

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.2 (SUMMER 2006)

Domesticating the Political

Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Beth Sutton-Ramspeck. Athens: Ohio UP, 2004. 272 pp.

Reviewed by [Sarah Alexander](#), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

<1>The advent of the turn-of-the-century New Woman was a groundbreaking moment in the history of feminism, yet one that, since that time, has sparked misunderstanding and debate. Regarded by reactionaries as masculine and “un-sexed,” the New Woman, along with the literature named after her, has also been dismissed as stodgy and moralistic. As *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*’ special issue on the topic itself suggests, the last ten years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the New Woman. In *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Beth Sutton-Ramspeck recalls Ann Heilmann’s description, in *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (2000), of the New Woman’s seemingly irreconcilable quests for domestic privacy, on the one hand, and public success on the other. Recognizing an eclectic blend of Aestheticism, domestic realism, and New Woman motifs in the work of all three writers, Sutton-Ramspeck departs from the narrative operating in Heilmann’s book and argues that Grand, Gilman, and Ward reconcile their artistic and didactic aspirations with their domestic concerns by employing a strategy called “literary housekeeping.” As literary housekeepers, these writers sought to produce “literature that takes the domestic world for its subject matter and attempts to effect change beyond the private home” (18). By using their domestic interests and capabilities to tackle public dilemmas, they cast into doubt the supposedly mutually exclusive nature of the public and private spheres.

<2>Each of Sutton-Ramspeck’s chapters begins by outlining the turn-of-the-century issues and movements that led Grand, Gilman, and Ward to cultivate literary housekeeping. In the opening chapter, Sutton-Ramspeck describes the women’s rejection of the “purely aesthetic and frequently elitist” (17) literary mood encapsulated in Oscar Wilde’s declaration in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “all art is quite useless.” Consciously opposed to “art for art’s sake,” these authors regarded literature as a form of housekeeping, a consummation of beauty and practicality. In *Our Brains and What Ails Them*, Gilman sarcastically describes “Literature with a large L” as “pure and undefiled” and “divorce[d] not only from fact but even from purpose” (qtd. in Sutton-Ramspeck 35). Although her work is less overtly didactic than that of Gilman and Ward, Grand combines her interests in social activism and aesthetics in fanciful narratives resembling New Testament parables. Her “uncannily prescient heroines” (32) push the bounds of realism even as their poor marital choices point to Grand’s belief that the well-being of future generations depends on the reader’s selection of a “proper” spouse. Gilman, taking a “motherly” approach to writing, provides fictional models of individual growth, personal as well as civic, in order to encourage readers to transform their own lives and communities. Ward, meanwhile, creates a dialogue between herself and her audience that operates not only on an individual level but on a collective level as well. The preface to the 1911 edition of *Robert Elsmere* illustrates what Sutton-Ramspeck calls Ward’s “dialogic approach”: the novel “is entirely related to a particular time and milieu; and those who are drawn to it read it, unconsciously lend it their own thoughts, the passion of their own assents and denials. [...] The reader’s eager sympathy, or antagonism, completes the effort of the writer” (qtd. in Sutton-Ramspeck 56). Filling fictional domestic spaces with characters who embody political opinions ranging from radical socialism to rigorous conservatism, Ward’s dialogical approach asks readers to participate in her “criticism of life.”

<3>Sutton-Ramspeck cleverly organizes the remaining chapters around roles and tasks traditionally associated with the image of the housekeeper. Chapter 2, which focuses on the literary housekeepers’ depictions of motherhood, begins by noting the writers’ unsettling enthusiasm for the eugenics movement. Rather than viewing marriage and procreation as private acts, the literary housekeepers argue that women have a duty to their nation and to the human



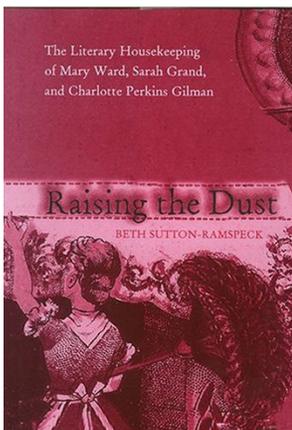
Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 2.2



species to choose “fit” husbands. All three writers’ approaches to eugenics are riddled with puzzles and paradoxes; in Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), for example, the attempt to create domestic spaces that balance the demands of public and private life is undermined by the fact that Herland is a gynocentric autocracy, not a land of equality. Perhaps more successful is Grand’s effort to reconcile biological essentialism with the power of education and individual will. In *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Winged Victory* (1916), venereal disease, “degenerate” fathers, and inbreeding result in physically and morally feeble offspring whose unhappy fates urge readers to preserve the health of the community by selecting mates with robust “blood.” At the same time, Grand insists that education and moral behavior promise “genetic” benefits for future generations. By cultivating their intellectual faculties and fine-tuning their moral sense, Grand argues, women can take human evolution in a progressive direction. Although they reveal a faulty understanding of genetics and a troubling fondness for social Darwinism, the literary housekeepers’ portrayals of motherhood as both private relationship and public responsibility represent a revolution in thinking.

<4>The next chapter focuses on the repercussions of the sanitary science movement and the late nineteenth century’s preoccupation with interior design. According to Sutton-Ramspeck, the collision of sanitary science and the “house beautiful” movement allowed women to address home design issues with greater authority. Connected to her neighbors by a public street reinforced by water and gas pipes, sewers, and electrical wires, the homemaker claimed responsibility for creating a sanitary home and, with the help of her fellow housekeepers, a sanitary nation. In Sutton-Ramspeck’s reading of Grand, the power to redesign living spaces translates to economic power. In *The Winged Victory*, Ella Banks grows weary of making lace in her isolated domestic space and eventually converts it into a profitable lace shop. Still resembling a home on the outside, Ella’s shop represents a radical intermingling of the domestic and the public. Like Grand, Ward explores the capacity of the home to fulfil both domestic and public functions. In *Marcella* (1894), the civic-minded title character finds herself torn between the pleasure she takes in the beauty of the manor she has inherited and her socialist conviction that she has no right to such luxury. By announcing plans to convert the library of the manor she has inherited into a community “drawing-room,” Marcella ushers the laboring classes into a new social order while indulging her aesthetic sensibilities. Taking a more radical approach, Gilman conflates home design with the design of “homelike” public buildings. In stories like “Five Girls” (1894) and “Maidstone Comfort” (1912), she constructs ideal communities of kitchenless homes that set the hygienic and aesthetic standard. In such communities, domestic tasks are performed by specially trained residents, and “enlightened communal decision making displaces private choice” (117). Curiously, Sutton-Ramspeck manages to discuss Gilman’s visions of the collectivization of private property without making explicit reference to the growing popularity of socialism at the turn of the century. Although Sutton-Ramspeck argues that literary housekeeping creates a dialogue between the politics of physical space and the slippery boundaries between public and private spheres, “not to mention issues of property, class, nation, and empire” (139), her claim that this dialogue “subverts” homemaking traditions by smudging the line between domestic and communal would be more persuasive if it were couched in a discussion of late-nineteenth-century socialist discourse.

<5>Sutton-Ramspeck goes on to analyze the literary housekeepers’ depictions of food production and preparation, housecleaning, and needlework. Each of these tasks is reconceived in ways that bridge the alleged divide between public and private. Particularly noteworthy is Chapter 5, in which she examines advertising cards for soap produced during the domestic science movement in order to illustrate the literary housekeeper’s view of cleaning as a “centrally important, broadly social, and even, paradoxically, empowering activity for women” (177). For Ward, Gilman, and Grand, housekeepers are the guardians of the nation’s physical, moral, and cultural health.

<6>Cogent, engaging, and abundantly researched, *Raising the Dust* makes a highly useful contribution to a growing body of scholarship on New Woman authors. But the study is not without weaknesses. Rather than evolving from chapter to chapter, Sutton-Ramspeck’s argument at times becomes repetitive. The study would also have benefited from a more critical discussion of the public/private dichotomy. Although Sutton-Ramspeck incorporates discussion of key thinkers, including Plato and Jürgen Habermas, the public/private binary that she claims the authors in her study subvert could itself be interrogated more thoroughly so as to clarify the stakes of her thesis. The assumption is that the private realm equates with domesticity and the public with the larger world of economics and politics. But the idea that domesticity, despite the pretense of apoliticism, engaged with the explicitly political world of politics and marketplace, overtly and covertly is hardly new. Missing the opportunity to challenge traditional notions of

eracy and literacy, is rarely given the opportunity to challenge traditional notions of privacy by pointing to the power of the literary housekeepers' experiments with socialism to dismantle the public/private dichotomy within the sphere of economics itself, Sutton-Ramspeck retraces the line between domesticity and the world of politics and economics. Nonetheless, *Raising the Dust* makes a contribution by putting a new spin on what could be a shopworn argument in light of specific authors. Sutton-Ramspeck is not the first to suggest that nation-building begins at home; however, she takes a somewhat provocative stance in proposing that housework brings with it personal and social empowerment.

