Female privacy in eighteenth-century British print culture was often represented as facilitating salacious and debauched behaviour. The misogynistic gender roles, that branded women as lesser men, fed an interpretation of the female sex as being unable to control their libidinous urges. Women who were able to control these urges could claim virtue and sensibility as their greatest traits, but private spaces in which women could exist without the need for social performance fuelled anxieties about female deception. This article examines two eighteenth century artefacts that represent female privacy, and considers how their manipulation in print culture informed and promoted them as spaces in which the erotic and the lascivious could be found.

The anthropologist Morton H. Levine defines privacy as ‘the maintenance of a personal life-space within which the individual has a chance to be an individual, to exercise and experience his own uniqueness’.¹ With the notion of privacy here focussed on the individual, it can be argued that the discussion and exploration of privacy is an unattainable feat, for the act of divulging in a communication regarding a private and personal space, either psychological or physical, renders any claim to privacy redundant. Therefore, any investigation into the behaviour of people within a private space will inevitably comprise sources that demonstrate the very worst examples of privacy - those whose secrets have been revealed. This article will consider how eighteenth century print culture manipulated the unknowable nature of privacy to fallaciously and voyeuristically present the female private space as something lascivious and salacious. This notion will be explored via the examination of two artefacts that represent contemporary female privacy; a hand-sewn silk pocket dating from c.1760 (fig.2) and an etching by James Gillray titled ‘Sir Richard Worse-than-sly, exposing his wife’s bottom; - oh fye!’ (fig.1) and will consider how the treatment of these objects promoted misogynistic ideals and contemporary gender stereotypes.

Women were largely viewed as ‘defective’ men during the eighteenth century, with contemporaries such as Alexander Pope describing them as forming a ‘softer man’.² Therefore, gender roles during this period were formed via women’s dependence on men as the more dominant and unadulterated sex. This is explored in Joseph Addison’s Allegory of Publick Credit, published in the Spectator in March 1711 where the nonsensical female temperament is used as a means to personify the irrational nature of commerce and trade.³

³ Joseph Addison, Allegory of Publick Credit, The Spectator, 3 (3 Mar, 1711).
With men posited as the stronger and more logical ‘provider’ figures whose ‘higher earning power would see them [women] through raising a family and give them some sufficiency in old age’ the woman’s role was ultimately defined via her relationships with men; a definition which was thus ascertained via her perceived sexual status as either virgin, wife or whore.4 This in turn meant that the value of chastity and sexual purity became an integral part in the promotion of the female ideal. Therefore, if a woman were able to display a commitment to their chastity by resisting and regulating her sexual desires, she demonstrated that she was virtuous and less susceptible to the irrationality of her nature, as it was commonly understood. As Edward Ward theorised in 1716, ‘Constancy is maintained by Vertue, and she who hath lost her Vertue, hath nothing left to oblige her to be Constant’.5 Katherine Kittredge has noted that new ways of reading outward female behaviour were promoted, with a focus on detecting ‘the related [transgressional] behaviours that would indicate, through their deviance from the feminine ideal, that these women were rebellious in spirit and thus likely to commit or condone sexual transgressions’.6 This behaviour largely manifested itself in the performance of sensibility, which meant an ‘extraordinary sensitivity to emotional stimuli, expressed often through such physical manifestations as weeping, blushing and fainting’.7 In short, such behaviour suggested one’s ability to self-expose, rather than conceal.

While this may not seem to directly affect issues surrounding women’s privacy, a display of willing and frequent self-exposure suggested that there was little capacity or desire for concealment and that there was a greater authenticity in the woman’s virtue. Thus, the possibility of a woman desiring to consciously make herself unknowable was an acute social threat. Patricia Meyer Spack has argued that despite contemporary promotion of the practise of emotional openness in women, one could not avoid the possibility that a person may, ‘conceal – even from those who most needed to know- precisely what should define them’.8 This anxiety imbued the idea of female privacy, either psychological or physical, with caution and distrust. As Edward Ward once again warned other men, ‘be careful how you conceive too good an Opinion of a Woman at first sight, for you see not the Woman truly, but her Ornaments and Paint’.9

However, despite the distrust it inspired, women’s privacy was regularly acknowledged during this period. For example in William Congreve’s play of 1700, The Way of World, Millament and Mirabell discuss a pre-nuptial agreement which centres on Millament’s desire for privacy and autonomy as Mirabell’s wife,

MILLA. Trifles…. to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces on your part; to wear what I please… dine in my dressing-room when I’m out of humour, without giving a reason. To have my closet

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6 Kate Kittredge, Lewd and Notorious: Female transgression in the eighteenth century (Michigan, 2003), p.6.
8 Meyer Spack, Privacy, p.55.
9 E. Ward, Female Policy, p.1.
inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly, wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in. These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife.10

Similarly in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Squire Western’s sister is astounded at her brother’s insensitivity when he enters a female domain without permission,

‘Brother, said she, I am astonished at your behaviour; will you never learn any regard to decorum? Will you still look upon every apartment as your own, or as belonging to one of your country tenants? Do you think yourself at liberty to invade the privacies of women of condition without the least decency or notice?’11

In both examples however, female privacy is used as a plot device for comedic purposes, with Millament’s excessive demand for privacy inferring her dislike of her prospective husband, and Squire Western’s sister using his uninvited entry into her personal space to deliver a stern telling off. Nonetheless, it is the unsolicited penetration of a physical private space that most offends the women in these passages.

Contemporary architectural developments that hint at a psychological shift towards a greater concern for privacy, corroborate with Fielding and Congreve’s character’s concerns for the regulation of designated personal spaces. The introduction of back stairs, interior halls, corridors and smaller rooms intended for specific activities ensured the ‘dependable separation of individuals from one another’.12 13 Thus, it is the common understanding of the impropriety associated with the penetration of a woman’s private space where permission is required, that informs the titillation when it is invaded and exposed.

This notion is exemplified in James Gillray’s etching ‘Sir Richard Worse-than-sly, exposing his wife’s bottom; – oh fye!’ (fig.1) depicting Lady Seymour Worsley being spied on as she bathes in a private washroom. The etching dates from 1782 and was created as a satirical comment on the trial of George Bissett, who was sued for £20,000 damages by Sir Richard Worsley for the debauchery of his wife, Lady Seymour Worsley. The case note from the trial states that,

The Defendant [Bissett], on the 19th day of November, 1781, and on divers other days and times….with force and arms, made an assault on Seymour, the Wife of the Plaintiff, and then there debauched, deflowered, lay with and carnally knew her.14

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11 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, chapter vii – In which Mr Western pays a visit to his sister in company with Mr Bilfil (1749), Project Gutenberg edition <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6593/6593-h/6593-h.htm> [1 Mar. 2016].
Figure 1. James Gillray, *Sir Richard Worse-than-sly, exposing his wife’s bottom:— oh fye!*, 1782, etching, National Portrait Gallery, London. © National Portrait Gallery
However, many men claiming to be Lady Worsley’s lovers were brought forward to testify and evidence indicating Sir Richard’s complicity in the debauchery of his wife mounted. One particular incident, told to the court by Bissett’s solicitor Mr Bearcroft (and immortalised by Gillray), tells of the time Sir Richard held George Bisset on his shoulders in order to gain a better view of his naked wife,

… the Plaintiff there had absolutely raised the Defendant upon his shoulders to view his naked Wife while bathing, and at the same time called to, saying, Seymour! Seymour! Bissett is looking at you.15

That Gillray chose to depict this particular incident, when many more suspected lovers of Lady Worsley were questioned throughout the trial, indicates the eroticism associated with infiltrating a woman’s private space and acted as a seamless sexual metaphor for physical penetration of her body. Furthermore, the assistance given by Sir Richard to Bissett in his access to his wife’s privacy imbued the image with male consent and female passivity; the invasion of Lady Worsley’s room is not met by a wrath similar to that of Squire Western’s sister in *Tom Jones*, instead she peers coquettishly over her shoulder at the men. This serves to further reinforce anxieties regarding woman’s privacy as a means to enable the exploration of her true libidinous nature, free from the public performance of sensibility and virtue.

The idea of a dressing room as a place in which women could explore their salacious true selves is also expressed in William Hogarth’s 1738 engraving, *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn* [fig.2]. Although this space is by no means private, for the composition is abundant with women in varying states of undress, Christina Kiaer has noted that the all-female cast of this engraving reinforces the ‘perception of Woman as a figure of pretence and deception, the consummate actress.’16 Kiaer argues that Hogarth’s print is situated in ‘the context of the anti-feminist satire of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, particularly the convention of the satirist who exposes femininity by penetrating into the boudoir to lay bare the deceptions practiced there’.17 It is therefore arguable that a similar exposure of deception is at play in Gillray’s etching of Lady Worsley.

This notion is further reinforced by a later piece of evidence given at the trial by Lord Deerhurst, which stated that Sir Richard Worsley had found him in Lady Worsley’s dressing room at four o’clock in the morning. After exclaiming ‘Deerhurst, how came you here?’ Sir Richard ceased his interrogation of his friend. This incident was referenced by Lord Mansfield as he delivered his judgment at the trial’s close, saying ‘Is it not extraordinary to find a Gentleman in his Lady’s dressing-room at four o’clock in the morning, and nothing further said?’ 18 This declaration by Mansfield suggests that the presence of a man in the private room of a woman was clearly an indication of sexual behaviour and something a husband should be astonished by. That Lord Mansfield uses this example, along with the events in the bath house, as reason to award Sir Richard one shilling damages as opposed to

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15 R. Worsley, *The trial with the whole of the evidence*, p.12.
17 Kiaer, ‘Professional Femininity’, p.76.
18 R. Worsley, *The trial with the whole of the evidence*, p.20.
the twenty thousand pounds he originally requested (the consensus being that Lady Worsley was not worth the sum assigned by her husband due to her sexual proclivity), only serves to confirm that the penetration of a woman’s private space and her body were one and the same in the eighteenth-century mind.

The case of Lady Worsley demonstrates a multi-faceted breach in personal privacy. Originally, Lady Worsley’s privacy was negated by her husband, who took enjoyment in observing her relations with other men via an intrusion into areas designated for her personal privacy. When the case was brought to court, Lady Worsley once again relinquished her right to privacy by offering the names and details of her previous lovers to help the cause of George Bissett. This in turn instigated an outpouring of printed media depicting her most private moments and relationships for an even wider audience. It can be argued then, that it is the infiltration of Lady Worsley’s sexual privacy and the notion of sanctioned voyeurism by both her husband within their marriage, and Lady Worsley herself during the court case, that so excites a contemporary audience.

Figure 2. William Hogarth, *Strolling Actresses dressing in a Barn*, 1738, engraving (44.5cm x 56.3cm), The British Museum, London © The British Museum
Of course, not all women had access to their own private rooms but, from the close of the seventeenth century, every woman regardless of rank owned one or several pairs of pockets. The egalitarianism of pockets therefore meant that their representation as examples of female privacy infiltrated rank and could be applied to women universally. Figure 3 shows a hand-sewn silk pair of pockets dated c.1760 from a collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Pockets were often the first item a young girl would make when learning to sew and, as Ariane Fennetaux has discussed, young girls would be ‘taught by their mothers how to sew, embroider and quilt, and pockets offered an ideal practical exercise’. This practise reads as an initiation into womanhood; a world in which a woman would be required to darn, sew and embroidered as an integral part of her gender role. Indeed, the practise of making pockets honed skills a young girl would be expected to utilise as a woman and the work involved in making a pocket was, ‘an exercise in good housewifery’. While this practise arguably inferred the importance of the privacy borne through owning a pair of pockets on to young girls, it also cemented them as an item existing firmly within the female sphere.

Contemporary newspaper advertisements and court cases revealed the contents of lost and stolen pockets and shows us that women primarily used their pockets to carry household

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items and daily necessities such as money, thimbles and pins. Despite this, pockets were depicted in print culture as concealing much more lascivious articles.

This interpretation is arguably due to a pocket’s physical location close to the female body and accessible only via a slit in the outer skirt of a woman’s dress. Thus, to gain access to a woman’s pockets was to physically penetrate her clothing, and (as pockets were often found listed alongside items of female underwear in inventories and cloth merchant’s bills) touch an article of clothing that was categorised alongside her most private garments. As women did not wear drawers at this time, the touching of a woman’s pocket also had the scope to be an incredibly sexual act, bringing one in close proximity to a woman’s genitalia. Pockets therefore represented the threshold between a woman’s most intimate body parts and her public appearance, which, coupled with the aforementioned distrust of female privacy, made the item a tantalising and alluring object to explore. For example, in Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, Moll is able to attend a secret rendezvous with a lover due to her ability to hide items such as a fan, a mask and a pair of gloves in her pockets, thus enabling her to be, “as wicked as [she] please[s]” without detection.22 Pockets here enabled secret dalliances, extra-marital affairs and relationships that would otherwise be disapproved of by the father, husband or guardian, undermining male authority and assisting female promiscuity.

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The aesthetic similarity between a pocket and a woman’s genitalia (aided by the pocket’s proximity to this body part) was also widely commented on and manipulated. In Laurence Sterne’s 1768 novel *A Sentimental Journey*, the character Yorick is sexually tantalised when watching a woman look for a crown in her pocket, ‘So she put her hand into her right pocket, which was next to me, and felt for it for some time – I never bore expectation more quietly’, this scene depicting the woman’s hand searching in her pocket is described by Ariane Fennetaux as taking part in a sexual double-entendre, along with the inclusion of a purse, which ‘is described as being “just big enough to hold [Yorick’s] crown”’.

Similarly, in 1716, Edward Ward used the work ‘placket’ - the name given to the opening or ‘slit’ of a pocket - to discuss the genitalia of prostitutes in Waterlane, describing them as, ‘Whores with gaping plackets’. This rather crude interpretation of a woman’s pocket is also demonstrated in a 1791 etching by Thomas Rowlandson entitled, *A Sudden Squall in Hyde Park* [fig.4]. The etching depicts the effects of a gust of wind on a crowd in Hyde Park as it unfortunately reveals a passing lady’s pocket, leaving it exposed for the leering phallic lens of an old man standing nearby. As Fennetaux explains, ‘the satirist uses her flabby, gaping pocket as a trope to signal the woman’s promiscuity’. Thus, these print culture representations of pockets transform an object of female privacy that transcended rank, into an item imbued with sexual scope and salacity. Despite evidence suggesting that the contents of women’s pockets contained collections of mundane household items, print culture inferred that pockets could enable adulterous liaisons and hide sensational secrets. By likening their shape to female genitalia, particularly in the case of baggy or lose pockets, what was an item of female autonomy, became a source of sexual embarrassment.

The examples of female privacy discussed in this article, with the exception of the physical pair of pockets, can only claim to be signifiers of privacy. The artefacts discussed do not represent the true private behaviours of women, but manipulate known symbols of privacy to promote the image of women as sexually louche, morally corruptible and deceptive in their outward performance of virtue. Lady Worsley’s privacy was a triptych of public erotica and sensationalism; the illusion of privacy maintained and promoted in prints such as Gillray’s only heightens the naughtiness of the story. If we apply Morton H. Levine’s promotion of the individual to Lady Worsley’s case, nothing about her personal life can be considered private. Thus, the audience’s intrusion of the representation of Lady Worsley’s private space made Gillray’s images all the more tantalising. Similarly, representations of women’s pockets demonstrated the crude mockery of a woman’s autonomy and anatomy, reducing an object that was often the only private object in a woman’s possession, to a symbol of her sexuality; comparing it to her genitalia to arbitrarily signify sexual promiscuity. That contemporary reports of lost or stolen pockets often record money, tickets and pamphlets as their contents, indicates that pockets enabled a woman freedom away from the domestic sphere, and makes the misogynistic agenda associated with representing them as crude, sexual objects all the more explicit. The pair of silk pockets from the Victoria and Albert museum however, is the only example of inviolate privacy here discussed. Its contents and owner being unknown to

us, we can only speculate at its life story, with these now empty pockets existing only as a
vessel that once offered a woman the opportunity to possess a personal, secret and wholly
private space. Whether these pockets facilitated the louche sexual behaviour represented
in contemporary print culture we will never know, but that alone means this pair of
pockets can be regarded as an object that represents true and uncompromising female
privacy.

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Figure 4. Thomas Rowlandson, _A Sudden Squall in Hyde Park_, 1791. Print (41.5 × 53.2 cm), © Thomas Rowlandson Collection, Graphic Arts Collection, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.