

A Case Study of Mary Church Terrell, 1891-1925

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Abstract

Historian Shirley Carlson used the “Black Victorian” to expound her views on the characteristics of black women in public/private spheres. According to Carlson’s definition, the “Black Victorian” refers to the cult of Black womanhood. In this article, I wish to discuss the “Black Victorian” and the influences of racial reasons on black gender relations through a case study of Mary Church Terrell in 1891-1925. It is asserted that black women should follow the spirit of the cult of true womanhood in the private sphere, but they are also expected to be active in public sphere for the sake of their race. Once black women accepted responsibility for “lifting race,” there were no reasons for black men to interfere in women’s activities in public spheres. This provided black women with opportunities for self-development unavailable to white women, but was also expressive of the obstacles the black women faced—race and gender. Furthermore, when black women could play active roles in the public sphere for the race, Black men should take up some responsibilities formerly assumed by women in the private sphere. Thus, interactions between men and women in Black communities also changed. The case of the Terrells provide a good example of this.

Key Words: Mary Church Terrell, Robert H. Terrell, Black Victoria, political domesticity