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REFLECTING SELF-IMAGE:
“GIRLHOOD” INTERIORS
1875-1910

by
Sarah Anne Carter

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early
American Culture

Spring 2004

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"GIRLHOOD" INTERIORS
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This thesis considers two main categories of spaces: adolescent girls’ bedrooms at home and dormitory rooms at school. Through photographic and manuscript sources, enhanced by design books, fiction, and periodicals, the rooms and the objects in them are tools for understanding white, elite adolescent girls and college women coming of age between 1875 and 1910. The adolescent girls’ bedroom at home was a transitional and a highly charged space. As girls matured they made the transition from nursery to bedroom. Adolescent girls’ active participation in room design explicitly connected maturity with the power to design and to create an independent identity. With a focus on Smith College, college dorm rooms complicated this notion. Public opinions concerning “college girls,” personal relationships, financial pressures and personal interests shaped the process of individualizing the suite of standard issue bedroom furniture. Captured in photographs, constellations of objects and ephemera in the dorm room, especially the decoration on the dressing table, reflected various ways in which adolescent girls and college women saw themselves and wanted to be perceived. Carefully arranged dorm rooms offered college women the opportunity to craft a self-image of femininity and independence through interior design.
Figure 1

Interior of Smith College dorm room, c. 1890-1894, from the scrap book of Belle Richardson, Smith Class of 1894.

*Courtesy of Smith College Archives, Smith College.*
Introduction

A photograph from Belle Richardson’s album captured two students seated in a dorm interior at Smith College in the early 1890s [Figure 1]. A dressing table, desk and small tea stand form a triangle through this view of dorm life. A patterned shawl decorates the large, Eastlake-style dressing table, while various toilette accessories and a large pincushion cover its surface. The mirror reflects an American flag and a window beyond the photograph, draped with translucent fabrics. To the left, one student sits at a drop-front desk topped with artfully arranged pictures, clocks and baskets. Above the desk a wall full of pictures and cards visually extends the desk up into an arranged mass of ephemera. A small stand in the foreground completes the triangle. Replete with patterned tablecloth, bouquet of flowers and shiny, silver-colored teapot, it is the focal point of the picture. Behind it, the other student peacefully sits on the floor. A small bookcase, a hanging purse and ukulele, and two tennis racquets leaning against the wall complicate the central triangle with restrained verticals. The corner of a large rug echoes the main triangle of the image and suggests the room beyond the photograph.¹

¹ Belle Richardson papers, Smith class of 1894, Smith College Archives, Smith College.
This image offers a window onto the dorm life of late nineteenth-century college women. The carefully composed photograph, and countless others like it, suggests the importance of the dorm room interior. Here, ideas about domesticity and taste and the college woman came together. Carefully arranged dorm rooms allowed college women to craft a self-image of femininity and independence through interior design. The story begins in the girl's first bedroom at home and explores how she became "the triumphant owner of a room 'all her own.'"^2

Photographic and manuscript sources, enhanced by design books, fiction, and periodicals, recreate the world of nineteenth-century adolescent girls' private spaces. The rooms and the objects in them are tools for understanding girls coming of age between 1875 and 1910. In this life stage, room design was a complicated

^2 Martha Cutler "Girls Rooms," *Harpers Bazaar* XL: 10 (October 1906) 935-940: 935.

^3 While I draw upon advice books and published sources from the period, I am far more interested in girls' lived realities. One set of sources I do not fully consider is "College Girls Fiction," except as it relates explicitly to interiors. This huge literary genre is explored by Shirley Marchalonis, *College Girls: A Century in Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) and Sherrie Inness, *Intimate Communities: Representation and Social Transformation in Women's College Fiction, 1895-1910* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1995).

^4 I use the modern term adolescent girl to refer to young women from onset of menses to age of first marriage, the period of their lives in which they exercised a certain amount of control over their own spaces, but did not yet have their own homes. Adolescent girls are not explicitly considered until the early twentieth century with G. Stanley Hall's 1904 *Adolescence* and his 1909 "Budding Girl" article published in *Appleton's Magazine*. Crista DeLuzio provides a wonderful treatment of this topic in her paper, "The "Budding Girl": G. Stanley Hall’s Psychology of Female – and "Feminized" – Adolescence," (Society for the History of Children and Youth
amalgam of parental expectations, personal taste, and popular design that marked the transition from “nursery” to “bedroom” usually around age twelve or thirteen. These white, elite adolescent girls attended school and prepared for the lives of upper class women, far from the demands of wage-earning labor. They labored to form an identity bounded physically by their own spaces. 5

This thesis considers two main categories of spaces: bedrooms at home and dormitory rooms at school. It focuses on the notion of the adolescent girl’s bedroom as a transitional and a highly charged space and explores the connection between taste and girls’ education as it related to bedroom décor. 6 As girls matured

5 I am interested specifically in adolescent girls, as opposed to boys, because of the connection between notions of femininity and interior design and decoration. While few scholars still accept the notion of separate male and female worlds, historical memory and societal expectations have long connected “women’s work” and sense of self to the state of their homes and their presumed “sphere”. For a discussion of the “Separate Spheres” construct, see Linda Kerber “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” Journal of American History, 75 (1988) 3-39. A further study could fruitfully compare nineteenth-century room designs for boys and girls.

6 The design of the adolescent girls’ bedroom through time has received little scholarly attention. The short article “girls’ bedrooms” in the recent Girlhood in America: An Encyclopedia (2001) is the only work that directly addresses teenage girls’ spaces through time. Miriam Formanek-Brunell, Girlhood in America: An Encyclopedia (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO), 2001) 338-342.
within their homes, they made the transition from nursery to bedroom. Adolescent girls’ active participation in their bedroom design explicitly connected maturity with the power to design and to create an independent identity.

Dorm rooms complicated this notion. At school, students designed and individualized dorm rooms away from their families but they were not independent of societal pressures. Public opinions concerning “college girls,” personal relationships, 


8 Elizabeth Cromley argues that the bedroom in this period “shaped its occupant into the correct gender roles, rather than encouraging the occupant to express individual taste in shaping the bedroom.” (130) While certain gendered decorations may have been encouraged by parents and advice books, adolescent girls’ mastery of those conventions gave them a certain amount of power within the home they lacked as children. Their decisions to decorate and create their spaces offered them entrée into an adult world. Jane Hunter’s recent book is an excellent exploration of nineteenth-century adolescent girls’ social and intellectual culture. She identifies the adolescent girls’ bedroom as a transitional space and discusses the role of privacy in identity formation, but does not discuss the import of the design or decoration of the room (95-98). Hunter, How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
financial pressures and personal interests complicated the process of individualizing the suite of standard issue bedroom furniture. Captured in photographs, constellations of objects and ephemera in the dorm room, especially the decoration on the dressing table, reflected various ways in which adolescent girls saw themselves and wanted to be perceived.

Caught between the mythologized “female sphere” of home and a professional and public world of women’s colleges, the young women in this study faced a complex set of assumptions about their physical worlds. Their spaces, like their dress, were primary signifiers of status, taste and potential, offering adolescent girls and college women privacy, empowerment and the opportunity for self-fashioning.®

“A Matter of Education”: Girls as Designers

Women, who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns, possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other

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® Like all writers addressing early women’s colleges in America, I owe a great debt to Helen Horowitz’s fine book Alma Mater: Design and Experience in Women’s Colleges from their Nineteenth Century Beginnings to the 1930’s (New York: Knopf, 1984). She masterfully details the architecture of women’s college campuses and relates the architecture to efforts to create specific kinds of college environments. While she discusses the dorm, she does not consider the implications of dormitory room décor created by students. The chapter entitled, “College Women and Coeds” in her book Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures From the end of the Eighteenth Century to the Present (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987) offers a broader historical context for the college women in this study (193-219).
women. An intimate mother-daughter relationship lay at the heart of this female world.¹⁰

In her path-breaking article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" historian Carol Smith-Rosenberg offered a window onto intense nineteenth century female-female relationships, grounded in a daughter’s closeness to her mother. In a social sphere rhetorically separate from husbands and fathers, daughters often sought to imitate or negate their mother’s examples, as mothers encouraged their daughters to enter into "domestic apprenticeships," preparing them for their future roles. While Rosenberg recognized that most daughters would become mothers themselves, she argued that mothers and daughters were active participants in their own identity formation.¹¹

The mother-daughter dyad was central to the realization of girls’ identities through their bedrooms.¹² In 1878 Lady Barker wrote in "The Bedroom and the Boudoir" of the long-term effects of girls’ well-designed rooms on mothers and daughters,

What sumptuous room in after years ever affords the deep delight of the sense of ownership which attends the first awakening of a girl in a room of her very own? And it is a vivid recollection of this pure delight of one’s


¹¹ Hunter argues that changing ideas about daughters and domestics saved daughters from heavy housework and describes an inability to "reintroduce domestic apprenticeship among urban elite.” I define the domestic apprenticeship in far broader terms; for elite women good design and proper socialization are at the core of my definition. Hunter 25.

own bygone girl-days which prompts us to do our best to furbish up ever so homely a room for our eldest daughter.\textsuperscript{13}

Here, mother acts not out of an understanding of her own role as mother, but from a memory of the girl she once was and identification with the young lady her daughter is becoming.\textsuperscript{14} In 1896 the English Mrs. Horsfall explicitly linked the acquisition of one’s own room with “that half-emancipated state” between childhood and full maturity. In \textit{Pretty Homes}, she argued that the adolescent girls’ bedroom was a necessary stop on the way to adulthood. There the adolescent girl could “receive her school girl friends in the same way that the mother has her drawing room.” Her arrangement of the space would teach the adolescent girl domestic management and give her pride in her surroundings. Having arranged her “household gods” and bric-a-brac, the adolescent could “look round with a happy face and remark truthfully, ‘Monarch of all I survey’.”\textsuperscript{15}

This trajectory has a place in understanding what girls’ bedrooms may have meant to nineteenth-century adolescents and their mothers. Daughters saw and designed their own spaces in the context of their mother’s homes. Mothers were not only to give their daughters well-designed spaces, but the tools to successfully create and shape their own bedrooms and private worlds.

Like other rooms in the nineteenth-century home, children’s bedrooms were carefully crafted spaces.\textsuperscript{16} Writers and thinkers such as Charles Eastlake and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} “\textit{The Bedroom and the Boudoir}” by Lady Barker (London: MacMillan, 1878) 31-32.
\bibitem{14} Jane Hunter offers a psychological characterization of the nineteenth-century adolescent girl’s relationship to her mother. Hunter 103-107.
\bibitem{15} Mrs. Horsfall, \textit{Pretty Homes} (London: The European Mail Limited, 1897) 1, 4.
\bibitem{16} As Ken Ames has shown for the dining room and the hall and Katherine Grier has demonstrated for the parlor, nineteenth-century rooms were consciously designed
\end{thebibliography}
Clarence Cook equated "good taste" in interior furnishings with clear and concise intellectual, moral and cultural meaning. In his 1878 *House Beautiful*, Cook appealed to the parental desires of his readers to better their children by purchasing good design and to collect art. He argued that parents could teach good taste only through art, writing that, "A child's taste and delicacy of perception will be more surely fed by the constant habit of seeing and playing with a few of the best bits."\(^{17}\) Later he wrote, "Could his eye cooled in such a bath of dew, get pleasure any more from discordant color or awkward form? Our senses are educated more by these slight impressions than we are apt to think."\(^{18}\) Other writers like Maria Oakley Dewing, equated beauty in a child's room with a child's health noting, "That nurseries should be sunny and cheerful is a matter of health. That they should be beautiful, however uncostly, is a matter of education."\(^{19}\) For these commentators, a parent's design choices had implications for their children's happiness and potential.

Properly raised children, especially women, were expected to have a high facility for good design. As Eastlake wrote in the introduction to his 1868 *Hints in Household Taste*,


\(^{18}\) Cook 103.

While a young lady is devoting at school or under a governess so many hours a day to music, so many to languages, so many to general sciences, she is all the time forming that sense of the beautiful that we call taste: that this sense once developed will enable her, unassisted by special study or experience not only to appreciate the charms of nature in every aspect, but to form a correct estimate of the elements of art-manufacture. That this impression has gained ground so far as to amount to positive conviction, may be inferred from the fact that there is no single point on which well-bred women are more jealous of disparagement than on this.\(^\text{20}\)

While Eastlake apparently did not believe good taste could be explicitly taught, parents could inspire the principles of good design in their children. It was parents’ responsibility to see that daughters were able to create and to live in rooms that exemplified good taste.

Apart from their pedantic purposes, most people presumed that children’s rooms, especially girls’ rooms, had a particular look to them. Ella Rodman Church described the young lady’s and the girls’ room in her 1881 book, *How to Furnish a Home.* “The young lady’s room, with everything dressed in muslin flounces, and running either to pink or blue,” was her vision of the typical adolescent girl’s room. Little girls’ rooms do not seem different from adolescent rooms in their overall design, only in the function of specific furniture forms. She described the little girls’ room, “with its little, snowy-draped bed for six-year old Alice, and pretty, swinging crib for two-year-old Floy, [it] is perhaps the very sweetest-looking of them all.”\(^\text{21}\) However, a young lady’s bedroom was supposed to have more design content than Church implied.


In his 1883 treatise on *House Furnishing and Decoration*, Robert Shoppel questioned Church's idealized young lady's bedroom much the same way Eastlake criticized bedrooms filled with "gaudy chintz".\(^2^2\) Shoppel did not find meaning in the stereotypical design for a girl's bedroom because it had no intellectual content; it was not a consciously designed space. He advised parents to, "Adopt a lighter style by all means, let the special tastes of the occupant be consulted, but let the room itself be a means of education."\(^2^3\) Girls were supposed to have a role in their bedroom design and their assumption of that role had serious meaning. Parents did not simply give girls a new bedroom; girls had to know how to display their unique sense of beauty and self.

Authors encouraged parents to give their daughters a say in their bedroom design. In E. C. Gardner's 1878 do-it-yourself fictional tale, *Home Interiors*, a family decides to redo its home in the new artistic style. The undertaking was challenging, because the family, although financially comfortable, wanted to do much of the work itself. The daughter in the family, Mollie, needed a completely new space. She seemed to have returned home with her big Saratoga trunk, only to find her home did not have a suitable bedroom for a young lady. Along with her parents, she undertook the complex task of negotiating and creating her own space. Her mother decides to take what had been Aunt Mary's room, and states, "It is to be Mollie's room now, and must of course be repapered, redraped, and rejuvenated altogether."\(^2^4\) According to

\(^2^2\) Eastlake 2.

\(^2^3\) Here we also see evidence of the trend toward the bedroom expressing individuality. Robert Shoppel, *How To Build Furnish and Decorate, Containing Elevations and Plans for Houses, Barns, and Every Description of Outbuilding, Accompanied with Clear and Concise Instructions; Also a complete treatise on House Furnishing and Decoration* (New York: The Co-Operative Building Plan Association, 1883) 10.

the tale, a room for a young girl had to be just right, and indeed had serious implications. Even the choice of a simple border had to be congruous with the character of the room's intended inhabitant. Her father said of the chosen border, "The sixteen inch zone must be like Mollie herself, pretty, delicate and lively." Her room had to be more than attractive and serviceable. It would represent Mollie and indicate her good taste and success at bourgeois domestic economy. In the idealized tale, she was mature enough to have an adult room and therefore mature enough to have a say in its design.

"Coming Out" of the Nursery

Gardner's tale, although fictional, encapsulates the transition from nursery or children's room to bedroom. Mollie's room reflected her maturity and the place she was supposed to take as an adult in the family. Since her family was redecorating the space that had once belonged to her maiden aunt, the story suggests that Mollie may have filled the social role within her family of single woman as opposed to girl.

In other fictional tales, girls' transitions from nursery into bedroom indicated maturity or thwarted development. The state of her bedroom had serious implications in the life of the fictional sickly Miss Effie, a girl of fourteen from the 1864*Godey's Lady's Book* story "She Hath Done What She Could". Unlike her older sisters who "came out" of the nursery well before they came out into society, Effie was too sickly and ugly to ever leave it. As her sisters moved on to their own spaces, she

25 Gardner 27.
came to relish the privacy and "the privilege of a private bedroom." She could read what she pleased and exist in her own quiet world. However, the room was still a child's room and her occupation of it was an embarrassment. As she told a young man of her situation at a family party, she did so with "sad acknowledgement of her own unworthiness." She may have had her own space, but she did not have her own room and had not graduated from the nursery into adulthood. Unlike Mollie, she had no control over the design of her room; she could not receive friends in it, nor escape the signs of her immaturity.

Real girls, not just fictional ones, also experienced these transitions. In 1910, the trend observed in prescriptive literature was still the reality for many young girls. At Brucemore, now a National Trust Site in Iowa, the diaries of the Douglass family and their nanny Ella McDaniel, "Danny the Nanny," document a similar transition. Margaret Douglas, 1896-1981, a few months after her thirteenth birthday, moved into her own room on the third floor of Brucemore. This transition recognized her maturity and was the precursor to her move to New York the following autumn to attend Spence. Danny recorded the move in her diary on March 2, 1910, "Started to clean up the playroom preparatory to Margaret's moving upstairs." Two days later she

26 S. Annie Frost, story "She Hath Done What She Could" Godey's Lady's Book LXVIII (March 1864) 259-267: 263.

27 In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 "Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator, a convalescing patient, is forced to live in a space that had been a nursery. This suggests further connection between dependence and inadequacy and the nursery. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" in Best-Loved Short Stories of the Nineteenth-Century, edited by Stefan Dziemianowicz (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003) 264-283: 266.

noted, "Margaret moved up on 3rd floor and I moved into her room." According to an oral history taken of Brucemore residents, "[Margaret] considered herself privileged and very grown-up to be on the third floor away from the rest of the household." As she and her two younger sisters matured, each girl gradually moved from the nursery to her own bedroom and the large and bright nursery was redecorated into a bedroom and sitting room for Danny. The various rooms' multiple functions were determined by both their decoration and location.

Margaret recorded using her bedroom as a place in which she could receive guests or retire to for privacy. For example, in 1911, she recorded "Painting pictures in her room" with a friend and later noted working on puzzles there. Later in that same year she noted, "bought a picture for my room...fixed my room all in red."

As a writer from *The House Beautiful* noted, "it is in the grouping of the "little things," - the hanging of pictures etc., - that a girl comes to express herself most fully."

Margaret's private bedroom allowed her both responsibilities and expressive opportunities. Her spatial transitions sequentially moved her and her sisters through their large house.

Nineteenth-century architects, like those who designed the 1886 Brucemore, had to consider not only the function of the spaces they designed at one given time, but how those spaces could grow and develop with a family. By the 1860's, nurseries and playrooms were common features on house plans which specify room use. Architectural plans located nurseries in certain places for specific reasons:

29 Dumbaugh 56.

over the kitchen for warmth, apart from the adults of the family for privacy, near family chambers for access to parents, and in servants’ areas of the house for convenience. For example, in Brucemore the nursery was near the mother’s sewing room and next to the servants’ back stairs. Many of these plans and the accompanying text demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which bedroom function changed over the course of a family’s lifecycle. This pattern remains constant from the 1860’s to the 1890’s and in wealthy homes, like Brucemore, well into the twentieth century, according to socioeconomic status.\(^{31}\)

As children matured and found themselves in changing spaces, the physical meanings of their spaces also changed. As early as 1864, Robert Kerr’s *The Gentleman’s House* noted three distinct phases children go through in their domestic spaces, first they are in the nursery, then they are “withdrawn from the Nursery” and placed in the care of a governess in separate chambers, and finally, at a certain recognized age, the young people take their place with the adults of the family.\(^{32}\) These stages were signaled by distinct physical spaces. Kerr notes a specially designed nursery, a “schoolroom” suite and finally an adult bedroom. Parents could adapt these spaces from other bedrooms in the home. Kerr’s model refers to a large English country house, but similar transitions and flexible uses of space appear in more typical American domestic structures. In *Convenient Homes*, 1889, Louis Gibson writes, “In

\(^{31}\) This information is culled from a close study of nineteenth-century home architecture books in the Winterthur collection. Please see the Appendix “Architectural Books Consulted” for a listing of those books which relate to nursery placement.

\(^{32}\) Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman’s House; or how to plan English Residences from the Parsonage to the Palace; with tables of accommodated cost, and a series of selected plans*. (London: John Murray, 1864) 160-1.
a young and growing family, five is the ideal number of rooms for the second floor...it affords, first, a family room in front built over the parlor or sitting-room; next to that is a room in the front for the very young children, and afterwards for the girls, then the room in the rear of the family room may be for the boys; the fourth room for the guests and the fifth for the servant.” The family determines when and how children are promoted from nursery to their own spaces.

While the ideal for families with means was to move children through the home in a series of spaces, the ways in which families altered their spaces also indicated one’s maturity. In some cases redecoration was explicitly linked to maturity. Minnie B. Allen (b. 1862) of Boston, Massachusetts kept a series of diaries, the years 1873-1877, spanning her eleventh through fifteenth years. Minnie repeatedly mentioned “Her own little room”. With only one older sibling, brother Will a student at Harvard, Minnie led an active life, going to day school, socializing, riding with her father, visiting her brother at school and enjoying her private space. While she was focused on the way her room looked and on what she could do in it, her bedroom also reflected her status within the home. On her twelfth and fifteenth birthday her

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35 Minnie B. Allen Diaries, volumes 3 and 4, the Strong Museum Library.

36 This space seems to have been her primary bedroom, but as her family had two homes, one in downtown Boston and another at “Hillside,” it may have been one of two bedrooms.
parents surprised her with room decorations. After each campaign Minnie recorded renewed interest in decorating her spaces.

The room she described could be viewed as a reflection of Minnie’s relationships to her parents, her peers and her self. On October 22, 1874, she recorded, “Went to school in the forenoon. Failed two in grammar, and one in geography. In afternoon applied a letter to Ms. Clark. In evening went out to Hillside with papa....” This could have been an ordinary day except it was almost her twelfth birthday. She continued, “Then although my birthday was not till Friday, they gave me my presents. My little room had been papered and carpeted and my little furniture covered. Besides I had many other things.” Her little room had been redecorated as a surprise for her birthday, but her new decoration campaign did not end there. After reading her Chatterbox magazine (another gift), she continued decorating two days later by hanging a picture on her wall with her male friend Meilly, and placing an oil cloth mat her mother had bought for her fireplace. She completely redesigned her space and she subsequently added accessories of her own creation to augment her parents’ gifts of paper, paint, fabric, pictures and oil cloth.

Two months later, she described her Christmas gifts,

I had a little red rocking chair. A very cunning little bureau with four drawers in it, a little glass globe and a pretty stand with three fish in it and a worked shawl strap with MBA on it from Aunt Lizzie and Uncle Frank, a pair of skates from Will, a pretty little wooden box with eighteen boxes inside of it from Mamma, a real pretty mathbook from Annie and Bertie and other very pretty ones I had so many that I became quite tired of untlying them.38

37 Minnie B. Allen, October 22, 1874, 3:39.

38 Minnie B. Allen, Christmas, 1874, 3:55.
Her new chair, bureau and stand, along with her new wallpaper, oil cloth, and painting completed the refurbishing of her bedroom. Like the fictional Mollie, Minnie had a role in her room’s transformation. She was responsible for the ways in which much of her room’s design was realized. She recorded hanging the picture herself, laying the oil cloth, decorating her room with autumn leaves “from Fred” or willows she had collected herself.

Three years later on October 23, 1877, she described her fifteenth birthday surprise in a similar way, “As I opened the door into my room I had my birthday present. The whole chamber as I looked into the doorway, reminded me of a little scrap right out of fairy-land. Carpets down, curtains up, furniture all complete.”\(^{39}\) In only three years, her room was redone, but not repapered as it has been before. Instead of covering her furniture, she had received a new set, creating a unified “fairy-land” interior. The rest of her birthday she spent the afternoon in the newly designed space with two of her female friends, one of whom had brought her “the dearest little handkerchief vase!” With the help of her parents, peers and her own ingenuity, Minnie’s room changed and grew as she did. Its gradual transformation spread the expense over a three year period and eased Minnie’s transition from childhood. Her space reflected Minnie’s interests and style, but it also was part of her parents’ house and they made her new bedroom possible. A teenage daughter’s room was one room within the larger narrative of a well designed house.

\(^{39}\) Minnie B. Allen, October 23, 1877, 4:9.
Minnie's relationship to her bedrooms evolved through time. The Vale, the Lyman house in Waltham, Massachusetts, offers a different kind of insight into the ways in which girls moved through the house as they age. The 1884 "house book" of the Vale captures the living arrangements of the Lyman daughters at a particular moment and demonstrates the ways in which their spaces were ordered according to their ages and life-stages.

Modeled on photographic volumes like the 1883 *Artistic Houses* and part of a tradition of recording interior views, the Lyman family chose to record the Vale, their late eighteenth-century family home, and its combination of federal, colonial revival and aesthetic furnishings. In 1882, the Lyman family acquired the Vale after the death of Mr. Lyman's father in 1880. There are five relevant images from this series, three of the nursery and two of a young ladies' bedroom; these spaces compare well with a similar image taken of the Lyman's house on Mount Vernon Street in

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41 Ella Lyman Cabot, *Arthur Theodore Lyman and Ella Lyman: Letters and Journals with an Account of those they Loved and were Descended From* (Privately Printed, 1932) III:45.
Boston two years later. Ella, eighteen at the time of the house book, annotated the image of the room she shared with her sister Julia who was about twenty-five, but unmarried. Even in wealthy families like the Lymans, shared bedrooms were not uncommon. The nursery or children's bedroom was probably occupied by twelve-year-old Mabel or the five-year-old Rosabella.

The older girls' spaces are markedly different from the other rooms in the home [Figures 2 and 3]. The two older girls' bedroom was personalized with the photographs and personal effects of two distinct individuals. Two dressing tables, which differ in style and form, line one wall of the room. Each carefully arranged dressing table is clearly tied to a single sister, as are crowded tables at the feet of both of the beds. As opposed to the other bedrooms which are sterile reflections of aesthetic and colonial revival design, the older girls' room is far more informal and has clear evidence of its inhabitants. Even the bedrooms belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Lyman lack the sentiment and tenor of the girls' room.

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This photograph was probably taken right before the Lyman's 1886-7 move to 39 Beacon Street in Boston. Since Ella and Julia were sharing a room at the Vale they were probably also sharing this space in Boston. Cabot, III: 70. These images are all of private spaces. In the 1883 Artistic Houses, only 8 of the 203 photographs depict a bedroom or boudoir. Lewis et al 26.

Julia was considered to be a single lady by the time of the 1880 census, in which she was listed as "at home" as opposed to "studying at home" like her younger sisters. The two girls in the nursery, when compared to the 1880 census, could be Mabel and Rosabella, born in 1872 and 1879. They may be other children. The younger girl looks very much like a large doll in the photograph. The two older boys, Arthur, twenty-two, and George, eighteen, may have been already at college by the time the book was created. Ella mentioned they shared a room at the Vale in her biography of her parents. Her younger brother Ronald appears in a c. 1886 nursery view of the family home on Mt. Vernon Street, along with several of his friends.
The room the sisters shared at Mount Vernon Street, recorded in a different series of photographs, explodes with ephemera [Figure 4]. The walls are covered with pictures: the classical “Last Supper” over the fireplace, personal images of young ladies, perhaps the room’s occupants, reproductions of paintings and photographs of family and friends. The Lymans thrived on their social and genealogical connections to other old New England families. One can imagine that the images the girls chose to display on their dressing table represented those relationships [Figure 4a]. Homemade crafts including paper birds, white-work runners, and dried flowers also decorated and personalized the room. While the walls were hung in the style of an art gallery, with balanced groupings of pictures hung around the two bureaus and mirrors, there was a sense of controlled clutter and disorder.\(^4^4\)

The photographs taken of their bedroom at Mount Vernon Street suggest a variation on the 1884 house book image of their room. Although the room is far more controlled in the house book, it is still a space personalized with the unique identities of its inhabitants. Unlike the other bedrooms in the house which were presumably purged of most personal effects before the book was created, someone, perhaps Mrs. Lyman, Ella and Julia, or the photographer, chose to keep intact visual manifestations of daughters’ personalities and social connections. The book is a representation of Mrs. Lyman’s transformation of her husband’s inherited home; within that rendering,

\(^4^4\) Contemporary advice to servants and “young daughters of families in all stations in life” noted that maintaining a clean bureau is of special importance: “The bureau will require attention. Pick up and put away everything about it in good order...”. The array of items on the Lyman dressing tables, recorded in formal photographs, suggests the composed nature of the apparent disorder. Harriet J. Willard, *Primer of Domestic Science, no. 2: Parlor, Bed-Room and Laundry* (Chicago: Geo. Sherwood and Company, 1881) 25.
her daughters also voiced their nascent design sense. They are evident in their mother’s house.

Their younger sisters were visible in their mother’s house. They are displayed in the nursery along with their toys. The younger girl, perhaps Rosabella, looks almost like a life-size doll, suggesting her position within the family. Both are placed squarely in the nursery and are literally accessories in their parents’ home [Figure 5 and 6]. In contrast to the cluttered effect of the papers and ephemera of their older sisters’ bedroom, the girls become characters in an idealized image of childhood, not unlike the scenes Mary Northend would recreate. A stylized representation of simplicity and innocence, they do not shape the space they occupy. They are a part of it and are its literal justification. Their sisters do not appear in the spaces they clearly crafted themselves. The room they fashioned stands in for them. The room is beyond their control. They are part of its design. A comparison of these two bedrooms, suggests a visual transition from dependence to independence. The Vale’s house book recognized the blossoming identities of Ella and Julia, girls beyond childhood, and consciously reified the two younger girls.

Like Ella and Julia Lyman, Sarah and Matilda Haight’s bedroom was a conscious expression of their identity. Not only did they shape and control the way in

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45 In 1879, Mrs. Lyman recorded, “Went down with Mabel’s enormous Doll to have her leg mended.” This suggests the possibility that the second girl may really be a doll. However, whether it is a doll-like girl or a very realistic doll it still passively occupies the nursery. Cabot, II: 13.

46 Mary Northend was an early twentieth century authority on colonial American architecture and life as well as furniture and interiors. Collections of her photographs are at both the Winterthur Museum and at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.
which their bedroom, at 283 Madison Avenue at East 40th Street in New York, was photographed, they found a way to creatively position themselves within their room.\footnote{It is unclear whether these girls shared this space or if this was their permanent residence. It could have been the room of other children in the home, but pending further research, I believe the room belonged to at least one of the daughters.} In 1895 the Bryon Company took two consecutively numbered negatives of their bedroom [Figure 7 and 8].\footnote{The negative numbers are 11072 and 11073. The Bryon Company was active in New York between 1892 and 1942. During those years it was New York’s “Preeminent commercial photography studio”. In addition to an active career photographing theatrical stars and ships, the company photographed several prominent homes, like those of the John Jacob Astor and Andrew Carnegie. Peter Simmons, \textit{Gotham Comes of Age: New York Through the Lens of the Bryon Company} (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1999).} However, the surviving views are very different. One view was set to display the girls’ musical accomplishments, while the other displayed their artistic accomplishments, through specifically set up “trophies” [Figure 7a]. The arrangement of the pictures on the walls is different in the two views and the angles of the photographs give the impression of two entirely different spaces. However, on close examination, they are clearly the same space. Between the two photographs, the girls redesigned their bedroom consciously telling two different stories.

Peaking through a dressing table mirror, two figures, perhaps the Haight sisters, used the mirror in their bedroom to identify and claim the created image [Figure 8a]. They seem to have included themselves in the image they worked hard to shape with the complicity of the Bryon photographer. Calling cards are tucked beneath the frame of the dressing table mirror, photographs of a man and women, presumably Mr. and Mrs. Haight, as well as an oversized artist’s palette surround the reflected figures, who stand in a part of the room not captured by the camera. In the mirror,
they become “spectators of themselves” to gain a “sense of coherence” with their carefully designed space.\textsuperscript{49} Existing in the world only through the looking glass, their image alluded to a popular book and provided a critical link between the girl and the outside world. In these photographs, the girls’ bedroom simultaneously frames and helps create an image of its owner.

By the turn of the century, the connection between private bedroom and maturity was reinforced by prescriptive literature linking bedroom design with individual expression. While Elizabeth Collins Cromley has shown that this principle held for all members of the family in theory, it was most applicable to girls given their particular education and societal expectations.\textsuperscript{50} Girls like the Haight and Lyman sisters played an active role in the creation of their rooms. As adolescent girls, they had matured from their nurseries into spaces recognized within their families as theirs to shape. In their rooms they created conscious narratives with objects and their bedrooms reflected their position within their homes. This intellectual blueprint followed young ladies like these to their college dorm rooms in which they fashioned a self image of independence, somewhere between adolescence and adulthood.

\textsuperscript{49} Ann Colley uses the absent mirror as a device to explain facets of three writers’ childhoods. “Bodies and Mirrors: The Childhood Interiors of Ruskin, Pater and Stevenson” in \textit{Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth Century Interior}, eds. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) 40-58: 47.

\textsuperscript{50} Cromley 128-130.
The Politics of Dorm Room Design

It is a great step forwards, when the study of Euclid and the languages no longer implies disrelish or ignorance of household affairs; when a young lady may read even Latin without being suspected of a grease-spot on her gown, or blue stockings on her feet; and when it may be an object of fair ambition to her to be able to think clearly, and talk intelligently on current topics, even if they should happen to touch on politics without incurring the reproach of being "out of woman’s sphere."^1^ 

If girls’ bedrooms at home were places in which design skills could be tested and shaped by concerned parents, their bedrooms at school may be understood as an explication of those skills.52 Girls’ bedrooms in dormitories and in private boarding houses were spaces girls were permitted to shape, and control to their own likings within the rules of the establishments. While conscious expressions of girls’

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^1^ This quotation described Wellesley, but the views expressed are quite similar to those which motivated Smith’s founders. They strove to “reconnect” femininity and education. “A Woman’s College in Boston,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (June, 1876) XCII: 564.

52 Although I am discussing college women and women’s colleges in this chapter, I will use period term “college girl” to refer to female college students. Magazine articles and manuscript sources use this phrase and it is more descriptive of the perceived realities of many nineteenth-century college women. The term “college girl” is also significant in its connection to the “Gibson Girl” stereotype. Lynn D. Gordon successfully argues that “college girls” were associated with “Gibson Girls” in magazines as a way to make the college woman seem less threatening. Lynn D. Gordon, “The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women’s Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920,” *American Quarterly*, 39: 2 (Summer 1987) 211-230.
personalities and identities may be gleaned from their bedrooms at home, at school
there was much more at stake in their realization of self through personal spaces. With
a focus on Smith College and supporting and comparative documentation from
Radcliffe, Wheaton and the Ogontz School for Girls, dorm rooms and images girls
fashioned of their spaces emerge as complexly and consciously rendered
compositions. The highly charged metonymic meanings of these interiors concerned
girls, their parents and the larger world of thinkers and writers debating the effects of
higher education for women.

The men who created Smith College, which opened its doors in
Northampton, Massachusetts in 1875, carefully considered the meaning college life
had for its all female student body and the form it should take. They intended that the
rigorous academic curriculum be on par with that of Harvard and Yale, but had special
considerations. Considering the popularity of the ideas of Dr. Edward Clarke's 1873
Sex in Education, Or a Fair Chance for the Girls, which posited the derelict effect of
education on women, they were deeply concerned about the ways in which college life
could aversely affect the particular nature and presumed needs of the all female student

53 The typical Smith student from this period was about seventeen or eighteen years old
and probably from a family headed by a successful white-collar father. Sarah H.
Gordon, “Smith College Students: The First Ten Classes, 1879-1888, History of
Education Quarterly 15:2 (Summer 1975) 147-167: 148-153. Radcliffe, the Harvard
Annex was founded in 1879. Wheaton was founded as a Female Seminary in 1830,
and later became a college. The Ogontz School for Girls was initially the Chestnut
Street Seminary in 1850 and became the Ogontz School for Girls in 1883. Although it
is identified as a college in period sources, it could also be considered to be a
“finishing school” and became a junior college in the twentieth century.
They self-consciously wanted to create a college unlike Mount Holyoke or Vassar, founded in 1837 and 1865 respectively. Both schools drew on seminaries and sanitariums for their architectural inspiration. The large central buildings at Mount Holyoke and Vassar housed all students, class rooms and public spaces under one roof to promote social control. Students thwarted the administrations’ efforts. They developed a homo-social culture of “smashes” or intense crushes, unsanctioned intimacy and romantic connections among students. These relationships threatened the Christian values and patriarchal roots of the institutions by challenging accepted concepts of femininity and sexuality. Writers and thinkers found fault with this plan, to which, “not one young woman in ten can be subjected to without injury.” Smith’s founders railed against this potentially dangerous system and worked to create a college that would preserve the innocence and womanly nature of its students, all the while educating them to a higher standard of excellence. Their solution was to keep the students “at home”.

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From its conception, Smith’s founders sought to maintain femininity in the domestic worlds they created for their students. The first dormitories were actual houses. Dewey House, the first, was originally the home of a prominent regional family, reinforcing the school’s ties to domesticity and community. The setting and the freedom to come, to go and to entertain as one pleased was quite different from that of other women’s colleges. Smith replicated students’ home environments, instead of creating a processual landscape filled with monumental civic buildings. Unlike asylums, hospitals and hotels, in which people navigated great columned public spaces and long impersonal corridors to find bedrooms or friends, Smith students and guests entered homes. The Cottages, as the dorms were called at Smith, had their own series of barriers and entrances, but they drew from a domestic model of rights, responsibilities and decorum. Young ladies acting within the context of their adopted homes entered parlors and shared public spaces. They operated under codes of genteel respectability, not strict rules enforced by corridor monitors that controlled access to their upstairs private bedrooms. In these “homes” carefully designed student rooms were both public and private spaces.

Smith’s planners intended that the Cottages foster a general culture of femininity and normalcy, as one writer noted “to preserve as much as possible the

sentiment of home life." Although their function would inevitably change as the college rapidly grew in size, periodicals continued to record parents’ and daughters’ fears about leaving homes and entering new worlds well into the twentieth century. The relationships of college women to their house-mothers and the community of Northampton created an environment that critics believed would be better for proper development. However, it was up to the colleges’ women to prove the success of the system. In her book *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930*, Margaret Lowe addressed one way in which this success was measured at Smith. She rightly argued that college women’s frequent descriptions in letters home of beautiful and fashionable classmates was one way to combat the stereotype of the unfeminine and unattractive college woman. These women were quick to reject the incompatibility of intelligence and femininity in dress and appearance, tacitly acknowledging the social power and approbation which went along with such appearances on and off campus. Simultaneously, parents were pleased and peers bested.

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61 The popular press also addressed the stereotype of the college girl as unattractive by expressing surprise at the beautiful, accomplished student. Lynn Gordon argues this
The success of the Cottage system and the ability of the college student to maintain her feminine virtues were also at stake in room design and décor. At Smith, these spaces were the loci of students' socialization. They carefully recorded their rooms in photographs and correspondence, preserving the material manifestations of students' images of self. The images Smith students made of their rooms recorded their engagement in a traditional feminine outlet, although shaped and expressed in a way unique to the college experience. These images simultaneously signified socially-sanctioned, female maturity and offered students a personal and powerful mode of expression.

"Quite like Home at Smith College"

College girls' rooms, as the spaces were called, were points of discussion in the popular press well into the twentieth century. By reporting on the spaces female students occupied, authors could suggest both the values of the rooms' inhabitants and the positive or derelict effects of a college education on women. Eastlake had argued decades earlier that taste had to be a part of a woman's education. At home girls' bedrooms were a testing ground for these skills; college rooms were the location of the full realization of that taste separated from a domestic context.

was one way to associate the college girl with the unthreatening, all-American Gibson girl. I am more interested how this trend in the press affected real college women and how they presented themselves through their material worlds. Gordon 213.
Authors writing on college girls’ rooms in the late nineteenth century saw something unique about the flowering of room design in the last quarter of the century. By the early twentieth century, the effusive and expressive character of the late nineteenth-century dorm room was a vibrant contrast to the sterile dormitory life of earlier female seminaries and boarding schools. Writing in 1910, Mary H. Northend saw an end to this type of fulsome design noting that, “The day of the once dearly loved bedecked and be-signed room is decidedly on the wane.” The bedecked and be-signed room, what she calls “sentimental,” was replaced by “Art” with a capital letter. In the period between sterile asylum-like spaces and controlled and codified twentieth-century dorm life, much was at stake in the design of the college girl’s room. Although semantically and symbolically tied to girls’ bedrooms at home, there was no clear domestic model for the girls’ college dorm room. Bedrooms at home reflected desires to fill certain socially understood roles within family and peer-culture. Their design allowed girls to negotiate among financial means, personal taste and independence, always in concert with or at least the tacit approval of parents and relatives. At school, in spite of the home-like atmosphere of Smith, the narratives one chose to tell through space and design reflected one’s position among one’s peers; renderings of the space and design helped reassure and comfort far-away families and critics of higher education.

Ladies Home Journal's 1898 photo essay “Inside the Rooms of College Girls" tried to reassure families and prospective students by aligning college girls' rooms with domestic models, all the while recognizing them as a distinct genre of interior design [Figure 9]. The thirteen photographs representing seven women's colleges, presume a continuum of home life. The images of small spaces which tile the page present safe and refined rooms for college girls. There was no sense of one's position within a larger building or one's changed status as a student. Girls take tea, talk with friends and study. As the caption beneath a photograph of a Smith College room suggests, it really seems to be “Quite like home at Smith College” [Figure 10]. Textiles, furniture and decorative objects transformed the bare and basic dorm room into an artful interior. In the Ladies Home Journal, the images of girls in their rooms suggest the unique importance of these spaces to their inhabitants. Like the doll-like Lyman girls, who were accessories to their nursery, the presence of real but anonymous students completes the picture of the ideal college girls' bedroom.63

In contrast to the anonymous student rooms portrayed in the Ladies Home Journal, the Kansas City Star published an illustration on the society pages of a particular Smith student's room as a credit to her design skills [Figure 11]. The illustration, probably based on a photograph, depicts Miss Katherine Ceiley, class of 1899, seated in her bedroom.64 Unlike the students in the Ladies Home Journal photo essay, she sits to the side and looks upon the space the Kansas City Star credits to her. The author intuited from the images of this room:

63 This article brings up one of the main semantic difficulties of this study—they are college girls' rooms, but women's colleges. “Inside the Rooms of College Girls,” Ladies Home Journal, XVI (March 1898) 7.

It will be seen that the college girl of to-day is allowed to keep about her pleasant suggestions of the home she has left, and the little sanctum she calls her own is a great improvement in beauty and comfort over the mathematical character of the dormitory probably occupied at boarding school by her mother. \(^{65}\)

Katherine’s bedroom represented the typical girls’ room, comfortable, personal and artful. Instead of simply illustrating the article with her portrait, her carefully designed room stands in for her and indicates her status as a college student. The bed is buried under nine large pillows, dozens of photographs decorate the walls and a table and chafing dish stand ready to entertain. The constellations of props created a pleasing interior. Published images and descriptions of artful dorm rooms offered parents and students sets of assumptions about how a dorm room should look. In letters home, students described the reality of the implementation of these designs.

“I Wish You Could Look in Upon Me!”

Unlike adolescent girls bedrooms at home, where rooming and furniture decisions were based on social status, wealth and architectural specifications, the Smith “sub-freshmen” were offered a fairly uniform set of furnishings and rules with which to create a home. Shortly after moving into Smith College in September of 1878, freshman Mabel Allen wrote her mother a full description of the room she and her roommate encountered. The “Beautiful room” finished and furnished in light wood, probably ash, in Hubbard House, Smith’s second dormitory, contained the following items:

\(^{65}\) “In Society” *Kansas City Star*, 1897, NP. Smith College Archives, Smith College.

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There are two single bedsteads with delightful springs and mattresses, two rocking chairs, two common chairs, a bureau of which I have the upper and lower drawers, a double washstand with towel racks, each side and a large table with drawers in each end, which just fills the space between the two great windows with broad sills...

As Mabel and her roommate’s first task, she and her roommate began “arranging the room”.

While money, luck and social status helped students obtain choice rooms, the college provided fairly standard furniture forms: usually two beds, one or two bureaus or dressing tables, a few chairs, a table or desk and a washstand as well as standard gas lamps and stoves. Students had to work with these items, because rules involving the management of space were nailed to closet and bedroom doors, “Doors must not be taken from their hinges” and “Furniture must not be removed or taken apart” were two of the most common. Students found ways to get around these rules as letters and photographs suggest. In the 1883 “Home Life at Smith” the author

66 Mabel Allen, Smith class of 1883, does not seem to be of any relation to Minnie Allen of Boston. Mabel Allen to her Mother, September 11, 1879, 1-3, Smith College Archives, Smith College.

67 Gas lamps may be noted in several of the earlier views. Standard lamps may be seen in several views, often flanking dressing table mirrors. Some students, like Annie Jackson, had special lamps. Gas stoves were also typical; in some cases the gas consumed by the stoves in the rooms hid late night use of gas lamps. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Disenchanted Light: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 40-41.

68 At least one student was able to hide unwanted furniture in her closet, and portieres and images of rooms with altered furniture, like beds without head and foot boards document these subversions. See Belle Richardson, Smith Class of 1894. In the scrap book of Ella Eudocia Flynt, Smith class of 1883, a printed set of house rules edited by Hubbard House residents documents some of these transgressions. Next to the rule,
notes that, “it takes deft fingers to transform this irreproachableness into individuality.” Students draped cloth, covered beds with pillows, put up pictures, ephemera and photographs, and added teapots and chafing dishes to give their rooms individual character. Instead of being differentiated from other bedrooms in the home, as the Lyman’s girls’ bedrooms were, or that of the fictional Mollie as spaces occupied by adolescent girls, these rooms read as spaces occupied by individual students finding and expressing their personality and status within a group of similar college women.

The first step in conceptualizing and designing one’s room was to recognize one’s place at Smith. Some students newly away at school sketched and described their dorm rooms to give their mothers an understanding of the spaces they would occupy and to partially include their mothers in their decorating decisions. While these are rare survivals, they offer insight into students’ initial reactions to their rooms, to other students, and the outside world. Alice P. Miller’s 1877 letter to her mother contained a detailed floor plan of the second floor of her Cottage, in order to remind her of her room’s location and layout [Figure 12]. Located at the end of a hallway, the room Alice shared with her sister Helen was purposely just down the hall.

“All lights must be extinguished at ten (10) o’clock,” someone handwrote, “Or after.” Beside the rule forbidding students from raiding the kitchen for their own purposes, the same hand wrote, “Sugar and 13 lemons.” Smith College Archives, Smith College. In a short section in her chapter entitled, “Regulating, Watching and Penalizing” Sherrie Inness considers the décor of the fictional college girls’ room as a way to subvert the authority of the school through self expression. While students certainly broke rules, I see their designs at school as a unique variation on design at home as opposed to subversion of patriarchal administrators. Inness 30-34.

69 “Home Life at Smith College” 164.
70 Alice Miller to her Mother, October 7, 1877, 2-3, Smith College Archives, Smith College.
from two of their best friends, both of whom were able to have single rooms. The girls' beds, distinguished by “H” and “A” were also outlined. The drawing and the accompanying letter, which described Alice’s close relationship to Miss Coxe who lived down the hall, located her room in relation to that of her best friend.

Alice’s letters home suggest that girls considered some furnishings not provided by Smith to be standard conveniences. The two largest expenses that she tried to justify to her mother were for a $1.50 table cloth, “scarlet on a green ground” and a $5.00 bookcase. Considering the budget she shared with her sister was about $11 per month for all expenses, her purchases were extravagant and explain her inability to “balance her accounts” month after month. Older students who had occupied her room previously and described these items as necessary, sold her on the proper look of a dormitory room. Similar objects appear in almost every surviving photograph and are recommended in prescriptive literature. Student rooms also had covers for bureaus and shelves, screens to hide gas stoves or provide privacy, bed covers and pillows, and portieres and window treatments. As documented in photographs, college women augmented their rooms' basic structure of furnishings with a thin layer of papers, fabrics, and personal items. They enveloped their spaces with signifiers of their personalities.

71 Ibid.

72 See for example Martha Cutler “How to Furnish a College Room,” *Harpers Bazaar* XLIII: 8 (August 1909) 792-4: 792.

73 Some of the items in photographs may be analogous to signifiers used in eighteenth-century portraits, objects standing in for attributes.
Writers, parents, and students assumed and encouraged a close connection between one's bedroom and one's sense of self. College girls displayed items in their bedrooms that represented shared experiences and social connections. As Susan Stewart writes in *On Longing*, "an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation." The women were transients and they did not decorate their apartments with traditional materials of interior design such as wall paper or paint. In a manner analogous to a Victorian parlor, the students brought the outside world into their spaces; but instead of shells or exotic items, they decorated and personalized their spaces with programs from concerts, pictures of beaus, and plants "gathered from the walking club" or "the stub of a pencil that survived written examination days". A late nineteenth-century explosion of ephemera shaped these designs. While accused by some of creating spaces motivated by accumulation as opposed to aesthetics, the items collected and displayed by Smith students demonstrate a complex language of design, expressing both taste and social status.

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75 "Home Life at Smith College" 166.

76 I have considered Grant McCracken's critique of the language metaphor applied to material culture. By language, I mean various kinds of communication, visual, physical, emotional and material. I do not privilege the linear, western language model. The metaphor is particularly appropriate in the context of Victorian Symbolism. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 57-70.
The period from 1875 to roughly 1910 was certainly not aesthetically static. Japanisme, high Victorian excess, Moorish influences, artful aesthetic simplicity, and even Arts and Crafts design were all expressed in various ways in dorm rooms, often simultaneously. The foundational dorm furniture, often Renaissance Revival or "Eastlake" in style, remained relatively static, with the exception of iron beds brought into some institutions at the turn of the century. Commentators criticized décor ranging from the effete "candle burning before a lily" to the exaggerated "dust-collecting souvenirs." However, students chose personally agreeable stylistic offerings, responding to fashion, but not slavishly so or in a uniform way [Figures 13-15].

Drawing on over 150 photographs of dorm room interiors, several features appear to be common to dorm room design among Smith students and several contemporary schools, like Radcliffe, Wheaton and the Ogontz School for Girls. Three constellations of objects, desks and bookcases, tables with chafing dishes or teapots and highly decorated dressing tables are the foundation of dorm room

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aesthetics. The imprint of Eastlake and Cook are clearly seen in vignettes produced and created both for girls and the cameras they personally wielded and professionally ordered. Artfully arranged ephemera expressed the varied importance of students’ activities and social status through their spaces.

Academics did not figure prominently in the dorm rooms photographers recorded. In the *Ladies Home Journal* photo essay, only two of the thirteen pictures featured studying. Chromolithographs of paintings like putti from the Sistine Chapel and reproductions of classical busts and statues like Caesar and the Nike of Samotrace from the Louvre decorated student walls and shelves [Figure 16]. These objects suggested the students’ engagement with what Smith’s president called “aesthetic culture,” an awareness of art and music which was gradually incorporated into the Smith curriculum. They also implied the classical awareness of Smith women, who were expected to know Latin and Greek, just as their male counterparts at other universities. The model of winged victory displayed its owner’s awareness of the classical world, art history and a fairly recent archaeological discovery (the statue was found in 1863). As in parlors of the period, items like these presented their owners as worldly and intelligent.

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79 My term “constellation of objects” is similar in character to Seale’s “art unit,” or creative grouping of objects. The constellations I refer to are three distinct groupings of objects related to three particular furniture forms. Seale 19.

80 Gordon 159.

81 Typewriters do not appear in turn of the century photographs of the Smith rooms I considered. Beulah Marie Dix Flebbe, Radcliffe Class of 1897 recorded a having and using a typewriter in a handwritten letter to her cousin, November 8, 1896, Schlesinger Archives, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
Dorm décor could also offer social critique. One Smith student hung the amusing, enigmatic and seemingly post-modern sign “A Work of Art” on her bookcase. Perhaps, her critique questioned Aesthetic movement ideals, or found humor in their application. In an 1894 Wheaton dorm room, a skull, wearing a bonnet, may reflect an academic interest in biology, but more likely suggests the attitude of the room’s designer, who also hung a “room to let” sign on her bookcase [Figure 17]. Far more seriously, pioneering social worker, Maida Herman Solomon, Smith class of 1912, had her picture taken seated at her desk, reading a book hand-lettered with the phrase “W. Suffrage”. Her inclusion of the book suggested the serious goal of her academic pursuits.

Music and art production were also included in student’s spaces. Several students had musical instruments ranging from what could be a full size guitar case to a ukulele decoratively hung beside a mirror [Figures 1 and 18]. While students accessed pianos in dormitory common spaces, these smaller instruments added to college life and emphasized personal accomplishments. While only one student displays work in progress on an easel, like the picture displayed by the Haight sisters, several rooms have amateur sketches and paintings. Photographs by student photographers were a newer art form represented in these spaces.


83 Photonenumber MC418-51-77, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

84 In the 1880s, Schools of Music and Art, separate from but affiliated with Smith College were founded. They were later folded into the college as departments. Perhaps the influence of these schools may be seen in some of these interiors. Formal art classes and studios may have located Smith student art projects out of their dorm rooms. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 213-214; William Allan Neilson, *Smith College: The
Sports also had a place in these spaces. Although basketball was popular at Smith, tennis is the only sport clearly represented in dorm decor. Out of 67 Smith photographs, 11 have prominently placed tennis racquets, either decoratively mounted on the wall or casually resting in a corner ready for use. Of the 11 racquets, 4 seem to be a part of the permanent décor of the interiors. Interestingly several of these rooms with visible racquets were from Hubbard House, which is depicted with lawn tennis nets in a professional photograph [Figures 19-21]. Healthful living was an important concern of Smith parents and was reflected in this socially acceptable sport. Whether because of the social nature of tennis or the artful effect of the racquet on the wall, it appears to have been a popular decoration. Racquets appeared in photographs from Vassar as well as the Women’s College at Frederick, MD in the *Ladies Home Journal* photo essay.  

While hard to read from photographs, programs from and invitations to dramatic and musical performances, literary societies, political events and on campus social and religious engagements filled the college girls’ dorm room. Club life and dramatics were at the heart of life at women’s colleges. Printed rules, songs, and event programs recorded relationships among students. Scrap books filled with this type of ephemera suggest what may have adorned walls and mirrors. For example, Annie

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85Smith’s administration tried, with little success, to limit the press it gave the most popular sports like basketball, hockey and tennis because of concerns over women’s health. At the same time limited and feminine physical activity was necessary for healthful living. Sarah H. Gordon, “Smith College Students: The First Ten Classes, 1879-1888, *History of Education Quarterly* 15:2 (Summer 1975) 147-167: 159; Lowe, 49-51; Inness argues that the athletic female student, often deemphasized by school officials, was lionized in fictional stories. Inness 69-95.
Jackson’s scrapbook contains a republican page, complete with American flag, ribbon and “republican songs” [Figure 22]. Items like these, along with numerous photographs of dramatic or social events were probably displayed in dorm rooms as reminders and signifiers of relationships to peers and social commitments.86

Like gilded age big game hunters, who surrounded themselves with physical manifestations of their prowess, female students also filled their dorm rooms with men. Dozens of photographs obscured mirrors and cork boards and filled walls. Male students also engaged in this practice. A surviving image from Harvard College depicts a young man next to his bedroom wall filled with scores of photographs.87

Apart from the calling cards that Annie Jackson, Smith Class of 1882, described as “mirror ornaments,” scrapbooks, photographs, and other bits of ephemera came to document men in college women’s spaces. Programs from musical, dramatic and sporting events, primarily at Williams, Amherst and Yale, filled Smith scrapbooks and were popular wall decoration. This type of ephemera, like the calling card, presumes relationships, favor, and social status. Hattie G. Day, Smith class of 1887 recalled such a visit to Psi Upsilon and Chi Phi fraternities at Amherst with her friends. “[We] saw


87 This photograph, from the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, suggests the next project, a close look at the realities of boys’ rooms at home and male college students’ dorms. While I see an explicit connection between women and interior design, late nineteenth-century figures like Oscar Wilde and the leaders of the Aesthetic Movement challenge this connection. Two 1895 dorm room views from Clare College, Cambridge display decorative features similar to those found in Smith dorm rooms, suggesting opportunity for further comparison and study. Charlotte Gere with Lesley Hoskins, The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior (Aldershot, Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2000) 16.
all the rooms, were given memorabils (sic), had some good waltzes and a cozy time by the open fire. These young women had access to limited invitations, ability to travel to other campuses and, in many cases, opportunities their peers did not.

In some instances the women wrote about particular items from the men in their lives. Abby Parsons MacDuffie, Radcliffe class of 1883 wrote the following in a letter to her parents, February 1st 1880:

*I have had two additions to my room. John gave me a lovely almanac and Rufus has given me two lovely white wings of one of his pigeons. I have fastened them on the wall and they look very handsomely. If I only had some oars over the windows and a gun over the bed I should be perfect...*  

Abby’s commentary implies certain gifts from the opposite sex were considered proper decoration.

In contrast to the women’s colleges like Smith and Radcliffe, the dorm rooms at the Ogontz School for Girls represented men in a very different way. While the aesthetic movement inspired designs of some spaces, professional photographs of Ogontz rooms are dominated by a single type of object: pennants and banners from men’s schools [Figure 23]. The pennants change from year to year and represented

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88 Hattie G. Day to Jessie, October 10, 1886, 3-4, Hattie G. Day, Smith Class of 1887 Smith College Archives, Smith College.

89 Abby Parsons MacDuffie, *The Little Pilgrim, An Autobiography* (Privately Printed: New York, 1938) 23. Abby was the social class of 1883, but did not complete her degree until 1903.

90 While a reference specifically designating an object as a gift from a male friend or suitor at Smith has not been found, except for the occasional school pennant, items like fencing foils, sporting equipment, plants and other objects seen in images could have had such associations.
dozens of schools across the country, but the message was clear. Even isolated in suburban Philadelphia, Ogontz students had access to potential spouses attending prominent schools across America.  

While professionally produced images highlighted the men available to Ogontz students, amateur photographs showed a different side of school life. Ogontz students took photographs of interiors that featured their design skills. "Tasteful" vignettes and rare views of effusive dressing tables and crowded closet interiors contrasted with the administration’s parent-geared, school-sanctioned room images. Student rooms conveyed certain messages to peers and parents, but the same spaces also conveyed another important idea: the importance of "arranging" one’s room and the role of photography in capturing that arrangement.

“A Work of Art”: Understanding the Photographs as Objects

Countless images of student rooms survive. About half of the photographs considered in this study were taken by amateur photographers. The line between these two groups was blurry because students often ordered professional pictures themselves and some Smith students worked their way through college taking pictures. While

91 Ogontz students were generally younger than Smith or Radcliffe students; their display of banners and pennants may suggest categories of available men as opposed to particular relationships. Interestingly, in 1911 a pennant was also present in the daughters’ bedroom at Gustav Stickley’s Craftsman Farms as recorded by Craftsman Magazine. Gustav Stickley’s Craftsman Farms: A Pictorial History (Morris Plains: The Craftsman Farms Foundation, 1999) 20.

92 This is not necessarily indicative of larger trends in photography. The images I consider were selected because of their subject matter—dorm room interiors—this may skew the data. I doubt if accurate data could be found if all of the college-related photographs were considered. Shared cameras, easily reproduced cyanotypes, cost,

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the professional photographs, both at Smith and at the Ogontz School, documented space and décor, they also represented formal ideas of what spaces meant to students, parents and posterity. Amateur photographers from Smith and the Ogontz School for Girls staged photographs mimicking professionals and creating a new genre of art and expression. They recorded bedrooms as examples of Aesthetic design and expressed their own artistic ambitions.

In socially recognized ways girls elevated artful interiors into encoded works of art. Their photographs are not simple, nostalgic snapshot shots, designed to order and represent one's life or to control and censor memory. Some student photographic endeavors were driven by aesthetics, creating an image as opposed to simply creating a memory.

Professional photographers, Kodak cameras and the blue print or cyanotype process all offered students various means through which they could record location, purpose and survival in an archival setting would inevitably complicate the data. It is clear that both professional and amateur photography existed simultaneously on campus and that both types recorded dorm rooms. “Another [girl] almost entirely supports herself with her camera” “Life at a Girls’ College” Munsey’s Magazine, 870


94 West 1; West’s characterization of the “Kodak Girl,” the adventurous lady photographer, who appeared in Kodak advertisements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is quite similar to media representations of the “Gibson Girl” and the “College Girl,” suggesting a cultural blueprint for camera-wielding college girls as “new women”. Nancy Martha West, Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia (Charlottesville: University of VA Press, 2000) 1, 53-60. I see a parallel, but no direct connection, between the aesthetic goals of these students and the aims of Alfred Stieglitz to have photography elevated as an art form. Alan Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs: Images as History Matthew Brady to Walker Evans (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989) 169.
their spaces. Photographs of carefully arranged dorm interiors remembered an artful way of life and recorded careful and conscious design decisions. As Lida Rose McCabe wrote in 1893, college bedrooms manifested students' "abstract theories of the beautiful".  

In the 1880s, Northampton supported four photographers, in various partnerships. Smith students frequented these photographers who advertised, "Views of private residences made to order." Annie Jackson, Smith class of 1882, had the Knowlton Bros. take a view of her junior year room in May of 1881. Along with the image she preserved the note that confirmed their appointment in her scrap book [Figure 24]. The photograph documents two beds, her class year on the wall in leaves, pretty curtains with cornices, a desk, an elaborate lamp, several Japanese fans, and a screen, all artfully arranged. Annie chose to have her room recorded as a portrait she carefully staged and prepared. She may have purchased this single view of her room for her parents to record her life at school with its creeping vines and carefully arranged furniture, or to trade with her peers. Images of other rooms that appear in different scrapbooks alongside portraits suggested the social function of the images.

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95 McCabe 44.

96 In spite of several photographers active in Northampton, some Smith students frequented photographers from New York City, Saratoga and Albany. Further research could consider whether these photographs were intended to complement "house books" taken of these students' homes, literally domesticating the college dorm room. Northampton and Easthampton Directory 1885-6 Containing a General Directory of the Citizens, Classified Business Directories, Map Street Directories, Northampton City Government, Easthampton Town Offices, Churches Schools Societies, &c (Northampton: Price, Lee, and Co. 1885) 273. Thank you to Nicholas Schonberger for assisting me with Northampton directory research.

George Eastman's 1888 invention of the Kodak camera changed the way students recorded their rooms. Instead of drawing or describing, college students had the power to capture private moments and memories themselves. The 1888 Kodak cost 25 dollars complete with 100 shots and a 1/10 of a second shutter speed. While quite expensive, it was within the reach of wealthier Smith and Ogontz students. Several surviving round photographs document the use of the original Kodak, which used round film between 1888 and 1894.98 The full camera changed the way individuals viewed images and the process of photography. Because of the number of images available in each camera, 100 pictures, compared with the average of about 10 snapshots owned by families prior to this invention, many students made several views of their rooms—capturing aesthetic design and creating portraits of spaces and people.99

An example of this trend survives in pictures taken of and by three members of the Ogontz classes of 1891-2, Anna Gould, Olive Brooks and May (Maria) Graves.100 A series of five pictures, four interior compositions and one portrait against a carefully constructed background suggest the artistic possibilities of interior


100 The No. 3 Kodak was introduced in 1890 and was the first Kodak to produce rectangular images. This device or a similar model may have been used to produce this series of images. Douglass Collins, The Story of Kodak (New York: Harry Abrams: 1990) 75-76; Anna Gould, Class of 1892, Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.
views. Unlike the professional photographs taken of the Ogontz School that suggested its students had contact with eligible mates, this series of images emphasized their artistic ability. In a way, their poses refer to parlor amusements as the girls recreate idealized scenes and virtues associated with school: music and reading.101 The first four images are of three different girls moving through their bedroom, playing the guitar, reading, and gesturing toward a desk [Figures 25-28]. A Japanese screen, patterned textiles, fans, scattered books, framed pictures, ceramics and plants add to an artful effect. Between Figure 25 and Figures 26 and 27, the students added open books, adjusted cloth and placed art objects in prominent positions. Significantly, they removed a sporting team picture from an all boys’ school and obscured a wall full of snapshots with a floral screen. The scene they created emphasized an inward looking aesthetic interior, with focus on objects of beauty instead of social connections to the outer world. The final image in the series is a girl in a white nightgown, reclining against a fan and playing the guitar [Figure 29]. It clearly alluded to Pre-Raphaelite paintings. The images in which the girls are mainly in undress are personal, quiet and emotional portraits. Unlike the records of spaces created by some students at Smith and the Ogontz School, the images do not feature rooms that stand in for students, as Annie Jackson’s did. They project consciously composed images created by students with artistic sensibilities.

Mary Humphries Smith, class of 1894, explored similar compositional possibilities in her photographs. She documented all parts of her room, including the

101 There are many examples of “Tableaux Vivants” or “Living Pictures” in books of amusements. For example, see The Sociable, One Thousand and One Home Amusements (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1858, reprinted Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, ND) 149-173.
maid, a young college-age girl sweeping the floor, as her peers read books and letters [Figures 30-31].^\textsuperscript{102} The images she captured include candid shots, staged photographs, portraits and interior views. As in the \textit{Ladies Home Journal} photo essay, some of her photographs appear to explore the notion of the college girl as an integral part of the college girl’s room. In her staged shots of the maid and her friends “at work,” they seem to be a part of the scene, suggesting a composed document of everyday life, just as her shots of the empty rooms’ documented interior design. In other images, she used a floral, cloth screen as a background for two formal portraits of another student. Drawing clearly on professional models, she used the screen which probably hid her gas stove to create a makeshift portrait studio.^\textsuperscript{103} “Candid” shots of the maid beaming or of her friends smiling directly into the camera are more closely related to the snapshot as it records sentiment and relationships. This type of image documents the emotion and intimacy lacking in the documentary images of student life and interior design. Her camera full of pictures allowed her to explore all of these compositional possibilities and allowed her to create different perspectives on college life.

In addition to the Kodak camera, many students used the cyanotype or “blue print” process to record their spaces. Invented in 1839 and revived in 1881, when a London publisher started selling the specially prepared paper, this process appealed to the amateur photographer. Students could develop cyanotypes themselves without a darkroom and images could be easily and inexpensively reproduced. A 1901

\footnote{\textsuperscript{102} Mary Humphries, Smith Class of 1894, Smith College Archives, Smith College.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{103} N. G. Burgess, \textit{The Photograph Manuel; A practical treatise containing the Cartes de Visite Process, and the method of taking Stereoscopic Pictures, including the albumen process, the dry collodion process, the tannin process and various Alkaline Toning Baths etc} (New York: Appleton, 1863; reprint in \textit{The Literature of Photography} series, Peter Brunnell editor, New York: Arne Press, 1973) 203.}
article about student work on Smith campus noted that, “Blueprints…are so popular that the making of them attains well-nigh to the dignity of a trade.” Student photographers, the article continued, would take pictures of subjects ranging from scenes about college houses to visiting dignitaries and would quickly reproduce pictures for five cents each. 104 Several of the pictures in Belle Richardson’s 1894 scrap book were created with this process. Since the book contains at least two different spaces, with different students, Belle’s book probably contained reproductions of her friends’ rooms. 105

Two pairs of photographs, one pair featuring views of Belle’s bed and the other her dressing table, present two very different arrangements of her dorm room [Figures 32-35]. Like the previous series, these photographs contradict the spontaneity of the supposed “snapshot” composition. Belle is pictured twice in these images, reclining on her bed and standing in front of her mirror. The images in which she is present have carefully arranged sets of photographs, programs, and other ephemeral representations of Belle. The images in which she is absent are far simpler, suggesting she included objects as signifiers in her portraits. For example, in the view of Belle reclining on her bed reading a letter she is flanked on the left by a grouping of twelve photographs of men and on the right by an arrangement of ten landscape and group photographs [Figure 33]. Neither grouping appears in the other photograph in the


105 The room I analyze here appears in at least four different views in her book, while the other rooms appear only once. This suggests that the room with multiple images was probably her own room.
series which depicts the same corner without Belle [Figure 34]. In this series, the items Belle added helped explain her social position and made her portraits both documentary and revelatory.106

These images suggest the importance of “arranging” one’s room. While the everyday look of the rooms was shifted to facilitate photography, these spaces provide important records of what girls thought of themselves and how they wanted to be remembered and rendered visually. These photographs do not simply document interiors; they present carefully crafted images to the world.

FURNITURE: Working and Playing: Living in Spaces

The photographic records of dorm rooms are able to capture only limited physical movement. However, constellations of furniture and objects documented and facilitated certain types of activities girls enjoyed during their waking hours. Almost all dorm rooms contained three similar constellations of objects related to work, play and dress. The furniture provided by Smith presumes these functions, but the students created and shaped unique groupings of objects around the furniture. They wrote about their dorm rooms as places of work and play in letters, diaries and fiction, but the way

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in which they wove these into the structure of room design suggests a focus on social as opposed to academic pursuits.

Although crammed bookshelves and desks figure in all rooms, academics do not have a prominent place in the dorm rooms photographers recorded. Studying was done primarily in one’s room, according to student diaries and letters and spaces had to serve both a social and an academic purpose.\textsuperscript{107} Books stored in specially acquired shelves, desks for writing, and chairs for reading supported the necessary academic functions of the rooms. While a few photographs show students working at their desks, far more images, including the illustration from the \textit{Kansas City Star}, feature desks crowded with large framed pictures, books, and bric-a-brac [Figure 36]. In several photographs, social symbols render academic tools useless. Although one 1897 article noted that Smith students were smarter than their male counterparts, they were certainly not “grinds [with] glasses and masculine collars.” The same author continued, “all work and no play make Jill a dull girl.” This theme echoes through the dorm rooms portrayed in photographs.\textsuperscript{108}

Students who were too smart or overly ambitious were derided as “prods” in college slang, suggesting a preferred emphasis on other parts of one’s life.\textsuperscript{109} While

\textsuperscript{107} Students often studied in their dorm rooms. One student was permitted to study outside of her room because she needed extra time to study and could not finish her work before the 10PM lights out. Another student recalled arguing with a chatty roommate who would not give her quiet time to study. Evelyn Jean Forman, Smith class of 1883, Smith College Archives, Smith College. A caption from “Inside the Rooms of College Girls” includes a Smith girl studying on her bed.


\textsuperscript{109} “Slang of College Girls” NP, 1883 newspaper clipping from Smith College Archives, Smith College.
often shown reading, reclining on beds or sitting in chairs, students are rarely depicted writing either letters or papers. Nor did academic tools like globes or maps appear in these spaces. More photographs seemed focused on tea tables and chairs than on desks and writing equipment. The academic culture all Smith students shared regardless of popularity or wealth probably rendered such images redundant. Instead, dorm room photographs highlighted the social roles of Smith students.

The center table, with chafing dish, teapot or serving accoutrements, usually draped with a cloth, focuses attention on the room as a social space for entertaining [Figures 37-38]. The chafing dish party was a college staple and the “sine qua non of her [college girl’s] all-round popularity.” As Laura Naus argued in her 1991 thesis, the chafing dish party offered single men and single women like college girls the opportunity for culinary indulgences, performance and intimate socializing. Tea parties were also common. While magazine articles might record parties like a “Chemico-Physico Tea,” where beakers serve as teacups, most tea parties were simple private affairs. A photograph, entitled “A Tea” from the scrapbook of E. H. Carter, Smith Class of 1893 documented this kind of event [Figure 39]. In this scene, six

10 Figure 1 does not fit into this pattern.

11 Unlike the globe, terrarium and school books Minnie Allen recorded in her room, which marked her as a commuting scholar, Smith students did not need that kind of demarcation.


students reclined on a bed transformed with pillows; one student poured as others talked and laughed. Teapots and chafing dishes usually rested on ubiquitous center table cloths. Cloths like the one that cost the Miller sisters a $1.50, softened the look of the table and were an integral part of the room’s upholstery. The tables, more like small stands, often sported ball-turned splayed legs. They did not match the other intuitional furniture in the spaces or traditional bedroom furniture sets. The tables were suitable for turning one’s bedroom into a space for entertaining.

At the same time, conceptions of the “moral parlor” of the nineteenth century were changing. In the late nineteenth century, the formal and uncomfortable “best room” became the fodder of design critics who advocated spaces like more flexible “artistic cozy corners.” These corners were created with divans covered with pillows, perhaps surrounded with curtains and draped with fabrics. Like the exotic items brought into the parlors from the outside world, these groups of objects alluded to faraway places and bohemian mores, suggesting oriental aesthetic influences. The “cozy corner” intuited “the luxurious temperament of the orient.” The dorm room


116 Although I have found references to particular spring mattresses used by women’s colleges I have been unable to find specific references to furniture purchases. “Bushnell’s New Style of Spring Mattress,” January 1878, was advertised as used by several women’s schools including Vassar; Winterthur Library Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, No. 95x65.7. Drawing on proscriptive literature, Cromley briefly discusses the late nineteenth-century “modern girl” living alone in a small room using bedrooms as parlors. Cromley 130.

117 Karen Halttunen “From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality” in Simon Bronner, *Consuming Visions:*

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"parlor" with bed instead of couch was perfectly suited for this function. For example, Belle Richardson's scrap book records a bed with both head and foot board removed, while another displays the same bed with full bedstead [Figures 34-35]. Most students employed several pillows to cover their beds to create the effect of a divan, in some cases creating a dorm room which does not appear to have any bed at all. By contrast, a series of photographs from Wheaton in the 1890's show a very different aesthetic option. Parlor-bedroom decor is absent and beds with new-fangled pillow shams replaced the groupings of pillows. At Smith, "at home" evenings and casual whist parties were easily facilitated in dorm bedrooms.

The informal entertainments facilitated by the dorm room chafing dishes, teapots and make-shift "cozy corners" mask Smith's hierarchical social system.


118 Belle is included in the photograph with the full bedstead, suggesting the importance of recording a formal bed in her space. The image of the bed with the bedstead removed and covered with pillows, suggests the flexibility of her bedroom décor.

119 The upholstered, backless couch was a commercially available furniture form which imparted the "cozy corner". Celia Jackson Otto, _American Furniture of the Nineteenth Century_ (New York: Viking Press, 1965) entry 465. In her 1909 article, "How to Furnish a College Room," Martha Cutler suggested students purchase specific items, particularly the "couch-cover" or special bed cover. _Harpers Bazaar_ XLIII: 8 (August 1909) 792-4: 792.

120 Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Wheaton College Folder.

121 This comes through in articles about college life and in letters. For example see Hattie G. Day, Smith Class of 1887 to "Jessie", October 10, 1886, 3, Smith College Archives, Smith College. In a domestic British context, the parlor-bedroom was recommended for smaller homes, whose adolescent daughters needed a place to entertain and escape from their siblings; Horsfall 5-9.
Although these entertainments were not formal affairs they were only open to a privileged few. Students, like Katherine Fiske Berry, class of 1902 and a daughter of missionaries to Japan, found herself ostracized from students of a higher social class. She wrote to her mother,

Some of the old girls with a few of the new girls whom they knew before, have formed a clique, pay no attention to the rest of us, and go about wholly by themselves... It is such a small house that it is mean to slight anyone. I don’t feel at home or very happy.

Although she lived in their house, certain students would ignore her because they had not been properly introduced. Katherine was able to move to a new house and be with students who were more like her. She had not been invited to private “at homes” or dorm room events in her first house, suggesting the constellations of furnishings related to entertaining held a very different meaning for her than they did for other students in her house. They represented both the ability to entertain and the power to exclude.

Room design could also divide shared rooms into two very different spaces, just as the Lyman sisters’ dressing tables were each clearly tied to a specific sister. For example a series of three photographs from number 13 Washburn House at

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123 Katherine lived in an off-campus boarding house and her room was filled primarily with her own possessions. Her inventory for her move includes items similar to those which are documented in photographs, “2 trunks, cori (?), bundle of pillows, lamp, books, dress suit case, chair, desk, table, book shelves, basket, umbrellas, racket and other trifles.” Katherine Fiske Berry, Smith Class of 1902, to her Mother, October 22, 1898, November 5, 1898, November 20, 1898, Smith College Archives, Smith College. Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 197.
Smith during the 1894-5 school year depicts a room clearly divided in half for its two inhabitants, Allie and Essie. One image depicts the two students at either side of the room, while two others each labeled, “Allie’s Corner” and “Essie’s Corner” tied the particular compositions to each individual girl. In another instance, a student at Dana Hall, a private girls’ school in Wellesley, Massachusetts drew her mother a floor plan of her bedroom immediately upon her arrival at school on September 21, 1900. She did not like her roommate, “an awfully unhealthy girl and not at all likeable,” and her drawing’s emphasis on two large folding screens in the center of the room highlighted her palpable dislike [Figure 40].

While the bedroom at school was both office and parlor it was also a staging area for one’s performance in the world beyond the bedroom. The dressing table, bureau with mirror, or dressing case was often the central constellation of dorm room furnishings and ephemera. This object signified the importance of a girls’ room as a dressing room, as a space in which she shaped and prepared her image for the world. Photographs of these groupings of objects and portraits of girls in these mirrors within their rooms capture this complex moment of public and private self-fashioning.

The Phenomenology of the Dressing Table

In dorm rooms, the dressing table was usually the room’s most elaborately decorated item and held the most complex constellation of meanings and objects. A

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124 Class of 1895, Smith College Archives, Smith College.

125 Louisa Marion Bosworth to “Mama,” September 21, 1900, Bosworth Papers Schlesinger Archives, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
multifaceted symbol, suggesting vanity, privacy, contemplation or social power, it
alluded to artistic and literary conventions. Through the centrally placed mirror, the
decorated dressing table visually located the girl in her room. Photographs of the girl
reflected in her decorated dressing table mirror recorded an artful grouping of objects
and tangibly represented her engagement with college culture. These pictures provided
the student with a souvenir of an earlier version of herself, surrounded by a collection
of items standing in for college life.

The dressing table was a standard bedroom furniture form. In sets of
furniture offered for sale, the dressing table was ubiquitous. However, girls and
college students changed the meaning of this form by covering it with a layer of
ephemera and objects. While objects, like toilette sets or pincushions were functional,
vases, pictures, parasols and draped fabric were used to create careful arrangements.
Some students created tasteful groupings of objects, but many ignored tastemakers’
warnings against the “mistaken sense of individuality which induced [the student] to
cover her walls with innumerable small pictures,” “to fill her mirror and hang her gas-
jet full of dance programs,” and “to cover every available space on dressing table, desk
and bookcase with personal photographs.” The dressing table could be the center of
an aesthetic interior, or a manifestation of high Victorian excess.

126 Carolyn Brucken notes that in suites, the dressing table, bureau, or dressing case
was standard. Carolyn E. Brucken, “Victorian Privacy: An Analysis of Bedrooms in
American Middle Class Homes from 1850-1880” (Winterthur/University of Delaware:
MA Thesis, 1991) 38-40. At the same time, similar suites were also in use in England.
R. W. Symonds and B. B. Whineray Victorian Furniture (London: Studio Elements,
1987) 170. Serge Roche suggests the stylistic origins of the dressing table. Mirrors,

127 Martha Cutler “Girls Rooms,” Harpers Bazaar XL: 10 (October 1906) 935-940:
940.
Two photographs of Smith bedrooms from the 1880s demonstrate the stylistic range of this trend. The dressing tables in these two images are of identical construction, but send completely different decorative messages [Figures 41-2]. Both case pieces contain four drawers with round wooden knobs and simple frame construction. The mirrors are both flanked with wooden triangles decorated with incised lines, as are the drawer fronts, sides of the case and the mirror frame. The tables are basic, inexpensive and mass-produced of “Eastlake”-inspired design. The photograph of 23 Hubbard in 1882 displays dried leaves, a tennis racquet, a religious motto, probably “Simply to thy Cross I Cling,” pretty bottles, artistic frames, postcards of images from the classical world and a few photographs around the mirror. It is refined, simple, and neat. In contrast, the same dressing table expresses Victorian excess in 22 Hubbard in an 1889 photograph. Draped cloth, large pincushions, an artfully arranged tam with tassels, a brush and hand mirror as well as a cloth draped Pre-Raphaelite chromolithograph complete this vignette, identified as a “Smith college girls' room of the eighties.” The different characters of the decoration prove that the process of creating a constellation of objects surrounding a dressing table was not dependant on the nature or tenor of the objects. Students who preferred both aesthetic and high Victorian décor framed their reflected images with personal and significant objects.

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128 Ames found two other examples of religious mottos hung above dressing tables in nineteenth-century photographs. He suggests that they provided spiritual reassurance to the people who looked in the mirrors below. Ames 101, 115.
The highly decorated dressing table appears in almost every bedroom. The mirror and dressing table offered students and adolescent girls at home an opportunity for decoration because the mirror and frame provided the ideal place for pictures and ephemera. Annie Jackson's collected calling cards could be tucked into the frame. For others, the mirror offered a place to hang decorations that were easily within students' reach. Instead of calling in a pre-approved handy man, as the school rules suggest, to hang a picture or to decorate a space, the dressing table was accessible, easy and inexpensive to decorate. It was also a flexible medium. Students could move pictures and switch invitations. For these reasons, it was the ideal place for students to create a physical representation of themselves and their world. Things which were personally significant for various reasons could be simultaneously kept and displayed.

The image of the girl in her dressing table mirror conjured up notions of vanity, power and sexuality in the Victorian imagination. In literature, the dressing table mirror had the power to reveal a heroine's true character and offered her the opportunity for self-reflection. In visual art, the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolists employed the image of a woman reflected in a mirror to explore themes of influence,  

129 Since some photographs do not show entire rooms they do not contain the dressing table. In every room which has multiple images or a full room view, some kind of dressing table is present.

130 In a nursery image from the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the mirror in the room has the same type of ephemera tucked into the frame. The mirror is well out of reach of the children in the room, suggesting that it was decorated by the adult who shared their space, probably their caregiver.

beauty and power. Similarly the mirror had other complex literary associations because it highlighted the tensions between “Art and Life,” as well as the power of the mirror to reflect one’s soul. As Michael Bartram wrote in the *Pre-Raphaelite Camera*, “Mirrors … hinted of other worlds.” In photographs, the mirror often served the practical purpose of presenting another angle of the subject’s body, but it also created a double of the subject. By design, the dressing table confronts the body. The mirror allowed its owner to see herself framed within her own world and offered her opportunity to shape her reflection with pictures and accessories. Photographs of the student reflected in her mirror suggest the resonance of the image. In adolescent girls’ bedrooms, the girl in the mirror is framed by a mantle of encoded ephemera. The dressing table and its décor shape and surround the reflected young lady.


134 Indeed, the reproductive powers of the mirror are analogous to those of the camera. Trachtenberg calls this the “mirror effect.” Trachtenberg 5.
As a symbol of one's personal private world and a reflection of the body the outside world would see, the dressing table grounded the artistic bedroom. By being photographed in the dressing table mirror, girls placed themselves in their rooms and used their rooms to explain who they really were. The photograph of a girl in her dorm room simultaneously proclaimed her status as a college student and as designer of an artful, feminine bedroom. This convention, reinforced by stereotypes of the revelatory mirror, served to suggest the true personality of the woman captured in the mirror. Sylvia J. Eastman, the principal of the Ogontz School for Girls from 1877-1912, chose to be photographed in such a way, with the banner “I give back smile for smile” superimposed over her reflected image [Figure 43]. The photograph clearly presented the main role model for the girls as feminine, but it also offered commentary on her character and her position within the school. In far more nuanced ways, the dressing table portrait reflected a complex idea of who one is and how one is presented to the world.

Dressing tables were simultaneously public and private; the private shaped and helped create a well-structured public persona. In several Ogontz School photographs, the dressing table mirror was mostly obscured by ephemera; only a small circle of reflective surface remained for one to actually see the mirror [Figure 44]. The compositions altered the functionality of the mirror. It ceased to reflect physical reality, and offered an edited reflection, defined by a self-designed frame. Like a picture frame in a gallery, the armature of ephemera set the image of the reflected girl

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apart from her peers and space. This edited reflection complicates the association of the dressing table with vanity; it suggests that vanity may be related to more than physical appearance.

Belle Richardson's image captured in her dressing table mirror also reflected an altered reality [Figure 45]. Her reflection was augmented by a composition of fourteen photographs, a religious picture, an open letter and art objects, placing her within a carefully crafted context. This image does not record what had always been in Belle's room; items were introduced to embellish her portrait. In a previous picture of Belle's room, items that were on a shelf next to her dressing table were removed and arranged on the surface of her table, including a small white vase [Figure 33]. The shelf was replaced with the grouping of photographs. A sign with her class year "'94" is introduced into the portrait of Belle as well. This photograph positions Belle within social, religious and cultural networks through her dressing table. Here, she is shown interacting with her room, as she is captured in the mirror and her reflection is superimposed over the reflection of the rest of her bedroom. The portrait clearly ties her image to her carefully designed space. Her "stuff" does not merely contextualize her portrait. It is part of her portrait.

Highly decorated dressing tables like Belle's are simultaneously souvenirs and collections. Like souvenirs, the photographs, saved in scrap books and traded with friends, represented a past experience. The adolescent girls' dressing table was a physical representation of college and adolescent life, a life that was created by a patchwork of experiences, opportunities and relationships. Like the "College Girl's

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Memory-book” described in a 1904 article, the decorated dressing table was “an autobiography, in fact, that has taken four years in its compiling.” On the dressing table was a constellation of objects that preserved the photographic past and simultaneously reflected the present. Acting as a photographic souvenir, this collection of souvenirs stands in for experiences collected over time and specifically in time. In this way it transcends the function of souvenir, defined by Susan Stewart as parts standing for particular experiences, memories and acquisitions.

Collected calling cards, photographs, arranged leaves, ukuleles and tennis racquets cease to simply represent particular memories, which taken in total suggest college days. The photographs of these arranged collections are carefully composed metonyms for college women themselves. They suggest the transitory nature of both the college girl and the adolescent’s girls’ bedroom. It was a life stage to be remembered and recorded because it was unlike anything that came before or after.

An 1889 photograph from the Ogontz School suggests the power of the dressing table in this transitional narrative [Figure 46]. In the photograph entitled, “Dinner Bell,” a student is pictured as she prepares to leave her dorm room, pausing for a moment to survey her appearance in her mirror. Against the backdrop of an artful screen, she gazed at her reflection, edited with the inclusion of a few photographs and draped cloth. As the caption suggests, only by confronting her dressing table and seeking approbation could she venture out of her room. A satisfactory image in the

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137 I do not mean to imply that the same dressing table was decorated over the course of four years, but that ideas about decoration were accumulated over time. Martha Cobb Stanford, “The College Girl’s Memory-Book for 1901-1904,” Women’s Home Companion XXXI:11 (November, 1904): 18-19.

mirror permitted her to join her peers at dinner. Perhaps, portraits of students reflected in dressing tables and photographs of dressing tables themselves served a similar purpose. The girl in the dressing table mirror was a way to self-consciously capture and remember a moment of self-fashioning. It was also a reassuring reflection, reminding the college girl of the complex visage she presented to the world.

Conclusion/Summation

Bedrooms at home, like bedrooms at school, were narratives as well as interiors. They expressed closely related themes of education and taste for nineteenth century adolescent girls. One’s ability to actively design one’s own bedroom, as opposed to passively occupying a nursery was part of growing-up. Like the Haight sisters’ trophies to music and art, adolescent girls exploited the narrative potential of their well-designed spaces by personalizing certain features. Away at school, the bedroom became a conscious expression of individual identity both bounded by and expressed through expectations of traditional femininity. Photographs of dorm rooms presented a “domesticated” vision of higher education for women by locating the dorm room in an understood continuum of girls’ bedrooms at home. School-issued furniture shaped the choices college women had; they used ephemera and personal items to fashion individualized spaces. Photographs of these spaces were souvenirs of both college days and social relationships. Collections, especially the constellation of objects associated with the dressing table, did not merely suggest the young woman
who created them, but shaped her reflection. The college woman used her dorm room and photographs of her space to craft a self-image of independence and femininity.
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fig 2-8a pg 67-71

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Figure 9

“Inside the Rooms of College Girls” Ladies Home Journal, March 1898
Figure 10

Detail of Figure 9, “Quite Like Home at Smith College”

Figure 11

“A Smith Girl’s Room,” “In Society,” Kansas City Star, 1897
Courtesy of Smith College Archives, Smith College
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fig 12-22 pg 74-78

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Figure 23

Dorm room from the Ogontz School highlighting pennants and banners from men's schools. This 1907 view appears to be the pinnacle of that fashion. *Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*
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fig 24 pg 80

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Figure 25
A view from the scrap book of Anna Gould, Ogontz School, class of 1892.  
*Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*

Figure 26
A view from the scrap book of Anna Gould, Ogontz School, class of 1892.  
*Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*
Figure 27

A view from the scrap book of Anna Gould, Ogontz School, class of 1892. 
*Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*

Figure 28

A view from the scrap book of Anna Gould, Ogontz School, class of 1892. 
*Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*
Figure 29

A view from the scrap book of Anna Gould, Ogontz School, class of 1892.

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fig 30-31 pg 84-85

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Figure 32

Belle Richardson, Smith class of 1894, at her dressing table mirror.

Figure 33

View of dressing table from scrap book of Belle Richardson, Smith class of 1894.

Both images Courtesy of Smith College Archives, Smith College.

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Figure 34
Belle Richardson, Smith class of 1894, on her bed.

Figure 35
View of bed from the scrap book of Belle Richardson, Smith class of 1894.

Both images Courtesy of Smith College Archives, Smith College.
Desks from the Ogontz School for Girls. Detail of Ogontz bedroom, c. 1907. 
*Courtesy of Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*

A chafing dish, detail of Figure 11. 
*Courtesy of Smith College Archives, Smith College.*

A teapot, Detail of Figure 1. 
*Courtesy of Smith College Archives, Smith College.*
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fig 39-42 pg 89-91

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Figure 43

“Sylvia J. Estman and her-self”, principal of the Ogontz School, 1877-1912. Note the motto “I give back smile for smile” on her mirror.

*Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.*
Figure 44

Detail of Mirror in Ogontz dorm room, c. 1885.
*Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archive, Penn State Abington.*

Figure 45

Belle Richardson in her dressing table mirror, detail of Figure 32.
*Courtesy of the Smith College Archives, Smith College.*
Figure 46

"Dinner Bell"

Courtesy of the Ogontz School Archives, Penn State Abington.
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Instead of listing each manuscript and photograph culled from archives or every collection I consulted in my search for information directly related to girls' bedrooms, I list the main archives I utilized and the main collections or subject folders I found useful. Individual manuscripts and photographs are cited within the text.

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Library Company of Philadelphia
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Museum of the City of New York
The Bryon Collection

Ogontz School for Girls Archives, Penn State Abington
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Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University
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1895, Edith Harrington
1895, Marguerite Milton Wells
1902, Katherine Fiske Berry

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Photographic Collection
Furniture Catalogue Collection
Hall of Everyday Life in the American Past

Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities
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Interiors—Unidentified—children’s rooms
#15 Mt. Vernon St., Arthur Lyman Residence, MA Boston
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MA, Norton, Wheaton College
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APPENDIX

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Reed, S. *House Plans for Everybody. For Village and Country Residences, costing from $250 to $8000; including Full Descriptions and Estimates in Detail of materials, Labor and Cost, with many practical Suggestions, and 175 Illustrations*. New York: Orange Judd Company, 1879.
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