

## Behind Closed Doors. At Home in Georgian England

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**Reviewer:** Helen Berry

When historians of the future come to write about the historiographical preoccupations of 21st-century Britons, they surely will observe our growing obsession with consumer behaviour and material culture. One particular trend in the last 20 years has been the widening of methodologies employed by historians, from the traditional text-based approaches to archival research, to a wider conceptualisation of all forms of historical evidence as artefacts, including the written and printed word. This has allowed a broadening of the traditional purview of the historian, opening up new possibilities for studying all manner of material goods which previously had been considered more within the milieu of the archaeologist or art connoisseur than the historian. But we have needed pioneers, historians skilled in rendering the discrete and often daunting specialist languages of diverse fields such as art history, design history and archaeology into workable tools. Underpinning historians' reticence about using material culture has also been a certain political attitude regarding the 'proper' nature of research. Is interpreting an artefact in a museum as worthy as squirreling away in an obscure archive? A similar doubt hangs over the increasing availability of high-quality online resources. The Old Bailey Online project allows keyword searches to be performed in a matter of seconds: but is it somehow 'cheating'?

Amanda Vickery's stunning new book on domestic life in 18th-century England trumps the traditionalists by showing what can be achieved when a historian boldly goes into these new terrains, harnessing the technological advancements that the internet has made possible with an impressive array of original archival evidence (including over 60 collections in various archives and local record offices) and a kaleidoscopic range of material sources: from textiles, furniture, and the visual arts, to wallpaper, and the built environment. She positions her study in the 'uncharted space between architectural history, family and gender history and economic history' (p. 3). Her meat is the 'experience of interiors', and the 'determining role of house and home in power and emotion, status and choices' (p. 3). From the mansions of dukes and duchesses explored in chapter five ('Rooms at the Top'), to the tiny scraps of embroidery left lovingly with abandoned babies at the Foundling Hospital, nothing is too grand nor too humble for Vickery's consideration. She rightly draws attention to the over-preoccupation in previous histories of consumption with the middling sorts: both princes and paupers find a home in her book. She also takes a side-swipe at the theory that an 18th-century 'consumer revolution' was driven by middle-class desire for social emulation (p. 304). At such moments, she successfully navigates the hazardous waters between writing for academic historians and for a general audience. There is enough critical engagement with the historiography to satisfy

the scholar that she has taken a clear position on the key issues that frame her research, but executed in a prose style that is always accessible and engaging, full of wit and illustrative detail. This is not an easy balance to strike, as any historian who has ever attempted to write for the trade press will know. Vickery's prose is a model of its kind: as elegant and as bracing as a brisk rub-down in a gilt bath with carbolic soap.

Some of the considerable achievements of this important book are Vickery's sheer mastery of the sources, the originality of her materials and methodology, and the provocations contained in her seductive prose. Certain central themes are elaborated from her seminal 1998 work, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian Britain*.<sup>(1)</sup> Though the title of her new book belies it, gender is also a central theme of *Behind Closed Doors*. As in *The Gentleman's Daughter*, Vickery argues that the structures of patriarchy, by which every married man was in theory lord of his domain at home, were in practice always reliant upon the co-operation of husband and wife, and the mutual reliance of both genders upon one another for a harmonious and happy life. In the everyday practicalities entailed in setting up a family home, Vickery sees a 'colourful universe of gender negotiation' (p. 300), performed within a set of expectations shaped by social rank and sex. In chapter three, 'Setting Up Home', she unravels the intricacies of double-entry bookkeeping (something for which anyone who teaches undergraduates on this subject will ever be grateful), marking carefully the gendered patterns of accounting. While men oversaw expensive one-off purchases like coaches, women saw to the everyday needs of clothing children and feeding the household. Even when a pioneer of taste such as Theresa Parker at Saltram House in Devon oversaw the commissioning of fashionable interior decorations, their names were often hidden in the ledgers and accounts, which always paid formal deference to the authority of a husband in such matters (p. 125). Vickery exposes the various historical controversies over whether and when the distaff side started to gain control over the look of a domestic interior (pp. 299–301), arguing that it is more convincing to 'disentangle the persistent and the newly emergent in the jurisdictions of both men and women' (p. 301). One of the crucial themes which she draws out most effectively is the gendered aspects of taste, the truly innovative contribution of the Georgians to the long-standing debates (dating back to at least classical antiquity) over the tensions between luxury and virtue. Taste, she proposes in a memorable simile, was like a new and luminous strand in the tapestry of good Christian stewardship and 'huswifery' (pp. 164–5). She concludes in chapter ten, 'A Sex in Things?' that there was no crude division between 'men's things' and 'women's things'. Although Rococo style was often depicted as a sinuous and feminine style, injurious to good old fashioned Tudor manor houses (with their masculine associations of old English hospitality centring upon hearth and hounds), she proposes it is mistaken to feature women as a group with a single architectural taste. 'The platitude that an entire sex spurned Greece and Rome for Paris and Cathay awaits proof', she observes drily (p. 259). In a detailed study of the account books of Trollope and Sons, a London wallpaper manufacturer (chapter six), she teases out the nuances of consumer priorities, which were as much about rank and fortune as about gender. The country parson wanted wallpaper that was 'clean and neat', his frugal wife showed her virtue if she fixed up a room that was both a credit to their station in life, and within budget. Such careful stewardship, Vickery shows, was far removed from contemporary diatribes against luxury and dissipation.

The deep ambivalences and political underpinnings of the concept of 'home' for Georgians, as well as for ourselves, make this as much a book about discomfort and exclusion from home as much as it is about the realisation of a cosy ideal of domestic bliss. Though a chapter is devoted to the enjoyment of emotional security derived from having a home of one's own and a range of material comforts that were available even in modest households by this time (chapter eight, 'A Nest of Comforts') Vickery does not sweep uncomfortable truths under the Turkey-carpet. She admits that in history as today, behind the façade of domestic contentment 'Chaos often reigns. Cruelty begins at home.' (p. 3) Within the pages of this book are examples of single people (the never-married, as well as widows) and married couples who articulated the solace that was to be found within their own four walls. A happy home could be the material outworking of a mutually-supportive husband and wife, like Lord and Lady Shelburne, who had sufficiently discrete spaces within their home to pursue separate interests, but enough co-operation to invest a mutual concern in one another. Their joint decisions over which furniture and drawings to buy for their living rooms, Vickery shows, were indicative of much more than just their love of fashion, but their ongoing and successful

negotiation of intimacy as a couple (p. 154). As chapter eight, 'Women Alone' explores, some spinsters could be humiliated by their own families by their domestic dependence, but the never-married and widows could also find delight in the dignity that came with their own front door and genteel rooms into which they could invite friends and enjoy the polite rituals of tea-taking. The genteel domesticity of Diana Eyre, spinster of Nottingham, is vividly and enticingly sketched as a full and happy life (pp. 213–5), in contrast to the misery of the Duchess of Grafton, estranged from her husband and frantic to maintain the trappings of her status after her jewels were bestowed on another woman's bosom (p. 141).

As Vickery shows in chapter seven, 'Trials of Domestic Dependence', contentment at home did not depend upon one's marital status. Some married couples owned grand houses which were not homes, and could sometimes be little better than cages. The harrowing story of the marriage of Anne Dormer of Rousham serves to illustrate the point (pp. 193–6). Today, visitors to Rousham in Oxfordshire may freely roam and picnic in the beautiful gardens designed by William Kent, oblivious to the despotism that once took place there. Anne could not even walk into the garden on her own since her insanely jealous husband was effectively her jailor ('a constant spie he is over me'). In such instances, patriarchal authority could be exceptionally cruel, particularly if a wife's family did not intervene to help her. Vickery's assessment is convincing, that 'Hierarchy, rank, dependence and independence were the categories used to make sense of the household and an individual's role within it' (p. 203). Power relationships found spatial expression in terms of who controlled which parts of a house, especially its locks and keys. Vickery shows only too clearly the vulnerability of those who had no private space of their own. One of the most intriguing case-studies presented here is that of Gertrude Savile, the impoverished sister of a baronet, who spent much of her life in a withdrawn, diminished condition, complaining of her dislike of company. Perversely for a woman, she did not buy tea-making accoutrements even when she had the happy fortune of coming into an inheritance later in life (p. 189, and chapter eight, *passim*).

Astonishingly, 47% of London households had lodgers (p. 33), whose only privacy was often a lockable trunk: otherwise, nothing prevented prying landladies from wandering in and out of their room, or rummaging through their belongings. As Vickery shows from her original interpretation of the Old Bailey records in chapter one 'Thresholds and Boundaries at Home', privacy was a mutable concept for the Georgians, but it *was* something which individual men and women prized and tried to attain, since it was associated with personal dignity. Vickery is keen to argue here (as elsewhere in her research) that men were subject as much as women to the gendered expectations of their day. In chapter two, 'Men Alone: How Bachelors Lived' she explores the intriguing and previously-hidden subject of how men got by between leaving their parents' home and setting up a household of their own. She shows from a range of personal testimonies just how dependent men were upon working women and female relatives. In their personal diaries, unmarried men like Dudley Ryder expressed their consciousness of a lack in their lives if they were without their own hearth and home, a comfort which necessitated their securing a good and prudent wife. Vickery tends to the plight of some bachelors with great sympathy ('Matrons bestirred themselves to make certain that no young fox was let loose in their dovecotes', p. 61). In doing so, she adds a certain pathos towards unmarried men even though during this period the sexual double standard was just one respect in which the cards were stacked in their favour.

It is in such empathetic yet firm handling of the sources that Vickery slips in polemical points, dressed up as a plain-speaking statements of common-sense unequivocation. As mistress of the aphorism, her style is often to round off a paragraph with a short, pithy remark that seems to summarise all that has been presented, offering what appears to be *le dernier mot* on any given topic. So we have the following: 'Wedding bells announced the decorators' (p. 88); 'Anxiety about correct behaviour is the cumulative impression of the letter-book, not hedonism' (p. 178) and 'Tea was a universal habit by 1760' (p. 272). All well and good (although, was it *really* universal by that exact year?) But what should the cautious reader make of the following statement: 'It is a Romantic fallacy that only alone in the closet or on an isolated peak does the self truly know itself' (p. 45). Admittedly Vickery qualifies this startling transcendental assertion of the truth of selfhood with the more moderate (and incontrovertible) assertion that 'social interaction and public performance were crucial to the building and enactment of identity'. But many keepers of spiritual diaries in

the early modern period, not just romantic poets on craggy outcrops in selfconsciously Wordsworthian manner, asserted the importance of solitude in one's 'closet' and prayerful retirement, as Vickery's own evidence elsewhere in the book illustrates perfectly. The point was not to be alone in an individualist, modern sense; in order to know oneself in a less secular age than our own, one had to be alone with God.

*Behind Closed Doors* is beautifully illustrated throughout, and provides a model for how historians in future might cast their ambitions more widely in the archives for artefacts that bring colour and texture to the study of the past. These include some truly remarkable examples of domestic work made by women that have often been ridiculed as the 'perfection of pointlessness' (p. 232) but which Vickery challenges the reader to reconceptualise as part of an 'ancient and venerable' tradition (p. 233). The astonishingly fine cut-paper work by Anna-Maria Garthwaite showing a country house and deer park (1707) (p. 252) merits the enlargement it is given in the end papers to the book, and animates the discussion on the hierarchy that has traditionally been imposed upon the arts that is at the core of chapter nine, 'What Women Made'. This brilliant chapter does for British women's needlework and crafts what Laura Thatcher Ulrich did many years ago for early American historiography, and ought to open up the specialised world of textile and design history as a new and rich seam of inquiry for historians. That the publication of *Behind Closed Doors* coincided with touring exhibitions on Mrs Delany and Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill at the Yale Center for British Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum suggests a growing momentum behind a more widespread interest in these particular types of material culture.

It is possible to think of many more topics relating to the theme of the experience of the domestic interior than could possibly have been addressed within the scope of the ten chapters addressed by Vickery. Children's experiences remain elusive, although recent work by Anthony Fletcher has shed new light on this subject. Music-making at home was so essential to the conviviality of 18th-century polite society, and receives a mention from Vickery, but has yet to find a historian who will give it the deeper attention it deserves. Like *The Gentleman's Daughter*, *Behind Closed Doors* will inspire much new research that will explore more fully the new vistas opened up within its pages.

## Notes

1. Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1998)[Back to \(1\)](#)

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guardian

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