

pable of mixed feelings and contradictory reactions. Even authoritarian husbands who wanted women to be ultra-obedient also needed them to be competent to govern.²³

Married women were at once deferential wives and powerful mistresses, a conceptual inconsistency that women often manipulated to their advantage and a contradiction from which men often profited. Even if polite magazines and sermons often idealised the melting qualities of modern femininity, the gentry and the middling sort despised the weak and wishy-washy in a mistress. In fact, a sexy battleaxe was what many busy men liked in practice – nimble, capable and commanding – to free them to pursue their own affairs without distraction. A wife of whom a man could be proud was handsome and decisive, mistress of any occasion, equal to any emergency. Yet where husbands and wives did not see eye to eye, the contradiction on which household organisation hinged made the home the obvious battleground (pl. 1). The paradox at the heart of marriage increased the likelihood of skirmishes over domestic space. Equally, the patriarchal edifice could easily be toppled by illness, death and financial crisis or undermined by treachery and insubordination. The widower's characteristic frenzy to find a replacement housekeeper and apparent inability to maintain a household alone expose just how much shoring up went on behind closed doors (fig. 3). In the ordinary jog-trot of domestic routine in harmonious families, patriarchal imperatives were quietly offset by the exigencies of life, husbands typically resigning the field to wives for the day, who themselves had no choice but to delegate to servants, apprentices and even lodgers as the need arose.²⁴ A general cannot run an army without lieutenants. A head without limbs has no grip on the levers of power. And access to the levers is no mean opportunity.

A trusted household manager was indispensable to genteel and middling men for their dignity, their comfort and their convenience. Mobility was the mark of an independent man. Even gentlemen of no obvious occupation liked to range widely in pursuit of sport, and were expected to assume administrative obligations appropriate to their property, on the bench, the jury and the turnpike commission, most of which carried them miles from home. Officers of the militia were called away on annual manoeuvres, and after 1688 MPs were obliged to be in London up to half the year. Country doctors and surgeons had to have their horses ready and baited, while Assize lawyers could be away on circuit for weeks at a time. Successful merchants and manufacturers rode the new turnpikes in pursuit of new markets and ideas. While Somerset MP Edward Clarke hobnobbed in Westminster in the 1690s, his wife Mary was left behind in Taunton, run ragged by their boisterous brood and 'mannageing your concerns heare . . . letting getting bying selling, receving and paying to the best of my poore under-



3 *The Welch Curate*, 1775, mezzotint. Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT, 775.6.2.1.1. Welsh clergy, especially lowly curates, were notoriously impoverished. According to the accompanying verses, the print shows a curate so poor that his wife has to earn money by going out to wash. Unusually for a man, therefore, he is left responsible for the duties of housekeeping, which turn out to be onerous: 'Each Faculty and Limb beside, Eyes, Ears, Hands, Feet, are all employ'd.'

No Georgian house was yet a home without a sedimentary stratum of objects and furnishings crafted by women, yet no female activity has been so disparaged by both male critics and feminist commentators as domestic handicrafts. The contemporary importance of craft is dispensed with and a crucial layer of the household is torn away. Yet female handicrafts were endorsed by God, exemplified by the virtuous woman of Proverbs, who clothed her children and ornamented her house to the credit of her husband. Those who affirmed the femininity of Proverbs extended from the arch-Tory Sir Robert Filmer, the staunch Whig Richard Steele to the Reverend James Fordyce, who added a modern discrimination to archaic virtue: 'In every thing she makes, whether for sale or for use, she displays a just taste of what is both beautiful and splendid.'⁴⁸ For Fordyce, in other words, the Bible authorized the exercise of female taste in the home (fig. 8).

Not that taste was static. Massive needlework seemed as antique to the Regency commentator as seaweed landscapes and hair jewellery appear to us. 'Our great grandmothers distinguished themselves by truly substantial tent-work, chairs and carpets, by needlework-pictures of Solomon and the queen of Sheba', which were now all consigned to the garret, remembered Maria Edgeworth in 1798. 'Cloth-work, crape-work, chenille-work, ribbon-work, wafer work . . . have all passed away in our own memory.'⁴⁹ Fashions in craft changed dramatically between the Stuarts and the Victorians, excited by the efflorescent commerce in craft materials, manuals and education. In 1810 Rudolph Ackermann smugly congratulated ladies of refined taste 'on the revolution which has of late years taken place', fuelling his art materials business such that 'drawing and fancy work of endless variety have been raised on the ruins of that unhealthy, and stupefying occupation, needlework'.⁵⁰ The elaborate edifice of artistic novelty rested on biblical foundations, though the virtuous woman now had myriad talents to exhibit.

Cottage or lodging, town house or farmhouse, it is hard to overstate the importance of the Georgian home to its inhabitants. Yet it is important to recognise that homes came in a variety of forms besides the stable patriarchal household of master, mistress, children, servants, apprentices and other dependants on which so much attention was lavished by theorists at the time. Take the humble Hutton clan in Derbyshire in the 1730s. At the death of William Hutton's mother in 1733, his wool-comber father, quite forlorn, sold up their Derby house and moved the children into lodgings with a widow who had four children of her own. Meanwhile, Hutton also 'had an uncle who was a Grocer, and a bachelor; also a grandmother who kept his house', and two miles away 'three crabbed aunts, all single, who resided together as Grocers, Milliners, Mercers and School-



8 *The Seamstress*, 1765, mezzotint. Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT, 765.0.89.



12 William Hogarth, 'A Harlot's Progress', 1733, Plate 1, printed etching and engraving. British Museum, London, s.2.21. Moll Hackabout has just arrived in London on the wagon from York. Her luggage is shown in the bottom right of the print, consisting of a parcel, a basket and her trunk, marked MH.



13 William Hogarth, 'A Harlot's Progress', 1732, Plate 5, printed etching and engraving. British Museum, London, 1858,0417.548. Moll Hackabout is dying of venereal disease in a run-down garret lodging. On the left, a woman is shown rifling through the clothes in her trunk.

13). Moll's box is the size of a large trunk, but some were small enough for a woman to carry. Boxes stolen from servants were valued at between sixpence and a shilling. They were commonly made of deal (i.e., pine, the cheapest wood), often named or initialled, and even decorated. Lucy Stockford's deal box, in which she kept her clothes and money in 1795, was 'covered with flowered paper'.³⁷ Without a room of their own and the defence of a locking door, servants had to put their faith in the lock to their box, though these could be forced too, as they often complained.³⁸ The lack of even a box was a sign of the meanest status. Suspicions about a servant's collusion in a theft at a surgeon's house in 1785 were dismissed when it became clear he had nowhere to hide the haul: 'Have you ever searched for the things that were lost in his places? – No, the maid makes his bed constantly, he has no place, he has no box.'³⁹ Those without a box

slept with their valuables under their heads at night. William Droyre and his wife survived by selling cabbage nets and rags in 1787. At their lodgings in Hampshire Hog Yard there was

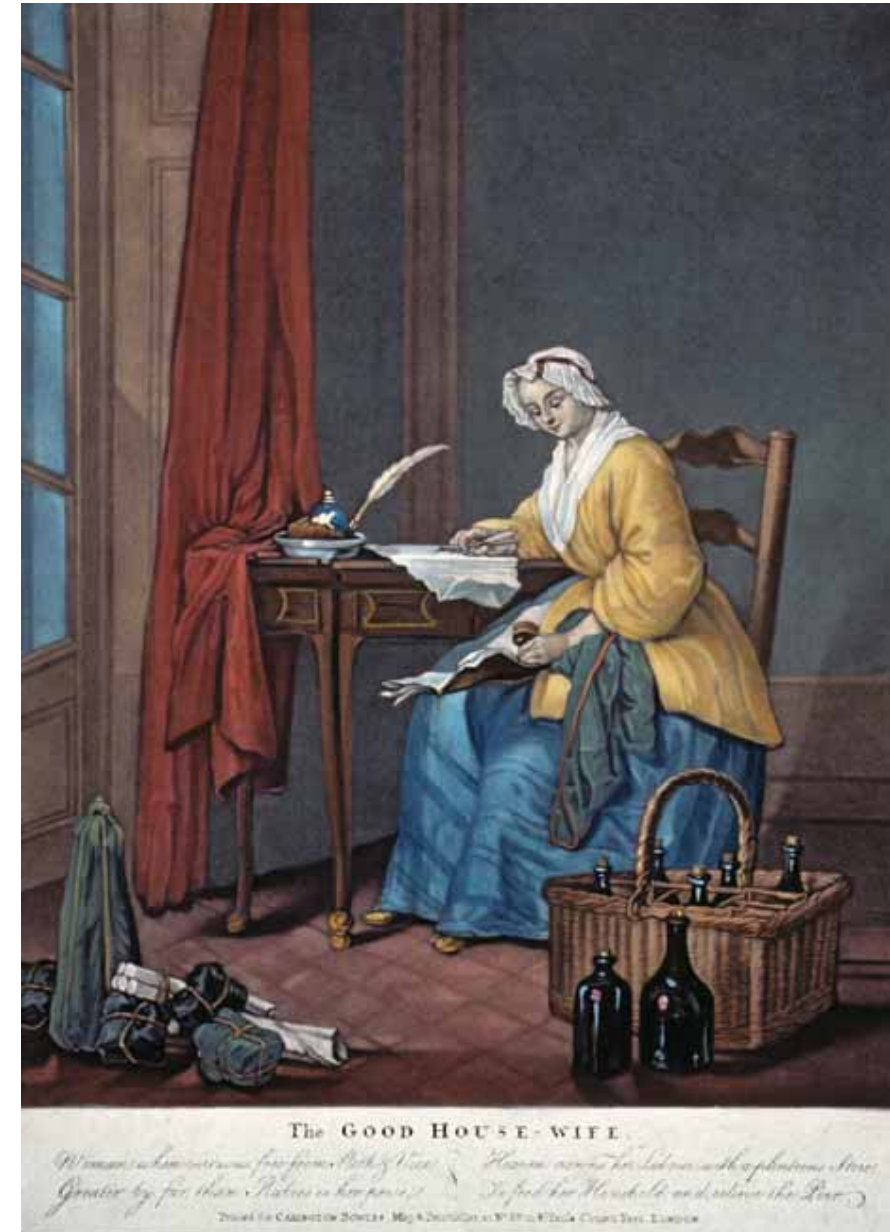
neither a bolt nor yet a latch to the door; the last that goes out, takes a bit of padlock, and locks the door, and takes the key down, and hands it in the kitchen; several people lodge in the same room; there are three beds all occupied, and there was one woman drunk in bed when they came there . . .⁴⁰

The bit of padlock is the crown of squalor. Access to privacy was an index of power.

My evidence derives from a particular source. Perhaps the low-trust atmosphere that pervades the Old Bailey is a distortion; doubtless longer-term tenants



6 A Common Council Man of Candlestick Ward and his Wife on a Visit to Mr Deputy at his Modern Built Villa near Clapham, 1771, coloured engraving. Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT, 771.11.1.2. Like the absurd suburban villa in Robert Lloyd's poem *The Cit's Country Box* (1756), Mr Deputy's villa is a ludicrous combination of classical, Chinese and Gothic architectural elements.



7 *The Good House-wife*, n.d., mezzotint. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1958–357. A well-off woman dressed for work in a plain bed gown sits at a table with pen and inkwell. She is doing household accounts, checking a sheet of paper against the book she holds on her lap. Around her on the floor lie bundles and a basket of bottles. The verse reads: 'Woman, when virtuous, free from Sloth & Vice, Greater by far, than Rubies is her price: Heaven crowns her Labour with a plenteous Store, To feed her Household, and relieve the Poor.'



21 (above) Cream silk apron (detail) embroidered with English garden flowers by Miss Rossier for Miss Rachel Pain on her marriage to her brother, circa 1736. Museum of London 37.178/2. High-quality needlework with an amateur provenance.



22 (right) *Bodice-Coat Flannel the bottom worked*, 1759, flannel embroidered with worsted yarn. London Metropolitan Archives, A/FN/A/9/1/143, Foundling no. 12843. Crude embroidered decoration on the bodice coat left as a token with an infant boy at the London Foundling Hospital.



23 Ribbon embroidery on the inside of the lid of a wooden box decorated on the outside with paper quill work, n.d., Museum of London M18716. The box contains a set of small interlocking boxes, each covered with a different form of embroidery. It is probably a finished example of the kind of prefabricated kit commercially produced by suppliers like the Temple of Fancy in the early nineteenth century.



34 (above) Anon, *A Family Being Served with Tea*, circa 1740–5, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art B.1981.25.271. An exquisitely dressed older woman presides over a round, three-legged, mahogany tea table. Her porcelain tea set is arranged on a silver tray. On the left, crossing the threshold, a liveried servant brings in a kettle of hot water, the room reflected in its shiny metal.

35 (facing page top) Embroidered casket or workbox, 1671, wood covered with panels of satin, embroidered with coloured silks. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, T.432–1990. Martha Edlin embroidered the coverings for this box, possibly from ready-drawn panels, when she was 11 years old.

36 (facing page bottom) Workbox in the shape of a cottage, 1790–1800, wood veneered with ivory, made in Vizagapatam, India, for the English market. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, W.20–1951. The country cottage, symbolising rustic innocence and domestic retirement, was a popular shape for workboxes, but this Indian-made example also appealed to the taste for exotic materials.

