to Europe in the early 1930s to visit the graves

8. Plant, *Mom*, 20.

9. Plant *Mom*, 54.

10. Plant, *Mom*, 28.

of their sons killed during World War I. The trips were meant to honour the sacrifice of these women, and give closure to their grieving, in only a way that having their feet walk the same ground their sons died on could. Plant pulls together a number of disparate threads to show how these women's honour and assertion that motherhood was "as a civic duty as crucial as soldiering itself" was called into question.¹¹ Despite their strong adherences to a maternal identity, the war mothers did not curry favour with progressive feminists, who expressed anger that Congress killed the Sheppard-Towner Act, the federal program designed to improve maternal and infant health, yet found the funds to pay for a two week, first class trip to Europe for a handful of citizens. The Gold Star's funding may have represented the state's respect for the war mother's sacrifice (and lobbying efforts), but it did not impress progressive feminists striving to improve the living conditions of impoverished families. Nor did it curry much favour with war widows and grieving fathers who were excluded from participating in the Gold Star voyages, since their losses were not considered to be as great as the mothers'. In the scheme of things, the Gold Star criticism was a relatively minor incident; more crucial was the wartime and interwar pathologizing of mother love by psychologists and the military as being responsible for producing sons unfit for soldiering. By World War II, Plant shows how mothers were banished from inspiring wartime imagery, replaced instead by young women seeing their boyfriends and husbands off to war, while they in turn headed to the factories to do their part.

One of the most interesting cases in Plant's book is her analysis of the National Association for the Advancement of Colour People's (NAACP) boycott of the Gold Star pilgrimages when it became known there were to be segregated ships used on the voyages, and that accommodation for the Black war mothers did not match the luxury of the white women. A quarter of the Black war mothers pulled out in protest, but for the rest "mother love trumped racial solidarity" and they were labelled in the African-American press as race traitors for this choice.¹² As Plant notes, Black women had since the Civil War successfully appropriated the respectability associated with maternalism, both in their own communities and sometimes outside of them. For African Americans, moral motherhood often meant that mothers were held "responsible for instilling and cultivating racial pride"; hence civil rights activists "viewed the pilgrims' capitulation to segregation as a maternal failure, which helps to explain the strikingly harsh manner in which they condemned the women."¹³ This is one of the only chapters in all of these books that explicitly devotes attention to the experiences of non-white women and the voices of non-white public commentators on women's roles and responsibilities. This

11. Plant, *Mom*, 59.

12. Plant, *Mom*, 70.

13. Plant, *Mom*, 70.

chapter is therefore particularly valuable, making for a far richer understanding of the gendered and racialized constructions of ideal womanhood.

If the criticism levelled at war mothers helped alter perceptions of maternal status, so too did advances in medicine that promised to make the birthing experience painless. Plant demonstrates how from the colonial era onward, the pain and suffering of childbirth had long been considered critical ingredients in what made mother love so pure and special. The paternal and societal acknowledgement of labour as an ordeal; and the real risks associated with it granted middle class and elite women a certain public respect for their suffering, as well as a particular proprietary stance with their children. It could also translate into political leverage for maternal and child welfare causes. One Washington mayor proclaimed Mother's Day a state holiday "in acknowledgement and honor of the one who went down in the valley of the shadow of death for us."¹⁴ Improving maternal mortality rates and the rise of medicated births in the twentieth century lessened the maternal suffering and death in childbirth. Plant also calls attention to the postwar natural birth movement and its celebration of controlled pain. Usually these two movements are shown to be in complete opposition to one another; however Plant reveals their shared responsibility for crafting the public association that mothers need not suffer in childbirth. Whether through Lamaze or anaesthesia, the former valorization associated with labour vanished, and with it a new saintly motherhood arose where "the woman who suffered least ... came to be deemed the most worthy."¹⁵ De-emphasizing the turmoil placed on a woman's bodies during labour and delivery made the road to motherhood appear less extraordinary, and therefore less automatically laudable.

Plant ends her book with an analysis of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963). Rather than viewing it as a spark that ignited second wave feminism, she asks readers to consider it on the same continuum as *Generation of Vipers*. Although Friedan stops short of blaming mothers themselves, instead drawing attention to the systematic way women were forced into limited lives, she painted a portrait of housewives as resembling lobotomized prisoners of war. As Plant points out, Friedan's portrayal of "American mothers as parasitical and pathological" alienated countless middle-class women for whom "her exposé of suburban domesticity read less like a groundbreaking feminist manifesto than a discouragingly familiar assault on mothers and housewives."¹⁶ Although Friedan attempted to reach out to full time homemakers in her second book, this effort was not enough. As Plant states, "Though feminists supported a whole host of measures designed to make housewives less economically vulnerable, committed traditionalists would never believe that feminism represented their true interests. For in truth, the two groups

14. Plant, *Mom*, 122.

15. Plant, *Mom*, 145.

16. Plant, *Mom*, 146.

held fundamentally different and irreconcilable views on womanhood and motherhood."¹⁷ Interestingly, postwar desires to preserve identities associated with the traditional ideal woman and remake it were shared responses to the twentieth century decline of maternalism, particularly moral motherhood. Plant sees these events as representing the fall of the Mother, and all the reverence associated with that title, in favour of plain old mom.

Working 'Til Death (or Divorce) Do Us Part

AT THE SAME TIME AS MOTHERS were on the receiving end of a social make-over, wives were going through a similar transformation. If loyalty was to 19th century wives what morality was to 19th century mothers, soaring divorce rates across the twentieth century threatened wives' *raison d'être*. In 1910 only one in a thousand Americans were divorced. By 1940 the divorce rate had doubled, doubling again five years later at the end of World War II and followed by small dips and peaks in the postwar period before spiking again in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ In *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth Century United States*, Celello shows how in the decades following World War I, the rise in divorces coincided with higher expectations about marital relationships, in turn influenced by expert advice, popular culture, and wartime separation. Celello argues that the shifts in marital patterns and attitudes caused marriage to be viewed as something needing constant tending. The notion that marriage required work was entirely new, a radical change from the pre-industrial revolution view of marriage as an economic coupling or the more recent Victorian notions of a romantic companionship. Over the course of the twentieth century, the idea of marriage as work became part of the American collective consciousness, one in which "Experts and the public alike ... engaged in a constant negotiation between trying to hold on to 'traditional' relationships and transforming marriage into a thoroughly modern institution that could thrive in the face of prevalent and relatively accessible divorce."¹⁹

Certainly the idea of troubled marriage had always existed, but with divorce difficult to attain and highly stigmatized, there were too many social, economic, and legal barriers to make it a reality of everyday American life until the 1930s, especially for the middle class. The turning point, Celello argues, was the increasingly popularity of companionate marriages that imagined matrimony organized around the traditional sexual division of labour, but founded on potentially more ephemeral qualities: love, loyalty, and sexual pleasure. The result was that "Americans grew more willing to end their unions if marriage

17. Plant, *Mom*, 176.

18. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 4.

19. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 3.

failed to live up to certain romantic expectations.”²⁰ To staunch the flow of divorce, science-based experts – sociologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists – positioned themselves as a necessary third partner in guiding husbands and wives in navigating, or better yet, avoiding marital crises. They believed the key to marital survival was for men and women to receive preparatory training in the form of popular quizzes, academic classes, and counselling before they walked down the aisle. Once married, couples were expected to continue their education and turn to counselling when they encountered problems.

Despite the increase in divorces taking place during the Great Depression, Celello shows that experts paid little attention to the strain that unemployment, underemployment, and poverty had on marriages. Then, during World War II, the importance of keeping the democratic family intact was considered to be important and patriotic work, concepts which helped raise the profile of marital experts. The focal point for this advice were new war brides, whose often hastily arranged marriages were followed by long separations from their soldier husbands, leaving them to be “essentially wives without husbands.”²¹ These women were presented by experts to be at best ignorant about marriage and at worst prone to infidelity. The wives were advised to take on war work in their husbands’ absence and to prepare to receive home men changed by wartime. As wartime marriages dissolved during and after the war at alarming rates, it was clear the expert advice went unheard or was simply not useful. Despite this failure, Celello demonstrates how “The audience for a marital work ethic grew during this time”; and in “the ensuing years the ability to hold a marriage together, for better or for worse, became the very definition of marital and wifely success.”²² When divorce occurred, experts usually blamed wives for not working hard enough to make the relationship work. Much like Wylie’s attack on mothers, the shortcomings of wives became positioned as a national problem.

Cecllo’s most valuable contribution to the field is in viewing marriage not as a relationship or institution, but as a genuine form of labour performed by wives, one which had a complex relationship with women’s other paid and unpaid labour. “Experts often paid lip service to the inclusion of men in the marital work equation,” explains Celello, but in practice marriage was considered a wifely duty.²³ In the interwar and postwar periods, women’s magazines and daytime television were the most popular conduits for marital advice. These mediums directed women to adjust their attitudes about romance. If they wanted to keep their husbands, they had to create a welcoming home environment, craft a pleasing appearance, be responsible in planning pregnancies,

20. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 23.

21. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 61.

22. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 71

23. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 41

and keep within the prescribed family budget. In the 1960s and 1970s feminist voices inserted an alternative opinion, arguing that it was equality above all else that was the most important factor in marital success. By the 1980s, when many middle class families included dual income spouses, most experts agreed that a good marriage should be an equalitarian one. Yet Celello's chapter on the rise of second shift also shows that women, both as working wives and as homemakers, continued to perform the majority of domestic labour. In the latter twentieth century, marriage care was considered one more domestic chore to tackle alongside child care, cooking, and cleaning. One exception to this discourse was during the resurgence of the Conservative right in the 1980s, which saw groups like the Promise Keepers reclaim male authority in the home because God had ordained men to be in charge of their families. Yet "Such calls for reinscribing male authority," Celello argues, "had little to say about men's roles in the daily work of their marriage relationships, precisely because they work had traditionally been performed by women."²⁴

Cecllo explains that women's leadership in marriage work happened not only because it was assorted with the domestic realm, but because of the lingering presumption that "women had more of a vested interest, as well as the necessary time, to work toward a successful marriage."²⁵ Although rarely named by the marriage experts, Celello unpacks the assumptions positioning women as continually having more to gain from marriage compared to men. Even with increasing amounts of married women performing paid work outside the home throughout the century, from an economic perspective, men's continually higher wages created the impression that women automatically gained much needed financial security from marriage. Although, as Plant shows, motherhood was contested during this period, marriage continued to be the most reliable realm in which women could achieve the greatest public respectability and remain free of the scorn heaped upon divorced women. Furthermore, until birth control and abortion became legal and more liberal views about sex became the norm, marriage was the only approved space for women to have sex. Rightly or wrongly, these intertwined factors positioned women as the spouse most motivated to stay married.

Repackaging the Expert

THE TYPICAL EXPERTS ACTIVE in altering women's images in the books *Mom* and *Making Marriage Work* are men with accreditation in the sciences, social sciences, law, and journalism; also visible are self appointed social critics such as Wylie who feel compelled to share the wisdom of their experience. Women's authority in these matters remain on the fringes, either by the nature of their less mainstream ideology, such as most second wave feminist activists, or

24. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 152.

25. Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 42.

because their position as editors and writers of women's magazines do not grant them the same name recognition or authority as professional men. However, in *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America*, Carolyn M. Goldstein unmasks a legion of female experts who received the same respect and attention for their disciplinary knowledge as did male professionals. Although their field of expertise and associated skills were highly gendered, domestic scientists achieved their credibility in the same way as their male colleagues did in other fields, through graduate degrees, research experience, and funding from state and business sources.

Goldstein positions the rise of home economics as a consequence of late nineteenth century industrialization, which saw "the economic function of American homes shift[ing] from producing goods and services to consuming them."²⁶ Domestic scientists, predominantly college educated, middle class white females, saw themselves as absolutely necessary and perfectly suited to guide homemakers through the transition from producer to consumer, as well as to act as a trustworthy advisor on the "women viewpoint" to manufacturers and the government.²⁷ This choice befits a profession whose chief value was education. It was also a means of self preservation to keep their field, one that initially focused on the production side of making household goods, but relevant in the technologically evolving consumer economy. Goldstein argues that this cohort of home economists operating in the first half of the twentieth century should be considered as "mediators" in their secondary relationship to the market, one where they served both producer and consumer, though she acknowledges certain career paths placed many more solidly in one camp or another.²⁸

Creating Consumers provides a detailed history of the field of home economists and shows how individual leaders employed in universities, government agencies, think tanks, and corporations came to shape public opinion about consumer goods. Their influence was particularly effective regarding anything to do with the kitchen, be it appliances, processed foods, and recipes; indeed, home economists were often critical players in designing instructional guides, marketing campaigns, and nutritional standards. There was great focus on training women to be rational consumers, ones who made savvy choices that enhanced their families' health and happiness while protecting their budget. Goldstein demonstrates how this goal reinforced mainstream gender norms which "tied women's social responsibility to their work in the home" while also elevating "the status of that role by maintaining that women's work as consumers had social and economic value."²⁹ The embrace of the rational

26. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 1.

27. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 4.

28. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 10–11.

29. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 45.

consumer identity also gave “homemakers a roadmap for achieving middle class identity through consumption.”³⁰ Of course favouring consumption over home production was to be tempered during the scarcity of the Great Depression and World Wars, when achieving a middle class lifestyle included a return to frugal domestic production and conservation. Guiding homemakers in times of national crisis was framed as critical patriotic and civic work for the home economists employed by the United State Bureau of Home Economics (USBHE), the major employer of home economists in the 1920s through to the early 1940s.

For home economists in the private sector, it was critical to their code of ethics to be “objective professionals” who balanced the needs and wants of producers and consumers equally.³¹ Yet the 1936 theatrical performance of *Experiment 63*, a play commissioned by the American Home Economics Association for incoming domestic science students, suggests the impossibility of objectivity in a corporate environment. In this play Miss Welldone, a home economist employed in the experimental kitchen of an advertising agency, is shown to be impressively innovative on her first day of the job where she excels at planning promotions and recipes for the Bingo Beans account. She is also an example of grace under pressure when bullied by a consumer regulation group. The play concludes with Miss Welldone being fawned over by the company owner for her “million dollar scheme” of marketing ideas. While the play is meant to celebrate Miss Welldone’s impressive ingenuity and usefulness, it is also clear that it is in her best interests to put the corporation’s needs first, thus guaranteeing her job security and career advancement.³² The underlying message in *Experiment 63* is supported with evidence from real home economists employed in corporations, where their main role was to assist in crafting a superior product that appealed to consumers and result in profits. Home economists rose to the occasion as they simultaneously had to justify the expense of their salaries and the value of offering not only their technical skills, but also a window into women’s minds. At times it was challenging to reconcile the origins of their profession in education reform with the demands of corporate capitalism. Regardless of the moral tensions, home economists proved their worth in product testing, development, promotion and sales and found stable employment throughout the interwar period.

The latter part of *Creating Consumers* documents the redundancy of home economists in the postwar period. Despite it being an era of unprecedented consumption driven by economic prosperity and Cold War ideology, home economists’ “special feminine connection to food preparation and the ‘average’ homemaker” was undermined by the closure of the USBHE and the rise of

30. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 45.

31. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 137.

32. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 136–137.

male dominated business and technical specialties.³³ As well, the rejection of domesticity in the women's liberation movement "placed home economists' field under harsh public scrutiny and criticism."³⁴ Presumably, having several generations of homemakers used to modern consumption also played a role in lessening the demand for such extensive professional expertise in what had become the norm. Due to the disconnect between expertise and need, state funded and corporate home economics jobs disappeared, and academic positions shrunk significantly. Many degree programs closed while others merged into education faculties. If *Experiment 63* were remounted in the 1980s, it would likely feature the granddaughter of Miss Welldone employed in the last refuge of domestic science, a home economics high school classroom.

Conclusion

ALTHOUGH THEY ARE INTERESTING in their own right, when they are considered in tandem the books *Mom*, *Making Marriage Work*, and *Creating Consumers* underscore the exceptional upheavals that perceptions of ideal womanhood underwent across the twentieth century. Certainly women have always been told they needed to work hard at managing their private lives and households. The difference in the twentieth century, compared to earlier periods, was that women were no longer seen as capable of managing their private lives without the outside assistance of strangers, usually men. Also new was that married middle class, white mothers, normally the standard to which all racialized, immigrant, working class, poor, and single women were thought to be unfit in comparison, were constructed in the advice literature as needing rehabilitation. This shift suggests that regardless of status and privilege, women could not escape the gendered assumptions about their inability to behave in the best interests of their family and nation.

At the same time, these books demonstrate the symbolic significance that mothers and wives held throughout the twentieth century. Left to their own devices, these women were thought to love their children too much and their husbands not enough. Moreover, their previous homemaking skills became superfluous in the modern world that changed them from producers to consumers. The imagined cost of not subscribing to the new remodelled version of ideal womanhood was legions of broken families, and consequentially a broken nation. Unsurprisingly this anxiety was heightened during wartime when the United States was most alert for fifth column saboteurs, be they spies, enemy aliens, or uncooperative women. This latter group included mothers producing sons too emotionally weak to be soldiers, disloyal wives who were leaving soldier husbands without happy homes in which to return, and irrational homemakers who were wasting national resources. Amid the

33. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 244.

34. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 282.

chorus of experts who positioned themselves as crisis managers, self help sages, or methodical scientists, we hear voices of women who were critical of the women-blaming rhetoric, and the added workload that accompanied it. At the same time, since these activists' main focus was usually on achieving equity in the public sphere, the authors demonstrate how suffragists, second wave feminists, and women professionals, either deliberately or consequentially, contributed to remaking and undoing older perceptions of mothers, wives, and homemakers.

This research reveals what a deafening force self ascribed and professionally accredited experts were in transforming perceptions of ideal womanhood across the twentieth century. It also speaks to the availability of expert source types. We meet very few real mothers, wives and homemakers in the three books. Rather we are introduced to popular representations of married couples on screen or in the pages of advice columns, meant to act as inspirations or warning signs to their audiences. It would have been helpful if the authors had broadened their use of sources from the prescriptive to get closer to the lived experiences. Plant gets the closest to this with her use women's letters to Wylie and other experts, but we really do not gain much insight in how ordinary women grappled with, listened to, or even cared about the public attacks and makeovers on their identities. Did the discourse have much impact on women's daily lives? If so, for whom and how? Did region matter? What about political affiliation or religion? Reaching the so called ordinary woman, a construction in itself, is always a challenge for social historians. Oral history might have been one way for Celello to see how couples interpreted the advice and performed marital work away from the gaze of experts. This might have left an opening to discuss a topic left out of the advice literature – domestic violence – and its role as an instigator of divorce or marital work. As well, knowing more about the private lives of the domestic scientists and how they balanced work and home life, or evidence from consumer groups, might have been a way for Goldstein to see how the home economic campaigns were consumed at the grassroots level.

Children are also surprisingly absent from these three works. Despite the focus on mothering, we hear little about or from the children themselves. They are barely mentioned as the casualties of divorce or as newly situated teenage consumers. Even if contemporary experts did not see the children themselves as essential agents in remaking ideal womanhood, the role and experiences of middle class children goes through rapid transformation in the twentieth century, much of which is interconnected to their place in the family and occupied its own set of advice literature. I would have expected books that place families at the centre to have cast more visibility on where children fit into these debates or how their voices and experience could make the history richer.

Despite the limitations that come from depending so much on prescriptive sources, Plant, Celello and Goldstein's work offers insight into an understudied

phenomenon of twentieth century America. While suffrage, war work, development of the welfare state, civil rights, women's liberation tend to dominate the narrative of what changed for American women in this era and what complicated assumptions about ideal womanhood, these new books show how what was considered to be women's most stable of identities went through great change too. Expectations about what it meant to be a wife, mother, and homemaker were radically transformed in terms of the emotional and social value assigned to each role and the labour seen as necessary to achieve the recommended standards. Not surprisingly, there were no final words or victors in these debates and they continue today. Once again at the centre are a myriad of experts, this time most of this women, who analyze, panic over, and celebrate middle class women's rejection, acceptance, or merging of traditional and modern versions of womanhood. Whether one examines the Mommy Wars or the Having It All conundrum, the ideals associated with motherhood, marriage, domestic chores, and paid work continue to remain contentious, challenged, and in flux as they did in America during the last century.³⁵

35. See for example these two pieces: Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>; Stephanie Coontz, "The Triumph of the Working Mother," *The New York Times*, 1 June 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/opinion/sunday/coontz-the-triumph-of-the-working-mother.html>.