

The Parlour and the Suburb. Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity

Review Number:

456

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 June, 2005

Author:

Judy Giles

ISBN:

199247374X

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£16.99

Pages:

208pp.

Publisher:

Berg

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Kate Bradley

The concept of 'separate spheres', or the organisation of society into a private, domestic, female world and an active, public, male domain, is closely associated with Victorian society and, arguably, has had a pervasive influence upon gender relations since. Women's sphere was that of the home, or activities closely connected with it. Motherhood and the rearing of children were integral activities for women of all classes; domestic management was another key area, as was the care of elderly or infirm relatives. Where women worked, their activities were relatively 'domestic' in tenor, perhaps teaching or nursing, or undertaking piecework at home.

Feminist historical analysis has in recent decades been concerned with unpacking this apparent social division. On the one hand, the existence of a segregated world may explain the relative absence of women before the twentieth century from public life and activities, or the acceptance by women of a narrowly defined domestic role. Yet this also creates further problems. Recent criticism of the debate, such as that by Amanda Vickery, has argued that ‘separate spheres’ was a projection of an idealised society rather than a reflection of concrete realities. (1) Women have rarely been entirely confined to the home, with working-class women often having to balance the demands of work and home (2), and middle and upper class women participating in philanthropic and suffragist activities. (3) Widows and single women in particular often had to undertake work outside the home as a matter of financial survival, whatever the time period in question. Yet despite the opportunities presented by World Wars One and Two for women to work outside the home and in very different industries to those they may have been employed in before the wars, women have been seen as ‘retreating’ to the home in peacetime.

This debate naturally has an impact upon studies that seek to explore women’s lives in either the home or in public. If we accept that the reality was never as clearly defined as simply a matter of private or public, then the range of questions we may seek to answer broadens out. If domesticity was presented as an ideal for women to aspire to, how did they negotiate this ideal and experience it? Has the notion of domesticity changed in the course of the twentieth century, and how have women responded to it? Although women succeeded in obtaining the legal rights to fully participate in society, why do discourses of domesticity continue to operate? What have been the impacts of social, economic and technological change on this experience of domesticity? Also, perhaps, should we look more broadly at the experience of men and domesticity as well?

The Parlour and the Suburb enters into the discussion of women and domesticity with its analysis of how women in the early to mid twentieth century negotiated modernity and the demands of domesticity. Studies of women’s lives and experiences in the first half of the twentieth century have largely considered their increasing involvement in public life (4), their contribution to the war effort in 1914–18 and 1939–45 (5), and their involvement with public services. (6) Giles’s study is therefore a fresh perspective on the interactions between the individual woman and domesticity. Her point of departure follows the extension of the franchise to women from 1918, their experiences of war and their entry to the professions and government. The first half of the twentieth century was the founding point of ‘modernism’, that often rather nebulous term applied to the last century. Distinct from literary modernism, ‘modernity’ as a base concept refers to an advanced capitalist state. It is a society in which industry is increasingly secondary, if not tertiary; its economy is consumerist. Members of that society experience higher standards of living. Traditional ways of organising society – around the church in a small village – have long been eroded and new ones emerge with the rise of the urban and suburban experience. The increase of extensive transport and communication networks has effectively shrunk the world, and also created the potential for greater mobility. Although an extremely basic account of twentieth century modernity, this is the base from which Giles begins her analysis. What happens to women in this ‘brave new world’?

Giles begins her study with a consideration of how texts such as *The Women’s Room* by Marilyn French (1978) attacked domesticity in the suburbs and its impact upon women. The characters in the novel wish to see themselves as modern women doing ‘work that matters’ rather than being confined to the home doing chores (p. 3). Modern men, Giles argues, spent their time outside of the home, engaging fully with the world, doing ‘work that matters’. In contrast, modern women stayed at home, immersed in a world of domesticity that could support (or stifle) the public modern man.

The first chapter of *The Parlour and the Suburb* is concerned with the interconnections between the suburbs, the ‘prudential marriage’ and self-improvement. Giles argues that while male modernists – including George Orwell – viewed the growth of the suburb as a victory for a morally bankrupt, feminised mass, the reality could be substantially different for women. As Giles evinces from oral testimonies, the suburb was a place that offered opportunities for stability. The expansion in decent, comfortable and affordable housing after the First World War offered both working- and lower-middle-class women a stability and quality of life that had

not necessarily been available to their mothers. This was, according to Giles, a form of social progress in which citizenship now had to extend new rights and meanings to the population. It encompassed the right to a decent standard of living, to higher standards of health. It also, Giles argues, involved an increasing emphasis on the woman as consumer and the home as a site to be produced by consumption. If the home was the source of health and well-being, consumption was the tool to achieve that aim.

Chapter 2, 'Help for housewives', explores the changing relations and patterns in domestic service in the early twentieth century. Beginning with an analysis of Virginia Woolf's attitudes towards her own servant and the concept of domestic service as a whole, Giles convincingly argues that the upper-middle and middle-class homes were a significant site for the negotiation of class relationships. While women such as Woolf disliked the notion of their servants being deferential to them, in the earlier part of the century middle-class women were not expected to run their households without help.

Servant-keeping not only acted as an indicator of social status, but also differentiated the experience of domesticity for women of different backgrounds. In the middle-class home before the Second World War, the 'lady' of the house was largely divorced from the physical realities of housework. From those houses with one maid to those with a phalanx of paid staff, in order to preserve a sense of class difference the middle-class woman depended upon working-class women to preserve order in her home. As Giles argues, cleanliness, neatness and the preparation of meals were ways in which middle-class women could maintain the continuities of their lives, and maintain their privileged status. Dealing with dirt, disorder and waste products was a working-class concern. But, as Giles points out, this social dynamic did not go unchallenged. Giles discusses working-class women's valuing of domestic service as a respectable occupation for their daughters to enter, but also women's negative attitudes towards it. This could range from rebellion to more covert resistance to the lady of the house as the domestic servants reasserted themselves as individuals.

The concept of middle-class homes requiring working-class help in order to operate properly was still prevalent after the Second World War. The demands of the war, and the concomitant requirement that young single women, in particular, become geographically mobile and able to enter into different types of work, encouraged the fear that working-class women would lose interest in domesticity. Yet the changes were not absolute. Giles explores Celia Fremlin's *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* (1940), which concluded with the view that while domestic help was still essential, what was now required was a shift away from residential domestic service to 'modern', non-residential chargs and waitresses. Giles views this as a significant change in perspective, with the residential style of domestic service being seen as involving a repression of sexuality and causing hysteria. It was argued that long-term employment in service robbed women of their wider gender roles, infantilising them by limiting their access to marriage and denying them full independence. The employing family also had the potential to become a surrogate family, providing a sense of stability that the servant may not have experienced in her childhood. Giles argues that although middle-class women still expected a degree of servility in the home, the location of this servile/cross-class relationship shifted from the 1930s from the home to the public realm of the department store.

Giles's third area of consideration is consumption and its role in the creation of 'homes'. This was related to two developments: the arrival of the department store (with its lower-middle- and working-class sister, the high street chain) and the growth in women's magazines. The department store in particular came to function, Giles states, as a community centre for upper-middle-class women, as well as replicating in public the domestic deferential relationship between the 'lady' and the 'maid'. The stores offered new opportunities for women's employment, but essentially they moved one type of work – the facilitation of another's life – from the home to the store.

The high street chains also enabled working-class women to become consumers in their own right. Women were able to 'just look' without undue interference from sales assistants, and to enter into a fantasy world of consumption. Consumption as a pleasurable leisure activity was thus extended to the working classes, and aided not only by changes in retail, but by the production of cultural artefacts that promoted the incentives to spend.

The magazines of the time facilitated this development of consumption, with the promotion of the concept of the 'professional housewife'. Articles and advertisements encouraged the buying of items to enhance the home aesthetically, as well as cleaning products that could replace domestic servants. Giles shows that commodities began to replace service and drudgery by making cleaning accessible to middle-class women or by reducing the physical labour required. This might be summarised as the product doing the work rather than the person using it. This was a significant psychological and technological change, perhaps in response to the decline of the domestic service industry. Although Giles argues that the take-up of consumer durables was relatively slow before the 1950s, it would appear that a joint task force of consumer durables and chemicals could replace pure human labour and drudgery.

With this came a change in emphasis to highlight the home as the location of the housewife's skills, this time in corralling products rather people. Housewifely duties and skills were seen as a labour of love, as a vital service to the nation. Enter the experts: scientists provided products as solutions to ease the burden. Domesticity changed from drudgery and servility for some to a home constructed by one woman, aided by the consumption of products.

Giles's concluding chapter places her discussion in the broader context of the twentieth century. She argues that feminists have often overlooked the role of the home in women's lives, but that an approach that locates domesticity within modernism has the potential to rescue it from invisibility. It also, she contends, challenges the more traditional views of modernism as well as the concept that the private and the public are polarised domains. Feminists from the 1960s, Giles suggests, have unquestioningly accepted the apparent retreat to domesticity in the 1950s, without exploring the psychological and social impulses for it – the desire for safety and security after the insecurities of particularly working class life before the advent of the Welfare State.

The Parlour and the Suburb is an engaging and thought provoking text, and provides a balance to historical works that examine the increasingly public life of women in the twentieth century. However, if there is a criticism to be made, it is that the scope of the book is somewhat limited by what it can reasonably examine in two hundred pages. This is frustrating as *The Parlour and the Suburb* stimulates ideas about other ways in which domesticity, class and gender have interacted in the public and private lives of women. For example, the role of schools and club organisations in educating women and girls in domestic science would naturally follow on from the discussions of domestic service and consumption. But this criticism is also a compliment; a monograph that provides a fresh perspective on a particular topic should provoke questions from the reader. For those working in the fields of gender, social change, domesticity and citizenship, *The Parlour and the Suburb* will be of great interest.

Notes

1. Amanda Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36, (1993), 383-414.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Unpicking Gender: The Social Construction of Gender in the Lancashire Cotton Weaving Industry 1880-1914*, (Aldershot, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Elizabeth Roberts, Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England*, (Oxford, 1980).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Helen Jones, *Women in British Public Life, 1914–1950: Gender, Power and Social Policy* (Harlow, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (1984); Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, (1965).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England*, (Aldershot, 1991).[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review but is unable to respond due to current time constraints.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/456>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2448>