



## Huebert, Ronald. Privacy in the Age of Shakespeare

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**Huebert, Ronald.**

*Privacy in the Age of Shakespeare.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. Pp. xv, 336. ISBN 978-1-4426-4791-6 (hardcover) \$65.

In an age reeling from post-Edward Snowden revelations about minimally regulated global systems of surveillance and massive corporate (mis)uses of big data to manipulate unwitting citizens at an unprecedented level (think Palantir, Facebook, and Google), Ronald Huebert's book about privacy in the age of Shakespeare is a welcome addition to discourses and historiographies of human intimacy.

The word "privacy" in English emerged in the 1590s as a referent for secrets, seclusion, solitude, and "private matters," with the more contemporary sense of an inner state "free from intrusion" arising in the early nineteenth century. Synonyms for privacy form part of a rich network of connected words in the English language, evoking, among others, matters personal, individuality and autonomy, confidences, in-camera exchanges, the erotics of intimacy ("private parts"), things unvoiced, unspoken, including the metaphysics of inexpressibility and interiority, introversion and reticence, self-containment and hermeticism, antisocial solitude, reticence, and discretion. In Shakespeare's corpus alone, the word "private" occurs some seventy-four times in seventy-three speeches across thirty-four works, a good indicator that the word was deployed regularly and carried meaning to a large number of people. "Privacy" occurs less regularly (only three times) in Shakespeare, but is used—for instance, by Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* (3.3), in ways that still resonate: "Of this my privacy / I have strong reasons" (2.2068–69).

The ideology of privacy, then, is firmly if not tremulously positioned between its relevance to notions of individual self-fashioning (itself always the result of the conjunction of singularities with corporate contingencies) and its uses by governance structures to maintain hegemonic relations of power that require the subordination of individual agency to its dictates and that require knowledge of individual privacy in order to do so more efficaciously.

Huebert's remarkable gathering of relevant texts and close readings fully engages with this truncated summary of the intensely layered ways in which privacy resonates in early modern discourses congruent with the so-called age of Shakespeare. The historical span Huebert traverses lies between Sir Thomas

More's *Utopia* (1516), and its "abolition of privacy," and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and its "divinely sponsored construction" of privacy (4). Central to Huebert's project is the notion that privacy was of "genuine importance in the age of Shakespeare" and that this focus runs counter to "the prevailing critical orthodoxy, which would claim that there's no such thing as the private in early modern culture" (6). Huebert underlines that in early modern English literature the "distinction between the public and the private [is referenced] with great regularity" (17) and that the "verbal landscape of Shakespeare's time is densely populated with users of the word 'privacy' and its cognates, and that many voices both shape and are shaped by the social history of the word" (23). Of particular interest is how Huebert frames some of these cultural circumstances, closely tied to the religious ideological struggles that played out in Reformation and Counter-Reformation discourses: "the Reformation was a good thing for privacy" something Huebert astutely links with "the movement away from a universal church committed to prohibiting private interpretation and towards the division of religious practice into many sects and denominations, most of them committed to fostering private access to deity" (24).

The close reading practices that are deployed through the book reveal a remarkable pattern of intersected social and literary practices. Though Huebert modestly demurs thinking of his work as social theory, the implications of his literary focus take the book into the very social practices of which literature is an expression that resolutely sought to give meaning to the relations between the public and private spheres. From More's abolition of private property in *Utopia* through early modern forms of dissidence and the sense of privacy as the absence of official status whose ultimate expression was public execution, to the insufficient protections against state surveillance in an age in which the state surveillance apparatus was a critical tool of absolutist power, to Andrew Marvell's emergent valorization of "privacy as a right that one's culture ought to respect" (26), Huebert takes readers on a richly rewarding journey through the interface of literary discourse and social theory. Huebert nuances the distinction between attempts to invade celebrity authors' lives—as in the case of Shakespeare and the most recent act of intrusive necrophilia evident in the radar scan taken of his putative grave site in the anniversary year of his death—and the close reading practices deployed in relation to the texts those authors produced, choosing the latter methodology as more appropriate to his critical inclinations. The risk of such a move is that it obviates the obvious and

sometimes unexpected ways in which private histories do in fact emerge as the result of archival work, social geographical work, and the like. But the point Huebert makes about the constructedness of privacy as an ongoing phenomenon is well taken, and certainly holds throughout the arguments he unfolds.

In a closing parable, Huebert focuses on a passage from Sir Thomas Browne's "most private work" (299) *Religio Medici* (1642): "but to call ourselves a Microcosme, or little world, I thought it onely a pleasant trope of Rhetorick, till my nearer judgement *and second thoughts* told me there was a reall truth therein" (301; emphasis mine). The very idea that one can have "second thoughts" and that they can arise out of an originary interiority that allows us to modulate the microcosm of self in relation to a greater emergent reality is a remarkable intuition. Huebert's reading of this passage avers that the more Browne "says about the world out there, as he sees it, the more he reveals about his inner self" (301). In the resilient if not oxymoronic co-creative interchange that emerges is a foundational episteme for the ways in which private and public contingencies are reciprocal, inseparable aspects of world-making that encompass us in ways we cannot help but continue to invent.

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**Knapton, Michael, John E. Law, and Alison Smith, eds.**

*Venice and the Veneto during the Renaissance: The Legacy of Benjamin Kohl.*

Reti Medievali E-Book 21. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2014. Pp. xxx, 516. ISBN 978-88-6655-663-3 (paperback) €38.

During a scholarly career spanning nearly five decades, Benjamin Kohl (1938–2010) left his mark not only on the study of late medieval and early modern Venice and Padua, but more generally on the study of the Italian Renaissance. Some will know Kohl from his many books and articles which deal with the intersection of politics, humanism, and society. Others will know him for his editions and translations of documents, or his databases like *The Rulers of Venice, 1332–1524*. Anyone who has used his *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance* (edited with Alison Smith) as a textbook for an undergraduate course is keenly aware of his commitment both to the twentieth-century scholarship on this topic and the documentary evidence that forms its basis.