

*More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave.* By Ruth Schwartz Cowan. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

*Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic.* By Jeanne Boydston, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

*The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930.* By Wendy Gamber. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Domestic work remains a devalued, peculiar activity: essential yet sporadically avoidable, ongoing yet invisible. Americans perceive housework to be essentially separate from the central endeavors in our lives: paid work. "Yet in many ways," Ruth Schwartz Cowan observes in *More Work for Mother*,

housework is more characteristic of our society than market work is. It is the first form of work that we experience. . . . It is also the form of work that each of us—male and female, adult and child—pursues for at least some part of every week. . . more people spend their days in this "peculiar" form of labor than in either of the two more "standard" forms—blue-collar or white-collar work. (8)

Cowan's book examines changes in household technology and "work processes" over the last two-hundred years and women's shifting positions in the households they maintained. She analyzes why housework is connected to industrialization, and why "advances" in technology have changed the details of housework without really lessening the labor. Cowan wants to explain how the wife became the type of figure she is today: the single provider of domestic services for all members of the household. The whole family lives in the home, and yet the trajectory of the last two-hundred years is one of household responsibilities devolving ever more onto one person: the wife. By situating housework outside of the rest of our work lives, Cowan thinks we are engaging in "cultural obfuscation," purposefully denying the ways in which housework reflects industrialism so that we can imagine the home as a premodern oasis (4). Housework may be unpaid, isolated, and unspecialized, but Cowan points out that in other respects, home-maintenance is manifestly industrial: dependent upon "nonhuman energy sources" (public utilities) and subject to change through the development of new, industrially-made products (6). Moreover, the household and who works in it has always reflected changes in the larger economic system. Technological innovations such as

castiron stoves, municipal water, and manufactured boots freed men from chopping wood, hauling water, tanning leather, and making shoes. Men could take wage jobs instead, leaving women at home to work in their traditional tasks. The sole association of women with the domestic sphere is a direct result of industrialization and therefore cannot be conveniently disassociated from the capitalist transformation of American life (66-67).

In *Home and Work*, Jeanne Boydston notes that Cowan was the first modern historian to place housework within industrialism instead of analyzing it as an unrelated type of labor. Cowan's account focuses on the ways in which technology has altered housework and women's relation to it. Boydston expands on Cowan's analysis of housework in the context of the emerging industrial order by attempting to place domestic labor within market capitalism, applying questions of monetary worth where there is often assumed to be no wage equivalent. Not only was housework affected by industrialization but also "women's unpaid domestic labor [was] a central force in the emergence" of American industrialized society (xi). Even as household thrift became crucial to getting through the day, ideas about the value of labor became increasingly associated with the wage alone. Boydston examines what the implication of wage-valorization was for "workers whose labor remained outside of the wage standard" (x). She finds that this essential unpaid work became less visible because it was less calculable: "as households became involved in market purchases, their material environment was assumed to reflect the husband's earning power, rather than the wife's labor" (137).

While the unquantifiable nature of housework under this system seems to separate it from wage work, Boydston agrees with Cowan in seeing the two types of labor as industrializing together in a symbiotic relationship:

At its core, industrialization was a reorganization of labor, and that was its chief characteristic in the household as well as in the paid workplace. . . . What is most striking about the early industrial period is, not how different housework was becoming from paid labor, but rather how closely the reorganization of the two forms of work were replicating each other. (101)

That is, housework became the abstracted product of a designated type of worker (women) in service to another type of worker (men).

Boydston points out how housework becomes "pastoralized" in popular culture. Women themselves began to question whether what they did had economic value. Boydston explains this process of devaluation by a recourse to the Marxist analysis of how capitalism works—value is determined not by objective worth but by what those who control production deem best for their own interests. If the home is idealized as a work-free space, male laborers will fantasize about going home instead of storming the factory to de-

mand a living wage. The work, however obfuscated, remained, even as the home was idealized as a leisure zone because of its wagelessness.

While Cowan and Boydston focus on unpaid household labor, Wendy Gamber chooses to analyze the roughly concurrent devaluation of a particular type of *paid* female labor: dressmaking and millinery. In *The Female Economy*, Gamber describes the world of the custom women's clothier as one of unusual economic independence, characterized as one of the few areas in which women maintained power because of acquired artisanal skill. She acknowledges that the dressmaker's shop seems to embody the new frivolity among middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth-century more than female independence, as bourgeois matrons concerned themselves with ribbons, ruffles, and corsets. But Gamber argues that " 'fashion,' however oppressive to some women, created significant opportunities for others" (1).

Perceptions of dressmakers and milliners revealed Victorian America's anxiety over where to place skilled, independent women who worked for decent wages. Such women were stereotyped as either distressed gentlewomen forced to earn their keep, or as menacing schemers who meddled in their customers' lives. Literary portrayals equated "dependence with gentility and independence with vulgarity . . . [and conveyed] an obvious message: woman's place was in the home, not in the dressmaking or millinery shop" (19). Not coincidentally, these characters typified the "abnormal" in another respect: they were usually unmarried. Gamber suggests another reason why these women might have remained unmarried. Custom clothiers were in the unusual position of financial independence, and matrimony "represented less a refuge than a gamble to tradeswomen who pondered it; those who married risked both their psychological autonomy and their economic security" (27).

Dressmakers and milliners took pride in their crafts, but remained separate and invisible to other skilled, male workers, cut off from the public expressions that help define male labor culture. Indeed, dressmakers presented an anomaly unexplained by separate spheres logic: "If small business was . . . 'a school of manhood', its meanings for womanhood were far less clear . . . most observers assumed that women—'naturally' lacking [self-reliance and rugged individualism]—would enter the commercial world only out of sheer desperation" (26).

Although she is discussing paid labor, Gamber is concerned with the same process that occupies Cowan and Boydston: "the construction of sexual divisions of labor, how such arrangements change over time, and the consequences of those changes" (2). Housework becomes devalued and isolated when it becomes solely associated with women. Women's ability to earn a living in the "needle trades," becomes qualitatively different from the work of other, male wage earners because needle trades are assumed to be a mere extension of the woman's domestic sphere. Gamber argues, however, that the needle crafts were highly skilled and operated on the apprentice system. Thus, they were not mere extensions of domesticity into the workplace, but

actual professions. As with the male crafts, dressmaking and millinery became deskilled and factory-based toward the close of the nineteenth-century: "once highly skilled crafts predominantly controlled by women, the manufacture of dresses and hats became relatively unskilled processes largely controlled—if not entirely executed—by men" (3). While the work continues to be paid, women's individual efforts become increasingly invisible, much like in the household, where the technology is assumed to be doing the work, and the only time the woman's handiwork is noticed is when some task has been neglected.

Gamber draws a specific parallel between the industrialization of needle trades and the increase in Cowan's "work for mother" by pointing out how the sewing machine and the mass-production of patterns made dress shops less necessary while increasing individual women's work (155). She also implicitly connects Boydston's pastoralization model in the home with the continued viability of specialty shops for women's needs. As long as women are considered ornamental beings, elaborate clothing that beautifies and constricts the female body will continue to be a profitable business venture. Gamber makes clear that the task Cowan and Boydston have outlined, that of uncovering women's economic identities during the era of "The Cult of True Womanhood," requires the inclusion of dressmakers and milliners. Because these trades were associated with women, they were subject to similar essentialist judgments and perceptions, and vulnerable to the same dismissal that the male, public world felt for housewives.

Second- and Third-Wave feminists have exhorted women to break free from the anonymous servitude of domesticity—and practically everyone has jumped at the chance. But the problem of domestic labor remains a puzzling one. While women may have escaped the stigma of being tied exclusively to the home, *housework* remains an unappreciated, stigmatized activity, unquantified in an industrial society that supposedly calculates the cost of labor to the ha'penny. Cowan, Boydston, and Gamber argue that women's work shaped the entire nineteenth-century economy by enabling others to work in the specialized wage work that kept the system going, and by providing an "other" that male workers could identify themselves against. The enduring legacy of women's association with domestic work is embodied within the home itself: like brick, stone, or concrete, women were the physical foundation of the home, supporting the activities of life while remaining largely unnoticed.

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