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Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century America

Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), illustration, p. 275, 284-295.

William A. Alcott, *The Young Wife; Or, Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation* (Boston: Charles D. Strong, 1851), 83-96.

These two documents offer different, but in some respects complementary, views of women's "duties" in nineteenth-century America. The question that I typically ask students enrolled in my "History of the American Home" course offers a good starting point for our discussion: Did Beecher and Alcott believe that housework was "work"? Why or why not?

The daughter of Lyman Beecher, a prominent Presbyterian minister and evangelist, and the sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Catherine E. Beecher (1800-1878) was a renowned educator and prolific author. Her best-known work, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, was first published in 1841. As its subtitle indicates, Beecher intended her treatise as both a textbook to be read by students enrolled in "female academies" and as a guidebook for housewives. *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* included more than thirty chapters and offered detailed instructions on subjects ranging from "economy of time and expenses" to "the propagation of plants."

A cousin of Bronson Alcott (the father of author Louisa May Alcott), William A. Alcott was a physician, educator, and widely published advice writer who is probably best remembered as an early proponent of vegetarianism. His various advice manuals, including *The Young Husband*, *The Young Man's Guide*, *The Young Woman's Guide*, and *The Physiology of Marriage*, were controversial in their time for their relatively explicit discussions of sexuality, which Alcott believed needed to be carefully regulated. As this excerpt from *The Young Wife* suggests, Alcott's concerns extended to gender roles within marriage.