

giving credit where it is due, the iconography of this beautiful book allows modern readers a glimpse into the lives of women who did not belong to the elites and whose role was vital in the material culture of the period. *Louder than Words* makes a substantial contribution to the history of female work, not solely thanks to Sheridan's conclusions, but also because of the questions that she asks throughout her book, suggesting new research pursuits for economic, cultural, and art historians.

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Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, eds. *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. x+246pp. US\$69.95. ISBN 978-0-415-94953-8.

Amanda Vickery. *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xviii+382pp. US\$45. ISBN 978-0-300-15453-5.

The twelve strong essays collected in *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century* illuminate the circuits of production and consumption that moved furniture and decorative objects from city to countryside, back and forth across the Atlantic, as well as the social pressures that imbued those objects with significance. The first of four thematically organized sections maps the global itinerary of materials and styles. Madeleine Dobie's terrific essay studies the use of luxury woods from French colonies in the West Indies to construct furniture in an Orientalist style. She argues that the exotic guise of the furniture concealed from metropolitan consumers the slave economy that supplied them. Chaela Pastore discusses the vogue for mahogany; though the wood grew in Saint Domingue, Creoles who bought mahogany furniture were criticized for mimicking the elites in France who wanted to monopolize this luxury as a token of national and racial purity. David Porter's chapter returns to the topic of Orientalism by way of a treatise on aesthetics by William Hogarth. Chinoiserie exemplified the features that Hogarth claimed had universal appeal (for example, novelty, asymmetry, and femininity), yet the style repelled him. Porter shows that the Chinese style was often satirized as a source of female pleasure that displaced men; its connotations thus undermined the heterosexual dynamic implicit in Hogarth's theory of beauty.

While Pastore and Porter examine efforts to regulate fashion, the second set of essays profile people who carried fashions across

geographical and social boundaries. Natacha Coquery reconstructs the business of a Parisian upholsterer whose trade in second-hand goods broadened access to high-end fashions. With the help of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vermont woodworker James Wilson produced the first globes for sale in the new Republic. David Jaffee records Wilson's achievement as an instance of "Village Enlightenment," whereby cosmopolitan knowledge was introduced to the provinces by commerce (81). Jaffee complicates the centre-periphery model of diffusion, though, by showing how American artisans often adapted English styles to local tastes and thereby signalled their nation's independence. Kathryn Norberg analyzes the ways in which courtesans appropriated features from aristocratic interiors in order to create the novel and seductive environments in which they plied their trade. The third section of the volume continues this investigation of the domestic interior with Donna Bohanan's discussion of noble houses in provincial France. The decoration of these homes closely resembled those in Paris and Versailles, a consequence, Bohanan argues, of a change in laws that deepened the division between old and new aristocracy by taxing the latter more heavily. Goaded by this check to their aspirations, parvenus in the provinces embraced the elite style emanating from the court and city to assert the authenticity of their rank.

Anyone who has ploughed straight through the museum galleries devoted to ceramic dinnerware, bored by so much sameness, should definitely read Mimi Hellman's compelling semiotic analysis of the matched set. Hellman argues that seriality would have been alluring prior to industrialization, given the difficulty of manufacturing apparently identical objects by hand. The matched set was priced beyond the reach of most consumers, but for those who could afford them, their multiplicity provided a pleasing sense of continuity and order. The *meuble*, a matched set of furniture, could unite a group of people while signalling differences in status among them, depending on the type of chair one sat on and its position in the room. Mary Salzman suggests that a pair of eighteenth-century paintings taught people to interpret interiors in just this way. Noting a standard reading of the objects in Jean-François de Troy's *The Garter* and *The Declaration of Love* (1724) as clues that reveal to the viewer how the depicted scene will unfold, Salzman instead presents the objects as signs that female figures in the paintings use to express desire non-verbally to male companions. Viewers of the paintings were thus encouraged to speak with things, like the Lagadoans Gulliver encountered on his travels.

The forging of identity and relationships through the use of innovative kinds of furniture is explored in the volume's final section. The tea table as a site of female sociability is Ann Smart Martin's topic, while Dena Goodman situates the origin of the *secréttaire* within a

transformation of writing from a collaborative to a solitary practice. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, people dictated their thoughts to secretaries, but by the eighteenth century people more commonly wrote on their own, and the middleman was replaced by the piece of furniture named after him. Desks stacked high with drawers and cubbyholes were created to facilitate private correspondence; their ornate marquetry and gilded hardware dignified an activity that had become personal. The inner life of furniture is addressed in Carolyn Sargentson's essay on secret compartments in desks. The servants, tradesmen, and nosy visitors circulating through aristocratic households had owners worried about theft and maintaining privacy; their anxiety was allayed by furniture with ingenious locks, false-bottomed drawers, and recesses hidden behind spring-loaded doors. To operate these clandestine workings was to have an intimate relationship with a thing.

I learned much from reading all of these informative essays, but I was most engaged when the authors moved beyond the now familiar link between the commercial revolution, social distinction, and upward mobility, which too often leads to a reductive account of eighteenth-century material culture solely in terms of a competition for status. These essays show that status was just one of many things, and not always the most important, that people sought in consumption. Taken as a whole, the volume reveals how integral furnishing was to modern personhood: decoration and furniture were media of self-expression, tools of affiliation and exclusion, objects of sensuous enjoyment, products of exploitation, and catalysts of social and psychological change.

A central aim of consumption was to create a sense of home. Amanda Vickery's *Behind Closed Doors* provides a rich, wide-ranging history of the English home in the long eighteenth century. To understand the home as a social concept implanted in a physical environment, Vickery crosses disciplinary divisions and pursues her subject through an array of sources, from diaries, letters, and ledgers to novels, pattern books, and advertising, all the while adroitly alternating between different expository scales, from sympathetic sketches of ordinary people, in all their domestic contentment or rancour, to synthetic overviews of changing trends in habitation. Central to her analysis are two intertwined changes commonly associated with the period, though far from completed within it: the rise of the conjugal family and the transformation of the home from a locus of production into one of consumption. The attitudes towards gender that follow from those changes and the influence of these attitudes on everyday living among the genteel and middling classes receive particular attention. Women who were everywhere subservient to men gained through marriage more authority in the home, where they entered significant roles as household

managers, canny consumers, and agents of sociability. Masculinity was also tied to the private realm. With the rise of companionate marriage came an ideal of parity between husband and wife. Men were expected to relinquish their control over certain household matters to women who otherwise remained their legal inferiors. In a revealing phrase, Vickery claims that wives “experienced ownership” in the act of housekeeping, but surely this is not the same as *having* ownership (88). Vickery thus argues that the norm of “marital courtesy” perpetuates the gender hierarchy by ameliorating married women’s subordination within it, though she emphasizes the power this norm confers on women rather than the privilege it preserves for men (198).

Equality at home is evident in the account books of the Cotton, Grimes, and Arderne households studied in chapter 4. According to Vickery, the entries suggest that women paid tutors and bought linen and decorative objects, while men handled payments for major renovations, coaches, and wool. If there was a gendered division of responsibilities, then, it was not an uneven one. Education is no less important an expenditure than construction, and in Vickery’s assessment, interior decoration was not a frivolous matter. Over the course of the century, a tradition of paternalistic hospitality gave way to modern practices of civility that sought to mitigate differences in wealth and rank. Women presided over this new form of social organization, in rooms that they designed for entertaining visitors. The right decoration also signified gentility, and by having command of it women took charge of the image the family projected to others. The emerging discourse of taste, which required no formal training, permitted this ascendancy of women at home. Vickery’s examination of the ledgers also disproves the stereotype of the materialistic female shopper, showing instead that the majority of women’s purchases were for other family members. Men were just as likely to indulge in luxury, and not just with foppish canes and peacock jackets. Barometers, Vickery observes, were essentially wall ornaments that worked better as props of enlightened masculinity than as tools of scientific investigation. Her chapter on the gendering of commodities shows that the relation was not always fixed between the gender attributed to things and the gender of their typical buyer. Men collected porcelain, for example, but this preference was still considered by many to be effeminate. Usually such associations were customary, but in some cases the gendering of furniture was deliberate, such as when distinctly shaped desks began to be created for and marketed separately to male and female users late in the century. Vickery concludes that gender difference, as well as equality in marriage, was entrenched through consumption for the home.

Other chapters examine the growing desire for privacy as revealed by the proliferation of locks on interior doors; the symbolism of design

schemes in aristocratic homes; and the living arrangements of single men and women, which are here usually set in dismal contrast to wedlock. These chapters exhibit the same scrupulous use of evidence and a keen sense of the most telling anecdotes, absorbingly narrated. As the details accumulate, they tend to confirm and nuance—rather than alter significantly—our understanding of the private realm in this period. A notable exception is her pugnacious critique of a “founding legend of women’s history ... the withdrawal of middling and privileged women from productive work and their relegation to a separate sphere of home as a consequence of industrial capitalism” (232). Vickery rejects this “tale of female incarceration in the domestic sphere,” preferring “newer interpretations of the affluent home as a site of administrative expertise rather than a cage” (308, 232). “Virtuous domesticity ... was more a self-conscious performance than an inescapable oppression,” she insists, and sociologists are “too pessimistic” about the possibility of female agency “within a framework of masculinist control” (160, 112). Whether or not you accept Vickery’s revisionist claims about the empowerment that eighteenth-century women experienced through domestication will depend on how plausible you find her premise that the authority husbands granted wives over some areas of home management amounted to something more than a weak surrogate for the opportunities women were routinely denied. Women (or men for that matter) may not have been imprisoned in the home, but it would be hard to know this from reading Vickery’s book, which tells us very little about their existence in public, their role in the economy other than as consumers, their legal rights, or their political capacities, and yet all those factors certainly shaped their lives at home and what home meant to them too. Vickery proceeds as if the meaning of home was determined primarily by the actions and beliefs of the people living there, as if what happened in the home was disconnected from what happened elsewhere, and finally as if the definition of home was not endlessly, publicly contested. It would have been beneficial therefore if, in addition to taking us “behind closed doors” as Vickery does with such acuity and sympathy for her subjects, she also opened those doors to let more of the outer world into her analysis.

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