ALLEN, JUDITH A.


Reviewed by Cynthia J. Davis

Roughly ten years in the making and impressively researched, Judith Allen’s scholarly monograph provides a rich historical context that helps to situate and elucidate Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s influential feminism within the Progressive Era. This probing intellectual history seeks to prove that Gilman was indeed a suffragist where others may have denied it, a feminist where even Gilman herself denied it, and a progressive precisely because a feminist-inflected progressivism afforded her cherished reforms their best chance of implementation.

Allen divides the book into three parts: the first elucidates Gilman’s theories of the origins and effects of “sex subjection” and the extent to which these theories were informed by her takes on evolutionary history and sociology, a three-way intersection most cogently articulated in Gilman’s 1898 Women and Economics. The second section focuses on Gilman’s contributions to feminist theory and politics, her activism on behalf of women’s rights, the backlash her views
and activism generated, and the ways in which her feminism informed her search for a “human world” as an antidote to the man-made one. The third and final section explains how her feminism led Gilman to embrace Progressive Era reform initiatives, including pacifism, eugenics, sanitation, birth control, and anti-vice and anti-prostitution campaigns, in the hope that they would help to speed the realization of that desired human world. Precisely because, as Allen persuasively contends, Gilman’s reform Darwinism, feminism, and progressivism were mutually informative, there is some inevitable circularity in the topics discussed across the three sections.

A widely-known if often controversial figure in her lifetime, Gilman profoundly influenced generations of reformers via her numerous lectures, literary works and treatises, but Allen’s is the first book-length study to trace the influence of Gilman’s feminism systematically. Allen both resuscitates and validates the contemporary view of Gilman as “the preeminent feminist intellectual of America’s Progressive Era.” She explores Gilman’s signal contributions to the reform Darwinism that undergirded many reform movements in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and she pays particular attention to how Gilman’s feminist convictions intersected with her Darwinist beliefs. Indeed, few scholars have done as much to connect the dots between Gilman’s feminism and the concurrently emerging ideologies—including Nationalism, socialism, nativism, and eugenics—informing it, resulting in a multi-layered portrait of Gilman’s thought along with its foundations and effects. Earlier drafts of several of
these chapters have already appeared elsewhere, and now this book will further cement Allen’s reputation for producing some of the most historically informed and paradigm-shifting scholarship on Gilman in recent years.

Allen rightly positions Gilman’s critique of “the sexuo-economic relation” at the heart of Gilman’s larger critique of the “man-made world” and its often devastating consequences, including women’s subjugation, prostitution, vice, war, and other social ills. As human societies evolved from savagery to civilization, Gilman maintained, sex differentiation was increasingly exaggerated and the (hetero) sexual relation became increasingly confounded with an economic relation, so that humans emerged as the only species in which the female depended on the male for her livelihood. This confusion of sexual and economic relations resulted in the androcentric culture responsible for most of the problems that galvanized reformers in Gilman’s day. As Allen shows, Gilman devoted her career both to dismantling the justifications upholding this unjust society and to recommending essential reforms. By resuscitating Gilman’s foundational critique and its profound impact on her fellow activists, Allen illuminates Gilman’s importance to her day and also to our own. Along the way, Allen seeks to correct misreadings that tend too hastily to accept Gilman’s retrospective portrayal of herself as relatively removed from movements (feminism and progressivism, e.g.) in which she had played so formative a role.

It may be the polemical nature of many of Allen’s points as she endeavors to correct the scholarly record that occasionally leads her to frame her evidence too selectively. For instance,
in the course of analyzing the origins of Gilman’s theory of “sex subjection,” Allen foregrounds the impact of Gilman’s inequitable relationship with her sexually demanding first husband, Walter Stetson. In the process, Stetson comes across as something of a villain. But for all his flaws, the preponderance of Stetson’s frequently anguished letters and diary entries yield a more ambivalent, nuanced portrait of the man; also, in spite of Allen’s strenuous objections elsewhere to presentism, she herself seems to be anachronistically wielding “present-day ideas and perspectives” to assess and condemn Stetson’s nineteenth-century conduct. Furthermore, Allen’s portrayal of this marriage often accentuates Gilman’s resentment of sex subjection at the expense of Gilman’s simultaneous and overlapping objections to her own and other women’s domestic and maternal oppression. At times throughout the book, Allen clearly includes the latter (i.e. the domestic and maternal within the umbrella category of the sexual, but at other times she ties sex subjection more specifically to heterosexual relations in the strictest sense. This may also explain why Allen dwells at length on Gilman’s relationship with Walter Stetson and tends to slight the fraught relationships she forged with both her mother and her daughter, relationships that shaped Gilman’s critique of existing domestic and maternal practices as strongly as her first marriage doubtless shaped her critique of existing heterosexual inequities. Finally, this more extensive focus on sexuality and sex subjection may explain why Allen tends to slight the importance of Gilman’s Beecher lineage to her aspirations to “world service”—aspirations many of her great-aunts and -uncles shared. One of Allen’s most cogent arguments in this book is that scholars need to ground their claims in more comprehensive evidence, and while overall in her
larger intellectual history she leads by example, her sections on biography sometimes prove the exception to her rule.

Additionally, while Allen’s well-supported arguments about Gilman’s pivotal role in the feminist and progressive movements are persuasive and illuminating, her argument about Gilman’s suffrage activism seems less so. In the book’s middle section, Allen produces a wealth of evidence testifying to Gilman’s wide-ranging activism on behalf of woman’s suffrage. Allen then contends that Gilman’s copious suffrage work “belied the claim that she was not significantly involved in the suffrage campaign” (322). In my understanding of this claim as it is advanced by Gilman scholars, however, the supposition pertains not to her involvement in the suffrage cause but rather to her lukewarm feelings about it—the claim is qualitative rather than quantitative, in other words. Gilman wanted suffrage for women, to be sure, but she also wanted so much more, as she repeatedly explained. She worked for the cause because she believed it to be an essential step in achieving a more human world, but she never felt it to be the *summum bonum* other suffragists believed it to be. In short, while Allen makes a compelling case that Gilman scholars may have underestimated the extent of Gilman’s suffrage activism, she does not convincingly prove that they have overestimated the extent of her ambivalence about suffrage. Nevertheless, part of what makes Allen’s study so provocative is precisely the ways in which her arguments openly invite counter-arguments, stimulating rather than shutting down debate.
Especially where scholars have overlooked or oversimplified Gilman’s significant feminist theory and activism, Allen’s study offers a necessary and timely correction. By placing Gilman and her views in a broad and deep contemporaneous context, Allen troubles notions that Gilman herself may have helped to perpetuate and that Gilman scholars have at times unquestioningly reiterated without fully researching their validity. As an historian, Allen approaches and reads the record differently than do the primarily literary critics who have published the bulk of the scholarship that Allen refers to as “Gilmaniana.” The evidence Allen unearths and the critique she advances combine to help check a reproving, presentist tendency that has surfaced with increasing alacrity in the Gilman scholarship of the past two decades. In her final chapter in particular, Allen tackles the strand of Gilmaniana that seeks to expose Gilman’s racism or ethnocentrism in order to challenge taxonomies locating Gilman squarely within the feminist and/or progressive movements and that do so without recognizing or adequately historicizing the extent to which these two movements themselves helped to shape and were in turn shaped by the prejudices the influential Gilman voiced.

Setting an example throughout by historicizing where others have been wont to moralize, Allen defends Gilman from “third-wave antiracist and feminist whiteness studies critics” among others who have unearthed and isolated Gilman’s prejudices and held them up for condemnation. These scholars, Allen suggests, may have overreacted to second-wave feminists’ celebration of and overinvestment in Gilman by denouncing her instead as virtually irredeemable. Allen
contends that these detractors have perhaps unwittingly reduced Gilman “to a mere cipher for current debates over race and ethnicity” (341). Their presentism has led many to “condemn Gilman for failing to anticipate current values and ethics” (330-31), and their neglect of the fuller archive has led them to produce an incomplete and largely malignant portrait of Gilman’s often productive contributions to ongoing debates and movements.

This book represents a vital, thought-provoking, and insightful contribution to Progressive-Era and feminist scholarship broadly and to Gilman scholarship more specifically. It presents a thoroughly researched and compelling reevaluation of this influential and controversial figure and her contributions to feminist theory and practice. And it admirably exemplifies the rigorous standard of scholarship that Allen calls for in her conclusion, where she asks scholars “to bring greater precision, contextual sensitivity, and explanatory prowess to bear on the matter of causation, change, and periodization for the history of feminism” (362) and of figures as important to that history as Allen proves Gilman to be.

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