

in Virginia and the Carolinas, and some of her conclusions are specific to these groups and areas. Her attempt to puzzle through this vexing conundrum, however, has important implications for historians generally.

Although she is also careful to identify changes (and continuities) in the material and social organization of women's lives, Kierner seeks her answer primarily in cultural change, particularly in evolving ideas of what constituted "public" life. The years after the revolution witnessed a critical narrowing of what Americans understood to constitute a public presence. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kierner suggests, the measure of "public-ness" was the presence of males (and the absence of females—except, perhaps, as affirming observers) rather than any quality inherent in the activity or arena.

The particular trajectory of this shift in Virginia and the Carolinas was fundamentally determined by slavery. The commitment of the planter classes to that institution strengthened their commitment to authoritarian social structures and forestalled the emergence of radical critiques that might have encompassed gender as well as race.

Yet, it is a mistake, Kierner argues, to take the resulting patriarchal discourse fully at face value. In fact, throughout the antebellum era "white southern women . . . participated in the affairs of the public sphere and, in some instances, influenced the form and content of public life" (213)—as churchgoers, essayists, novelists, members of voluntary societies, social leaders, and sponsors of a myriad of public events. Kierner attributes the failure of these activities to generate a self-conscious feminist critique to their failure to assume a distinctly sex-segregated form—a development that fostered a certain self-conscious autonomy in the North.

In addition to its contributions to the ongoing critique of the public sphere, *Beyond the Household* offers provocative readings of the "public performance" of social rank as Southern elites attempted to consolidate themselves as a class—first against poorer whites and later against enslaved African-Americans.

Jeanne Boydston  
University of Wisconsin, Madison

*Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.* By Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998) 1383 pp. \$49.95

This remarkable history of New York City is not "interdisciplinary" in any conventional sense, but it may constitute an exemplification of synthetic narrative as a form of interdisciplinarity. No professional has ever written a narrative history of New York, and amateur attempts have been few, the last serious one more than a century ago. Burrows and Wallace have collected a mountain of monographic and antiquarian

writing, and they have synthesized it in a way that is likely to engage and inform professional and general readers alike.

*Gotham* does not offer a “strong” narrative; it relies upon subtitles as the ligature of synthesis. Still, the authors have smelted and refined the raw history upon which they build. Although they never hesitate to divert readers to a rich and revealing story or theme, there is, in fact, a big story, even if it remains more implicit than it should: the development of a trading post established on the periphery of a European empire into a self-sustained metropolis that rose to a position of power on the Atlantic stage, and perhaps even the global one, on the eve of the twentieth century.

Writing in an ironic mode, Burrows and Wallace tell the story of a city seeking (or being forced) to accommodate diversity, democracy, and capitalism; aspiring to be a place of justice, but often falling short, trapped in categories of thought and practice that cannot breach the boundaries of race, gender, or class; wanting to be a capital of culture, even though often more comfortable with capital and an imitative and sometimes crudely commercial culture.

Burrows and Wallace are sensitive to issues of process and structure, but they place more emphasis on particular people, places, enunciations, and human agency than, say, William Cronon in his quite different *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991). The virtue of *Gotham* is very much in the details. It visits New Yorkers in their homes and neighborhoods, their streets and workplaces, and their institutions of culture, entertainment, and politics. The central preoccupations of the authors—immigration, classes, races, gender, industrialization, urban development, political mobilization, cultural aspiration, and more—come to the readers through many voices; like New York itself, *Gotham* is filled with the kind of contending and loud voices that gives the city and this history its character.

The national and international context of New York's history is underdeveloped, however. The city is too self-contained; cities are not so firmly bounded. The translocal is especially important to New York, as Fanny Wright recognized in 1829, when she observed that the city “is the most central spot both with respect to Europe and this country” (511). There is not enough attention to intrusions from beyond the city, nor to the extensions of the city's life (economic, political, and cultural) beyond itself.

Thomas Bender  
New York University