

Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catherine Beecher to Martha Stewart: a Cultural History of Domestic Advice*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 250 pp., 50 b&w illustrations, £41.95 Cloth, ISBN 0807827029, £15.95 Paper, ISBN 0807853712.

Advice literature, such as etiquette, has been shown to be a useful cultural discourse for understanding social interaction and especially international relations. The social theorist Norbert Elias who worked variously in Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Ghana, developed in *The Civilizing Process* a theory of social interdependence as being exemplified in and served by changing codes of etiquette and manners. His work has formed the basis of recent Eliasian studies such as that of Jorge Ardití, whose *Genealogy of Etiquette* takes a long view of changes in the social infrastructure of Europe akin to the period addressed by Elias, and Cas Wouters, who has made comparative studies of etiquette in the Netherlands, France, Britain and the UK in the twentieth century (1). Historical studies of the importance of etiquette and manners in securing and maintaining social relations have concentrated on the nineteenth century, when European codes of conduct reached a flamboyant apogee, and during which specifically American manners are deemed to have flowered (2). Notable among these works is that of Arthur Schlesinger Snr, who in 1946 published *Learning How to Behave* in order to identify the development of specifically American manners beginning with the importation of English and French advice books to assist the pilgrim fathers, through the adaptation of those European models for consumption in the new world and the publication of the first specifically American conduct texts, and ending with an optimistic call for etiquette as a lingua franca for improving international relations in the immediate post-war period.

When compared with the continuing and fruitful academic discourse surrounding etiquette, domestic advice literature has rarely enjoyed the focal concern of academic interest in nationalism and internationalism, and had been used by historians largely as a complement to unpublished sources such as diaries and letters (3). Within the context of existing studies of advice, Sarah Leavitt's *From Catherine Beecher to Martha Stewart* appears to advantage as a book-length study of a relatively neglected sub-genre of published advice, domestic advice, for the purposes of understanding what it means to be American. Leavitt's acknowledgements testify to the support she has enjoyed from

the US academic community for a project that reclaims an area of popular culture for academic scrutiny within American Studies and foregrounds issues of nationhood and ethnicity.

In telling a story of the historical development of American culture, Leavitt's decision to focus solely on the USA has negatively affected her periodisation. While Leavitt's treatment of the experiences of a range of Americans from Irish immigrants to black servants in chapter three 'Americanisation, Model Homes, and Lace Curtains' is illuminating, and her chapter six on 'Our Own North American Indians: Romancing the Past' is similarly worthwhile, Leavitt's text is considerably weakened by her Americanism. This book takes an interest in cultures other than the dominant, normative North American mainstream only when those cultures appear on American soil in the form of immigrants. This approach produces some unqualified and therefore unconvincing generalisations ('the subjects discussed in domestic advice manuals have remained remarkably consistent over time encompassing the vast changes in the role of women in American society', p.4), as well as specific assertions that are frankly erroneous ('Domestic advice manuals originated in the 1830s', p. 9). The latter example will surprise scholars of European culture who engage with a discourse rooted long before the flowering of print culture in the eighteenth century that has charted the raft of domestic changes attendant upon industrialisation.

A serious omission from Leavitt's bibliography is all too evident here: the pre-eminent historian of his generation, Harvard professor Arthur Schlesinger Snr published his careful study of the influence of European (and especially English) advice on an emergent American advice discourse in 1946. Schlesinger's work is of its time (a post-war panegyric on the role of manners in maintaining international peace) and indeed Leavitt is prepared to acknowledge the early influence of European sources on American publications, but Schlesingers' account is subtle enough to allow for a continuing interplay between Europe and America evident in mid-twentieth century advice texts. Like Schlesinger, who examined a period of several hundred years in order to explicate the utility of advice literature for his post-war contemporaries, Leavitt purports to explain a current phenomenon, the vogue for domestic pursuits exemplified by Martha Stewart's Omnimedia successes through examination of historical forerunners. However, the book loses focus around mid-century calling into question the author's

stated aim and failing to recognise the contribution of Stewart's direct forebears of the 1970s and 1980s. Of course Leavitt's work of rehabilitation is laudable; Beecher was among the most influential and best-selling writers of the nineteenth century along with Lydia Maria Child, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Sarah Josepha Hale. But actually, following treatment of the nineteenth century in her first chapter 'Going to Housekeeping: Creating a Frugal and Honest Home', six thematic chapters illuminate the significance of domestic science, Americanisation, modernism, child psychology, ethnicity and open-plan family life in US culture of the first half of the twentieth century.

Leavitt's book repeatedly refers to American qualities and practices without always spelling them out and this failure to tease out what is specifically American about the practices recommended flags up a tendency here to describe rather than analyse. Chapter four, on modernism, is a case in point. A summary history of modernist design is followed by a lengthy digest of domestic advisors critiquing bric-a-brac with the effect of reducing the shift from Victorian ideologies of domestic comfort to modernist designs for living down to a debate about ornaments or home accents. Leavitt finds justification for this in her sources: 'For domestic advisors, modernism often translated into simplicity' (p. 114) without sensing a need to go beyond what her sources say to explain the roots of modernist design in for example, British Arts and Crafts artefacts of the late nineteenth century, Dutch De Stijl and the outcomes of the Bauhaus art and design college in Germany from the 1920s to the forced immigration of key modernist practitioners necessitated by the Third Reich. Furthermore, the discussion of modernism here is too reliant on Penny Sparke's 1995 discussion of gender, modernism and decoration in *As Long As Its Pink*, although chapter seven on 'Togetherness and the Open-Space Plan' is a prime opportunity for the development of an original discussion of new American practices, and their influence on European practices (4).

As an initial foray into largely uncharted territory, Leavitt's work is extremely welcome. Its value lies in naming and characterising the authors and works of domestic advice produced in the US in the first half of the twentieth century. In this sense, *From Catherine Beecher to Martha Stewart* is a worthy landmark, which will assist the orientation of subsequent studies. It is unfortunate that the book requires readers to assess the American-ness of the discourses under scrutiny without reference to

comparative examples, but the book remains extremely useful for those interested in transatlantic culture who can enjoy arguing with and filling in the comparative gaps themselves.

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(1020 words)

## NOTES

(1) Norbert Elias, 'The History of Manners', volume I of the *Civilizing Process*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994 (first published in 1939 as *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Basel: Haus zum Falken). Cas Wouters, 'Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the 20th Century: Part One - The Integration of the Social Classes', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1995(a), pp. 107-124 and 'Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the 20th Century: Part Two - The Integration of the Sexes', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1995(b), pp. 325-339. Jorge Ardití, *A Genealogy of Manners: Transformations of Social Relations in France and England from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

(2) Treatments of nineteenth-century European advice include Andrew St. George, *The Descent of Manners: Etiquette, Rules and the Victorians*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1993; Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society Etiquette and the Season*, London: Croom Helm, 1973. Studies of American etiquette advice include Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Learning How to Behave: A Historical Study of American Etiquette Books*, New York: Macmillan, 1946; C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1860*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1999; Esther B. Aresty *The Best Behaviour: the Course of Good Manners - from Antiquity to the Present - as Seen through Courtesy and Etiquette Books*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1970 and John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1990. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Expert's Advice to Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1978) and Lynn Peril's *Pink Think: Becoming a*

*Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons* (New York, London: Norton, 2002) are two studies based primarily on advice literature which elucidate developments in the ideology of American womanhood of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(3) Grace Lees-Maffei, 'Studying advice: historiography, methodology, commentary, bibliography', in 'Domestic Design Advice', a special issue of the *Journal of Design History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2003), pp. 1-14.

(4) Penny Sparke, *As Long As Its Pink: the Sexual Politics of Taste*, London: Pandora, 1995.