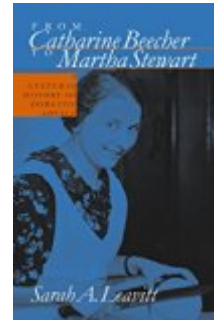


Sarah A. Leavitt. *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiii + 250 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2702-4.



Reviewed by Samantha C. Thrift

Published on H-Women (June, 2003)

Domesticating Fantasies

According to Sarah A. Leavitt, "[f]urniture, curtains and bathroom fixtures do not have inherent qualities of morality or character. Domestic advice manuals give these items cultural significance and characteristics. Just as a cigar is never really just a cigar, a living room can never be just a living room" (p. 5). The author convincingly argues this point in her engaging book *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. Leavitt's study of these women and their works reveals how domestic advisors understood and articulated the connections between domestic space and the larger world. She contends that domestic advisors and their texts constructed fantasies about the home that were shaped by prevailing national ideologies of gender, race, and class. Ultimately, "the true domestic fantasy was that women held the power to reform their society through first reforming their homes" (p. 5).

Leavitt uses the quintessential domestic diva of contemporary times, Martha Stewart, as a springboard for her analysis, stating that, "[t]his

book, in essence a genealogy of domestic advice, locates Martha Stewart in a historical context of writing about the home that has been important to American culture for more than a century" (p. 4). Although intrigued by the spectacular success of Stewart, who preaches domestic advice from her Omnimedia pulpit, Leavitt demonstrates that her appeal is not altogether novel or surprising, given the cultural themes that surface in more than a century's worth of advice about the home.

This book traces the emergent themes in domestic advice literature between 1850 and 1950. The author pays particular attention to the fifty-year time period between 1890 and 1940 because it "demonstrates the relationships between the home and the rise of formal education and professionalization for women, as well as the dramatic influence of consumer culture in constructing expectations for the household in that period" (p. 5). Along with manuals, trade catalogues, magazines, and periodicals, Leavitt includes more unusual items in her analysis, such as housing floorplans, architectural sketches of domestic technologies, and even school assignments from a home eco-

nomics student. The diversity of this collection of resources makes for a rich and nuanced examination of the domestic culture of that time period.

In her book, Leavitt discusses how domestic advice writing created a means by which women were in control of a collective female moral destiny. The first few chapters identify several cultural themes emerging from domestic advice manuals, including morality, science, Americanization, and modernism. To begin, Leavitt describes how late-nineteenth-century advisors like Catharine Beecher emphasized the importance of Christian ideals, such as simplicity, cleanliness, and affordability, in domestic space. The parlor, especially, was a highly contested moral ground for the frugally minded advisors and their "falsely opulent" middle-class readerships. However, at the turn of the century, the concern for simple, even sparse, home furnishing and decoration was couched in the newly emergent scientific discourse of cleanliness and hygiene--a secular authority that was penetrating the American middle class. In turn, these women became educated in the "science" of homekeeping; domestic advisors "turned every home into a small laboratory, where women could control the experiments" (p. 41). The professionalization and institutionalization (i.e., schooling for girls) of home economics occurred during this period. The early twentieth century also witnessed a massive influx of immigrants to the United States. A number of domestic advisors addressed the "old world" ideas about the home that accompanied these new populations, by advocating their "Americanization." Domestic advisors believed that if immigrants' homes could be reformed, so could immigrants' lives. This was particularly important, since the home was perceived to be a foundational element of the nation's life and strength (pp. 76, 78).

In her chapter on the Modernist influence on domesticity, Leavitt skillfully describes how domestic advisors navigated the gendered terrain between the masculine modernist sensibility ad-

vocated in their manuals and the feminine Victorian style preferred by most homemaking women. Subsequent chapters consider the impact of pop psychology on color choice and children, and the management of contradictory aesthetics in the domestic space, such as Modernism with Colonial New England or American with exoticism. Her final chapter explores how the open-space house plan sold to middle-class families in the postwar era promulgated a domestic fantasy of "togetherness." The new architectural design signified not only the value of a strong family bond, but also the socio-political importance of the home as it represented "America's best virtue" (p. 191).

By specifying the links that connect the private, feminized space of the home to the public, masculinized arena of "culture," Leavitt joins the ranks of other writers, both historians and otherwise, who have laid bare the dialectical construction and perpetuation of the separate spheres of gendered influence (like Lynn Spigel, who has conducted exemplary analyses of the impact of television on the family in the postwar era).[1] Without fail, Leavitt pinpoints the connections between the seemingly insignificant elements of a household, such as bric-a-brac or area rugs, and the cultural ideologies that speak to issues of gender, patriotism, religion, and morality. Leavitt's subject matter is particularly noteworthy. She focuses on a neglected tradition of women who accessed a position of authority originating in the home. Leavitt convincingly illustrates the unique role held by these women, as they used their public voices to disseminate ideas relating to the role of women and education, social action, and science, as well as domestic advice. Moreover, the domestic advisors' cultural authority provided a means to create discourse about and to help construct national ideologies. By focusing exclusively on domestic advisors and their writings, Leavitt's succinctly argued book constitutes an original and substantial contribution to the field of domesticity

studies that will benefit scholars interested in American history and gender studies.

Throughout the chapters, Leavitt gives her reader brief vignettes of several domestic advisors, effectively contextualizing the concerns, interests, and motivations that drove their prescriptive writings. According to these descriptions, domestic advisors were women with interests and achievements external to the home; they were social and/or political activists, doctoral degree holders, scientists, and educators. This is an especially significant component of the analysis, since it not only gives the advisors a more human face, but also demonstrates that despite their varied interests and accomplishments, domesticity persevered as a concern and priority for these women—a theme which is noticeable in contemporary women's fascination with Martha Stewart.

Another strength of this book is the quality of Leavitt's analysis as a whole. In her explanations of the associations drawn between certain household furnishings and cultural ideologies, the author does not simplify the complex intersection of cultural, political, and social beliefs by considering the multidimensional impact of emerging social trends, such as pop psychology, literacy rates, immigration patterns, political climates, social movements, and technological innovations. In addition, Leavitt avoids generalizing her subjects and their audiences. Although much of the writing in domestic advice manuals was directed toward white, middle-class women, the author pays attention to the impact of the advice on new populations, such as immigrants. For instance, bric-a-brac in a white, middle-class home referred to "too many pictures on [the] wall, too many tassels on a curtain pull, or too many pillows on a sofa." Leavitt continues, making note that for immigrant homes, bric-a-brac denoted "religious statuary, crocheted afghans, and other 'foreign' and 'unnecessary' objects" (p. 121). Such inclusions of the *other* perspective create a wonderful friction in what could have been a superficial reading of the

white, middle-class experience. Leavitt sets forth a nuanced understanding of domestic advisors. Given that their advice remained quite consistent over the decades, it could have been easy to portray the domestic advisors as a homogeneous collective. However, the author reminds her reader that these were individual women who offered different advice, stemming from different agendas. For instance, in the age of staunch Americanization, the New Mexican domestic advisor, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert, endeavored to bridge a cultural gap by "influencing both the way that Hispanic New Mexicans viewed mainstream American culture and the way that Americans all over the country viewed New Mexico" (p. 87).

While Leavitt has delivered exceptional historical scholarship and analysis, there are a couple of points in her argument that could stand to be more fully explored. The first relates to one of the stated purposes (and title) of the book, which was to situate Martha Stewart within a historical context of domestic advice. Without problem, Leavitt places Stewart within a historical tradition. She also evinces thematic continuities between early domestic advice literature and contemporary advice writing, especially in her concluding chapter where she notes the presence of extensive home improvement sections in local bookstores. She also makes the case that fantasy is an integral part of domestic advice literature, even in contemporary times. However, this reviewer found the transition made between the end of the study in the 1950s and the domestic advice market of the 1990s too superficial and lacking in adequate commentary. Primarily, Leavitt could offer her readers more of an explanation of Stewart's place within this matrix of domestic advice history. Undoubtedly, the forty years of tumultuous (and feminist) history that transpired between the end of Leavitt's document analysis and the rise of Martha Stewart have affected the content, production, and reception of domestic advice writing.

The second point pertains to a founding premise of the text, which is that domestic advice writing sells a domestic fantasy, since the proffered advice was not realized by women in their everyday lived experience. Leavitt finely demonstrates this in her analysis of her primary documents. However, women's engagement with Martha Stewart's lifestyle seems to occur on a practical, tangible level. Although it is true that Stewart's projects *in toto* articulate a fantasy vision of domesticity, fans readily acknowledge their attempts to recreate Martha's projects. Part of Stewart's phenomenon, and a major difference from early domestic writing, is the apparent desire to take Stewart's advice, to whatever degree. Leavitt herself confesses that, "[I] had prepared her special-occasion hors d'oeuvres for a recent Superbowl party, and felt I had good credentials to speak to her.... I could not help but be influenced by my ... love of her work" (p. 2). Does this drive to take Martha Stewart's advice bring the domestic fantasy and the domestic reality closer together than in previous generations? What are the implications of this drawing together?

Both of these critiques relate to how the author incorporates the contemporary Martha Stewart spectacle into conclusions drawn from her historical analysis. Ultimately, the criticisms do not undermine the quality or validity of the work itself, but rather offer sites where the author could tease out specific issues without losing the critical scope of her historical project.

These quibbles aside, Leavitt's cultural history is a valuable and timely piece of scholarship, especially in light of the pervasiveness of domestic advice literature in contemporary North American life. In addition, this book opens avenues for further research into domestic advice writing and, equally importantly, the figure of the domestic advisor in other cultural contexts and time periods. The inclusion of evocative, relevant illustrations and a comprehensive bibliography also make this text an engaging read and a significant

research tool for academics and popular audiences alike.

Note

[1]. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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Citation: Samantha C. Thrift. Review of Leavitt, Sarah A. *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

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