In 1953, W. G. Hoskins profoundly shaped our current understanding of early modern privacy when he identified the Great Rebuilding, a boom in residential remodeling of the 1570s to 1640s, as an effect of a new desire for privacy that had filtered down from the aristocracy to yeomen farmers. A massive remodeling of England, the Great Rebuilding replaced medieval halls, large spaces for communal living and dining, with two-storied houses of many smaller, specialized rooms. Such small rooms, according to Hoskins, enabled a “withdrawal from communal life,” first for the master of the family and later for everyone else.¹ This concept suits our modern sense that privacy involves freedom from others’ surveillance or knowledge; it also implies that prior to the Great Rebuilding, privacy had not been valued in the same way. Lena Cowen Orlin revises this narrative by arguing that the desire for privacy competed with an equally strong value placed on surveillance as a guarantor of order. Some of the changes in domestic architecture characteristic of the Great Rebuilding, she convincingly demonstrates, enhanced opportunities to observe others.² This chapter examines domestic privacy from a new point of view: the relations between masters (or mistresses) and servants represented by household orders, or manuscript lists of directions to servants. Household regulations suggest that privacy involved carefully managing proximity to others; it was achieved not through isolation, but by presenting oneself to public view surrounded by one’s supporters at rigorously specified distances. I will argue that the seventeenth century saw an increasing focus on privacy defined by the omnipresence of attractive and gracious attendants, which replaced elaborate ceremonies and the mutual gaze of master and servant as rituals defining aristocratic mastery.
The carefully preserved “privacy” of seventeenth-century householders involved taking a prominent position at the apex of a hierarchy of increasing privilege, observed by many, while closely accompanied by a select few. Often, when writers of household orders mention “privacy,” they are referring to a traditional status marker compatible with what C. M. Woolgar refers to as “public living” in late medieval households: “Separation was a mark of status and honour, not of modesty.”\(^3\) The lord did not seek to escape others’ gazes, but to increase the scarcity, and thus the value, of access to his presence. Patricia Fumerton describes such early modern displays of domestic privacy as “privacy exhibited in public,” and Alan Stewart identifies the most inward of inner rooms, the closet, as “a place of utter privacy, of total withdrawal from the public sphere of the household” that “simultaneously functions as a very public gesture of withdrawal, a very public sign of privacy.”\(^4\) Such approaches reflect the complexity of domestic privacy in this period and highlight its performative dimension. Privacy in this sense meant not freedom from observation, but an act excluding some and privileging others.\(^5\) The 1526 Eltham household orders of Henry VIII demonstrate a concern for this kind of privacy:

Considering that right mean persons, as well for their more commodity do retire and withdraw themselves sometimes apart ... it is convenient, that the King's Highness have his privy chamber and inward lodgings reserved secret, at the pleasure of his grace, without repair of any great multitude thereunto; it is therefore ordained, that no person, of what estate, degree, or condition soever he be, from henceforth presume, attempt, or be in any wise suffered or admitted to come or repair into the King's privy chamber; other then such only as his grace shall from time to time call for or command; except only the ministers now deputed ... being in all the number of fifteen persons, whom the King's grace, for their good behavior and qualities hath elected for that purpose.\(^6\)

An entourage of 15 constitutes the king's “secret” and “inward” retirement, a “privacy” hardly recognizable as such now, but nonetheless crucial to the king's honor. The privacy of the great was inherently paradoxical, for a king would be at all times the focus of attention. The throngs surrounding Henry marked his importance; removing himself from view altogether would be as unsuitable as mixing freely with all comers. Such assertions of privacy were both highly conscious of an observing audience and embedded in a network of established formal