

*Catharine Beecher's
Undeclared Treatise on Domestic Privacy*

by *Diana L. Pointer*

A matron sits down at her desk in a well-lit study to write a letter while her infant dreams contentedly in the lamb-decorated nursery upstairs. The wafting smell of roasted turkey lingers throughout the house coming from the efficient and organized kitchen. Soon, the peaceful silence is broken by the arrival of the patriarch home from a hard day's work at the office. The woman casts aside her letter and rushes to attend to the needs of her husband who now sits in the parlor reading the evening newspaper. After the two exchange some light banter, the lady of the house sees to last minute dinner preparations in the kitchen while the man takes his place at the head of the table in the dining room. After enjoying a healthful and delicious meal, the couple adjourns to the parlor to spend the rest of the evening visiting and reading before retiring to their bedroom upstairs.

This was Catharine Beecher's vision of the perfect domestic scene for all middle-class northern families during the nineteenth century. Although never married nor a mother, she felt herself well qualified to write about such issues and became quite famous at it as well. Her vision of domestic tranquility and privacy inspired thousands of northern women to buy her books and follow her advice and methods for running an efficient and inviting home. But what led Catharine Beecher to perfect an idea of domestic privacy in an era where privacy in one's own home was an unknown and little-desired aspect of life? Although she was highly influenced by the role of evangelical religion and of the impact of increasing health standards, Beecher's idea of domestic privacy was most inspired by the need to give middle-class women a place of their own.

What drove nineteenth-century middle-class individuals to demand privacy, and just what was the middle class? Privacy, in relation to nineteenth-century standards meant "an obligation to social activities that a person does not want to meet so instead the individual remains secluded in

a comfortable place.¹ Romanticism and migration encouraged this in Europe and the United States. Once families became hedged-up in crowded busy neighborhoods the need for privacy naturally increased. No longer were the nearest neighbors five miles away. With the growth of cities spurred by industrialization "more and more families began to hold society at a distance, to push it back beyond a steadily extending zone of private life."²

Now that an understanding of what privacy meant to the average nineteenth-century American has been established, it is important to define what was meant by the middle-class. According to Beecher, being middle-class was based on an attitude developed over one's lifespan. It was not based on economic factors nor one's heritage or ancestors, but rather on a culmination of beliefs and values. Being middle-class in the nineteenth century meant that one was willing to work hard, not only for wages but in all facets of life. One also needed to recognize the existing social norms and follow them. Beecher's idea of middle-class was simply built upon the idea of conformity--conformity to social, cultural, and intellectual aspects in order to allow one to become a thriving and well-thought of member of society.³

Beecher recognized the need for a work detailing aspects of privacy written by a woman. Before publication of her *Treatise of Domestic Economy* (1841), all the major household books were written by men with the domination of their sex clearly illustrated. Theodore Dwight's *The Father's Book* (1834), told readers to turn to the man of the family for every domestic issue as did Herman Humphrey's *Domestic Education* (1840). The only other domestic tract written by a woman besides Beecher during this time, Lydia Maria Child's *The American Frugal Housewife*, (1832) did not

¹Barrington Moore, *Privacy: Studies in Social and Cultural History* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1984), 6.

²Philippe Aries and Georges Duby, eds, *A History of Private Life*, Vol. IV (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 308. Other works detailing the privatization of the family include Lawrence Stone's *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, and Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World*.

³Catherine Beecher, *American Woman's Home: Or Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful Beautiful and Christian Homes* (Hartford: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1975; reprint, 1869), 15-17.

mention specific names or functions of rooms.⁴

Beecher, on the other hand, propagated a domestic system whereby each room served a specialized function and had a specific name. With the help of a noted architect she designed, an eight-roomed cottage that featured a twenty-five by sixteen foot room with changeable specialization along with seven other distinctly named rooms. In order to divide and specialize the large room, Beecher advocated the use of a wooden movable screen that reached the ceiling. On one side of the screen the space could be used as a breakfast room while the other side could be used as a bedroom. Later in the day, the breakfast room could be turned into a sewing room while the bedroom could be arranged into a parlor by using her design for a sofa/bed. The specialized rooms included a large kitchen, a parlor, three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a drawing room.⁵ In this sense, Beecher personalized and specialized the American domestic environment. This led Americans to experience a "new kind of space within which they forged their identities and around which they organized their social and political interaction."⁶ Beecher felt that organized and unique floor plans economized labor, time, and expenses which allowed for "health, thrift, and domestic happiness."⁷ She felt the same way as one of her friends, Lydia Maria Child who stated "a separate room is the right of every human being, a place where one can lock the door, be safe from intrusion, and in silence and freedom gather strength for the next thing to be done."⁸ Mainly, Beecher wanted domestic organization and privacy so that women could possess their own niches in society.

Another factor which greatly influenced Beecher's concept of domestic privacy was the impact of evangelical religion. Through the guidance of her famous preacher father Lyman Beecher, Beecher was well-acquainted with the tenets of the Calvinist faith. Although she herself was unable to experience conversion, she recognized the need of others to have "The

⁴Catherine Kirk Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 166.

⁵Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 27.

⁶Sklar, XI.

⁷Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 24.

⁸Sklar, 166.

Experience." This required privacy.

Daily delving into the state of one's soul was a requirement of Beecher's strain of Calvinism. In order to know one's self, quiet and inward reflection was needed. This required scrutinizing one's relationship with family and friends, one's daily activities, and the realization that God was watching over whatever one did.

Evangelicals such as Beecher and her father placed heavy emphasis on Bible-reading, studying, and praying: most particularly--private praying. Beecher advocated that women should make it a daily occurrence to have private devotionals before breakfast.⁹ It was necessary that every person "daily cultivate the spirit expressed in the divine private prayer."¹⁰

Therefore, a religious household was needed in order to best support the Christian life. Because the world was filled with the works of Satan and sin, those wanting to live the truly religious life needed to escape into the tranquility and seclusion of private prayer. Rejection of "the world" while nestled in one's special religious place, presented a way for one to adequately determine the fate of their soul.

Private prayer and reflection were not the only attributes required. Using the example of their Puritan forefathers, Calvinists such as Beecher and her siblings practiced the art of diary-keeping in order to ascertain the state of their souls.¹¹ By having a special space in one room where one could daily record religious experiences, one could easily determine the extent of one's religious faith. In turn, these tenets of faith influenced Beecher's vision of domestic privacy because she realized everyone needed a place where he or she could find solitude.

The importance of religion in relation to women's domestic roles and privacy was also recognized by Beecher. In fact, she could be called the inventor of the child-rearing practice of "time out." Instead of taking one's anger out on one's children, she advocated the use of private prayer: "Remove yourself from the child's vicinity and reflect inwardly on the

⁹Catherine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977; reprint, 1841), 221.

¹⁰Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 217.

¹¹Sklar, 213.

child's actions and turn to God for guidance."¹² While the mother reflected and prayed in one room, the child should be sent to his or her room to contemplate the wrongdoing. She stated that "the power of religion to impart dignity and importance to the ordinary and seemingly petty and unimportance of domestic life, greatly depends upon the faith of the individual."¹³

Although Beecher did not advocate a specialized ninth room for religious purposes within her houseplan, she still recognized the need of all individuals to have a place within their home to seek divine direction. Allowing one to possess a "niche" in a room was in her opinion enough physical space in which to properly ascertain one's relationship with God.¹⁴ This also demonstrated that religion should play a part in every domestic activity, not just in a specialized room. In that respect, religion played a substantial role in her concept.

Revolutions in the health field greatly influenced Beecher's concept of domestic privacy. Beecher had always considered herself on the cutting edge of scientific knowledge and made great efforts to keep herself informed of all discoveries in various fields, especially after the death of her fiance, Alexander Fisher in 1823. She immersed herself in his works and accepted herself as a much better scholar than others gave her credit for being. As a result, Beecher became intensely interested in both science and medicine.

Much of Beecher's cottage floorplan was designed with the inclusion of new health standards. She wanted homes to be places where "healthy virtues flourished."

One of her biggest complaints centered on the issue of proper ventilation. With the advent of new more efficient stoves for heating and cooking, Beecher was concerned about the impact carbonic acid (the natural gas produced by flame) had on humans. She detailed the horrible disease of scrofula that resulted from improper ventilation which caused undue stress on the joints, eyes, ears, and skin.¹⁵

¹²Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 285.

¹³*Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 437.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 50.

Beecher described situations in which large families "crowded themselves into one room around the stove---no ventilation with poisoned air circulating all about them."¹⁶ It was no wonder that families emerged during the spring pale and lifeless! She even went so far as to state, "tight crowded sleeping-rooms, and close air-tight stoves, are now starving and poisoning more than one half of this nation."¹⁷

To correct this recurring problem among middle-class families, Beecher advocated proper ventilation of all houses and public places. Churches presented an especially horrible problem as she exclaimed, "I have often returned from church doubting whether I had not committed a sin in exposing myself so long to its poisonous air."¹⁸ Proper ventilation seemed necessary in all rooms along with individualized sleeping quarters.

Beecher assured her readers that "pure air" both day and night was a prerequisite to good health. Families should not crowd around a stove, nor should they seal every window in their homes. Instead, she advised them to make sure a fresh supply of air was allowed into "each and every room but especially those designated for sleeping."¹⁹

Although several family members sleeping together for warmth was a customary practice, Beecher frowned upon it because she learned through the miasma theory that "the body throws out all sorts of matter, through the skin and lungs, that is truly as poisonous as carbonic acid."²⁰ Naturally, because of the danger of receiving "poison through the pores" was greater during sleeping, Beecher advocated that no more than four individuals should sleep in the same room, and then only if proper ventilation was instigated.²¹ Therefore, individual bedrooms became a necessity. The greatest factor contributing to Beecher's concept of domestic privacy centered on making the home a place for women to dominate. By having specialized rooms with designated functions, some rooms naturally fell under the jurisdiction of women: most especially, the kitchen and the nursery. Beecher wanted

¹⁶*Ibid.*,
¹⁷*Ibid.*, 49.
¹⁸*Ibid.*, 55.
¹⁹*Ibid.*, 57.
²⁰*Ibid.*, 57.
²¹*Ibid.*, 57.

women to realize that "each department of a woman's true profession is as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men."²² Her domestic plan had no space or rooms dedicated to the activities of men intentionally. This is because she wished to restore the "natural" hierarchy with men having control in the political and work arena but with women having the upper hand in the "important place": the home.

Beecher urged women to "exert considerable social power from their private stations"²³, and she arranged her eight-roomed cottage accordingly. The parlor was designed as a "podium" from which women could deliver powerful messages. The efficient and well-organized kitchen enabled women to produce healthy and delicious meals to keep their families in good standing. The dining room embodied the vehicle for intellectual pursuits with guests. The bedroom, of course, became the shrine to procreation.

Beecher's ideas for decorating a nineteenth-century house attested to her belief that the home should be the woman's sphere. As most Victorians, Beecher abhorred empty space and instructed her readers to work on "achieving the essence of a home, proper decoration."²⁴ Her idea of proper decoration included a wide array of pictures, sculptures, ceramic figurines, plants, more plants, and lace. The fragile and busy look of a typical Victorian parlor naturally made a man look like a bull in a china shop.

The kitchen of Beecher's cottage was designed in order to allow women a chance to appear knowledgeable and efficient. By arranging utensils and cooking accessories in an organized manner, women could complete a complicated meal in half the normal time making them look wonderfully adept and far superior over men in the kitchen. Beecher told her readers to "make your kitchen efficient and as a result, your family will greatly appreciate your finished efforts."²⁵

Perhaps, most importantly, the nursery served as the place where women could show their superior knowledge to men. Women over the years have

²²*Ibid.*, 220.

²³Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191.

²⁴Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 337.

²⁵Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 163.

been so indoctrinated that "The Experience of becoming and being mothers has dominated their thoughts, determined their behavior and determined their position in society."²⁶ Beecher wanted to use this well-known fact to secure women a place where they could feel superior and educated. In the nursery, this could happen. Naturally men would take a positive view of this since women were acting well within their traditional sphere. The nursery was one of the places where women were subordinate to no one.

Beecher wanted her concept of domestic privacy to dispel the myth that "a housekeeper's business and cares are contracted and trivial."²⁷ Through education and indoctrination she hoped to change the middle-class women's thinking. Beecher realized that women would never be able to compete with men in the political or economic realm so she wanted women to dominate in the one place they could: the home. She saw her duty as "interpreting and shaping the collective consciousness of American women."²⁸

However, certain factors shaped her awareness of domestic privacy as well. Due to the heavy-handed authority of her father, Beecher never lost her belief in the Calvinist strain of religion. Although she tried to modify her "moral philosophy," she still used the same basic tenets of belief to affect her concept of domestic privacy. New innovations in the scientific field encouraged Beecher to reevaluate her notions of privacy to include proper ventilation and individualized sleeping space to avoid the dreadful disease of scrofula. Most importantly, Beecher's concept of domestic privacy allowed women rooms in their home in which they could be the master and ruler. In the kitchen and the nursery, women took orders from no one.

²⁶Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes Toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 1.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 220.

²⁸Mar, 131.

The Lichtenstein Thesis: Did Slaves Develop Their Own Moral Economy?

by Gay Usher

The question of whether slaves in the American South actually developed a moral economy of their own has been answered in the affirmative by Alex Lichtenstein. According to the Lichtenstein thesis, slaves did in fact develop a moral economy separate and distinct from the morals and values of the whites.¹ I disagree and intend to refute his thesis by examining slave narratives, folkloric autobiographies, and the Works Progress Administration interviews of the 1930's. If theft had been condoned by their moral code, then the slaves could not have fully accepted Christianity and the moral code derived from it. Yet this contradicts the obvious central role played by the black church. Only by addressing these smaller questions of whether theft was a form of resistance to slavery, whether they experienced guilt, or whether they accepted the teachings of Christianity will I be able to answer the big question of whether slaves developed their own moral economy.

In Lichtenstein's article, "That Disposition to Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," he presents his own theory. He bases it on Marxist critiques of the neutralization theory of Levine and Ayers.² The neutralization theory argues that "the deviant often recognizes the moral validity of the dominant normative system even when he or she breaks its laws or codes." The person's morals are neutralized by the necessity to commit an act that goes against the society's and an individual's own morality.³ The best example of deviance among the slaves is theft. According to Lichtenstein, the slaves

¹Alex Lichtenstein, "That Disposition to Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law,"

Journal of Social History 21 (1988): 413.

²*Ibid.*, 414.

³Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (Oxford, 1984).