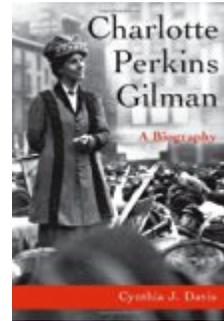


Cynthia J. Davis. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 568 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3888-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-3889-7.

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## A Living Defined by Doing (All the) Things

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was many things, including poet, novelist, journalist, preacher, mother, wife, and friend. She remains one of the most profound voices and prolific writers of the women's movement. Although Gilman's life story has been told before, not least by Gilman herself, Cynthia J. Davis, professor of English at University of South Carolina, Columbia, seeks to provide a more comprehensive narrative in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography*. [1] Rather than emphasize one phase over another, Davis offers readers a broader look at Gilman's entire life, or as Gilman would have it, her "living." Davis explains in the introduction, "Charlotte preferred the term *living* to *life*. She insisted on this distinction because, as Gilman wrote, '[l]ife is a verb, not a noun. Life is living, living is doing'" (p. xv). *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* is a remarkable retelling of a "living" that includes, but is not limited to, the career of a figure larger than life.

Unlike previous biographers, Davis seeks to produce a "thick description" of this controversial figure. [2] She begins simply with nomenclature. Not only did Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ideals ebb and flow throughout her life, but so too did her identity; she used three different surnames over the course of her life. Davis opts to refer to her subject more intimately as "Charlotte," the identity retained through each phase of her life. The choice suits Davis's ambition with this work: to produce a unified narrative of a figure whose identity changed several times. Whatever may be lost in the more informal signification is more than regained through Davis's familiarity

with her subject and sources.

Divided into six chronological parts, each distinguished according to Charlotte's locale (save part 3 titled "At Large"), *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* unfurls a timeline of sorts that pauses to reflect on, among other things, Charlotte's genealogy and relevant popular culture. Part 1, "New England," is most pointed in its contextualization of Charlotte. Firmly rooted in New England through her ties to the Beecher family, Charlotte's story unfolds from an ostensibly coherent family tradition. At once proud of Beecher conviction and uninterested in the family's evangelicalism, Charlotte charts a path according to her own principles, namely "doing things" to better humanity and to worship God (p. 34).

Davis succeeds at making Charlotte a complicated figure caught between being selfish and selfless—a spectrum many educated, white, middle-class Americans occupied during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Like Gilman herself, Davis moves her foci between Charlotte the individual and Charlotte the piece in a larger context. She adeptly paints Charlotte as both unique and representative of her own time. For instance, Davis demonstrates how Charlotte remained interested in but not committed to popular reform movements of her time, such as the suffrage or settlement house movement. In both cases Charlotte remained sympathetic to the cause but convinced that the movement was too narrow in its ambitions. Charlotte supported, for example, her friend Jane Addams and even stayed at Hull House during a visit

to Chicago, but her devotion to humanity did not include serving in a settlement house herself.

Where other Gilman-focused works, like Judith A. Allen's recent manuscript, have focused on Charlotte's public role as a feminist writer, Davis notably places Charlotte's public works in conversation with her private thoughts.<sup>[3]</sup> Never too far removed from Charlotte's literary significance, Davis sprinkles her narrative with quotations that frame chapters and subsections. The plethora of epigraphs brings Charlotte's voice to the fore, especially when the historical record falls silent. In this respect, Charlotte's public voice aids in understanding her private life. It is in these instances, however, when Davis's hand as an editor-turned-biographer is most prevalent. On the page, Charlotte's poetry and literature appear as an intervention in her "living." Davis inserts poignant excerpts from Charlotte's poems and novels when chronicling episodes of depression, frustrations with lovers, and ostensible shortcomings as a maternal figure. Though she does not argue as much directly, Davis's presentation results in Charlotte's personal relationships appearing as an interloper in her public endeavors.

As a result, Davis portrays Charlotte's literature more as a means to work through private struggles than a selfless effort to contribute to society. Refreshingly, Davis does not shy away from juxtaposing Charlotte's professed philosophies with her lived experiences. A major strength of this biography is Davis's willingness to reveal inconsistencies, contradictions, and potentially unflattering elements of Charlotte's aspirations. One may read such peccadilloes as evidence of Charlotte's idealistic escape from reality; however, in Davis's telling these details provide necessary depth to the causes that at first blush often appear romantically utopian. The best summation of the tug-of-war between a "domestic" Charlotte and a "public" one belongs to an aside buried in chapter 6: "it was in Charlotte's best interest to be selfless" (p. 153). Even though Charlotte sought to do her "living" according to high standards of service to others, Davis demonstrates that she was consistently nagged by the unwelcome demands of her own life. Consequently, Davis's contribution lies in bringing Charlotte's private, personal life in conversation with her professional life and creative endeavors.

In spite of her extensive knowledge of Charlotte's life and letters, Davis avoids heavy-handed analysis. Prudent with her speculations, Davis does account for both

her own educated doubt regarding the current historical record and probable misrepresentations based on Charlotte's self-perception. Davis clearly admires her subject but refrains from placing her on a pedestal. Curiously, however, Davis appears reluctant to define Charlotte's relationship to her close friend Martha as homosexual despite Charlotte's conspicuous unrequited feelings. Davis chooses to quote—rather than describe—Charlotte's letters and poetry devoted to the loss of Martha to marriage, allowing the reader to determine the nature of their relationship. What remains curious is *why* Davis is reluctant to define the relationship as homosexual rather than homosocial. Given Charlotte's proclivity to both assert herself and redefine her identity over time, this critical period calls for the analysis of a historian. Davis's interventions, though infrequent, are welcome and, in this case, needed.

For a biography of a figure directed by her beliefs, more contextualization of Charlotte's changing religious views is also warranted. Raised in the midst of Beecher evangelicalism, drawn to the healing powers of theosophy and spiritualism, and driven by liberal Protestant hopes in the progress of humanity, Charlotte's credos were part and parcel of larger trends in American religion that go underexplored. These quibbles, however, should not detract from Davis's achievement. As a comprehensive biography, the book more than succeeds. After reading *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography*, one is surprised that Charlotte's career was left for so long without being considered as a whole. Even though Davis's work weighs in at over five hundred pages, her writing style and fruitful research leave the reader wanting more, rather than less, of both Charlotte's *and* Davis's observations.

#### Notes

[1]. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935).

[2]. Ann J. Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990); Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); and Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne, 1985).

[3]. *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, and Progressivism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

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