



Trull, Mary E. Performing Privacy and Gender in Early Modern Literature

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Trull, Mary E.

Performing Privacy and Gender in Early Modern Literature.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. ix, 232. ISBN 978-1-137-28298-9 (hardback) \$85.

Since the 1989 English translation of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, developments in critical theory by scholars like Michael Warner, Lena Cowen Orlin, and Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin have directed our attention toward interrogating the history of publicity's emergence; its inclusive and exclusive aspects; its discursive features and strategies; the nature of its relations to privacy, domesticity, state apparatuses, market economies, identity, and subjectivity; and, for feminist and queer studies in particular, whether marginalized or oppositional groups might constitute subaltern counterpublics. Mary Trull's *Performing Privacy* situates itself within and builds upon these ongoing critical conversations, particularly by expanding on Habermas's notion of "privateness oriented toward an audience," a concept that confounds binary logic by connoting a privacy that seeks, rather than evades, exposure. Trull's study explores how gender inflects privacy in a range of imagined publics, positing that literary form—especially genre, intertextuality, and tropes of overhearing—played an important role in creating new possibilities for the public representation of "private" women, both as subjects and as authors. Focusing on representations of female publicity, women authors, and tropes of privacy and overhearing, Trull elucidates how generic conventions shaped privacy, authority, and gender by attending to the relationship between form and gender in a variety of early modern discourses—including devotional and secular lyric poetry, drama, and prose fiction—and one non-literary genre: household orders.

In her first chapter, Trull emphasizes how multiple concepts of privacy—some now obsolete—were current in early modern England, including that of a shared familiarity or privileged confidentiality. Looking to both classical and contemporary models, Trull locates early modern privacy not only in the family, property ownership, or the prayer closet, but also in friendship, servitude, patronage, clientage, and other forms of intimate association occurring within public realms. Concerned with analyzing early modern violations of the concept's gender conventions, Trull observes that, despite early modern privacy's multiple meanings and political, religious, scholarly, and social connotations,

modern criticism has tended to limit the topic of women and privacy to the home. Widening the parameters of her search in an effort to address that inadequacy and challenge its presumptions, Trull argues that publicity and privacy are not dichotomously opposed but rather dialectically interrelated, contingent, and contextual concepts possessing performative functions, features that permit their meanings repeatedly to be redefined anew. In her second chapter, Trull interrogates performances of privacy in constructions of Reformation religious penitence and lament, comparing John Knox's verse paraphrase of Psalm 51—which is centrally concerned with King David's emergence from private sin to simultaneously private and public confession (intercourse with God, but a model for all sinners)—with John Calvin's sermonic psalm commentary, which advocated a more shame-faced approach than Knox's pugilistic attitude urged. Anne Lock's sonnets, Trull argues, draw on both positions to construct a performance of revelatory privacy that not only ushers the lamenter into a counterpublic community of believers but also makes both David and Bathsheba potential models of penitence. Trull's third and most innovative chapter examines the manuscript circulation of early modern household orders—some attributed to women—which provide detailed accounts of how private household instructions, profoundly concerned with gender hierarchy, constitute calculated constructions of privacy publicly disseminated. Trull's strategy here brilliantly exemplifies how our understanding and interpretation of literary works can change when considered in light of forgotten or overlooked period archives. The book's fourth chapter turns to Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* and the gendering of social ambition, figured as a movement from private to public life, by examining the influence of female lamenters in fallen women ballads on Shakespeare's depiction of Helena, whose career trajectory Trull compares with that of Parolles: while Helena proves her worth and becomes a mistress, Parolles pretends to greater gentility than he possesses and is relegated to the role of household clown. Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* and its satirical deconstruction of the tradition of overheard laments are the focus of Trull's fifth chapter, in which she argues that Wroth's recontextualizing the voyeurism and artifice that eroticize female publicity in pastoral romance via the social realism of women's laments in the ballad tradition ultimately transforms the gender dynamics of privacy by revealing the desires of the female lamenter alongside the conventional pleasures accorded to the male voyeur. Trull's deployment of the term "erotic

privacy” here is far clearer than it becomes in her subsequent chapter, wherein she applies it to depictions of retreats from publicity in Aphra Behn’s panegyric odes. Trull contends that Behn redefines “interest” in the odes as an affective tie of mutual obligation between superiors and inferiors, rather than deploying it as an allusion to private, rational self-interest, thereby offering her reader a view of the nation as feudal household that simultaneously harks back to an idealized past while anticipating the eighteenth-century market economy’s focus on domestic privacy and private interests. The book’s brief, final chapter considers the performative aspects of modern privacy in the context created by electronic social media sites, such as Facebook.

Predominantly engaged in nuanced close readings of female performances of privacy and publicity in a range of canonical and more obscure texts, *Performing Privacy* admittedly neither breaks new theoretical ground (scholars have long noted the multiple early modern meanings of privacy) nor, despite its final appeal to the internet generation, is it likely to appeal to undergraduate researchers—a drawback compounded somewhat by its rather slender index. Nevertheless, *Performing Privacy* is a carefully crafted, meticulously researched, scholarly study that cogently demonstrates the experimental formal, generic, and rhetorical strategies that early modern writers employed to trouble the formal and generic conventions of the publicity / privacy opposition. Contesting conventional approaches to the topic, Trull’s study opens a capacious window on early modern constructions of privacy and gender, usefully prompting us to rethink the relationships among gender, genre, publicity, privacy, and the performance of subjectivity.

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