
Lori Merish. *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 389p.

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For about a decade, Americanists have been working on rethinking the meaning of the once-maligned sentimental tradition. A part of this larger project, Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* will be most useful for scholars of American literature and scholars of gender since it gives a sprawling and often tantalizing account of ways in which American commodity culture found its emotional expression in the sentimental forms of the nineteenth-century. Merish's primary project is to show how things became not merely things but incorporations of both text and ideology (particularly as these things are consumed by women in sentimental narratives): that is, as Merish says in the preface, the nineteenth-century prelude to the twentieth-century Cartesian cogito, "I shop; therefore I am."

Sentimental Materialism takes the reader on a chronological voyage through a variety of cultural expressions that reveal the economics of market culture as an underpinning of sentimentalism. Reasoning that the republican culture of the eighteenth century must be a prelude to the flowering of consumerism in the nineteenth, Merish, following the Frankfurt School, reads the Scottish Enlightenment as central to a rethinking of the relationship between capitalism and freedom. She links this idea to the beginnings of the sentimental narrative in America, suggesting that women's political existence in the new republic depended on the organization of female emotions through the trope of the domestic.

By the 1830s, the fledgling nation had undergone significant changes and the elements of consumerism were feminized. Merish theorizes that religion played a role in the development of commodity culture, arguing that, contrary to received belief, there is no impassable gulf between materialism and revivalism. Through her reading of Peter Cartwright's *Autobiography*, she posits that nineteenth-century Americans were exposed to the notion that the maintenance of a certain style of home and the acquisition of appropriate domestic objects were indications of one's spiritual standing. The work of spreading this gospel of religious comfort and decency devolved on women and was reflected in sentimental narratives.

Building on her discussion of the psychology of caring for objects and home as part of logic of sentimental consumerism, chapter three makes the case that the creation of an emotional face for consumerism made consumerism's capitalist imperatives seem natural and human. The portrayals of this economy of domestic happiness hid a variety of unpleasant facts about the management of a comfortable home. The drudgery of domestic work was painted as an outpouring of love and everything in a household, from pets to children to slaves and servants, was reconstituted as marginalized objects whose existence was refracted through and dependent on the sentimental vision.

Because the human objects of the domestic sentimental vision are themselves subjects who participate in American culture, Merish balances the chapters on white women's sentimentalism with an examination of the sentimental strategies of African-American women. In the process of incorporating the sentimental design, black women call into question the very basis of sentimentality. Some, like Harriet Jacob in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, subtly undermine the precepts of sentimentality because the unpleasant realities of the slave situation force a re-ordering of the conventions to accommodate both truth and ideology. In stark contrast to those who accepted the implicit requirements of the dominant culture, Sojourner Truth rejected all the ladylike underpinnings of sentimentality and found herself criticized by both white and black men. As a further exploration of the construction of African-American women's identity, Merish introduces subject of commodity through a less known text, Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. A slave who became seamstress to fashionable Washington women, including and most importantly Mary Todd Lincoln, President Lincoln's wife, Keckley was able to manipulate both the practice of dressmaking and sentiment. Like Keckley, African-American women appropriated fashion as "an alternative, competing register of publicity and social recognition" problematizing "binaristic constructions of racial embodiment" (229). African-American narratives such as those of Pauline Hopkins and Emma Dunham Kelley helped in the creation of an African-American equivalent of the white sentimental female; this sentimentalized African-American female, usually a mulatta, provided a means for African Americans to participate in the same civic conventions that governed the social recognition of white American women.

Awash in a sea of female consumption by the end of the century, American culture discovered an acceptable male version of consumerism, one that incorporated the outward thrust of American imperialism. This "highly visible and highly charged imperial commodity" was, naturally enough, the cigar (270). The advertising and cartoons of the 1890s vividly show the "cross-racial homoerotics" of

this obvious phallic symbol. In a world dominated by an ideology of consumerism explicitly identified with the feminine, male consumption of cigars carried within it the twin identities of the frontier spirit and imperialism in its conquest over the Other.

This overview of Merish's argument merely hints at its complexity. She brings together many texts that are not widely known: I have noted a few of these, particularly the biographies by Cartwright and Keckley, but I have not had the space to address the many others she cites including novels by Eliza Farnham, Frances Harper, and a whole genre called the Mormon novel. Like many texts that are thematic and cultural in their approach, the amount of territory that Merish covers is both vast and extremely specific; consequently, the argument is often a bit diffuse. Although it has many strengths, the scholarship should be less broad in some of its claims. For example, Merish says that she will identify the discourses that promoted certain historical developments (2). In chapter two, she argues that the sentimental tradition incorporates a historical development she titles "pious materialism" (91). Yet the primary evidence the text presents for the widespread nature of this development among Protestants is a single, not widely known, text by Peter Cartwright, a Methodist. Despite this cavil, Merish's book offers the reader an opportunity to rethink sentimentalism, an important element of nineteenth-century American social, political, and artistic culture. ✱