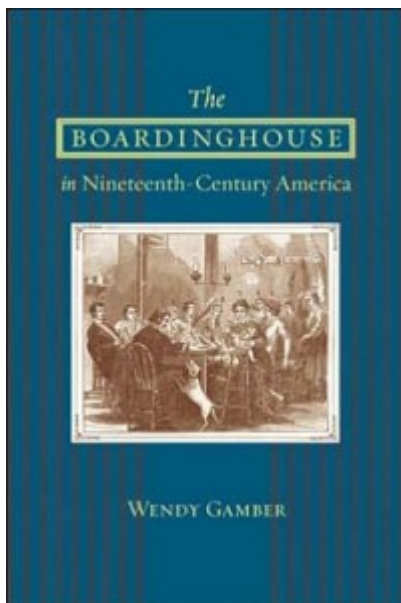
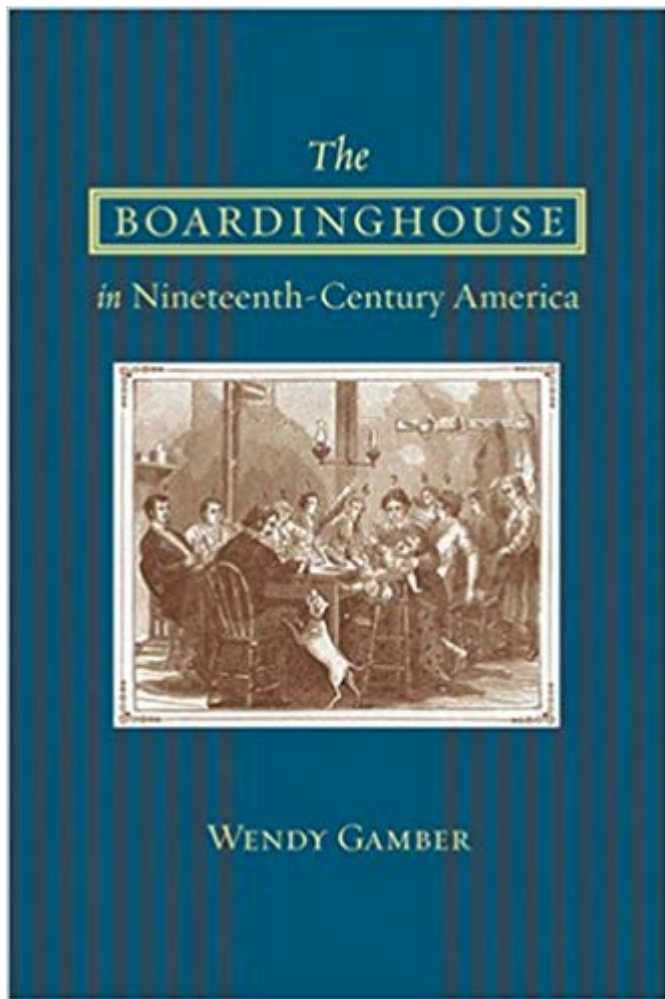


# Leather Steaks and Indigestible Pies



Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). 232 pp., hardcover, \$45.

We generally associate industrial revolution with the destruction of artisanal labor. Wendy Gamber reminds us in her history of the nineteenth-century boardinghouse that American capitalism destroyed the household as well and consequently revolutionized the meaning of home. This explains the nervous response by contemporaries to the growing practice of boarding, which filled a vital niche in an industrial system that moved people around as much as it moved goods. It increasingly moved them off the farm and into the city where they found employment (judging from the large number of young clerks populating Gamber's boardinghouses) administering all the new commercial activity.

But boarding was not just a servant of the industrializing economy. It was itself an exchange relationship. And that is what made it so dangerous, for in organizing domesticity around a business plan, the boardinghouse subjected the home to baser material concerns and so violated an emerging consensus regarding the need to keep commerce out of private life. And yet, as Gamber makes clear, "if the nineteenth century was the golden age of the bourgeois home, it was also the age of the boardinghouse" (3). She confronts us with a familiar dialectic by which the redemptive powers of progress generate the social ills they then pretend to remedy. "Only with the rise of home as a cultural icon," Gamber continues, "did numerous Americans begin to perceive boarding as a social problem" (3)—a problem because it introduced the promiscuity of an anonymous market into the putatively virgin territory of the home.

Controversies over boarding consequently became a way for talking about industrial dangers and negotiating the transformations overtaking family, womanhood, city life, and middle-class propriety in general. And yet, Gamber's very success in exposing this crowded site of cultural anxiety and conflict is also a source of frustration for the reader, for she keeps her archaeology ever close to the surface. The reason is clear in the book's "essay on sources," comprised almost exclusively of works of history, a sure recipe for under-theorization and missed opportunities in a study that promises to examine what generations of historians have failed to notice. It is not enough, in other words, to make formerly marginal subjects the focus of scholarly attention: social and cultural history must also engage other disciplines, whose distinct contextualizations will then guide our own rereading of the sources.

Eating is a good example. "Social commentators spilled more ink on food than on any other aspect of boardinghouse life," Gamber tells us at the opening of a chapter entitled "Boarders' Beefs" (78). This comes as no surprise. If boardinghouses represented the subversive forces unleashed by capital's destruction of agrarian patriarchy and household hierarchies, then a proper diet offered a practical means for reestablishing stability in a society that now rested on the personal prerogatives and sovereign status of the individual. Abstaining from meat, or coffee, or tea, or from strongly flavored food of any kind, preferring bran breads, dried apples, and ever-greater quantities of water, all in order to ward off dyspepsia and chronic gastritis, among other recently diagnosed nervous disorders that attacked the body's digestive system (and that required close attention to matters of hygiene, comportment, and

exercise as well)—this was how the self-help literature of the period convinced the self-interested citizen to take control of his appetite.

None of these “dietetics,” however, are included in Gamber’s chapter on food (not even a passing reference is made to Grahamite boardinghouses), despite their promise to broaden the discussion and incorporate the boardinghouse in a social anthropology of liberalism. Instead, “Boarders’ Beefs” addresses a single, albeit not unimportant, aspect of the moral economy of food. This subject is also essential to the book’s central, if under-argued, thesis that women were the scapegoats for the cultural crisis triggered by capitalism. Thus, efforts by boardinghouse keepers to control expenses made them into a symbol of parsimony serving up “leather steaks” and “indigestible pies and doughnuts,” the evil twin of the industrious, frugal housewife whose own economizing was carried out for its own sake, that is, without reference to profit margins. The boardinghouse menu consequently became a notorious sign of transgression, revealing an all-too prevalent breach of the boundary “between love and money” (8). “By turning every square inch into a commodity,” boardinghouse keepers erased any distinction between the home and its ideological antagonist, the market (42).

The commodification of intimacy has long worried the bourgeoisie, which otherwise enjoyed the fruits of the widening web of commercial exchange. This found a persistent expression in the intensifying discourse over prostitution—what Baudelaire called the “savage face of civilization,” in recognition of the modern character of this “oldest profession.” The prostitute was reinvented in the nineteenth century as a morality tale, a horrifying lesson of what awaited all “public women” who ventured too far outside the realm of domestic virtue and engaged too closely in the world of trade. Gamber takes note of the whorish stigma that was attached to boarding and explains the analogy: “Like brothels, [boardinghouses] sold women’s services, bringing housewifery into the marketplace” (97). And so, we encounter another figure in the modern pantheon of dangerous women who violated their womanhood by selling services that should never have been put up for sale in the first place. The larger history of the boardinghouse, it turns out, is a history of women’s labor in a man’s economy.

This is an important conclusion, for it also explains how the fate of labor and the household were intertwined and how women’s work became a “wedge issue” for separating them and so bolstering the post-agrarian axiom that separated home from the rest of society. The ambiguous publicness of the boardinghouse would seem, then, to have served the new ethos of individualism, and angry rhetoric about indigestible pies and doughnuts might also have been a way to legitimate the new bourgeois family. I was left waiting for Gamber to elaborate on these themes and to further explore their relationship to virtue, privacy, urban space, and the labor market, all equally fundamental to the boardinghouse and to modern life. Only once this is done will the history of boarding acquire the heft Gamber assigns it.

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