What does a liberal home bring to mind? For the art historian Judith Neiswander, the answer lies in a strain of Victorian upper-middle-class domestic interiors fashioned under the influence of decorative advice literature. While she notes that the authors of these advice books were not necessarily politically informed, nor even especially active as voters, they embraced liberal values of self-expression against the dead weight of normative style. Neiswander acknowledges that her history of the liberal home must sidestep some of the key figures in Victorian architecture and design: men like Ruskin and Morris, who deplored the self-absorption of the bourgeois interior and the laissez-faire capitalism that funded it. She turns instead to John Stuart Mill, and in particular to sections of *On Liberty* (1859) devoted to the struggles around the cultivation of individuality in the private realm. Where the emergence of individuality had once been subject to the state imposing its will, Mill observed a new and greater threat from pressure to conform to the dictates of public opinion, a law of a different but no less forceful kind. In the face of such constraints, Mill urged the private development of defensive eccentricity: “Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.”

Neiswander finds just this argument reflected in the design literature’s attack on oppressive conformity and its subsequent promotion of defensive variety and self-expression. While she

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2 Ibid., 38.
3 Ibid., 39.
suggests that Victorian advice authors gave Millian liberalism domestic form, she overlooks liberal ambivalence about the home such as that documented in Elaine Hadley’s *Living Liberalism*. Hadley traces a liberal migration away from an increasingly fraught and intemperate public sphere and toward the private realm, but not, significantly, in its wonted domestic form. From midcentury the home was associated with the demanding moral order of wives and mothers and ceased to satisfy liberal requirements of disinterestedness. Instead—and this is Hadley’s key observation—liberalism effectively decamps toward the profoundly private realm of cognition, an individuated, yet impersonal space devoted to the propagation of political ideas. For liberals the home, as Hadley describes it, was subject to “impulse, influence, and reflexive attachments to one’s personal self, to one’s spouse, to one’s children, and to other sorts of detail” that inhibited free thought. The resulting move into realms of purer thinking was prompted by the failure of the home to defend against such intrusion and to secure the kind of superlative privacy needed to foster liberal thought. This essay takes up what might be considered the fraying midpoint between the apparently fully realized material cultures of liberalism identified by Neiswander and the imminent liberal flight from domesticity described by Hadley, a point where men tested practical means of actualizing liberty in a context of encroaching domestic scrutiny. Theirs was a wary, mobile, and vernacular liberalism, increasingly deformed by inhibitory domestic pressures and narrowly fixated on privacy and the self-expression it enabled.

I. GOLDEN PRIVACY

Commenting in 1863 on the Vernon case—an excruciatingly embarrassing legal action arising from an extramarital affair in 1842—the *Spectator* lamented the reporter’s relentless urge to expose the concealed: “In this country privacy is almost impossible. Somehow or other everything gets divulged, and people who either want to do good or do evil in private must go to some land where the institution of a reporter is unknown.” The kind of press invasion manifested in the case notwithstanding, the Victorians enjoy a reputation for living in a “golden age of privacy” that took the sheltering home as its most conspicuous symbol. Even amid the abstractions of *Principles of Political Economy*, for example, Mill subtly domesticates his discussion of privacy in terms that derive from the physicality of some primordial threshold crossing, writing of “a circle around every individual human being which no government . . . ought to be permitted to overstep . . . [or] some space in human existence thus entrenched around, and sacred from authoritative intrusion.” In his sweeping overview of English domestic housing that served as the scene-setting for his own contribution to the shape of gentlemanly dwelling, the architect Robert Kerr rings in the fourteenth century with the phrase “privacy introduced,” which is to say that a recognizably Victorian form of architecturally fashioned domesticity had finally arrived:

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defended without, sociable within, concerned with dividing masters from servants and providing deeper retreats for women. Later, Kerr goes so far as to nominate privacy as the “primary classification”\(^\text{10}\) of the ideal dwelling, placing it above comfort or convenience. Visitors to England such as Carl Gustav Carus readily identified a concern with domestic privacy as a national trait that found expression in the preference for single-family dwellings and the barriers designed to preserve them from trespass: “The expression [“Every man’s house is his castle”] receives a true value when, by the mere closing of the house-door, the family is able, to a certain extent, to cut itself off from all communication with the outward world, even in the midst of great cities.”\(^\text{11}\)

Although obviously no liberal himself, Thomas Carlyle apprehends this feeling of, and for, unmolested domestic privacy in “My Own Four Walls” (1825), a poem that luxuriates in the defensive pleasures afforded by the modest house in its secure state:

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King George has palaces of pride,
And armed grooms must ward their halls:
With one stout bolt, I safe abide
Within my own four walls.

When fools or Knaves do make a rout,
With gigman dinners, balls, cabals,
I turn my back, and shut them out;
These are my own four walls.\(^\text{12}\)
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In its withdrawal from the noisy push and shove of the public sphere, domestic privacy offered the precondition for an inhabitable liberalism, a space for the thinking of liberal thoughts and the feeling of liberal emotions. And yet, as Katherine Henry notices in *Liberalism and the Culture of Security*, as a state, privacy proved especially vulnerable to illiberal violation from a range of sources and motives including, of course, the base and barely disclosable.\(^\text{13}\) To demand the protection of privacy was to be haunted by the prospect of disruption and insecurity. Privacy was—and doubtless remains—subject to a thousand banal intrusions, as well as facing graver threats from newly invasive (and often liberal) instruments: an emboldened press, freer speech, photography, thinner party walls, spreading plate glass windows (or, more latterly, the Internet). The Victorian middle-class home was scarcely innocent of these encroachments, defensively thickening its window treatments and dividing its internal arrangements into ever more discrete parts. It is not my purpose here to map the erosion of privacy but rather to make visible a form of inhabitation emerging from a context of waning domestic freedoms. This alternative divines a space of free expression that is liberal in ethos but not in content, playing out a specifically domestic variation of a liberal dilemma: freedoms practiced amid the stark inequalities of asymmetrical power relations.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 67.


What follows are two brief case studies in the form of household testimonies. The first offers a fictionalized and unevenly radical critique of the state of domestic liberty and the related quality of household privacy.

II. THE VICTORIAN HOME

Readers of G. W. M. Reynolds’s spectacularly invasive fiction set within the intermittent domesticities of Buckingham Palace reap the rewards of extravagant license. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London* (1844) was by far the most successful novel in mid-Victorian England, selling tens of thousands of copies domestically to urban working- and lower-middle-class readers, as well as attracting an avid European audience reliant on unauthorized and, in some cases, outlawed translations. Owing a substantial debt to Eugène Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris* (1842), Reynolds’s *Mysteries* are pulpy, discursive, and resistant to summary. Three chapters of the first series and four from the second are devoted to Henry Holford, a lowly potboy recruited to burgle Buckingham Palace. As a character, Holford condenses a number of actual intruders such as the infamous “Boy Jones,” whose multiple palace trespasses included his claim to have lived hidden among the royal family for some weeks. In Lytton Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* (1921), Jones’s escapades stand in symptomatically for the confusion, negligence, and mismanagement that bedeviled the court—Strachey’s favored theme. Jones was discovered in the palace several times, including an occasion when, according to the *Times*, he was pulled from beneath a sofa “of the most costly and magnificent material and workmanship, and ordered expressly for the accommodation of the royal and illustrious visitors who call to pay their respects to Her Majesty.” Reynolds’s *Mysteries* draws on the *Times* journalist’s resolve to luxuriate in specific, and hitherto-unknown, interior detail as well as anticipating Strachey’s politicization of palace intrusion. Holford’s break-ins afford a comprehensive survey of the palace from stateroom to storage cupboards, while his hiding spots allow him to overhear suppressed histories of royal madness, scandal, treason, corruption, and attempted murder.

Once he clears the palace walls and passes unremarked through an unlocked door, Holford enters a “magnificent saloon, adjoining the library,” where, like the Boy Jones, he finds refuge in the underside of a “downy sofa.” Princess Victoria enters and obligingly seats herself directly on top of the concealed intruder. From this intimate, if optically challenging, position, Holford absorbs Victoria’s “magnificent” bust, her nervy impatience with court protocol, and the fact that her ministers withhold information about the state of her humbler subjects. As John Plunkett notes, *The Mysteries* routinely mix radical politics with royal melodrama, romance, and

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14 In some respects Jones was already a literary figure, or at least determined to become one. Interviewed in his prison cell, Jones stated that he would write a book about what he had seen in the palace generally, and the queen’s bedchamber specifically, although his need to bear actual witness suggests a failure of the literary imagination: “Yes, I will ‘write a book’ that will be read by great and small. For seldom Truth before has scaled a Royal Palace wall; And never, I may safely say has Prying gone so far as that of which I have to tell, in spite of the prison bar; In spite of the skilly diet, and the treadmill’s grating jar.” Paul Pry, *Royal Secrets; or, A Pry in the Palace* (London: John Cleave, 1841).


18 Ibid., 181.
voyeuristic eroticism, or rather they draw a firm line between the corrupt court and Victoria as a warmhearted innocent. Holford patrols that line, amassing damning intelligence, on the one hand, while marveling at a range of dewily sentimental and, occasionally, arousing scenes, on the other. Between these bouts of surveillance, though, he mostly explores. After several hours “cramped by his recumbent and uneasy position” beneath the sofa, Holford emerges to sit in the “place where royalty had so lately been.” It is from here that his forays begin: the library first, then an upper chamber filled with “old furniture, trunks, boxes, bedding, and other lumber,” and onward, up the great marble staircase, through the carved and gilded drawing rooms and state apartments before arriving at the picture gallery, where he discovers works confirming Victoria as “passionately attached” to the arts. However, his capacity for cool appraisal evaporates in the face of the adjoining throne room:

The imperial seat itself was covered with a velvet cloth, to protect it against the dust. Holford removed the cloth; and the splendours of the throne were revealed to him.

He hesitated for a moment: he felt as if he were committing a species of sacrilege;—then triumphing over the feeling—a feeling which had appeared like a remorse—he ascended the steps of the throne;—he placed himself in the seat of England’s monarch.

Overhearing servant gossip about Victoria’s plan to receive Albert, Holford quickly decamps to the yellow drawing room, where he slips under yet another sofa, soon to be occupied by the royal couple. What he observes between them leads him to question Albert’s general want of manliness, but he graciously concedes a “certain fitness in their union.” As the gathered courtiers retreat to a discreet distance, the wooing couple engages in a tête-à-tête. Holford notes that “for a short time they seemed to forget their high rank, and to throw aside the trammels of court etiquette; in order to give vent to those natural feelings which the sovereign has in common with the peasant.”

Although the chapter ends on such an affectingly egalitarian note, George Shiff’s accompanying illustration (fig. 1) restores the differentiations of rank. The seated couple command the brightly lit center: Albert all ardent focus, Victoria, head inclined attentively, a flattered smile across her lips. Holford is glimpsed in the lower-left-hand corner, his disembodied face peering from below the sofa and between its curtained legs; a gothic thing, curdling the apparent sweetness of this private moment. It is the courtiers’ decorous withdrawal that prompts the couple to speak relatively freely of their feelings, and yet they miscalculate their degree of liberty, failing to detect Holford’s presence as an immediate hazard and, moreover, as an enduring—and invisible—condition of domesticity itself. In other words, there is nothing to prevent Holford, or someone similarly disposed, from prosecuting his or her own interests through the medium of the vulnerable interior.

The illustration of Holford in all his sofa-lurking monstrosity labors to disavow the narrative source of *The Mysteries*, allowing the reader to reap the fruits of Holford’s sly witnessing while instinctively rejecting the unsavory means of their collection. Shiff’s tightly triangulated

19 Plunkett, “Regicide and Reginamania,” 15.
21 Ibid., chap. 59, 183.
22 Ibid., 185.
composition also forecasts Holford’s fate; maddened by his desire for Victoria, he will, in a later chapter, make an unsuccessful attempt on Albert’s life and end confined to an asylum. But the narrative has not arrived anywhere near that point as yet. Where the illustration and written text do converge is in the suggestion that Holford occupies a realm distinct from that of Victoria and Albert or, rather, that he demonstrates a contrasting experience of domestic privacy. Victoria and Albert are secured in the palace by a complex of physical, legal, and moral safeguards, such as the walls Holford lightly scales, the unlocked doors he opens effortlessly, and the dutiful servants and loyal courtiers he overhears to the royal couple’s manifest disadvantage. Holford’s trespass on royal privacy far exceeds that of the media at its most intrusive. Throughout the 1840s increasingly clamorous press coverage of the palace provoked tensions, some limited accommodation, and, inevitably, numerous satires, including a full-page cartoon (fig. 2) from *Punch* (1848) in which a “Paul Pry,” notebook in hand, peeps through a keyhole to sketch “the Royal Chest of Drawers.”

Pry’s keyhole peeping is party to a long tradition of sexualized curiosity finding satisfaction through the home’s apertures—clearly an “outrage” but an oddly respectful one in the sense that Pry exploits a weakness of the lock while observing the door as an insuperable barrier. By contrast, Holford’s position under the sofa, wedged in nooks, or on the throne itself affords relatively unrestricted, immersive, and multisensory access to Victoria. He doesn’t observe her intimacies so much as partake of them from within his own reserve. It is worth pausing for a

moment over this achievement: Holford creates for himself what is, in effect, the only consistently private space within what must have been regarded as one of the more secure homes in Britain.

The Mysteries don’t speak directly to a mid-Victorian crisis in the provision of domestic privacy—understandably, that is not a theme that Reynolds pursues. Holford’s secret residency resolves a more practical problem: providing directly reported working-class testimony of the palace as institution. However, Holford’s triumph—his scandalizing access—is also something of a dead end. The critical account of palace corruption in The Mysteries is all but overwhelmed by Holford’s thrilling proximity to Victorian and Albert. His fascination with the royal couple identifies a problem with domesticity as a state uncongenial to the formation of political thought. What emerges most forcefully in this section of The Mysteries is not a set of political ideas but the course and consequence of Holford’s illiberal actions.

As he moves about, Holford traces a novel counterarchitecture that is private, interstitial, and posterior to palace architect John Nash’s aggressive pomp. Holford hides in the gaps in what
passes for the palace’s routines, as well as cognate spaces found between boxes, mattresses, furnishings, and floors. In his obsessive pursuit of proximity to Victoria, then, Holford altogether abandons conventional postures and the sociable pleasures of upholstery in favor of the informational rewards of ascetic underspaces.

Holford’s extended immunity from detection suggests that his preferred recesses are imperceptible blanks, but that is not strictly correct. Certainly, writers of domestic advice like Mrs. Beeton or “A Lady”—the anonymous author of *Common Sense for Housemaids*—knew these spaces well, instructing servants to shift “sofas and tables, so as to get at every particle of dust that may have gathered under them, and leaving no remote corner untouched in the hope that the eye of the mistress may not penetrate so far.” The underneath, like those remote corners, is consigned to domesticity’s intensive sanitary and symbolic routines, demanding spectacular exertion performed under supervision. But, as “A Lady” notes, the mistress’s eye may not penetrate to the farthest corner, a myopic limitation she urges housemaids not to bet against, while grudgingly conceding a prospective hiding place for their unfinished labors, among other uses. In “The Sofa,” one of Dickens’s “Three ‘Detective’ Anecdotes” published in *Household Words*, the ostensibly undetectable underneath does not advance mischievous domestic freedoms but rather makes possible their prosecution. A thief stealing money from coat pockets at Saint Blanks Hospital is caught red-handed by a detective who has hidden himself beneath a specially modified sofa. The guilty party—a young medical student—is horrified by the sudden appearance of the detective: his unnerving pallor (the detective is ill at the time of the arrest), the eccentric, draft-defeating handkerchief tied around his head, and, above all, the brute fact of his emergence from an impossible gap beneath the sofa. “[The thief] turned blue—literally blue—when he saw me crawling out, and I couldn’t feel surprised at it.” The detective appears as if from another dimension, one that affords a greater privacy than the totalizing kind demanded by the sneak thief. The underneath proves so unimaginable that its spontaneous revelation is apprehended supernaturally, anticipating the nervy responses to suddenly animated furniture in Spiritualist séances. Stories like these fitfully attend to an illiberal privacy that occupies and supersedes conventional privacy founded in the home’s routine protections of keyed locks and discretion.

The exceptional privacy Holford secures within the palace is composed of rooms, and the objects they contain, used against the grain of habit—an accidental revolutionary practice that culminates in the throne room with Holford briefly regnant. These remarkable liberties come illiberally; they are freedoms bound to the spoiled comforts and dissolved confidences of others. Holford’s hiding holes reveal spaces of exemption both from and within the domestic, accounting for a novel but not particularly actionable form of household privacy. As Reynolds traces in Holford’s longer narrative arc, his physically constrained but apparently limitless access to the intimacies of others eventually exacts a punishing mental toll. His feelings move inward, sickeningly, rather than outward into a liberal engagement with the world. Holford’s Buckingham residency is at once a highly eccentric alternative to the household order and a common tendency skulking within domesticity itself.

24 A Lady, *Common Sense for Housemaids* (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1853), 47.
26 Freud explores this problem in his analysis of the infant Wolfman, who, like Holford, witnessed unguarded behavior from an interstitial, blank space—the crib in a corner of the parental bedroom—that did not register for the occupants of a room devoted to the pursuit of other goals. Sigmund Freud, *The “Wolfman” (from the History of an Infantile Neurosis)* (London: Penguin, 2010).
Reynolds’s oblique account of privacy made out of the exposure of others offers some bleak insights into the limited prospects of domestic life, but it does not yield testimony rooted in practical experience. For that, I turn to the second case study: the example of Linley Sambourne—not, on the face of it, a likely or even plausible comparison with Holford or, for that matter, with Reynolds. Sambourne was active from the 1870s, long after The Mysteries of London’s heyday and, as a cartoonist for Punch, scarcely shared Reynolds’s radical politics. And yet there are surprising continuities across their respective accounts of modern privacy made out of the whole cloth of domestic discomfiture. Like Holford, Sambourne was aware of gaps in the residential floor plan—how these opened illiberal possibilities of dwelling that in turn measured the diminishing prospects of liberal domesticity.

III. THE LIBERAL INTERIOR

In her introduction to The Cosmopolitan Interior, Judith Neiswander compares Sambourne’s Kensington home at 18 Stafford Terrace with Woodbine Villa, 7 Alpha Place, St. John’s Wood, better known as the setting for Holman Hunt’s The Awakening Conscience (1853). Where Hunt’s meticulous rendering of a cold and ostentatious Rococo Revival interior etched sexual fall into the material culture of the parlor, Sambourne’s home, by contrast, is described as a warm, eclectic mix of art-furnishings expressive of individuality and comfort—a liberal interior.27 Neiswander is silent on the relationship, if any, between Sambourne’s activities within the house, including his work as a cartoonist for Punch and, from the early 1880s, as a photographer of both licit and illicit subjects.

Originally apprenticed as an engineer, Sambourne commanded a precisely drawn copyist’s line but indifferent sketching skills. Photography, which he described as a “valuable adjunct,” compensated for these deficiencies in his training and capacity.28 Many of these “adjunct” photographs were shot in the terrace’s small rear garden, where family members, servants, friends, amateur models, and often Sambourne himself would pose as political, historical, or allegorical figures or were arranged in tableaux as dictated by the theme of Punch’s weekly cartoon. The resulting images reveal a surprising range of affect in his working- and middle-class subjects and are far more arresting than the stiff, narrowly topical cartoons they made possible.

Marion Sambourne’s diary does not address her experience modeling for her husband but does acknowledge her impatience with his constant relocation and repurposing of household furnishings as props and the time he devoted to a pursuit that straddled his professional and amateur interests, what she variously described as “those everlasting photos,” “those hateful photos,” and his “endless, endless, endless photography.”29 Sambourne’s nude studies inaugurated what were to become a substantial second category in his photographic archive, only a portion of which were used as drawing templates. The remainder, as photography historian Mary Ann Roberts wryly observes, “are largely without aim.”30

These “aimless” photographs could hardly be described as a guarded secret. Marion was, to some extent, aware of what he was doing, as was Sambourne’s circle of friends and associates. Many of his nudes were shot at Edwin Abbey and Alfred Parson’s studio and, from 1893, at the serious-minded Camera Club on Charing Cross Road. Sambourne’s interests emerged at a liberalizing moment for nude photography, particularly in the wake of J. C. Horsely’s unsuccessful moral campaign to demonize female models as prostitutes. In an interview conducted in his studio, Sambourne candidly acknowledged the size and diversity of content of his collection as the reporter set the scene:

We crossed the room to three of the pretty Louis Seize cabinets, in which were several long drawers, and in these there must have been upwards of 10,000 photographs.

Let us glance through them in order. That top drawer, we need not waste time over that, all nudes; the next drawer, semi-nudes and draped. Now here we come to character photos. Here are the clergy. Even in the face of such avowal there were degrees of discretion. While many of his nudes were broadly classical in their poses, others traded in more conventional, if less admissible, pornographic postures. The point here is not to trace the increasingly discreet circles through which Sambourne’s most explicit imagery may have circulated or to filter the practical requirements of the commercial artist from the delectations of the artistically minded gentleman or, for that matter, the furtive masturbator. Rather, it is to notice that in the interview quoted above, and within his professional and social circles, the presence of erotic subject matter does not presumptively activate a boundary between the public and the inexpressibly private. Finding that boundary—and, with it, a more decisively sequestered domain—is the undeclared subject of photographic work that falls within the third and rather more ambiguously defined category of Sambourne’s photographic archive, one that Mary Ann Roberts summarizes as “images made out of curiosity for personal pleasure.” This is not a phrase or an organizational principle that would necessarily exclude erotic imagery, but in addition to scores of travel and street subjects, it does capture some of his most secretive or, perhaps, least defensible work—images that are at most odds with the apparent liberality of his home.

An entry from Sambourne’s diary reads “photod sleeping figure” (fig. 3). The print, bearing the reverse inscription “6.30 am Nov. 1887,” depicts a housemaid lying under a thin blanket, with what appear to be pages of newsprint at the foot of her modest, iron-framed bed; it is an image made possible by Sambourne’s overruling her claims to private, unmolested repose. What protections are flouted here? In his model of the ideally segregated home, the architect Robert Kerr insisted that “each class is entitled to shut its door upon the other and be alone.” Servant privacy relied on mutual trust but was subject to contradictory directives. A maid’s apparent entitlement to a locked wardrobe, drawer, or box was countermanded in advice literature that

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32 Ibid., 14.
33 “How I Do Mr ‘Punch’ Pictures: An Interview with Mr. Linley Sambourne,” Pall Mall Gazette, 8 November 1889, 7. See also “Mr Sambourne at Home: An Interview with Mr Punch’s Chief Cartoonist,” Daily Mail, 10 January 1901, 7.
35 Kerr, Gentleman’s House, 68.
encouraged mistresses to monitor servant bedrooms and personal possessions. Ideally, the mistress’s surveillance fostered self-regulatory behaviors in the servant, although the presence of a locked box might warrant further investigation. Sambourne’s image of the sleeping maid is not party to that kind of external or internal surveillance. While undoubtedly invasive, there is nothing particularly investigative or evidentiary about its mode of address. Beyond the newspapers, there are no objects to fund speculation about her habits, relationships, or tastes. When documenting the contents of the maid’s room the curators of what is now the 18 Stafford Terrace House Museum noted that the room contained a washstand, painted chest of drawers, and some photographs and watercolors.

Sambourne’s tightly framed composition excludes a host of potentially revelatory things: the brushes, books, and other tokens that make the bedroom a space of private self-cultivation. And yet her isolation from everyday trappings is insufficiently sentimentalized to suggest either the innocent transformations of the dream state or some kind of personified essence of Sleep. Her sleep is raw, undisturbed by the light level, and, we may infer, the sounds of Sambourne opening her door, adjusting his camera, and making an exposure.

In the absence of an express invitation, plausible suspicion, or a matter of household business, the inappropriateness of Sambourne’s action is both clear and compounded in photographic commemoration. By entering her room, Sambourne places himself at odds with the flow of purposeful traffic in the house—where the housemaid is obliged to come to him—plotting instead a spatial form that privileges illiberal impulse. However, unlike, say, Walter, the priapic author of My Secret Life (1888), Sambourne is not a classic voyeur of the peephole but a frank threshold

crosser.\textsuperscript{39} The brute fact of his intrusion registers in the camera’s undeniable proximity to the maid’s occupied bed. What the image reveals is both the familiar perils of misplaced confidence in the moral and architectural protections afforded by corridors and doors and the compensatory affirmation and instantaneous restoration of the master’s privacy. In other words, the servant’s exposure is itself the fleeting content of Sambourne’s unrestricted private experience arrested in the moment of the photograph. His privacy is not found in, or founded on, the cellular disposition of rooms segregated by gender and function but is snatched at opportunistically from the weaknesses of those arrangements, a critical thematic of Victorian domestic unease.

As his interests in photography deepened, Sambourne’s approach to documenting private material grew stranger and somewhat riskier in subject matter, notably drawing some of his nude studies into the heart of Stafford Terrace. On two occasions in March 1893, while Marion was away at Ramsgate, Sambourne photographed Kate Derben and then Madge King (fig. 4) seated on what was referred to as the “Moorish table,” a small, low-set, and geometrically patterned piece of lacquerwork.\textsuperscript{40} Unlike the crudely draped plinths classically supporting many of his studio nudes, the table—even when isolated by a backdrop from its immediate context—is a distinctively recognizable object from the Sambournes’ morning room. The nudes are not emphatically orientalized; although their poses echo those found in paintings from Ingres to Leighton, they lack the permissive context of the fully realized harem and remain instead within the everyday ornamental sphere of the Moorish table as conversation piece. Arranging and photographing nude bodies pressed against the tabletop both extends and infringes upon the range of meanings associated with a domestic object of this type, as a practical side table, as an artistic marker of cosmopolitan tastes, and as an exotic counterpoint to sincere English manufacture.


Sambourne’s images intervene in the manifest content of his décor, opening a set of private—and persistent—associations that form the latent content of the furnishings, as distinctive in its way as Holford’s excavation of the underneath.

By relocating the Moorish table from its morning room context, Sambourne takes liberties with a space described by domestic advice author Mrs. Panton as “set aside emphatically for the mistress’s own room—sacred to her own pursuits, and far too sacred to be smoked in on any occasion whatsoever.”

Marion Sambourne’s morning room is itself the setting for an unidentified woman most likely photographed in the same period as the Moorish table studies. She is posed nude on Marion’s armchair (possibly draped with a throw rug for the purpose), which is positioned between her desk and table. Although the existence of the photograph testifies otherwise, it is a doubly prohibited object, recording an interdicted event in an image unlikely to be disclosed. Sambourne simulates an impossible liberty taken with the house generally, and Marion’s domain specifically, in which her morning room variously entertains a scene of unthinkable incursion and dispossession, the graphic content of an erotic thought, and a vignette from some radical form of domestic leisure. This is a shocking image made possible by Marion’s absence. A providential gap has opened in the home’s routine, permitting a looser and more associative approach to documenting the interior, treating it as a space of intermittent privacy and arousal rather than a testament to status and taste. On Marion’s return, and subsequently, the serious business of her desk and the seemlier pleasures of her armchair are permanently subject to the remnant traces of this staged alternative to the polite liberal habitus of conventional domesticity, priming and capacitating her morning room to the literary fate of irony, whether in Sambourne’s memory of the event or in the fact of the print itself, filed away in the long drawers and subject to his endless recataloging. In their fine calculus of risk and reward, Sambourne’s images present a view of privacy at its least liberal and most invasive, less a quality distributed unequally between family members and servants than something extracted unexpectedly and without warrant from others, a furtive state to savor rather than permanently inhabit. The freedoms taken in the photographs are not continuous with the supposed triumphs of the liberal home but rather the products of its entrenched illiberality.

41 J. E. Panton, From Kitchen to Garret: Hints for Young Householders (London: Ward and Downey, 1893), 92.
42 In The Art of Furnishing on Rational and Aesthetic Principles, H. J. Cooper describes the interior—in this case, of the drawing room—in terms that suggest just what Sambourne places at risk: “[This room] should be the embodiment of our finer nature, and often does most faithfully represent us in our individual characteristics, our tastes, and capacities.” H. J. Cooper, The Art of Furnishing on Rational and Aesthetic Principles (London: Henry S. King, 1876), 11.