Contingent Privacies: Knowledge Production and Gender Expectations from 1500 to 1800

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Abstract This epilogue presents the main insights from *Women's Private Practices of Knowledge Production in Early Modern Europe*, demonstrating the key ways in which privacy factored into women's knowledge-making practices. The chapter highlights women's strategies of publicizing the private as a knowledge-sharing strategy, the role of the home in knowledge-making in the early modern period, and the limitations and affordances of navigating knowledge-production processes in a female body. Moreover, this contribution emphasizes privacy as a malleable, contingent, and continuous negotiation, not necessarily respected by default, but that enabled women to balance gendered expectations and knowledge pursuits.

Keywords Knowledge production • Gender • Privacy • Home • Body

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Women's knowledge production in early modern Europe encompassed a broad variety of topics, crossing and redefining the boundaries of gender expectations in their historical and regional contexts. Elite women were able to do so by carefully navigating social norms of decorum, adapting their knowledge practices, reconfiguring the spaces utilized for knowledge activities, and tailoring the communication in their knowledge exchanges. Through a careful examination of cases from English, Italian, French, and German territories between 1500 and 1800, the chapters in this book demonstrate the wide breadth of strategies that enabled women to instrumentalize the private in their quest for knowledge.

This broad chronological and geographical scope is an intentional choice, being key in unravelling how women maneuvered privacy and the private as knowledge producers. The recent curiosity regarding women's writings and the positioning of their work in relation to the public/private divide has mainly been directed to insular contexts, even though the need for cross-cultural analysis has been pointed out, with few but notable comparative works demonstrating the richness of broader perspectives.[1] In the present volume, we widened the range of time and space, looking at the opportunities offered—and the challenges presented—by women's complex social relationship with notions of the private and the domestic in the broader early modern period.

Our chapters look at the periods leading to and immediately after the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a period considered to be a defining moment when a category of domesticity associated with the household received firmer contours.[2] This has also been a highly studied period to tackle women's intellectual production and their circulation in learned circles.[3] By shifting focus to the sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries, we added a more layered understanding of these processes and

[1] In 2017, Martine van Elk skilfully built upon Michael McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity* to look at women's writers in the seventeenth century, a crucial period to the development of a distinct sense of domesticity according to McKeon. Elk expands the focus of analysis by contrasting the English context—McKeon's point of departure—with examples of the Dutch Republic. Elk, Martine van. *Early Modern Women's Writing: Domesticity, Privacy, and the Public Sphere in England and the Dutch Republic*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017.

[2] McKeon, Michael. *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

[3] Norbrook, David. "Women, the Republic of Letters, and the Public Sphere in the Mid-Seventeenth Century." *Criticism* 46, no. 2 (2004): 223–40.

could identify the continuities and transformations of the challenges that women faced and the approaches they employed in their knowledge pursuits. In this epilogue, we will see how women's private practices of knowledge production operated across many levels of early modern society.

Women's Knowledges and Publicizing the Private

When we think about women's intellectual production in the early modern period, we must pay heed to how gender played a role in knowledge circulation and portrayal to wider publics. Writings by women did reach the print market, but many times their circulation was done more safely via the sharing of manuscripts. Many authors have also stressed the different ways in which 'printed' did not necessarily equate to 'public' in the early modern knowledge marketplace.[4] Mary Trull brilliantly pointed out the dichotomy-breaking potential of understanding privacy as a performance for early modern women's writings. By understanding privacy also as a trope, the idea of the 'private' also became an instrument for people to enter the public eye and adjust the levels of publicity to one's work.

This power to instrumentalize the private in order to navigate the extent of the circulation of one's intellectual work within selected publics was fundamental for women to insert themselves in public knowledge conversations safely. Jelena Bakić demonstrates this aspect explicitly in the case of Camilla Herculiana. Herculiana carefully navigated the paratextual aspects of the publication of her work, painstakingly crafting a justification for and the validity of her position as a female knowledge-maker through dedicatory epistles and continuous highlighting of her integration in circles of knowledge with her male peers. Despite her *Lettere di philosophia naturale* being published, it seems to have reached a limited audience, at least according to the surviving copies, and even with all the care behind the publication, at some point, things went amiss, leading to the Inquisitorial trial against her. Even then, a gendered response—although going against her own will and arguments—managed to avoid a conviction, with her attorney claiming her female nature as a justification for her potentially dangerous opinions.

[4] Love, Harold. *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993; Elk, *Early Modern Women's Writing*, 8.

This art of navigating how private aspects reached the public also operated in more indirect ways than via publication in print. The case of Lady Lumley, explored by Natália da Silva Perez, is a clear demonstration that the instruction of a sixteenth-century aristocratic woman could follow the same humanist principles expected of a proper Christian education for their male peers. Knowledge of Greek and Latin and translating the classics was at the core of erudition, especially in the English context following the influence of Catharine of Aragon's presence and patronage in humanist circles and her insistence on a high-level education for her daughter Mary I. The kind of education provided to one's daughter was a political statement, and Silva Perez demonstrates Lady Lumley's awareness of this fact in the way she displayed her knowledge acquisition and development to her father. Although a private investment, Lady Lumley's education was also an asset of public influence to Lord Arundel. By skilfully producing translations and hortatory letters, she transformed a private and exclusive learning process into a recognizable token of her family's ideals and allegiances. Nevertheless, Silva Perez stresses that this was not an exercise just for show: Lady Lumley used the opportunity of translating a classic like Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* to reflect on what it meant for her, as a woman, to be inserted in the learned humanist circles, cross-referencing her knowledge and Erasmus's influence to insert her understanding of Christian principles into *The Tragedie of Euripides Called Iphigeneia*.

Isabelle Lémonon-Waxin shows us that women's access to certain forms of knowledge also depended on their skilful fostering and navigation of private networks of knowledge. Victorine de Chastenay had the privilege of being born into a family already embedded in *savant* culture, but it was her mastering of how to communicate with knowledge-makers, how to display her learning prowess, and how to keep norms of decorum that allowed her to reach knowledge circles and institutions that would rarely be available to other women. By achieving the title of *chanoinesse*, also, she was able to maintain a certain independence in a position as a private person with appropriate public recognition.

Material assets also supported women's positions within these knowledge networks. Joëlle Weis exemplifies this exquisitely with the examples of the private libraries of Duchesses Elisabeth Sophie Marie and Philippine Charlotte of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. While they stress the fact that the libraries are their private collections, they also instrumentalize those spaces to insert and maintain themselves in the circles of knowledge. As such,

women's association with the private was not only used as allure from its exclusive nature, but as a way to provide them access to knowledge networks.

Therefore, women could turn their connection to the private and the domestic to their advantage: it could operate as a *quasi* marketing tool, as a personal asset in noble society, and as a crucial tool to regulate the level of publicity appropriate to reach a balance between recognition and personal safety. Privacy provided them with a measure of power to differentiate what knowledge should remain private from what could be disseminated, as well as a way of tailoring their presence in knowledge circles.

Knowledge Production at Home

When we think of spaces of knowledge production in the early modern period, a few locations come to mind: the university, the laboratory, the library, or the cloister, for instance. For members of the elite, versions of these spaces could also be fitted into the home—nobles would have their own private laboratories, writing chambers and cabinets, and extensive book collections. A lively space for knowledge experimentation, the home offered a sense of safety, where testing practices could be done with less care for observers who might judge or misconstrue one's practices. Nevertheless, the knowledge produced in domestic confines usually had to go through a process of legitimization to be considered valid in broader networks of knowledge agents.[5]

Women's knowledge production at home is usually associated with the kitchen. However, none of the case studies here focused on the production of what could be called 'domestic knowledge'—as in knowledge of running and upholding a household. Indeed, distinguishing this form of knowledge from other kinds of early modern experimentation and advice literature was not such a simple task when looking at their applied principles.[6] Most recently, the work of Lucy Havard, in particular, demonstrates

[5] An excellent exploration of this dimension can be found in Bičak, Ivana. "Chops and Chamber Pots: Satire of the Experimental Report in Seventeenth-Century England" in *Early Modern Privacy: Sources and Approaches* edited by Michael Green, Lars C. Nørgaard, and Mette Birkedal Bruun. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 266–280.

[6] Hahn, Philip. "Domestic Advice Literature: An Entangled History?" in *The Routledge History of the Domestic Sphere in Europe: 16th to 19th Century*. Edited by Joachim Eibach and Margareth Lanzinger. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2020, 43–58.

the intricate interconnectedness of cooking, preserving, and other domestic knowledge with early modern science.[7] Rather, our authors look at the home as a space in flux, in which knowledge could be pursued in designated rooms, such as private libraries, but also behind makeshift and temporary shieldings, such as a folding screen. While we might associate the home with women's realm, these malleable boundaries within the house and between the domestic and public spheres also affected men and children.[8] For women, though, the home implied particular sets of duties and responsibilities, which could, in turn, provide different knowledge affordances.[9]

One of the main challenges for women was to navigate between the home and other knowledge spaces. Camilla Herculiana was explicit about this difficulty, with her apothecary providing a fruitful environment for the kind of knowledge she aimed to focus on further, but with the duties of home taking up most of her mental space. Of a more noble lineage, Lady Lumley, on the other hand, profited from her education at home, with the indoor mobility of private tutelage allowing her to benefit from both knowledge exchange and solitude for deepening her analysis of her lessons' contents. Centuries later, Victorine de Chastenay also used the safety of her home as an opportunity to reflect deeper upon the lessons she learned from her readings and interactions with other *savants*. Elisabeth Sophie Marie and Philippine Charlotte transformed their private collections into semi-public spaces within their own homes, which could be adapted from private and isolated locations to explore knowledge into places of exchange with other nobles and intellectuals.

[7] Havard, Lucy J. "'Almost to Candy Height:' Knowledge-Making in the Early Modern Kitchen, 1700–1850." *Cultural and Social History* 19, no. 2 (March 15, 2022): 119–39; Havard, Lucy J. "'Preserve or Perish': Food Preservation Practices in the Early Modern Kitchen." *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science* 74, no. 1 (March 20, 2020): 5–33.

[8] Joris, Elisabeth. "Gender Implications of the Separate Spheres" in *The Routledge History of the Domestic Sphere in Europe: 16th to 19th Century*. Edited by Joachim Eibach and Margareth Lanzinger. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2020, 364–380.

[9] Wunder, Heide. "'Privacy' and Gender in Early Modern German-Speaking Countries" in *Early Modern Privacy: Sources and Approaches* edited by Michael Green, Lars C. Nørgaard, and Mette Birkedal Bruun. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 63–78.

Women, Knowledge, and Their Bodies

While the knowledge of the female body in the early modern period is often associated with social taboo, both physicians and lay people were fascinated with female anatomy, menstruation, their reproductive system and particularities in contrast to the male body.[10] Women's relationship between their bodies and knowledge production was twofold: their quests for knowledge about their own bodies and the extent to which their bodies enabled their knowledge pursuits.

Existing in a female body could come with some hindrances in procuring knowledge. As many of the contributions have shown us, being the only female in male-dominated learning spaces was not an acceptable position for an aristocratic woman. They had to employ strategies like learning chaperones, distance learning via letters, and curated tutelage at different stages in life. In many cases, women had to conceal their presence in their processes of knowledge production. Displaying knowledge pursuits in public was not always well seen. Although being knowledgeable was praisable, their efforts needed to appear dedicated but not obsessive or as getting in the way of their other duties. Too much effort in producing knowledge would be akin to vanity, but some level of inclination towards knowledge-seeking was necessary, as it was also a form of showing avoidance of idleness. Striking this balance of acceptable levels of knowledge activity was an art in itself. Lady Lumley performed this art via her knowledge demonstrations to her father, while Camilla Herculiana did so by contrasting her wish for knowledge with her diligence with the tasks required of her gender. Victorine de Chastenay placed her activities behind the folding screen, and Philippine Charlotte stressed how knowledge filled her leisure time in her writing.

A curiosity over reproduction and the functioning of their own bodies appeared across most of our case studies. Lady Lumley copied the properties of *Lapis Aquilae* from a medical encyclopaedia due to its effects on childbirth and pregnancy. Philippine Charlotte made a glossary comprising genitals and reproductive organs, complementing her formal knowledge with subjects of her own interest. Camilla Herculiana focused on her own health and how it impacted her intellectual work. At the same time,

[10] McClive, Cathy. *Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2016; Read, Sara. *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013.

her avoidance of dedicating her writing to female issues could indicate that such subjects would alienate her from engaging with male natural philosophers. The same can be said for Victorine de Chastenay—her knowledge quests focused on subjects she could easily share with other *savants*. It does not necessarily mean that Camilla and Victorine did not chase after that kind of knowledge, but it could be that their wish to keep it as private knowledge potentially prevented them from writing about it.

Lady Lumley, Camilla Herculiana, Victorine de Chastenay, Elisabeth Sophie Marie, and Philippine Charlotte were skilled knowledge producers. Their connection to the private and domestic realm did not stop them from pursuing knowledge, but it also did not mean that privacy for their pursuits was a given. This privacy had to be carved out, depending on very malleable circumstances and negotiations that were far from guaranteed to succeed. Nevertheless, privacy strategies enabled them not only to adapt to a landscape of gendered expectations, but also to turn their association with the private realm into a crucial tool for their processes of knowledge creation and dissemination.

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