

“Good society and domestic comfort that can be found in a private family:” Landladies and the labour of respectability in 19th-Century London

Kristina Molin Cherneski
Northumbria University

Historians have often suggested that households took in lodgers in an effort to “make do,” forced by circumstance to destroy the privacy of their nuclear family to make ends meet.¹ However, I would like to argue in this paper that the picture can be further nuanced. While economic choices were certainly limited for women in nineteenth-century Britain, landladies were not just victims of circumstance. They were also business women, and asserted respectability for themselves and their businesses, challenging their lack of visibility in census records and the ways they were characterized in the cultural products of the time. Small scale lodging arrangements were a common occurrence and part of the experience of “home” for many in the nineteenth century, with one or more lodgers living in a landlady’s dwelling. Quantitative confirmation of these arrangements and their numerical permutations have been explored in depth by historians.² However, landladies can also help us see the fluid

¹ Leonore Davidoff, “The separation of home and work?: Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England,” in *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 151-2. The chapter was first published in 1979 in a collection edited by Sandra Burman. Similar studies are less freighted with the weight of the “separate spheres” approach but still suggest women who worked as landladies were unusual or unfortunate or both, and largely focusses on measuring financial exchange and household demographics. See, for example, David Hussey and Margaret Ponsoyby, *Stories from Home: English Domestic Interiors, 1750-1850* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007), especially chapter five; S.J. Wright, “Sojourners and lodgers in a provincial town: the evidence from eighteenth-century Ludlow,” *Urban History Yearbook* 17 (1990): 14-35; Jeff Meek, “Boarding and Lodging Practices in early twentieth-century Scotland,” *Continuity and Change* 31, no. 1 (May 2016): 79-100; Jane Humphries, “Female-headed households in early industrial Britain: the vanguard of the proletariat?” *Labour History Review* 63, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 31-65; and more focused on the poverty of the lodgers than the landlady is Stephen Page, “Lodging and Poverty in late Victorian Leicester: A Socio-Geographic Perspective,” *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archeological and Historical Society* 68 (1994): 121-44. For a recent discussion on the challenges and rewards of using census data to understand women’s lives and work, see Edward Higgs and Amanda Wilkinson, “Women, Occupations and Work in the Victorian Census revisited,” *History Workshop Journal* 81 (Spring 2016): 17-38.

² Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Page, “Lodging and Poverty”; Hussey and Ponsoyby, *Stories from Home*; Alison Kay, “A Little Enterprise of her Own of her Own: Lodging-house Keeping and the Accommodation Business in Nineteenth-century London,” *The London Journal* 28, no. 2 (2003): 41-53; Meek, “Boarding

boundaries between public and private life; they were in public running a business, while their business was providing “the private,” a home for their lodgers. They employed the language of respectability and privacy to signal their understanding and respect for the meanings of home, at the same time as they ran a public business and showed themselves in the community.

Women who turned their homes into a business by taking in lodgers were not only relatively common, but were part of a significant population of female business operators, who participated openly in the economic and social life of nineteenth-century London. As a result of the city’s rapid expansion connected to rising trade, new industries and jobs, and the consequent large-scale immigration, lodging was no longer most common for servants and apprentices, and was not restricted to the lowest classes. While all types of households took in lodgers, single female-headed households were the most likely to do so. In the 1851 census, 2,741 women were listed as letting lodgings, numbers that placed lodgings keeping second only to millinery as a field of enterprise for women.³

This study includes both women who had assets enough to require and pay for insurance, and those whose status is more unclear, like the women who testified at the Old Bailey and those who took out classified advertisements in the *Morning Herald*. None, however, were so poor as to be part of the group that lived in the common lodging houses or on the street; they necessarily had to have a home to rent out space within it, however limited. While their businesses might be tenuous, they were well-enough off to have a roof.

and Lodging in Scotland”; and for similar studies examining Canada, Richard Harris, “The End Justified the Means: Boarding and Rooming in a City of Homes, 1890-1951,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 1992): 331-358 and Bettina Bradbury, “Pigs, Cows and Boarders: Non-wage Forms of Survival Among Montreal Families, 1861-91,” *Labour* 14 (Fall 1984): 9-46.

³ Molly Boggs, “‘Given to you by nature for an Enemy’: The Landlady in mid-century London,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 23, no. 3 (July 2018): 310. Further, due to the nature of the census, these figures are likely to be a significant underrepresentation; see Edward Higgs, “Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth Century,” *History Workshop Journal* 23 (Spring 1987): 59-80 and Higgs and Wilkinson, “Women, Occupations and Work,” 17-38.

Regardless of their precise class status, however, their gender shaped the ways they ran their businesses and the labour they did to assert their place in the economy.

The records of the Royal and Sun Alliance Insurance Company provide a snapshot of the landlady as a successful female entrepreneur. They support the findings of historians using census and other sources that show that women were active in keeping lodgings, and even claimed the identity of business operators. These insurance records reveal that out of 128 total records for “lodging-house keeper” between 1810 and 1841, the years for which records are available, 39 of the policies were held by women, or 30 percent of the total. This means not only that women were a substantial minority of those holding policies, but they were also responsible for the business, such that they purchased insurance in their own names. This almost certainly underestimates the number of insured women lodging-house keepers, as many women would be hidden behind the names of their husbands and partners in other policies purchased for lodging-houses in these records.

These findings are striking in contrast to Alison Kay’s 2003 analysis of another set of insurance records, from the Sun Fire insurance company for the years 1851 and 1861, which contained no examples of female policy holders specifically listed as engaged in lodging-house keeping. Kay speculates the policies are obscured because a landlady’s business assets were also private assets—one’s house and furniture—and so will not be reflected in business policies. Kay finds 25 women in her sample who describe themselves as lodging-house keepers in policies for private assets. While samples from different insurance companies may not be directly comparable, not least because the records of the Royal and Sun Alliance end prior to Kay’s first sample, the fact that women took out policies as business owners themselves shows they were less obscure than Kay’s sample might indicate.⁴

⁴ Kay, “A Little Enterprise of her Own.” Moreover, records for the late eighteenth century certainly show women active in gendered trades. Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: the English Clothing*

Several of these extant policies were held, however, by the same women. Among the 39 policies listed held by women, 30 were held by different women, seven women held two or more policies, and two women held three. Details contained in the listings of the women with more than one policy reveal the growth of their assets or business in the additional property insured. Several women took out successive policies on the same property. Lucy Mill took out three policies on her property at 30 Arundel Street, The Strand, in the centre of London, within easy walking distance to courts and legal chambers, among other major banking, commercial and administrative offices. One of her policies was taken in February of 1836, one in March of 1836 and one in March of 1837. Mill's first policy was on the building itself; £500 on the brick structure at 30 Arundel Street.⁵ The next policy was on the contents, including the household goods, fixtures, wearing apparel, printed books and plate in her dwelling place for £540, and china and glass insured for £60. A year later, she insured more fixtures, household goods, wearing apparel, book and plate for £440 and £60 more of china and glass. Mill's insuring of the building implies her responsibility and investment, perhaps even ownership, of the property, while she had, and continued to accumulate, enough goods in her lodging-house to almost double her insurance coverage.⁶

Other records reveal that women could have large or growing enterprises and control over several properties, insuring two or more addresses. Eight of the 30 women with policies insured adjacent or multiple addresses. For example, Hannah Lyons insured numbers 3, 4 and 5 Shire Lane in 1829. The record also mentions her property at 8 Fleur-de-Lis Court in Fleet Street. Lyons' policy was the largest of the records of female lodging-house keepers with

Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 110, Table 4.4. Women were 14% of the total insured Salesmen/Saleswoman, that is retailers (and sometimes makers) of readymade clothing, 1777-1796.

⁵ The purchasing power in 1830 of such a sum would be around £36,000 in 2017 pounds.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>

⁶ Lucy Mill insurance policy, Royal and Sun Alliance Insurance Group Policy register, CLC/B/192/F/001/MS11936/550/1215622 (Feb 1836), CLC/B/192/F/001/MS11936/550/1215772 (Mar 1836), CLC/B/192/F/001/MS11936/555/1247491 (Mar 1837), London Metropolitan Archives, London.

multiple policies, at £1500. Lyons insured all the buildings listed, four in total, worth a combined £1200. She insured the contents, including a special line about “pictures and prints” not included in most other policies, and a unique line insuring her “jewels therein” for £50. None of the other records insured jewels specifically; Lyons insured both substantial real estate, as well as luxury goods including jewellery.⁷

In the case of Sarah Titmus, the insurance records tell us a bit more about the extent of the business she was operating. In 1833, she insured her lodging-house at 13 Eden Street, Hampstead Road, and the policy mentions adjoining property at 14 Eden Street. She insured the goods contained in the dwelling at 13 Eden Street, as well as the goods “in a Cottage and workhouse behind all communicating,” perhaps indicating that Titmus had an additional business besides her lodging-house, and she may have lived in the adjoining property rather than in the lodging-house. She had connected all her properties, however. Along with the common language used in other policies about household goods and a separate line for china and glass, Titmus also insured £50’s worth of “pictures and prints,” perhaps decoration in her cottage, or an effort to make the lodging-house more homely.⁸

These records suggest that running a lodging-house could be a successful enterprise for some women, and that they were able to be economically profitable over periods of years and increase their property holdings. Women must have made enough profit not only to have assets worth insuring, but also valuable enough to require more insurance over time. Businesses run by women were neither rare nor something they sought to obscure in order to remain hidden in the private sphere. They took charge in the public sphere, assertively

⁷ Hannah Lyons, CLC/B/192/F/001/MS11936/520/1092955 (Jul 1829), LMA. The value of Lyons’ jewellery would be about £3,300 in 2017 pounds. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>

⁸ Sarah Titmus, CLC/B/192/F/001/MS11936/537/1154606 (May 1833), CLC/B/192/F/001/MS11936/547/1222468 (April 1836), LMA.

managing their risk by purchasing insurance for their growing operations.⁹ Rather than a picture of desperation or “making do,” these women demonstrate calculated attention to their businesses, both independent and invested.

This evidence of landladies as business women, working in public view can be made more complex by examining the nature of their ventures and everyday life in their lodgings. Much of the discourse surrounding landladies, both contemporary comment, and from the landladies themselves, used the language of respectability. Respectability was “a matter of moral character, self-control and reputation,” that is, to be respectable was to be respected, creditable, reputable. In Victorian texts, it was associated with “good character,” and seriousness, sobriety, responsibility, trustworthiness, gravity and (sometimes) quietude.¹⁰

Yet respectability “can be seen less as a fixed status than as a performance” that people might choose to perform or refrain from depending on the audience.¹¹ Though “respectability” might have been defined in particular ways among the middle class, it was a flexible enough term that it could come to incorporate different meanings for other classes in nuanced ways. It was more about playing a role in the appropriate circumstances than a constant fixed identity. Working-class people, then, might embody middle-class definitions of respectability when they needed to, code-switching in a courtroom or with a lady rent collector. They might subtly redefine what respectability meant in certain situations, for

⁹ Jennifer Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century England* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111. Aston finds a similar commitment to long term business operations in the nineteenth century, arguing that “women entered trade as part of a long-term financial plan rather than a stopgap or temporary fix until a new male provider could be secured.” Women operated enterprises on a permanent basis and were “a common feature of English urban society.”

¹⁰ Mike Huggins, *Vice and Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 176. Huggins notes that the middle class used respectability to distinguish themselves from the “rough” working classes, they also distinguished upper class and aristocratic norms from respectability as well (175). See also Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), especially part three and Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representation of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), chapter one, “The Norm: Respectable Femininity.”

¹¹ Susie Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: politics, culture and society in nineteenth-century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2017), 119.

example, defending friendly society meetings in public houses from middle-class condemnation by claiming the location supported conviviality and fellowship rather than drunkenness and vice.¹² Respectability was a performance of characteristics and behaviours that landladies could use in their role as women in business.

Rather than shy away from such claims, women used the language of respectability and potential lodgers used the same in return.¹³ In my sample from the *Morning Herald* in 1832, there were a significant number of lodgings advertised, both from those providing and those seeking such arrangements. Over the year, there were 266 notices from providers, and 58 placed by those seeking accommodation. While it is difficult to establish how many of these advertisements were placed by women acting independently as landladies, at least some women were open about their gender and can be counted.

Some advertisements declared that “a lady” sought lodgers, or specified a lady or gentleman, still others referenced a “family” opening their home. Many gave an address to send an application, and some of these refer to a “Mr.” or a “Mrs.” to address the enquiry. Yet others gave initials or simply an address or post office location. Advertisers might forward applications to a coffeehouse or bookshop, locations to which individuals might have had their mail directed, not necessarily the location of the lodgings, or even of the person letting the lodging. Of the 266 advertisements I found, 129 referred to a “family” letting lodgings, and 74 did not provide any personal context (offering lodgings “at a respectable establishment” rather than “with a genteel family,” for example). Almost 70 percent did not specify the gender of the business owner, but rather obscured the identity of the owner behind more generic terms. However, 50 of the advertisements, or 19 percent, stipulated a woman or

¹² Examples from Ellen Ross, “‘Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep’: Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighborhoods,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 27 (Spring 1985): 41 and Simon Cordery, “Friendly Societies and the Discourse of Respectability in Britain, 1825-1875,” *Journal of British Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 1995): 40 and 51.

¹³ Huggins points out that “to be effective, respectability had to be recognized and accepted by others.” Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians*, 175.

a lady as owner, or included a woman's name as the vendor of the lodging services. Most strikingly, only 13 advertisements, or under 5 percent of the total, contained a man's name, or claimed that a man or gentleman was offering the lodgings.¹⁴ While women's presence as advertisers was occluded in the *Herald*, women were still much more likely than single men to use their gender to advertise their lodgings.

As I mentioned, the most popular way to advertise lodging was to suggest the lodgings were let by a "family." Family in this context was a capacious term, and did not refer exclusively to a nuclear family. This can be seen in several examples that not only listed their business as run by a "family" but listed the family's members. In one case, an advertisement began by declaring, "A Clergyman residing with his Wife and Daughters in a handsome detached home,"¹⁵ and another stated "A Widow lady, whose family is reduced to one daughter" sought a "gentleman and his wife or two ladies" as lodgers.¹⁶ Importantly though, in this sample, women were always present when the "family" was described in detail and several "families" contained only women. This, then, shows how many women were involved in lodgings, even when not declared in the text of the advertisement.

The language of respectability was significant in advertisements, for both those seeking tenants and those looking for accommodations. For example, in January, there was a total of 21 advertisements for lodgings and four placed by those seeking lodgings; 15 and three, respectively, of those advertisements used "respectable" or "respectability" in their

¹⁴ While I attempted to establish the gender of the advertiser to consider the role of women running lodging businesses themselves, it is important to recognize that female labour would always have been associated with letting lodgings. Even in the case of man nominally "in charge," he would most likely hire a maid or other woman to be responsible for, at minimum, the daily cleaning and cooking, a woman to do the laundry, and often running of the day-to-day of the lodgings, including letting the spaces and dealing with tenants. As John Styles notes in his study of London lodgings in the eighteenth century, "it was women who did the work" (70). Women were ubiquitous figures in the running of lodgings, even when their names were not listed on top. See John Styles, "Lodging at the Old Bailey: Lodgings and their furnishing in Eighteenth-Century London" in *Gender Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, ed. Amanda Vickery and John Styles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 70.

¹⁵ *Morning Herald* (London), December 20, 1832 and November 26, 1832. Subsequent references will list month and day; all are from the *Morning Herald* in 1832.

¹⁶ October 22, similar October 2.

text. Those that did not use those words directly made other references to the same concepts, suggesting a “select establishment,”¹⁷ or a “fashionable situation upon a scale of superior style and comfort,”¹⁸ or “domesticated habits,”¹⁹ and a “genteel house.”²⁰ This prevalence might be seen as defensive. That interpretation, however, would be perhaps too influenced by middle-class ideas of respectability, prescriptive literature and gendered precepts. In fact, the language of respectability was ubiquitous, and not just confined to advertising for female-run lodgings. Single male proprietors, anonymous proprietors and families all used this language as well. The content of the advertisements varied little despite the gender of the proprietor.²¹ This was, instead, the sales technique for lodgings in this period, and all those attempting to run this business used the same language to attract tenants.

The relationship between privacy and respectability was constitutive, with each reinforcing the other. Landladies performed respectability and supported that performance by claims to the provision of privacy. Yet they also had to perform a balancing act, for keeping oneself to oneself had social costs as well as benefits for working class society generally and landladies in particular. Ellen Ross points out that while “respectability meant maintaining privacy,” at the same time, neighbourhood- and community-building activities such as borrowing, lending and gossip were fundamental to working-class women’s cultures. As such, “the staunchly respectable were isolated from the sharing networks that provided both pleasure and a measure of security.”²² A social price could be paid for too much privacy, with

¹⁷ January 3.

¹⁸ January 6.

¹⁹ January 18.

²⁰ January 25.

²¹ This echoes Barker’s findings in Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield; she notes “it is striking how infrequently the language of advertising appears to have been influenced by gender” (Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 87). Phillips’ findings are similar, with women engaging in similar techniques and equally concerned with reputation as necessary for a successful business. Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700-1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006), 228.

²² Ross, “Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep,” 52.

very practical results. In addition, respectability was a performance that was meant to be seen, and to be respectable was to be in view of, and judged by, one's community. The markers of working-class wealth and respectability, like Sunday clothes, ornaments for the mantel, or participation in friendly society meetings, were meant for public display.

For landladies, the balancing of conflicting demands of privacy and respectability was particularly difficult. Allowing for too much privacy could mean that they did not control the respectability of their lodgings sufficiently. If they neglected to monitor the tenants, or the neighbourhood appropriately, or kept secrets about their business from the neighbours and community, they might be deemed less respectable.²³ Notions of proper middle-class domesticity of the period were at odds with the realities of people living in common, with community and social norms.

At the same time, rather than a concern over the privacy of the landlady and her family, what becomes obvious when exploring the topic of nineteenth-century lodgings is that the landlady was not only giving up her own privacy and that of her family. Importantly, she also became privy to much of what might be going on in her house. And she had the power that goes along with having information and freedom of movement through this space. In this, one can observe not only the realities of privacy in everyday life for those who lived in lodgings, but the relationship between power and privacy.

Like the claims to respectability in advertisements for lodgings, emphasizing the privacy offered by lodgings was common in advertisements, and demonstrates both the significance of privacy and the ways it operated for people in shared living spaces. The word "private" was used frequently, much as respectability was a key feature, and again related to the larger argument the advertisers were making about the lodgings they provided. "Private," in line with "family" and "respectability," signalled the lack of purely pecuniary motivation

²³ Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians*, 178.

and the existence of a homely environment. For example, an advertisement from a “family of the first respectability” suggested that “merchants or professional gentlemen” would appreciate the “good society and domestic comfort that can be found in a private family.”²⁴ Often, it was noted that “no other lodgers are kept,”²⁵ not only pointing out the house was a smaller establishment, not a busy “boarding house,”²⁶ but also indicating through the language of privacy that this feature had value. Others advertised “no children”²⁷ or access to “private sitting/drawing rooms,”²⁸ emphasizing that a lodger could keep to her/himself if desired.

Old Bailey Proceedings reveal the everyday interactions of landladies and lodgers, the way that privacy was understood and experienced, and the power of the landlady within her house. Landladies testified to what they observed throughout their house, the control they had over the doors and keys, and their reckoning of everyone’s comings and goings. They both respected the privacy of those who lodged with them and pointed out their knowledge and control. In this, they demonstrated the balance they managed between running a respectable business through observation and control, and creating a welcoming private living space for lodgers.

Eleanor Russell exemplified this tension when she testified in the case of Fredericka Asge,²⁹ who was accused of robbing a couple called the Roberts, who rented space in the house. Russell declared that she was single, and kept the house herself, and that the Roberts lodged in “my two parlours.” She made clear that her kitchen was under one of the parlours rented by the Roberts, and that she could hear when Mrs Roberts left the house. Russell

²⁴ *Morning Herald* (London), March 24, 1832.

²⁵ March 28, June 1, June 9.

²⁶ Or an undesirable and disreputable common lodging house; see chapter one for the reputation and discussion of such establishments.

²⁷ May 2, May 28.

²⁸ May 16, June 6, June 8.

²⁹ *OBP*, 14 June 1847, trial of Fredericka Asge (t18470614-1512).

testified she “distinctly heard the prisoner [Fredricka Asge] walk across the room.” She knew Mrs Roberts and the prisoner Asge, had later gone out together, declaring “they left me in the house—no one could come in without my knowing it.” She described the activities of the residents and the sounds of the house on the morning of the theft in detail and at length:

I have a gentleman and lady lodging on the first floor—the gentleman was out—his wife and children were at home—I have a young man and his wife up stairs—the young man was away—my servant was in the house—there is a door from the passage to Mr Roberts’ front parlour and from that to the bedroom—there is a door from the passage to the bedroom, but that door is kept locked—during the whole time after Mrs Roberts went out to the prisoner till Mrs Roberts return, I was home—no one passed across the front parlour while they were away—I am quite sure about that—Mrs Roberts left the servant up stairs when she went out, but she [the servant] came down as soon as Mrs Roberts was gone—I am certain she did not go into the room—I do not believe anybody could have gone across the floor—I heard no one.³⁰

Russel was confident in the movements of the lodgers, the mechanics of the house and her knowledge of both. She knew who was in, who was out, and where the servants were. She took responsibility and spoke for the respectability of her house, and that she knew what went on in her home and business. The lodgers clearly had very little privacy outside the hearing of Miss Russell, but their lack of privacy also means that she could speak on their behalf and testify on the nature of life in their shared home.

Conclusion

By examining landladies as business women, first and foremost, and considering the sources from that perspective, a different picture of the landlady emerges than that of a poor victim of circumstance. Instead, landladies were participants in the world of commerce and worked to demonstrate respectability while doing so. They insured their business investments and through their insurance policies we can see their enterprises expand. Landladies advertised their businesses and took advantage of the language of respectability to reach their

³⁰ *OBP*, 14 June 1847, trial of Fredericka Asge (t18470614-1512).

desired clientele. They were public actors, with their word as business women accepted and valued in court.

Their lives reveal, however, the tensions between women running a business as a public activity and the nature of “home” and its claims to domestic privacy. Landladies were mobile: they could move through public and private life and claim a role in both. While they ran different kinds and scales of businesses, landladies all had in common their unchecked movement between so-called public and private space. They could claim respectability and control their own privacy. Significantly, though, they could speak to the respectability of others and control others’ access to privacy. The interrelationship between respectability and privacy, and the balancing act that landladies played between the two, reveals the everyday negotiations women had to undertake and the patriarchal nature of privacy. Rather than seeing such women solely as disadvantaged figures lacking choice, landladies’ role as business women demonstrated the inner workings of privacy, power and patriarchy.