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# Whose Room? The Domestic Library in the Nineteenth Century[1]

# ¿De quién es la habitación? La biblioteca doméstica en el siglo XIX

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**Abstract:** The nineteenth-century domestic library has been considered a masculine space though dedicated scholarship on the matter is scarce. This article seeks to locate the position of this room within the household, to illuminate how and why it challenges established assumptions regarding Victorian domesticity and, in many instances, is presented as an ambiguous, liminal space. Building on scholarship on Victorian domesticity, contemporary sources on architecture and realist domestic fiction by Jane Austen, Anne Brontë and George Eliot, this article inquires into the difficulties surrounding questions of entitlement and ownership of this room.
**Keywords:** Victorian domesticity; liminal spaces; gender and space; library; study.
**Summary:** Introduction. Unstable Domesticity. Inside the Library. The Difficulties of a Normative Library. Libraries and Domestic Realism. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** La biblioteca doméstica decimonónica se ha considerado un espacio masculino y los estudios específicos sobre el tema son escasos. Este artículo busca situar la posición de esta habitación dentro del hogar, aclarar cómo y porqué escapa a los fundamentos conocidos sobre la domesticidad victoriana y, en muchas ocasiones, se presenta como un espacio ambiguo y liminal. A partir de estudios sobre domesticidad victoriana, fuentes contemporáneas sobre arquitectura y novelas del género del realismo doméstico escritas por Jane Austen, Anne Brontë y George Eliot, este artículo indaga en las dificultades que rodean las cuestiones de apropiación y derecho sobre esta habitación.
**Palabras clave:** Domesticidad victoriana; espacios liminales; género y espacio; biblioteca; estudio.

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**Sumario:** Introducción. Domesticidad inestable. Dentro de la biblioteca. Las dificultades de una biblioteca normativa. Bibliotecas y realismo doméstico. Conclusiones.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the Victorian household was conceived as private, and therefore female, some of its spaces remained fluid and would operate both as public and private, attesting to the porousness and blurriness of the theory of separate spheres. One such example of the collapse of separate spheres is the domestic library or study. Although these two spaces can make for different rooms within a Victorian household, contemporary architects and designers, as well as present-day scholars, acknowledge their similarities and often use both terms without making any distinction.[2] This article adds to scholarship on domesticity by exploring the mutable depictions and uses of this room during the nineteenth century.

In the collective imaginary "the library and study are perhaps the most obviously masculine spaces in the home" (Tange 147).[3] So much so, that scholarship on this domestic space, unlike other spaces in the Victorian household, is extremely scarce. This may be due to the fact that women's use of domestic space, especially when it comes to instances of subversion, has stirred more interest among scholars, and to the difficulty of challenging deeply ingrained assumptions. In fact, neither nineteenth-century specialized writings in architecture and house planning nor fictional representations of this room provide a clear-cut, straightforward picture of this domestic space. It is thus that the Victorian domestic library remains greatly underexamined.

This article builds on scholarship on Victorian domesticity as well as nineteenth-century works written by renowned architects and designers such as J. C. Loudon, Robert Kerr, C. J. Richardson, and Charles L. Eastlake in search of a comprehensive description of the domestic library in the nineteenth century. To establish a contrast between these descriptive and normative writings and what coeval realist novels actually tell us about

[2] See for instance: Davidoff and Hall 377; Eastlake 127; Kerr 117, 118, 123; Loudon 855; Ponsonby 93; Tange 137; Tosh, *A Man's Place* 60.

[3] The belief that the nineteenth-century library was a male space was well spread. See for instance: Eastlake 127; Hamlett, "The Dining Room" 576; *Material Relations* 584; Kerr 116; Logan 31; Monrós-Gaspar and Arias Doblas 11–12; Tosh, *A Man's Place* 60.

this room, passages from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) are analyzed. Understanding literary styles and cultural domestic codes as continua which change progressively over time without clear-cut delimitations, these novels, authored by women and belonging to the realist convention, portray different versions of the library and describe the domestic dynamics going on inside a specific type of abode: large-scale gentry-style homes. These novels cover approximately the period between 1813 and 1832, which helps provide an idea about the instability of domestic codes in the early nineteenth century. This instability likely results from the mutability of spatial arrangements that Jennifer Ciro has shown to be taking place in the previous century, with country-house libraries owned by the aristocracy becoming public spaces towards the end of the eighteenth century. This shift, not surprisingly, would progressively leave its trace on Victorian domesticity as well (Ciro 89). Moreover, Ciro describes the different purposes that these libraries would come to serve depending on occasion and time of day, which further points to the versatile nature of the room. Therefore, this article shows how the library has been portrayed as male, female, and, ultimately, a liminal, fluid space "where power relations are played out" (I. Armstrong, "Spaces" 587). This analysis offers the opportunity to further explore what these representations may tell us about upper-class domestic ideology and the impact that different models of femininity and masculinity have on space. In fact, classifying the library as 'in-between' sheds light on its actual nature and brings this space into dialogue with current studies about nineteenth-century domesticity.[4]

## 1. UNSTABLE DOMESTICITY

For several decades, scholarship on Victorian domesticity has shown how blurred the public/private dichotomy actually was. It is thus that the "apparent coherence and authenticity" on the one hand, and the "internal instability and artificiality" on the other of Victorian spatial ideology permeates representations of the domestic library (Poovey 3). That is to say, the same tensions and frictions which were inherent to Victorian ideology also emerge when analyzing the domestic space of the library.

[4] For a recent study on the blurriness and liminality of Victorian spaces see Monrós-Gaspar and Arias Doblas.

The ideological instability which materializes within the four walls of the library allows for a fluidity that affects space and gender dynamics and helps illuminate the mutability of nineteenth-century domesticity codes in everyday life. Far from "the ordered space" which Nancy Armstrong sees as heavily reliant on "cultural hegemony" (23–24; 201), the ideal Victorian household was as much in the making as the ideology it was trying to live up to, contain, and display. Despite the ideological commitment to separate home and work, and place the figure of the woman at the center of the former, "[t]he boundaries between public and private life . . . were permeable and frequently transgressed" (Hamlett, *Material Relations* 41), a fact which becomes obvious when analyzing the library.[5] Even if the Victorian practice of sex segregation was also replicated inside the family house, some rooms, as it was the case with the library, functioned as liminal spaces whose purposes and 'rightful' inhabitants varied not only between households but even depending on the occasion and time of the day.[6] What this suggests is that Victorians had a variety of threshold, multipurpose spaces in their houses even if the importance of rooms with specific purposes was becoming the norm.

The instability of the library is also related to the "spatial negotiation" that Jane Hamlett highlights as essential to household dynamics ("The Dining Room" 579; *Material Relations* 96). While Hamlett's argument aligns with nineteenth-century experts when stressing the fact that Victorian interiors were increasingly designed for specific uses, she acknowledges how divisions of space were in fact "relational" and afforded permeability and transgression with the study being the epitome of the "divide between public and private" since, although it was a domestic space, its function belonged to the public sphere (Hamlett, *Material Relations* 5; 31; 38; 40). This shows how the in-betweenness of the library makes it a space with the necessary potentiality to subvert the status quo depending on who uses it and for what purpose, further

[5] Precisely because of this "permeability," scholars have had to resort to labels such as "privately public rooms" (Flanders 254) or "semipublic places" and "truly private spaces" when providing accounts about actual house management and arrangement practices (Gillis 120).

[6] In her study of Victorian architecture, domesticity and identity, Andrea Tange refers to "staircases, halls, and corridors" as *the* "liminal spaces of the middle-class home" (177). Yet, because liminality refers to a state "betwixt and between" and precludes having a clear structural status or identity (Turner 95), the domestic library or study can be fittingly categorized as liminal.

reinforcing the idea that spaces are not fixed and, indeed, are prone to be transformed by their users, or negotiated (Hamlett *Material Relations*; "The Dining Room"). This argument also foregrounds how, in spite of the implications which architecture has on identity formation, with space having an impact on individuals and their interactions (Tange 14), these are mutable. In fact, it is rather individuals' identities and the use they make of space that can have a truly transformative impact on the supposedly stable connotations of space.

## 2. INSIDE THE LIBRARY

As Ciro's work shows, from the end of the eighteenth century, the country-house library ended up becoming a public reception room (90–91); a change in identity that would progressively be adopted more widely by the upper classes. In 1825, *The Complete Servant*, a household guide with extremely minute details and advice for servants, refers to the library as one of "the usual family sitting-rooms" (Adams and Adams 277). Thus, we can see how at the beginning of the nineteenth century the upper classes were already using the library as a family room, hence destabilizing the notion of the library as the quintessential male space within the house. This raises questions about the real place, if any, reserved for the paterfamilias, the extent to which 'center' and 'periphery' were also unstable concepts within the household, and how these could accommodate Victorian gender dynamics.

### 2.1 Periphery and Manliness

The fact that the library has been considered – and largely remains– a male space poses a paradox: its being labeled as male within an allegedly female realm makes it sit on the periphery even when it is described as the space reserved for the patriarch. Moreover, the library is only financially affordable to the upper classes, regardless of the use they make of it, hence it is informed by notions of (gentle-)manliness which were under revision from the end of the eighteenth century thus further enhancing the in-betweenness and unstable characterization of this room. Therefore, the library represents a constant tension between in and out, private and public, and male and female, not only at the level of its physicality and actual location within the household, but also from an ideological perspective,

since, if the center of the home was female, a man's place was arguably the periphery.[7]

As historian Judith Flanders puts it, "[t]hat work was moving outside the home" was one of the "essential factor[s] in the creation of nineteenth-century domesticity" (xxii). In fact, scholars have commonly referred to the home not just as "the opposite of public" (Tange 11) but as its "antidote" (Tange 11; N. Armstrong 48). Therefore, the efforts to spread and sanctify the Angel-in-the-House ideal, with the woman at the center, meant that the man was allegedly relegated to the margins of his own home. It is for this reason that scholars have argued that "the paradox of defining masculinity significantly through domesticity meant that certain home spaces were coded as masculine places" (Tange 137). And the library or study, a threshold "internal[izing] the divide between private and public" (Hamlett, *Material Relations* 38), has been understood by many as a solution to the paradox.

The in-betweenness and blurriness of the library and study within the domestic space is underscored when John Tosh asserts that "[i]ndependent professional men . . . nearly always used a room at home *which served as office, library and an interview room according to need*," usually referred to as "the study," and which was "[r]eserved for the husband's exclusive use and often out of bonds for the rest of the family" (*A Man's Place* 60, emphasis mine). Tosh's work brings forward the ambiguity regarding the purpose this room should serve, and the collapse of the private-public distinction within the Victorian home. Nonetheless, Tosh traces here a difference between library and study, with the latter being a space specially devoted to work-related matters. The argument that this space conforms "to the principle of separate spheres by removing [men's] work from the domestic atmosphere" (*A Man's Place* 60) follows the trend, already discussed, which supports that not all rooms in the household were to be considered purely domestic. These statements emphasize the ambiguous and peripheral nature of the library and study as spaces that escape clear demarcation.

Indeed, while some scholars see the need for a male library as stemming from the fact that some professions made it a requirement, others

[7] As it has been argued, "[t]he ideological centrality of woman helps account for the importance that the idealized domestic sphere played during this period" (Poovey 80), and this "ideological centrality" was translated into space: "[t]he drawing room was the centre of the house, literally and spiritually. It was the status indicator, the mark of gentility, the room from where the woman governed her domain" (Flanders 131).

have argued that men were in want of a domestic space that could protect them from too much domestic bliss. The fact that the library or study has been described as "not so much sited *within* the home, as carved out *from* the home" (Tosh, *A Man's Place* 60, emphasis original) is another example of the difficulties to try and accommodate the public sphere within the perimeter of the house. This reinforces the peripheral and liminal qualities of this room from a physical point of view and makes it stand in direct relation to the Victorian gentlemen's club.

Considered "a surrogate home" or "a home away from home" (Milne-Smith, "A Flight to Domesticity?" 796; 807; Black 181), clubs are threshold spaces in between "private/public sphere dialectics" in as much as they provide privacy, and a sense of belonging to a community of "chosen equals" (Capdeville 22; 8). They were at the same time places of leisure and work, and, therefore, threshold spaces that contained all the comforts of the home without any of its pressures or demands. Thus, the Victorian club provides an "alternative domestic life for men" where all their needs were catered for in an intimate space chiefly characterized by privacy, discretion, propriety, and the absence of women (Milne-Smith, "A Flight" 798). These characteristics, essential to the gentleman's clubs, are shared by the domestic library or study as depicted by some scholars. This conceptualization has led Barbara Black to refer to clubs as 'a room of his own.' Similarly, when talking about the domestic library or study, Tange notes that "[i]t was the lucky middle-class man who had a room to himself that no one disturbed" (156). This statement complicates the Victorian concept of the home as refuge from the public sphere.

It was not until the late Victorian period that middle- and upper-class women could enjoy women's clubs, with The Somerville Club, founded in London in 1878, being considered the first of its kind and, possibly, the most emblematic (Monrós-Gaspar and Arias Doblas 160–62; Hughes 234). Yet, prior to this period, women had access to voluntary organizations and associations as early as 1775 (Morris 397). Although these were not appointed spaces and did not follow the rules of clubs, they nonetheless offered women the possibility of experiencing the public sphere on equal terms.

Like their masculine counterparts, women's clubs became hubs for political debate and discussion about the Woman Question but also spaces for "cultural production, training, and the generation of progressive ideas" (Monrós-Gaspar and Arias Doblas 148, my translation). In short, some of these clubs became spaces for women's liberation and betterment through

education. Women's clubs were also liminal spaces. In fact, and curiously enough, the decoration of the club's drawing room in particular was taken as a sign of the establishment's respectability (Monrós-Gaspar and Arias Doblas 151), establishing the threshold status of these spaces as continuations of the household. Yet, as Monrós-Gaspar and Arias Doblas conclude, the porosity and liminality of the clubs' drawing rooms eventually debunked the Angel in the House to give way to the New Woman's aims (156–57). Therefore, clubs functioned as proxy households that hosted activities proper to the public arena in spaces which still retained a clear connection, even if only aesthetically, to the private sphere.

## 3. THE DIFFICULTIES OF A NORMATIVE LIBRARY

The challenges to attempt a straight-forward definition of the Victorian domestic library or study stem largely from the fact that not even contemporary writings by architects and household experts are categorical. While there is consensus regarding ornamental aspects, its purpose is not always clearly delimited, and the terms "library" and "study" are often used interchangeably. It is important to note that the manuals analyzed in what follows are closer to the conduct-book tradition insofar as they focus on idealized notions about how houses should be run, decorated, and 'used' and try to present them as achievable because they are desirable, which helps to accommodate the contradictory nature of the library and its liminal qualities. Robert Kerr provides the clearest differentiation when stating that in the absence of a library in a small house owned by a professional or a man of learning, a study will be necessary (117; 118), an argument also supported by Tosh (*A Man's Place* 60).

Architects J. C. Loudon (*Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, 1835), Robert Kerr (*The Gentleman's House*, 1865) and Charles L. Eastlake (*Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details*, 1877) address the question of the decoration of the library but, instead of explicitly branding it a male space, they focus on how it should differ from other rooms usually considered female: "[t]he library, though it ought to be a handsome room, should present a great contrast to the light elegance of the drawing-room. The furniture should be substantial, the hangings of a warm but dark colour" (Loudon 798). Eastlake's take on this matter is much more categorical: "[o]f all the rooms in a modern house, that which is used as a library or study is the one least

like to offend a fastidious taste by its appointments. Here at least the furniture, usually of oak, is strong and solid" (Eastlake 127).

Loudon's advice on the decoration of the library draws upon gender without directly referring to it. While the characteristically female space of the drawing room should be "light" and "elegant," much as its ideal occupant, the library stands apart for its being "substantial" and presenting a "great contrast" (798). Loudon does not need to use the words "male" or "female," or "man" or "woman" for his message to get across. Having previously established that "none but a lady" can oversee the decoration of the drawing-room (Loudon 797), there is little need for further elaboration about the sex of the main occupant of the library. It is thus that we can see in Loudon's writing how "[t]he epistemological term *woman* could guarantee men's identity only if difference was fixed" (Poovey 80, original emphasis). The difference man/woman was the principle at the basis of Victorian ideology and demarcated man as the original, whole "I" and woman as "other." It is not surprising then that nineteenth-century architects applied this "familiar field of information" (N. Armstrong 87)—almost a universal language—to their works. In fact, when referring to the decoration of spaces, the adjectives used could, in some instances, refer to the room as much as to its rightful occupant. This shows to what extent "the sophisticated grammar" organizing household principles was internalized (N. Armstrong 87).

Such is also the case with Eastlake, who genders the library by opposition to other rooms in the house when he explicitly asserts that "'knick-knacks' were usually banished from the library. By that expression I meant to include that heterogeneous assemblage of modern rubbish which, under the head of 'china ornaments' and various other names, finds its way into the drawing-room or boudoir" (136). This "modern rubbish" that ladies store and display in their drawing-rooms or boudoirs is, we can infer, the fastidiousness Eastlake is glad to see the library free of. It is in this bold manner that the architect demarcates space and gender, making it clear that the library was male.

Kerr's advice is more succinct even if gender implications are still present. For him, "the style of design and decoration ought to be, although not devoid of cheerfulness, certainly subdued in character" (Kerr 116). In the same vein, Eastlake stresses the "intense respectability" that the library projects (127). This subduedness runs alongside the "manly simplicity" that was gaining currency as a trait of desired Victorian manliness (Tosh, "Gentlemanly Politeness" 471).

Another point of agreement among most contemporaries—though Eastlake provides very little specific information—is the fact that the library serves as family sitting room, as anticipated in *The Complete Servant*. In fact, Loudon and Kerr bring the domestic library close to the parlor, one of those public rooms in the house. While Loudon refers to the library as being "used as the family sitting-room on common occasions" (796), Kerr further describes it as "a public room, and somewhat of a lounge" (118). It is thus that the ambivalent and liminal nature of this room begins to appear in contemporary accounts: one single space is marked as reserved for the family—private—but also as a "public room" and "*somewhat of* a lounge" (emphasis mine).

In fact, the versatility and ambivalence of the library, its lack of a clear status, are further underscored by Loudon when he turns it into a male space: "[w]hen there is company in the house, the library would be the morning sitting-room for the gentlemen, who might here read the papers and new publications, write and answer letters" (799). In spite of his initial claim that "every apartment in a house has, or ought to have, its particular use" (258), Loudon ultimately surrenders to the mutability of this room. His concession further highlights how individuals have an impact on space since, on such occasions, the library serves as a masculine homosocial space for leisure and work, that is, it becomes a club at home—a significantly liminal place, as this article has shown.

Therefore, even if "specificity in house planning" became progressively prevalent during the nineteenth century (Hamlett, *Material Relations* 40), the library would remain a contradiction and an exception since architects themselves do not assign a specific role even when depicting the ideal library. In fact, the nineteenth-century library changes purpose not only depending on the occasion but also on the time of day,[8] a habit that began in the aristocratic country house.

Ciro has recorded how the library turned into a space for social gatherings and how the Victorian upper classes would progressively assign different uses to this room depending on the time of day. Being so, the mornings could see the library being used as morning room for family and guests or just for the group of men assembled at the house (91; 93). Towards the early afternoon, men could retire to the library after lunch

[8] In her seminal study about the Victorian parlor, Thad Logan also acknowledges that "the occupation of certain spaces was carefully regulated by time of day and occasion" in relation to dinner parties (32).

(92), thus signaling it a "clubbable space."[9] In the evenings, however, both sexes would meet again there and use it as "a proxy drawing room" turning it into a space of frivolity (91; 93). In turn, Hamlett has noted how, during the second half of the nineteenth century, "[l]ibraries often contained large numbers of chairs and pianos, suggesting family and possibly public sociability as much as male seclusion" ("The Dining Room" 584).

To add to this ambivalence about the library, Robert Kerr somewhat struggles to describe it:

> It is not a Library in the sole sense of a depository for books. There is of course the family collection; and the bookcases in which this is accommodated form the chief furniture of the apartment. But it would be an error, except in very exceptional circumstances, to design the Library for mere study. It is primarily a sort of Morning-room for gentlemen rather than anything else. Their correspondence is done here, their reading, and, in some measure, their lounging;—and the Billiard-room, for instance, is not unfrequently attached to it. At the same time the ladies are not exactly excluded. (116)

Kerr's library seems to be more practical than ideal since his attempt at a description is more rooted in everyday practicalities. His description undermines categorical assumptions about the Victorian library and destabilizes notions of gender segregation in this particular space. Being so, Kerr's library is, if anything, depicted as a liminal, in-between space: for every allowance he makes, there is an exception or clarification to be noted. The library is not just "a depository for books" or a room for "mere study," and it is only "in very exceptional circumstances" that the latter may be the case. Kerr's attempt to define the library thus starts with what it is not rather than with what it actually is. In this sense, we can see in Kerr's prose the importance of epistemologically fixed differences and how they work to identify a presumably male space based on opposites rather than similarities.

The sentence "[i]t is primarily a sort of Morning-room for gentlemen rather than anything else" attempts a gender categorization of this space. Nonetheless, Kerr, as Loudon, has to draw on a female framework of

[9] The term "clubbable" has traditionally referred to "one who is sociable or possesses the qualities requisite to be a club member" (Milne-Smith, *London Clubland* 30–31), however, I here propose to apply the term to those spaces possessing the qualities to function as a club since in the culture of 'clubland' space was as important as individuals.

reference—the morning-room—to establish what the library may be "rather than anything else." The ambiguity in Kerr's description of this space, and of the space itself for that matter, reaches its peak when the author clarifies that "[a]t the same time the ladies are not exactly excluded." With this final annotation we are left with a room that is best described as male "rather than anything else" but not "exactly exclud[ing]" women. Kerr's portrait of the Victorian library actually records the impossibility of setting in stone the practicalities of an ideology that was in the making.

In his aim to reflect on the reality of Victorian household arrangements, Kerr's premises are less restrictive than Loudon's and hence allow for multipurpose rooms. Still discussing the library, he concedes that "this is in great measure a Sitting-room" which in a small house may be "used as the Study, by a clergyman for instance, or as the Business-room" (Kerr 117). It is here that we can infer a difference between library and study: the study may substitute the library in a small house—probably due to lower income—and it does not appear to hold 'social' connotations. Rather, Kerr also specifies that "when the owner is a man of learning, we must either add a Study or constitute the Library itself one" (118), thus accounting for the versatility of the library and its similarities with the study.

It is when the library has to serve as study that Kerr clearly demarcates the gender of this space. The fact that the owner is immediately recognized as male is not surprising due to the ideological systems in place at the time of writing. Also, by describing the chief occupier of the study as a man with intellectual inclinations (Kerr 118, 123; Loudon 800) both Kerr and Loudon delimit on architectural terms the gender of the person with access to culture and intellectual accomplishments. This is likely the main reason why both the library and the study have been traditionally thought of as male spaces. Because "the good [Victorian] reading subject should integrate inward depth and public life" (Cohn 12), the good reader had to be male.

At the other end of the spectrum we find C. J. Richardson's *The Englishman's House* (1870). His is an entirely descriptive work which limits itself to explaining the layouts of existing dwellings. Therefore, while the words 'library' and 'study' recur several times, there is nothing in Richardson's publication that advises about functions and purposes. For this reason his 'case studies' further destabilize previous gendered or practical notions about the study in particular. While he describes the

layouts of several libraries, these passages do not offer any insight about the occupiers and, in most cases, he just enumerates and describes the style of the pieces of furniture. However, when dealing with the study, there are three instances where Richardson provides contextual information that makes the unstable, liminal status of this space clear and refutes the premises which Loudon and Kerr painstakingly try to establish.

The multipurpose nature of this space in what Richardson terms the "cheapest model that can be given for a villa" makes the room serve as "study or school-room" (229; 231). This particular example is the opposite of what Loudon and Kerr ascribe to the study. A similar example is provided when Richardson describes the spatial arrangements at "a small villa in the modern French style" (269), a so-called "French Maisonette." Here, "room c" on the floor plan "can be used as a study, but it is intended for a sleeping room" (271–72). With this example, the normative identity of the study is erased. Far from having "a marked character of use; as well as a particular character of style" and overlooking the fact that the features of a "library, or other superior living-room, ought never to be liable to be mistaken for those of a bed-room or closet" (Loudon 259), the space designed and built for a study has become a "sleeping room."

Nonetheless, Richardson's most destabilizing description of a study appears when he comments on the floor plans of a "villa, which has just been erected in Berkshire, in the neighbourhood of Windsor" and which is "intended as the country residence for a lady of rank" (183). This villa, according to Richardson, features a space he refers to as "the lady's room or study" (184). The author does not brand this room a morning room, or a boudoir, probably the closest female counterpart to the study, even if he uses such terms in other instances throughout his work. In considering the possibility of referring to a room for "a lady of rank" as study, Richardson re-genders this space to show the liminal, undefined status of the room.

## 4. Libraries and Domestic Realism

Although Nancy Armstrong has stated that "the household could not be invoked and used arbitrarily any more by authors of fiction than by those who wrote conduct books" (86) because "[domestic fiction] helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognise as the household" (23–24), truth is that the library has been endowed with an arbitrary nature by many. Despite the statement that "Victorian texts rely on the fact that these places held relatively stable associations for their middle-class occupants" (Tange

177), contemporary novelists have depicted the domestic library in a variety of ways that unsettles a fixed structural identity within the household and therefore exposes its liminal nature.

Even if, as this article has shown, specialists in architecture have gone to great lengths to try and delimit the library or study, they haven't always succeeded, precisely because "[t]he house, like its occupants, is never a stable entity" (I. Armstrong, "Spaces" 589). In the nineteenth-century novel space is "discontinuous, broken, and fractured" (I. Armstrong, "Theories" 21), precisely because it is not stable and it is depicted as prone to transformation depending on its inhabitants and the use they make of it. Furthermore, Isobel Armstrong goes on to show how "[i]n nineteenth-century narrative texts the order of family, class, outsiders and insiders, the barrier and the border, are paramount" because "[t]he Victorian novel is heavily invested in exploring boundaries, which are the sites of power, status, and exclusion, as well as the taboos on transgressing barriers, whether of class, or morals" ("Spaces" 582; 597). Therefore, the "ordered space" that Nancy Armstrong (23–24) considers so important is, in some novels, on the verge of collapse due to spatial subversion, something which is aligned with the depictions of the library. In fact, the novels under examination here are concerned with "the barrier and the border" of the library more to test their stability than to take them for granted.

Jane Austen draws on pre-Victorian architecture in her novels. By the time of their publication "the separation of masculine and feminine interior space was complete, explicit, and . . . ideologically self-justified" (Wall 367). Thus, her fiction shows household arrangements which would become normative in the Victorian period because "the domestic novel antedated . . . the way of life it represented" (N. Armstrong 9).

Although the author had first-hand knowledge of architecture thanks to the trips she made and the buildings she got to know, as her private correspondence evidences, some critics have noticed how descriptions of buildings in her novels are vague (Pevsner 404) or merely names (Kroeber 159), and that she is "spare in spatial imagery" (Hart 310). Nonetheless, "Austen's reader almost always knows exactly in which room any scene takes place" thanks to the descriptions provided (Wall 367). In particular, in Austen's novels drawing rooms are especially meaningful since they are the space where most social relationships and plot twists—and misunderstandings—take place (Wall 368); they are spaces for display. This is the opposite of what happens with Mr. Bennet's room in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Mr. Bennet's characteristically private room is

portrayed as a clear example of the library as a male space that offers solace from feminine interference and social pleasantries:

> In his library [Mr. Bennet] had been always sure of leisure and tranquillity; and though prepared, as he told Elizabeth, to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he was used to be free from them there. (Austen 70)

In a household populated mostly by women, Mr. Bennet's library is a retreat, almost a hiding place, the only room in the house which he can truly call his own (Austen 110; 341). Thus, the library is depicted as a clearly demarcated male space, a trait in line with conventional promulgations about the room but contrasting nineteenth-century general understandings about the library as the family sitting-room. Nonetheless, Hart has studied the importance of "privacy and intimacy" as organizing forces in Austean domesticity (306), and he has referred to Mr. Bennet as a "disturbing example of . . . ruthless privacy [and] selfish solitude" (326). Yet, if the "[t]he 'comfortable' room for Austen," as depicted in her novels, is one that must allow for "social comfort" and be "without confusion, show, or clutter" (Hart 314), Mr. Bennet's library exemplifies comfort in his own terms, to the point that even the mistress of the house is exiled from this room:

> "My dear," replied her husband, "I have two small favours to request. First, that you will allow me the free use of my understanding on the present occasion; and secondly, of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be." (Austen 110)

Although Mr. Bennet's library is here portrayed as "[r]eserved for [his] exclusive use" and he is desperate to mark it as "out of bonds for the rest of the family," especially for Mrs. Bennet, this is not due to a wish to comply with the ideology of separate spheres "by removing his work from the domestic atmosphere" (Tosh, *A Man's Place* 60). On the contrary, Burgan argues that within "Austen's implicit critique of the patriarchal hierarchy . . . Mr. Bennet can be seen as the only consistent and unyielding critic of society in the novel" precisely because of his constant retreats "to the sanctuary of his library" (537; 539). Because of the character's limitations to fight the status quo, Burgan considers Mr. Bennet "a 'victim

of the system'" (543), a circumstance which turns the character into an example of precarious, peripheral masculinity.

In spite of his desire for social distance,[10] Mr. Bennet's library ushers the purposes of male leisure—we are not aware of his having any specific task or occupation—and enforced social transactions and conventions. Access to a club being out of the question, Mr. Bennet's need for an exclusively male space within the house aligns with what different scholars have pointed out about men's need for domestic privacy. Perhaps to emphasize the social aspect of Mr. Bennet's room, we are first introduced to this space when Mr. Bingley returns the former's visit, a matter of merely "ten minutes" (Austen 11). It is also in the library where Mr. Collins is welcomed, to the owner's inconvenience, to spend his time reading or studying (70). Thus, Mr. Bennet's library becomes a homosocial space "carved out *from* the home" (Tosh, *A Man's Place* 60), showing that space is an unstable category.

Although at the Bennets' the library is the place where masculine civilities take place, most of the passages referencing this room relate to one of the key themes in Austen's works: marriage. The fact that the library is the place where some of the Bennet girls have their suitors accepted or turned down by the father makes for an interesting reading of this space: Wall has noted how "[t]he spatial margins of the novel—not its drawing-rooms—are where things have room to change" (370). This fact also problematizes the statement that "Mr Bennet consistently retreats into his library to protect and prolong his patriarchal inadequacy and inaction" (Wall 27; 369), since, even if in *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennet has a more business-like attitude to marriage, it is her husband who is in charge of taking the decisions. With Mr. Bennet always taking Jane's and Lizzy's opinions into account, the library is the place where the daughters' marital future and wishes are sanctioned, as shown in the following passage:

> In the evening, soon after Mr. Bennet withdrew to the library, [Elizabeth] saw Mr. Darcy rise also and follow him, and her agitation on seeing it was extreme. She did not fear her father's opposition, but he was going to be made unhappy . . . and she sat in misery till Mr. Darcy appeared again, when, looking at him, she was a little relieved by his smile. In a few minutes he approached the table where she was sitting with Kitty; and, while pretending

[10] In his work, Hart pairs privacy and intimacy with different types and levels of distance and decorum in Austen's novels.

> to admire her work said in a whisper, "Go to your father, he wants you in the library." She was gone directly.
> Her father was walking about the room, looking grave and anxious. "Lizzy," said he, "what are you doing? Are you out of your senses, to be accepting this man? Have not you always hated him?" (Austen 355)

Mr. Darcy is the last of the suitors to propose in the novel and, like those before him and irrespective of his higher status, he undergoes the same ritual. During these interviews between father and prospective husbands, the reader, together with the other characters in the novel, is shut out from the library, most likely because in Austen's novels "[c]eremonies of greater intimacy require more privacy" (Hart 312). Mr. Bennet's library then, is not a space of male seclusion just within the text but also outside it.

Even if Mr. Bennet is always candid about his views, the fact that the content of the interviews is not disclosed endows such meetings in the library with an aura of secrecy and confidentiality remindful of the unwritten codes of conduct set to regulate men's behavior in nineteenth-century clubland. It is thus that Mr. Bennet's library, a space he is openly protective of, may be read as a metaphor for his relationship with his two elder daughters, Jane and Elizabeth, about whose marriages he is also especially watchful. This way, although the library is portrayed as a clearly male space, it is also the place where Mr. Bennet keeps his daughters' best interests at heart, showing how "[s]paces are realized in Austen by the social actions and rituals that happen in them" (Hart 311).

In the case of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) roles are reversed, and the reader is presented with a completely abusive husband. Brontë's novel is a prime example of how spatial 'identity' can be easily overcome and transformed by the occupier's identity. The clash between Helen's Victorian morals and Arthur's Regency ways is key to show how it is the individual who has an effect on space rather than the other way round.[11] Furthermore, the novel shows how the library escapes normative "cultural assumptions" based on gender (Tange n. 15; 293).

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* "the novel's relationship to domestic ideology is an unusually vexed one" to the point that "[t]he novel makes a heroine out of a woman who runs away from her husband" (O'Toole 176).

[11] For a comprehensive analysis of how the Rengency and the Victorian periods are portrayed in the novel see Juliet McMaster's "'Imbecile Laughter' and 'Desperate Earnest' in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (1982).

Here the library is consistently depicted as a place of retreat, a characteristic also present in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch*. However, in Brontë's novel this is its prime function, that is, for the most part, the library is not portrayed as a space where things get accomplished; rather, it is a refuge, a sanctuary to escape to in moments of distress. And, what is more, libraries in *The Tenant* are an indisputably female space. This sets the different libraries in the novel away from the notions of masculine studious habits, family sitting room, etc. Throughout the novel, Helen Huntingdon is the chief occupier of the libraries at her different places of abode. She is shown to "retir[e] to the library" (Brontë 154; 315; 340), "take refuge in the library" (156; 167), and "shut [herself] in the library" (361) on numerous occasions. It is therefore no surprise that Helen comes to regard the library at Grassdale Manor "as entirely [her] own, a secure retreat at all hours of the day" (Brontë 353)—a depiction which offers a great contrast to the arguments put forward by some scholars regarding the gender of the natural inhabitant of this room.

Unlike Mr. Bennet, Helen is not escaping from female "folly and conceit" (Austen 70). Once she realizes she cannot perform her "higher calling" as dutiful wife, she takes refuge to shield herself from ruthless masculinity: Arthur Huntingdon is portrayed as the epitome of obnoxious, pernicious, aristocratic Regency habits (McMaster 354). As a man with no further interests than the enjoyment of the public, leisured, male sphere, Arthur has long been a member of clubland, a social space which he favors over any other and which he is unable to keep at a distance from the domestic, private sphere of the home. Thus, while the Victorian library, as described by architects and depicted in other novels from the period, bears a connection to the gentlemen's club, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* clubland invades Grassdale Manor disrupting any notion of domestic propriety and only the library remains uncontaminated. This process of disruption escalates and the collapse of spheres is made more and more obvious making the house "night after night one scene of riot, uproar, and confusion" (Brontë 348–49) to the point that any connection with the propriety of the gentleman's club is blurred, and domestic realism is displaced by a Gothic atmosphere, "replicat[ing] a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the center of the fictional world" (Jacobs 204). This shows how individuals can impact 'architectural identities' in different ways, thus doing away with any notion of stability attached to or derived from

particular spaces, and, in fact, "exemplif[ying] the ways in which domestic reality is obscured by layers of conventional ideology" (204).

Because "[n]one of [the] gentlemen had the smallest pretensions to a literary taste" (Brontë 353), Helen Huntingdon can turn the library into a female space from where she starts plotting her independence. It is in the library that Helen keeps her painting materials and where she starts producing works with a view to being able to sustain both her son and herself once she finally leaves Arthur.

> [Arthur] walked into the library. I followed, whether with the dim idea of preventing mischief, or only to know the worst, I can hardly tell. My painting materials were laid together on the corner table, ready for to-morrow's use, and only covered with a cloth. He soon spied them out, and putting down the candle, deliberately proceeded to cast them into the fire: palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish: I saw them all consumed: the palette-knives snapped in two, the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney. (Brontë 365)

Although Helen had subverted the conventionalities of the library as regards the gender of its main occupant, this space remained, nonetheless, a space of female confinement. Critics have noted how the narrative architecture of the novel, with Helen's account at the center, means that it is framed and, therefore, restrained by a male voice,[12] a pattern which mirrors her use of space, since, for the most part of the novel, she is forced into confinement. In fact, the passage above shows how Helen sees her plans thwarted, once again, by pernicious masculinity and Victorian codes of female submission. Therefore, while she has been the only regular inhabitant of the library, and after writing in her diary about her total lack of control over the household, her small realm is taken away from her.

The proto-feminist tone of *The Tenant* undermines notions about men's need for a room of their own within the household since, as the novel shows, it is the woman who ultimately gets displaced by the patriarch. Nonetheless, by portraying the library as a temporary female safe space, Brontë destabilizes cultural assumptions about the gender of the space showing how different types of femininity—in this case, the Victorian domestic woman—and masculinity—the aristocratic reckless

[12] In her article "Siblings and Suitors in the Narrative Architecture of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (1999), Tess O'Toole explores the different readings that critics have made of the narrative structure of the novel.

husband—affect space dynamics within the household. As O'Toole has argued, "Brontë's novel exposes rather than reproduces the myth of power embedded in cultural constructions of the domestic woman" (717). Because individuals' identities and personal interactions are not fixed, spaces have to adapt to accommodate new interpersonal dynamics.

A very different case, in fact quite the opposite, is depicted in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) where Rev. Edward Casaubon also likes having the library to himself but fails to take advantage of this privacy and accomplish any substantial task. Trying to come up with the *Key to All Mythologies*, Eliot's character is shown to spend most of his time in his library—a space with a charged symbolic importance (Kroeber 160; Swann 297) which evidences how characters can "come to be known or defined by libraries" (McCray 86).

Although Lowick Manor "lies somewhere between the parsonage and the palace" it does not feature a study (Trotter 48). Thus, this library destabilizes the ideal because although it serves the purpose of a study, this space changes from "private retreat" (Kerr 118) to public room depending on the occasion and Casaubon's mood, thus reinforcing the potential of this room as an ambivalent, fluid space impacted by its occupant. In fact, although Trotter, building on Kerr's treatise, has argued that in *Middlemarch*, and especially at Lowick, we find "mutually exclusive gendered spaces" (48), the library is not as clearly demarcated as in *Pride and Prejudice*. Contrary to the domestic arrangements shown in Austen's novel, Casaubon's library is a negotiated, fluid space and Dorothea is often invited to spend time there as assistant to her husband's intellectual quest:

> Even drawing Dorothea into use in his study, according to his own intention before marriage, was an effort which he was always tempted to defer, and but for her pleading insistence it might never have begun. But she had succeeded in making it a matter of course that she should take her place at an early hour in the library and have work either of reading aloud or copying assigned her. (Eliot 281)

The role that Dorothea performs in relation to this space is key to understand how power relations work in this couple: the wife accesses the library, a clearly male territory in this case, but only upon invitation and as accessory to the husband. This shows how, even if the room is used for different purposes, it is the man that oversees what happens in this space, thus relegating the woman to a subservient, secondary place that complies

with the notion of the library as "reserved for the patriarch." Swann has argued that the library at Lowick is one of the "expanding symbols" in *Middlemarch* since we can see how this space progressively expands for Dorothea (297).

Casaubon's library is a multipurpose room where he "gives audience," spends his "leisure" time on his own—"dozing chiefly" (Eliot 274; 474) —and also in the company of his wife:

> After dinner, at the hour when she usually began to read aloud, Mr. Casaubon proposed that they should go into the library, where, he said, he had ordered a fire and lights. He seemed to have revived, and to be thinking intently. (Eliot 475)

Yet, the chief purpose of Casaubon's library remains academic, which mirrors the conception he has of himself, that is why once he becomes ill and intellectual activity is forbidden, spending time in the library is understood to be "out of the question" (Eliot 288). Therefore, although this room is shown to serve multiple purposes, a change in its chief occupant has a direct impact on the functionality of the space, and once Casaubon is forced to stop his intellectual" enterprise the library loses its *raison d'être* and is shut.

With this turn of events, a process of emasculation begins for the character of Casaubon which, in turn, also affects the library. In as much as he is unable to fulfil the grandiose intellectual task he had set for himself due to his physical feebleness, his alleged superiority as patriarch is compromised and so is his use of the male space *par excellence* in the novel.[13] It is then that the library is "re-negotiated" and Dorothea is depicted progressively occupying a more prominent role in this room—a fact which anticipates Dorothea's reclaiming of this space upon her husband's death.

Immediately after Casaubon's burial the library is taken up by the other male figures in Dorothea's life—her brother-in-law, Sir James Chettam, and her uncle and former guardian, Mr. Brooke—who get together to debate the best course of action regarding the young widow's immediate future (Eliot 483). However, this paternalistic and patriarchal "occupation" of the room soon comes to an end.

[13] Casaubon's library has been categorized as one of the "most decisively gendered spaces" together with Dorothea's boudoir (Trotter 50).

Once Dorothea regains control over her life, and money, the library seems to recover its function as a place for study:

> She sat down in the library before her particular little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters, out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as not to injure one's neighbours, or—what comes to the same thing—so as to do them the most good. (Eliot 805)

Dorothea does not have much longer left as mistress of Lowick Manor but, in the meantime, her presence at the library re-writes the story of this space and "the process of rebirth begins for [her]" (Swann 297). Her "little heap of books" is insignificant compared to the array of books, notebooks, etc. which the late Casaubon required for his work. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Dorothea's task, because a woman's, is petty. On the contrary, while Casaubon's incomplete, never-ending, extremely ambitious project was of importance merely to himself and had a negative impact on his relationships with others, the library now becomes the place from where philanthropic projects will emerge. Reclaimed by Dorothea, this room, previously considered a "dead space" due to its symbiotic association "with the heart disease first manifest within it" (Trotter 50), or "a zone of incarceration" (McCray 86) is now a nest for new beginnings; "its restrictions giving way to freedom" (Swann 297).

The fluctuation that this library undergoes shows two facts: first, albeit initially branded male, the library at Lowick Manor is an unstable, mutable space that is negotiated as regards occupier and purpose, therefore, far from having the fixed status that some have attributed to it, it is an in-between space. Secondly, there is a direct impact of the individual upon the space, which furthers the liminality of the room from the perspective of its inhabitants, and which shows how domestic spaces can be reclaimed and altered.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the many sources that aim at establishing clear and stable gender boundaries within the Victorian middle-class household, this article has shown how the library is a room which escapes delimitations. Although it has been branded male by many, the paradoxical nature of this space emerges from contemporary architectural writings to nineteenth-century

fiction and present-day scholarship. It is for this reason that this article has suggested that the Victorian domestic library be best categorized as an ambiguous, liminal space whose status within the household is fragile because it is not static, but rather open to different meanings and functions. In fact, the library has been shown to be especially permeable: different types of masculinity and femininity have a direct impact on this space and its dynamics; hence its transmutable character. Therefore, despite the different premises that aimed at normativizing space, it has been evidenced that mutability affects both individuals and space and feels especially at home in the Victorian library.

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