



Situating Women's Private Practices of Knowledge Production in the Early Modern Context

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Abstract This chapter introduces the book *Women's Private Practices of Knowledge Production in Early Modern Europe* by exploring the interplays of gender, knowledge-making practices, and notions of privacy in the broader early modern European context. Paying heed to recent development in the historiography of women's intellectual works in relation to their association to the private realm, this chapter proposes an understanding of privacy as a privilege—although under constant negotiation—that elite women could instrumentalize in their knowledge pursuits, a notion that the following chapters flesh out in their nuanced case studies.

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Creating knowledge is a social endeavour. While it is true that individuals need time alone to ponder and reflect on their ideas, they also need a community of knowledge-making peers with whom to exchange and discuss these ideas. Women have always been a part of these social dynamics of knowledge-making, whether as interlocutors or as producers of knowledge.¹ Historiography of intellectual practices, however, has traditionally focused on contributions made by men.² In recent decades, this has begun to change, and women's practices of knowledge production have received more careful attention.³ This volume will contribute to this growing interest by tackling how women's knowledge production intersects with privacy studies. Here, we focus on the private knowledge practices of five elite women to elucidate how they fostered knowledge in their domestic spaces. We also unveil how their private knowledge practices constituted a form of social privilege that enabled them to engage in knowledge-making and navigate knowledge circles.

Women have reflected on the conditions of efficacy for their knowledge practices all through history. A paradigmatic example is *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405),⁴ where Christine de Pizan defended women's capacity to create knowledge, argued for the importance of providing women with a proper education, and praised her intellectual foremothers for serving as her role models. In the context of the *Querelle des femmes*, Pizan's example would be followed in numerous philosophical, theological, and social debates throughout Europe, which increased in number with the turn of the sixteenth century.

¹Zinsser, Judith P. *Men, Women, and the Birthing of Modern Science*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2005.

²Pender, Patricia, ed. *Gender, Authorship, and Early Modern Women's Collaboration*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017, 1.

³Hunter, Lynette and Hutton, Sarah. *Women, Science and Medicine, 1500–1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*. Stroud: Sutton, 1997; Ebbersmeyer, Sabrina, and Gianni Paganini, eds. *Women, Philosophy and Science: Italy and Early Modern Europe*. Vol. 4. *Women in the History of Philosophy and Sciences*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020; Boyle, Margaret E, and Sarah E Owens. *Health and Healing in the Early Modern Iberian World a Gendered Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021.

⁴De Pizan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. 1405. Trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant. London: Penguin, 1999.

With the development of humanist currents of thought, thinkers started to resituate women's contributions to knowledge and society as a whole. Erasmus of Rotterdam, Juan Louis Vives, and Thomas Elyot famously supported the spiritual equality of women, although they had different opinions on their social and political standing.⁵ Henricus Cornelius Agrippa shook the print market when his lecture *Declamation on the Preeminence and Nobility of the Female Sex* reached the press in 1529, in a public claim of feminine superiority,⁶ a position followed in 1553 by Charles Estienne, the famous sixteenth-century anatomist, in his *Paradoxes*.⁷ Marie de Romieu produced translations and poetry, writing on women being a source of learning in her *Brief discours: Que l'excellence de la femme surpasse celle de l'homme*. Marie de Gournay and Mary Astell defended the education of women and stressed women's contribution to the development of new knowledge. Nevertheless, as inseparable as women are from the historical processes of knowledge production, medieval and early modern women's intellectual work is still deemed distinct, marked by something that separates it from their male contemporaries.

This distinction mostly derives from what we see as women's more difficult access to 'publicity' for the knowledge they produced. While women's knowledge—especially practical knowledge dedicated to everyday situations⁸—was perceived as necessary, valuable, and commendable, it mostly circulated in contained networks marked by interfamilial, local, and domestic dynamics.⁹ When women's intellectual work reached a wider audience via print, it usually depended on a combination of their status, connections, and how well their ideas fit into expected norms and scholarly traditions. Women's publications raised conflicting reactions, from

⁵ Davies, Stevie. *The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature: The Feminine Reclaimed*. Brighton: Harvester, 1986.

⁶ Agrippa, Henricus Cornelius. *Declamation on the Preeminence and Nobility of the Female Sex*. 1529. Trans. Ed. Albert Rabil Jr. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁷ Pomata, Gianna. "Was There a Querelle Des Femmes in Early Modern Medicine?" *ARENAL* 20, no. 2 (2013): 334–5.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Leong, Elaine Yuen Tien. *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science, and the Household in Early Modern England*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

negative stereotypes of ‘public women’ to praise and exemplarity.¹⁰ Women were commended for their self-effacement, and their avoidance of public attention was often praised.¹¹ Having their knowledge recognized and respected depended on women carefully navigating the complex rules of decorum of their social environments.

Decorum was expected of any woman, regardless of social position. In order to receive respect from others, women were expected, for example, to dress and behave modestly, to display obedience towards the male figures of authority in their lives, and to fulfil their obligations as primary caregivers of their families, as mothers and wives. The example of the young Lady Lumley discussed by Natália da Silva Perez shows a student learning how to practice deference to figures of authority in her life. In the hortatory letters to her father explored in Silva Perez’s chapter, we see a pupil eager to demonstrate her knowledge of Latin, Greek, and political themes in order to make her father proud. Silva Perez demonstrates how this exercise prepared the young Lady Lumley for potentially writing differential letters to other authority figures that could become patrons to her knowledge. Her ability to hone that skill in private before making her writing available to selective publics enabled her to explore her own ideal while engaging with classic texts.

The realm of knowledge for women in pre-modern times is often assumed to have been circumscribed to the private domain, away from the intellectual public—unless stringent parameters were met. Yet, elite women did not always take this association with the private as a restriction, but rather turned it into a strategy to lend their knowledge production an air of exclusivity, even exceptionality, thereby raising its status. Recent scholarship has delved deeper into women’s writings navigating intellectual publics¹² and has demonstrated how privacy could be performed in

¹⁰Eger, Elizabeth; Grant, Charlotte; Gallchoir, Cliona O.; Warburton, Penny (eds.). *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere 1700–1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 2.

¹¹Ullyot, Michael. *The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Early Modern England*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 17.

¹²Eger; Grant; Gallchoir; Warburton (eds.). *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere 1700–1830*; Williamson, Fiona. “Public and Private Worlds? Social History, Gender and Space: Social History, Gender and Space.” *History Compass* 10, no. 9 (September 2012): 633–43; Dzuback, Mary Ann. “Gender and the Politics of Knowledge.” *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2003): 171–95.

female authorship in their process to achieve publicity.¹³ This entanglement of privacy, domesticity, and publicity when it comes to women's writings has been carefully examined in the context of England and the Low Countries by Martine van Elk in a contrasting study of how women writers expressed and crossed the blurry lines between the public and the private.¹⁴ These recent works have complexified how women traversed the porous thresholds of private life and public visibility, showing us that thinking of women simply as associated with the domestic world—and of those that became published authors as exceptional examples—smooths out a lot of the complexities involved in early modern women's practices of knowledge production and how they instrumentalized the label 'private' to support their knowledge endeavours.

We will add to this discussion by demonstrating how privacy played a role in how women were able to achieve knowledge, their strategies to disseminate and cross-pollinate their thoughts, and how they legitimized their practices. As Ronald Huebert stated, "privacy mattered to a great many early modern people—all the more so, I suspect, because of the religious and social pressures to conform and the efforts taken by authorities at various levels to monitor personal behaviour."¹⁵ As historical agents under specific gendered scrutinies, women were very aware of the importance of privacy as a way to regulate what could be known and how to become someone in the circles of knowledge. Victorine de Chastenay, as shown here by Isabelle Lémonon-Waxin, had to carefully navigate her contacts with the members of the learned community in the institutional spaces of eighteenth-century France. Her skill in manoeuvring these expectations granted her access to exclusive spaces where women were commonly not welcomed.

Considering this power of manoeuvrability of the thresholds along the public/private spectrum, we will work here with a broad understanding of what privacy could mean to early modern women and how it intersected with practices of knowledge-making. Previously, we have explored privacy as "the ability that people might have to regulate, adjust, or control access

¹³Trull, Mary E. *Performing Privacy and Gender in Early Modern Literature*. Early Modern Literature in History Ser. London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2013.

¹⁴Elk, Martine van. *Early Modern Women's Writing: Domesticity, Privacy, and the Public Sphere in England and the Dutch Republic*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017.

¹⁵Huebert, Ronald. *Privacy in the Age of Shakespeare*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016, 8.

to themselves or to their material and immaterial resources”¹⁶ or “a constant and iterant compromise which depended on practices of concealment, consolidation or dissolution for social bonds, and unspoken agreements (a turn of the head to allow someone some discretion, using one’s own body to shield another person’s actions, and daily instances of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’).”¹⁷ In this volume, we add to this understanding of early modern privacy by dissecting how gender factored in how those strategies could be employed by knowledge makers. Our aim is to untangle the processes of how women produced knowledge, how this knowledge circulated, and how it was received by different audiences.

It seems straightforward to assume that, because of their common association with the domestic realm and their challenge to have their voices heard in public, women would have more moments in private to explore different knowledge practices. However, these domestic spaces were constantly populated by a myriad of people—relatives, servants, guests, and a variety of other folks depending on the social status of the household.¹⁸ Therefore, having the possibility to regulate access to spaces of knowledge was crucial to performing the activities and maintaining the infrastructure necessary for knowledge production. Duchesses Elisabeth Sophie Marie’s and Philippine Charlotte’s exquisitely kept private libraries were an integral part of their domestic spaces. At the same time, they were clearly delineated areas for their book collections, curated via the Duchesses’ own tastes and funds. These designated spaces create opportunities for social encounters between agents of knowledge, consolidating and amplifying these noblewomen’s networks.

A moment of privacy was something that needed to be created, adapted, and negotiated in particular situations.¹⁹ If we start from the idea that privacy was something that individuals needed to establish by themselves on a daily basis—as a *practice*—we notice that it was not necessarily easier

¹⁶Silva Perez, Natália da. ‘Privacy and Social Spaces’, *TSEG - The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 18, no. 3 (29 November 2021): 5–16.

¹⁷Klein Käfer, Natacha, ‘Dynamics of Privacy at Sea: An Introduction to Privacy Studies in Maritime History’ in Klein Käfer, Natacha (ed.). *Privacy at Sea: Practices, Spaces, and Communication in Maritime History*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 2.

¹⁸Orlin, Lena Cowen. *Locating Privacy in Tudor London*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹⁹Fennetaux, Ariane. “Women’s Pockets and the construction of Privacy in the Long Eighteenth Century”, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 20:3 (2008): 307–334.

for women.²⁰ The boundaries of these created instances of privacy were porous and malleable and hardly ever respected by default. As such, carving out a moment in private to develop one's practices of knowledge production depended on agreements, strategies, and constant concern over social expectations.²¹ The case of Camilla Herculiana, discussed here by Jelena Bakić, is a clear example of these negotiations. She was a woman from a merchant family, whose father invested in her education, but that did not have as high of a status as compared to the other women studied in this book. Therefore, she had to stress that she prioritized her womanly duties over her knowledge pursuits, which implied her compliance with the gendered moral standards expected of her.

Knowledge comes in many forms. In this volume, we will explore different forms of knowledge as *practice*. Early modern practices of knowledge production would include observation, collection, categorization, repetition, note-taking, experimentation, crafting, cataloguing, reading, reflecting, as well as other related activities, such as travelling, dialogue, or meditation. Pamela Long has explored how openness and secrecy played a crucial role in the long-term history of craft traditions, opening up a discussion about the entanglements of knowledge creation, revelation, and control.²² Knowledge, therefore, depended on the ability to explore trial and error in private, but also on the exchange of experience and technique in a wider network of people 'in the know.' Women—especially members of the nobility²³—were part of knowledge networks and even created their own, exchanging knowledge they considered the most relevant for their experience in the early modern world.²⁴

As such, we are less concerned about *what kind* of knowledge women produced but *how* they went about their processes of knowledge creation

²⁰ Klein Käfer, Natacha and da Silva Perez, Natália, "Privacy and knowledge production: historical potentials and challenges", *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge*, forthcoming.

²¹ Klein Käfer, 'Dynamics of Privacy at Sea'.

²² Long, Pamela O. *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of Knowledge from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

²³ Rankin, Alisha Michelle. *Panaceia's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

²⁴ Neighbors, Dustin and Klein Käfer, Natacha. "Zones of Privacy in Letters Between Women of Power: Elizabeth I of England and Anna of Saxony". *Royal Studies Journal* 9:1 (2022), p. 60–89; Tarbin, Stephanie, and Susan Broomhall. *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2008.

and how privacy factored into their practices. We notice that what stands out about early modern women's knowledge production is not that they are on different subjects than men's, or the implied value of their knowledge.²⁵ The main difference comes from the strategies that they had to implement in order to fit into the expectations of intellectual circles at the same time that they upheld those of their gender and status. By focusing on their practices, we will highlight these rhetorical strategies, their particular knowledge networks, access to books, and how they went about cataloguing, note-taking, letter-writing, and engaging with specialists without crossing decorum norms.

This volume explores privacy in relation to knowledge practices in a gendered historical context. The cases chosen to exemplify women's knowledge-creation processes come from a historical context—namely early modern Western affluent social circles—that was privileged enough to have left historical traces of such processes. We acknowledge that these cases are historically circumscribed and cannot necessarily be generalized as representing the practices of actors from lower social strata, of migrants, or of actors that stemmed from a broader geographic and ethnic background. Rather than seeing this focus on elite women as a limitation, we take the opportunity to study the private knowledge practices of these elite women to unveil how this private knowledge-making was a condition for them to claim exclusivity and status for their practice. In other words, there seemed to be a conflation between something being private and therefore being elite or high quality. Nonetheless, we believe that the cases studied here can help expand the way we think about privacy in relation to women's knowledge. These examples can also help tease out patterns and strategies of private knowledge activities that can then be compared and contrasted, in future research, with the practices of women from different groups and social backgrounds.

In this volume, we will discuss knowledge practices by five women from different European contexts. Our chapters document, analyse, and discuss how women employed practices of privacy to pursue knowledge that did not necessarily conform with the curriculum prescribed for them. The practices of Jane Lumley in England, Camilla Herculiana in Padua,

²⁵ Hunter, Lynette. "Women and Science in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century: Different Social Practices, Different Textualities, and Different Kinds of Science" in *Men, Women, and the Birthing of Modern Science* edited by Judith P. Zinsser. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Victorine de Chastenay in Paris, as well as Elisabeth Sophie Marie and Philippine Charlotte in Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, will help us to exemplify the delicate balance between audacity and obedience that women had to employ to be able to explore science, literature, philosophy, theology, and other types of learned activities.²⁶ Our cases range from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, presenting continuities and discontinuities across temporal and geographical lines of the strategies that women used to protect their knowledge production and retain intact their reputations as good Christian daughters, wives, and mothers. We will see how having access to privacy—having the ability to regulate access to themselves while studying and learning—was a crucial condition for the success of the knowledge activities these women pursued.

In the chapters that follow, the reader will encounter discussions of the notebooks of Lady Jane Lumley filled with translations of works from the humanist canon; of the letters by Camilla Herculiana containing apothecary knowledge, and of her published book containing natural philosophy; of the scientific research notebooks produced by Victorine de Chastenay; and finally, of the opulent, rich private libraries gathered by Elisabeth Sophie Marie and Philippine Charlotte. These are all material testimonies to the practices of knowledge that these women conducted. Their analysis enables us to reconstruct a corner of the history of knowledge that is often left in second plan and elucidate the role that practices of privacy had in enabling these women to pursue their knowledge activities.

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²⁶Straznicky, Marta. *Privacy, playreading, and women's closet drama, 1550–1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 9–11.

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