

The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America. *By Wendy Gamber.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xii + 213 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 978-0-8018-8571-6.

Reviewed by Timothy B. Spears

Wendy Gamber's examination of the boardinghouse's place in nineteenth-century America underscores the extent to which the doctrine of separate spheres continues to underwrite compelling historical analyses of the American home. But while the first generation of histories of domesticity featured the home as a "haven from the heartless world," a realm dominated by middle-class wives and mothers and separate from the commercial world occupied by their husbands, more recent scholarship has blurred the distinction between home and marketplace. This trend has led to a more complicated understanding of the home as a discursive and material space that was critically tied to the market revolution that redrew American life. And it has helped to illuminate the economic and cultural pressures that sometimes nudged middle-class men and women out of their designated gender roles into overlapping spheres.

Strong research and lively prose make *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* a welcome addition to this important subfield of American cultural and social history. Although the book's focus is on New York and Boston, it is rich enough in examples—from archival and published sources—to illuminate the general contours of boardinghouse life in other cities as well. Compared to other studies of domestic life, the book is relatively free of, though not necessarily uninformed by, theoretical analyses of gender roles or the market culture. Rather, Gamber stays fairly close to her sources, skillfully presenting the stories of nineteenth-century boarders and landlords that she then uses as the basis for broader interpretation. By also closely attending to third-person representations of boardinghouse life, in particular, fiction, she establishes the cultural discourse that shaped both the perceptions and the experiences of boarding life.

At the heart of *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* is the concept of home, which Gamber shows to be a deceptively simple term. For instance, in the opening

chapter, “Away From Home,” Gamber revises the stereotypical image of the boardinghouse—as an unsavory gathering of rude tenants, bad food, and illicit activities—to show that it was a place where people made friends, began marriages, and cared for one another. The boardinghouse could, and often did, foster many of the attributes and values that middle-class Americans associated with home. This is not surprising, since between one-third and one-half of urban Americans either lived in a boardinghouse or took in boarders, and many other city residents rented single-family homes. In an increasingly urban nation, dominated by citizens who could not afford to buy their own houses, the boardinghouse was a common, affordable option. Still, in this climate of economic and demographic transformation, the bourgeois domestic ideal—of “keeping” house, rather than boarding—had great power, so much so that upwardly mobile boarders (and landlords) often preferred to say they were residing with “private families” (pp. 16–17). According to the loaded vocabulary of the nineteenth-century city, boardinghouses were for the working class.

Gamber’s discussion of the class-oriented anxieties surrounding the public-private divide yields some of her most valuable insights. A key marker of bourgeois domesticity and home ownership even today, privacy in the context of boardinghouse life was a measure of the establishment’s distance from the more public realm of the marketplace. Privacy was also a synonym for “respectability” and genteel culture, characterizations of middle-class life that evolved in contrast to the transient, anonymous face of the city. However, as Gamber notes, in the world of the boardinghouse, neither privacy nor respectability had a “fixed meaning” (p. 56). Instead, “privacy was an elastic concept” that expanded or contracted to meet the needs of middle-class boarders. So the protocols governing male-female relations and the use of individual and shared spaces (bedrooms and parlors) differed from one establishment to another as boarders were always negotiating the “boundaries between acceptable and disreputable behavior” (p. 31). These dynamics, plus the fact that many middle-class Americans chose to board rather than keep house (because it was less expensive and more convenient), suggest that the boardinghouse played an important role in forging the identity of the urban middle class.

Despite whatever class anxieties hung over the nineteenth-century city, the middle-class boarders whom Gamber highlights in this study seem adaptable, practical, sociable,

and relatively open to navigating the challenges posed by urban life. The transient and commercial nature of boardinghouse life required a certain street savvy, and throughout her study Gamber underscores the business of boardinghouse life, an enterprise that united boarders and landlords as they worked to create a home together. While boarders were concerned about the quality of the food or the cleanliness of their rooms, landlords—most of them women—had to shop for affordable food, hire servants, and manage the finances. Although the economic character of boardinghouses appeared to set them apart from real homes, as Gamber points out, over the course of the century middle-class housework increasingly required managerial skills. In this respect, the difference between boardinghouses and homes was not as significant as critics claimed.

While Gamber concludes with some thoughts on the diminished importance of boardinghouses and the rise of apartments and lodging houses in the twentieth century, a longer discussion of how the traditions of boardinghouse life figured in the development of the modern urban landscape would have given her study a stronger finish. But right up until the end, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* reveals the historical importance of this once ubiquitous American institution.

Timothy B. Spears is professor of American studies at Middlebury College, where he also serves as dean of the College. He is the author of Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871 to 1919 (2005).