

IT'S A PRIVATE MATTER. SPACE AND GENDER ISSUES IN SHAKESPEARE'S *CYMBELINE*

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Abstract: *The paper investigates the preoccupations of the 16th and 17th-century English society for the emerging phenomenon and concept of privacy, reflected, among others, in the new ways in which space is employed in defining hierarchies and gender roles. The paper deals with elements of cultural history related to the use and meaning of privacy, private life and private space in a Shakespearean play which is significant for the visual illustration of the concept – Cymbeline, more specifically, the bed-trick scene.*

Key words: *bed-trick, gender, privacy, private and public space.*

1. Introduction

The discussion about how privacy emerged as a new concept and phenomenon during the early modern period can be tackled in two ways. One is offered by the already classical approach of the culture of private life. In the Preface to the third book of *A History of Private Life, Passions of the Renaissance*, Philippe Ariès (1989:1) starts by asking a somewhat rhetorical question: is it possible to write a history of private life? It is a slippery subject to tackle because, in the period circumscribed by the present research, “private” and “public” were not meant as they are now, they were not the two opposite items of a binary pair, but areas with fluid boundaries, between which the distinction was not clear. The second approach is that of analysing space and gender as interrelated concepts, as Amanda Flather does in *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (2011), where she argues that space was omnipresent in a person’s life, not only as a passive background, but also a basis for the formation of gender and other types of identities and hierarchies.

Whatever private spaces the feudal communities offered, it was a “gregarious private” (Régnier-Bohler 1995:47), which meant the universe in which the individual evolved was a familiar world where people knew each other and could easily (and often would) keep an eye on each other. People were bound by relations of vassalage and, in a dangerous world, it was only dependence – on a more powerful entity, the patron or the community – that ensured survival.

Ariès (1989:2) identifies three major events which contributed to the change in people’s attitudes that separated the private from the public sphere and later facilitated the rise of individualism. The first is the change in the role of the state, which now increasingly interferes with the social space that had been managed by the communities in earlier periods. A weak or primitive state meant more power was in the hands of smaller, local groups, while now, the state, with a new judicial outlook and set of practices, removes this intermediate

level between itself and the individual. A direct consequence of the rise of the state is the decline of communal forms of sociability. The second event is the new attitude towards family and family life. Catherine Belsey, in *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (2001), refers to a shift, since the late 16th and the early 17th century, from the dynastic, to the nuclear family, giving the example of the royal family of England (James I's), the first "real" family in a century, after Elizabeth I's celibate, Mary's sterility and unrequited marital love, and Henry VIII's six repudiated or dead wives and two daughters he called bastards. Shakespeare's late romances, Belsey (2001:56) argues, prove this very interest in a new form of family organization, with a regular couple and (two) children who are fond of their parents and receive their parents' attention. *The Winter's Tale*, for example, is a play about a husband and a wife and about how their relationship affects their children, with issues of domestic violence and emotional abuse – a very modern approach, indeed. It is true that such attention of the nuclear family is an exception in Shakespeare's plays about "unnatural" parents, children, and siblings and about ever incomplete families (questions about Cordelia's mother, Lady Macbeth's children, and others have frequently been asked). However, the very fact that the nuclear model is presented as functional (in a play with a happy ending, despite its tragic plot) suggests this new ideal is already apparent at the level of common people's *mentalités*.

Ariès (1989:4) himself argues that, in post-feudal Europe, the family is no longer regarded as a merely economic unit, but as a refuge for people who are tired of the others' scrutiny, an emotional space where individual members are important in themselves (especially the children). This new configuration brings about a separation from the public domain – the street, the square, the court, or other communal spaces – as well as an extension of the former's influence over the latter, the family becoming, for the first time in history, an authority in itself.

The third event is the most visible of all, consisting of a brand new conception on daily life and its material manifestation, a new way of organizing it. In building and decorating a house, it was no longer only utility that mattered, but sophistication and taste, being a manner in which the individual and the family chose to externalize their private values (Ariès 1989:6). The art of interior decoration develops and diversifies to such an extent that, by the 17th century, it becomes the favourite subject of the greatest Dutch paintings. The domestic interiors portrayed by Vermeer or Rembrandt represent a new ideal, teaching the people of "the middling sort" how to live, what to acquire in order to display and enjoy. Housing in the early modern period implied more numerous, smaller, more specialized rooms, with vestibules and private stairways to increase their inhabitants' privacy, allowing them to enter without going through other rooms. To accept that this could happen, to the French anthropologist's view, means to accept a different periodization, to regard early modernity not as an age pre-ceding the modern times or continuing the Middle Ages, but as a unique, independent time in history. In this light, a genuine continuity of attitude can be seen from the early 15th to the late 17th century, despite the numerous political and religious changes that took place during the same two centuries, preparing the Enlightenment.

2. The Articulation of Private Space during the Early Modernity

The focus on material life as cause of the rise of privacy in Tudor England is also the subject of Lena Cowen Orlin's book, entitled *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (2009), which aims to bring to the scholarly forefront matters that, until a few decades ago, were considered trivial and irrelevant in a theoretical approach, no matter the scientific area the approach was reclaimed by. Daily matters of work and leisure, production and consumption, sociability and comfort have only recently become significant in an investigation trying to shed light onto ordinary people's existences, not only on the epochal events that shaped or destroyed them.

Lena Cowen Orlin (2009:2) argues that “personal privacy takes many forms: interiority, atomization, spatial control, intimacy, urban anonymity, secrecy, withholding, solitude.” But all these forms, which we, today, may take for granted, were the ultimate experience during the early modernity.

Moreover, French researchers like Philippe Ariès (1989:10) go as far as to argue that England was a pioneering country when it comes to privacy, a phenomenon which was still virtually unknown and unacknowledged in other parts of Western Europe. In England, given the special context of the establishment of Protestantism, the relative peace following the centuries of civil war between the Yorks and the Lancasters, the new Tudor aristocracy which was not the feudal elite of the previous centuries, but people of the middling sort, coming with a new approach and mentality, the affluence of this new class, a new material culture emerged, and, with it, privacy.

Another dimension where privacy starts manifesting itself in the early modern period, as an increased awareness of a potential for emotional and intellectual expression, but also as a discrete form of non-material heritage to be passed on from one generation to another, is personal writings. This genre developed in the late Middle Ages – in England, most conspicuous during the Wars of the Roses, such as the well-known Paston letters, written by a wife to her husband who was fighting, or the Plumpton and Lisle letters – and was very different from the official writings. Another obvious characteristic is the feminine authorship, aristocratic, wealthy women having an education and enough free time to devote to writing. As Olga Kenyon notices (1995:3), these women were some of the first to write in vernacular rather than in Latin and their good education set an encouraging example. These personal writings – letters, diaries, travel writing, etc. – are a material as well as non-material heritage to be passed on from one generation to another, on the maternal line. Mothers pass on to their daughters ideas and feelings on mostly private topics, such as duties towards husbands and families, female education, proper behaviour and household administration (Chedgzoy, Hansen, and Trill 1998:13). In the 18th century, the ground is thus prepared for these writings to attempt substantial definitions of women’s roles, sexual ethics, and power relations.

3. Privacy and Domesticity

Looking at privacy and domesticity in early modern England, Corinne Abate (2003:15) refers to the unstructured, fluid quality of daily female experience, which was enriched by the objects-symbols of the household, but also by their intimate friendships or kinship (of other women: mothers and grandmothers, daughters and nieces, godmothers and neighbours, patrons and tenants, nurses and maids, etc.). Their environment was isolated – a reference back to the study on pregnancy and childbirth in early modern England shows, by means of this most ritualized event, how separate was the life women led –, this isolation carrying dual meanings of shelter and confinement. As shelter, women’s private spaces gained a certain sacredness, becoming places with their own, clearly marked symbolism and aesthetic. Men seem to have known little about these spaces (out of their personal choice, mostly), as a random comment made by Edgar, in *King Lear*, indicates.

Reading a letter written by Goneril, in which she urges her lover to kill her husband, Edgar exclaims about the “undistinguished space of woman’s will” (IV, 6). It may refer to the nebulous notion of a woman’s irrational drives, incomprehensible for the rational man. But “space” – metaphorically as it may have been used by Shakespeare – distinctly makes us consider something more concrete and material, though this is as clouded a region as the woman’s mind. It is the *gynecaeum*, the women’s quarters, their room, their closet, their parlour, where patriarchal codes and values are obstructed. If the woman’s mind (her “will,” in Edgar’s words) is a place of uncontrolled desire, her room or suite is just as impenetrable,

not so much (or exclusively) in physical terms, but in terms of how much men know, understand, appreciate the activities circumscribed by women's privacy. The female domestic settings, with their material practices and material goods, are the places where another order is installed, in the absence of patriarchy, sometimes in secret, without male knowledge (though usually not without male consent), creating a sense of conspiracy and bonding between women who shared them – what feminist scholars came to define as “sisterhood,” a state opposing “brotherhood” not only in gender terms, but also in qualitative terms, promoting values based on creativity and emotions, rather than competitiveness.

4. *Cymbeline*: A Case Study

A rewarding manner to approach Shakespeare's plays in order to locate privacy, as the Elizabethans understood it, is to proceed from the most visible level to the subtler ones, from evidence of material life, to the more intricate notions of domesticity and intimacy for families and individuals. A play which pays close attention to both these levels is the late tragic-comedy *Cymbeline*. Here, the most elaborate inventory of a lady's material possessions is occasioned by a bet between a husband, Posthumus, and the boastful Iachimo, who takes the challenge of proving the unfaithfulness of the other man's wife, Imogen. Iachimo hides in a chest in Imogen's bedchamber, opens the lid at midnight, makes careful notes of all the furnishings and decorations in the room, as well as of every part of the woman's body, closes the lid and waits for the next day to win the bet. It is only circumstantial details that Iachimo has, but it is enough to enrage Posthumus, who decides, like the Moor Othello, to kill Imogen.

The reason why Posthumus wins the bet is given, in Catherine Belsey's opinion (2001:56), by the specificity of the inventory of Imogen's bedchamber that he offers instead of evidence of bodily contact and fornication. Belsey (2001:59) notes that “Iachimo's account of the furnishings is surprisingly specific in a play which elsewhere depends on a broad generic distinction between court and countryside, punctuated by brief excursions into an equally stereotypical Machiavellian Italy.” The decorations of Imogen's bedchamber enhance the credulity of Iachimo's version, but also guarantee, through their symbolism, the deeply sexual connotation of this story. What the cunning man describes is the bedroom of a newly-wed woman, a décor set for passion: statues of silver Cupids leaning on their torches and hangings depicting Diana bathing and Cleopatra's first encounter with Antony, on the golden barge. While Diana is a chaste presence, in accordance with Imogen's good faith – a message the reader must decode properly although Posthumus is completely unable to do so –, Cleopatra is the very embodiment of illegal love and sexuality. The Queen of Egypt as Venus is the very opposite of Diana: passionate, seductive, and dangerous. Iachimo's description of Cleopatra painted in the innocent wife's bedchamber is supposed to offer the jealous husband an analogy between the Queen greeting her imperial Roman guest and Imogen welcoming *her* Roman visitor in her intimacy.

In fact, just like in Othello's case, Imogen's actual betrayal is of less importance than the face the husband loses in a man-to-man confrontation (symbolic or not) – the Venetian general in front of a man inferior in rank, Posthumus in front of a man with whom he made a bet (therefore a commitment). This reaction is what Michael Hattaway (2001:108) calls “a residual ideology of chivalry.” The actual or seeming violation of the wife's body corresponds to an ethical violation of the man's honour – even if this happens only at the discursive level. According to Hattaway (2001:95) sexuality is not only a biological drive, but “a way of fashioning the self [...] which is constituted from and around certain forms of behaviour” in a social context. Coming back to the hanging in Imogen's bedchamber representing a scene depicted both by Plutarch and by Shakespeare himself in another play (*Cymbeline* was staged a few years after *Antony and Cleopatra*), the indirect evocation of the Egyptian woman on the

barge in a play where she is not a character as such is meant to increase the legendary aspect of the Queen's personality (actually, very few Shakespearean characters travel from one play to another).

The scenes where Imogen's room is carefully described are worth a closer look. There is scene 2 in act II, where Iachimo makes the notes in the lady's room and scene 4, in the same act, where Iachimo reads his notes in detail to the more and more offended Posthumus. In scene 2, Iachimo's findings are only briefly mentioned (the character writes down diligently, but does not actually give his audience much information):

But my design—To note the chamber. I will write all down. [*He writes.*]
Such and such pictures; there the window; such
The'adornment of her bed; the arras, figures,
Why, such and such; and the contents o'th'story. (II, 2, 24-27)

In the first line of the quote, Iachimo seems to force himself to get down to the business of "noting" the chamber. When he opened the lid, he was too taken by Imogen's sleeping beauty to remember his darker purpose. After "such and such" observations, he continues the contemplation of the woman's body, which includes spotting a mole on her left breast and slipping the bracelet off her arm. When he goes back into the trunk, the clock strikes three. When Imogen went to sleep and Iachimo opened the chest it was midnight. So the contemplation had lasted three hours: such and such pictures and the figures such and such that he catalogued must have made up a full inventory. This hypothesis is proved in scene 4, when Iachimo reads his notes in front of Posthumus: tapestry of silk and silver; a hanging with Cleopatra and Antony; a chimney piece with "chaste Dian bathing"; the ceiling decorated with golden cherubins; and the andirons – "two winking Cupids of silver." The room is, indeed, very richly decorated, with a sophistication that would equal any royal suite. It is both luxurious and well cultivated, comfort and art blending in order to satisfy the owner's physical, emotional and aesthetic needs.

But the furnishings in Imogen's chamber are not random. Enumerating them, Catherine Belsey says: "These decorations also signify." (2001:59) The scholar stops at the feminine doublets, Cleopatra and Diana, to point out that these mythological characters comment indirectly not only on the wife's innocence, but also on her husband's perversity. Posthumus, like other men in Shakespeare's plays (Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, or even Claudio in *Much Ado about Nothing*), are turned on by their partners' frigid chastity and nothing infuriates them more than the mere suggestion that these women could give and, what's more, receive pleasure. But the "noting" of the objects in Imogen's chamber can go further. First of all, Iachimo is arrested, as he opens the trunk, by the sight of the bed and its occupant. Quite natural and not at all unexpected, since we know he is attracted to the young woman and being alone with her at midnight can only increase his desire. But the interior Iachimo notes is a telling example of how privacy was conceived in the early modern period. What he sees is the element that always comes first, in any inventory: the bed. In a book called *Domestic Emblems* dating from 1539, Gilles Corrozet (in Ariès and Duby 1995:222), offers a list of objects one should hold in high esteem, in order of importance. Top of the list comes the bed, followed by the desk, the bench, the table, the cupboard, the trunk, and the stool. Corrozet voices a contemporary attitude when he invests the bed with an almost mythical value, free of any erotic innuendo. The bed is the honour of the house, a chaste witness of conjugal duty, but also of the contemplative state the individual can reach in perfect solitude and modesty. In fact, the bed was the only piece of furniture one would leave a poorer relative or a servant in their will (let us not forget here that Shakespeare himself wants his former wife to have "his second best bed" after his death), as well as an important part of a bride's dowry. Imogen's bed is, therefore, meant to make a subtle comment about

the very idea of honour in the domestic environment, a notion the repudiated wife will try to embody when, after fleeing to save her life, she adopts a new name – Fidele.

Imogen's bedchamber is privacy at its best: a place of retreat not only from active life, but even from her own body. It is midnight and the young wife has been so engrossed in her reading that she lost track of time – a scenario which seems to instantiate the clerical requirements for a married woman's good life. Imogen has been reading for three hours, in complete silence and seclusion and is now ready to sleep – alone, after commending her life to the gods. The contents of her reading, though, are Shakespeare's intervention in the moralists' scheme: the book is as unpious as it can be – Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She asks her maid to fold down the leaf where she has stopped reading – “where Philomel gave up,” Iachimo notices. The classical rape scene thus frames the pseudo-ravishment implied by the stranger's unwanted presence in the woman's bedroom.

The impression of intimacy is also given by the chimney piece—“Chaste Dian bathing.” Not only is the goddess of hunting the very symbol of virginity, or the mythological implication of an intruding male gaze quite conspicuous (the legend says that, while Actaeon was hunting, he saw the goddess naked; Artemis, enraged, turned him into a stag to be torn to pieces by his own hounds, as a punishment for his indiscretion), but the very notion of bathing intensifies the deeply private nature of this space and time. Taking care of one's body is, in late medieval literature, almost as important as providing spiritual food for one's immortal soul. Like contemplation, hygiene is a solitary act, implying a time and space of intimacy. While the process of adorning one's body with clothes and jewels may as well be public, washing works best in isolation. The need to bathe also offered the individual a few moments for themselves – a rare treat in a crowded household.

The richness of Imogen's bedchamber is in sheer contrast with another picture of domesticity displayed in *Cymbeline*. Imogen-Fidele, running for her life, finds the cave inhabited by Belarius and his two foster sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. The shelter she chooses from punishment, dishonour, and violence is crammed and primitive, “a poor house,” “a savage hold,” “a rude place,” where three men live together (now also joined by a woman in a boy's clothes), eating roots and whatever game they manage to hunt in the forest, sitting and sleeping by the fire. Still, in this meagre environment, there is more honesty, love, and devotion than at court. Shakespeare uses a similar spatial pair in *As You Like It*, where he opposes the sophistication of Duke Frederick's palace to the naturalness of the Forest of Arden, inhabited by Duke Senior, the corrupted urban milieu, to a “merry England” scenario. Belarius, who chooses the dissidence of the forest, and the two young princes, who have benefited from being raised far from the court, as “natural” beings, embody the ideals of medieval knighthood and “the unsullied strength of the sylvan world” (Bevington 2003:1478). Thus, the lady's bedroom may have offered her all the comfort and beauty interior decoration could hope for (not in the time of Roman Britain, when the play is set, but in Shakespeare's own age), but it is only the cold and dark cave in the forest that puts her mind and body at ease and finally reunites her with her husband.

5. Conclusions

It is true that, as Amanda Flather (2011:39) notes, the structural origins of the social system were not found in the employment of space. Still, from someone's place at the table or where they slept, from the proximity (or lack of it) of significant objects, in various loci destined for work or leisure, space and spatial insignia play a crucial role in the formation of the identity and self-awareness of the early modern individual, especially, though not exclusively, the woman.

Discussing privacy in the age of Shakespeare or even earlier may be risky as it could easily look anachronistic. However, treading on the path opened by Philippe Ariès becomes incredibly rewarding when one chooses to focus on the English Elizabethan life, as framed and staged by Shakespeare, given the numerous links and clues he offers, deliberately or not, about private life, most notably in the late romances such as *Cymbeline*.

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