

**Patricia Meyer Spacks.** *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. vii + 242 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-76860-1.



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**Published on** H-Albion (January, 2005)

In her latest book, Patricia Meyer Spacks continues her exploration of identity and selfhood in the eighteenth century from a new vantage point: conceptions of privacy. As an introduction to the topic, she reviews current discussions of the right to privacy and grapples with the definition and application of this ubiquitous concept. The book then examines a broad range of eighteenth-century sources, including novels, diaries, letters, and poetry. Each chapter centers on a specific kind of source, which Spacks analyzes to answer questions about conceptions of privacy in the eighteenth century.

Spacks argues that in contrast to the present day (when privacy is considered both necessary and valuable), the place of privacy in the early modern world was ambiguous at best. The separation it created between an individual and his or her community was perceived as a threat both to the interests of the community and to the virtue of the individual. Privacy, understood as secrecy and seclusion, created space for an autonomy that was considered especially dangerous in the case of women and youth. The eighteenth-century focus on the individual brought attention to the tensions that surrounded privacy while the rise of the novel and increasing literacy rates made the solitary reader the focus of societal pre-occupations with concealment, authenticity, appearance, and hypocrisy. Although physical privacy was still a rare

commodity in the eighteenth century, the psychological privacy afforded by reading distilled anxieties about the undisciplined and unpredictable reader and the elusive nature of the self.

Anyone who studies the self in the eighteenth century must confront the scholarship on sensibility and Spacks does so with a keen eye for the intersections of the two notions. While these two ideas might at first seem to be opposites, Spacks makes the intriguing suggestion that the public displays of feeling for which sensibility is known actually worked to protect the privacy of their performers by masking the self with spectacles of emotional revelation. Spacks makes a similar discovery when she examines the place of proper manners and the art of conversation. She argues that these ritualized performances of decorum, propriety, and restraint enabled their practitioners to conceal their true selves and create space for privacy behind a disguise of dissimulation. The mastery of these public conventions was doubly disturbing because it allowed one to control one's self-representation while giving the impression of intimacy and complete disclosure. On a less conscious level the practice of diary-keeping mimicked these patterns. Although a diary might promise to hold the "real essence" of its writer's inner self, Spacks found trivial details of the quotidian rather than "unmediated access to the in-

ner life” of their authors in most eighteenth-century diaries (p. 194). In the book’s last chapter Spacks examines the poetry of the late eighteenth century. In it she sees a continued commitment to the interior life and a shift from sensibility’s emphasis on pain towards a discourse of memory and the natural world, themes typical of the Romantic period.

The question of privacy in the eighteenth century is provocative, but the study’s attention to class is undeveloped. Spacks is aware that the texts she examines were produced by elites, and she acknowledges that despite the omnipresence of servants in the homes of the wealthy, privacy was more possible for the prosperous. She points out that in novels the impoverished characters have no sense of privacy and must expose everything about themselves in their efforts to beg for sympathy and money. However, she gives scant attention to the implication of the fact that novels and poems touched the lives of people at every socio-economic level, especially servants, the largest occupational group in the early modern world.

Further research on this topic might integrate two important aspects of reading that had a profound impact on definitions and experiences of privacy in the eighteenth century. Novels touched the lives of all who heard and read them, and one should note that the experience of reading in the eighteenth century was often public. Novels and poetry were not restricted to the elite—servants abounded in the homes of the middle and upper classes and they were often in attendance during readings. The reception of the ideas about privacy in novels permeated the emotional and psychological experiences of a wide range of people at every social level, and teaching privacy was not the exclusive role of members of the aristocracy, gentry, or the middle classes. Prescriptive literature speaks volumes about the dangers posed by servants, their excessive reading, and their access (and the

possible availability of their reading matter) to the daughters of the household. Consideration of servants, their role in the household, and their proximity to everything both public and private would shed light on conceptions of privacy among the wealthy and suggest a lot about the shape privacy took among the lower orders and the ways in which the search for privacy by one group imprinted the other.

It is also interesting to consider the place of privacy in the discussions of solitary confinement that took place in the eighteenth century. Proponents of solitude as a form of punishment, most notably Jonah Hanway (1712-86), praised the restorative effects of isolation on the morality of prisoners. Hanway wrote “there is scarce any wickedness but solitude will work upon it.”[1] To prove the efficacy of solitude, Hanway pointed to the mental clarity and productivity that he experienced in his “closet” and promised that all men would “learn to reflect” there rather than in “the bustle of resort, amidst the business, the pleasures, the vices, and crimes of men” (p. 93). This is certainly a very different sort of privacy than that described in the sources Spacks uses. Hanway promises that the real self will emerge in solitude and that reformation will be achieved precisely by the lack of disguise, dissimulation, and distraction.

This provocative and stimulating study is a welcome and pertinent addition to the scholarship on eighteenth-century interiority. Spacks foregrounds the unknowability of the self which was and remains a source of anxiety and fascination.

#### Note

[1.] *Distributive justice and mercy: shewing, that a temporary real solitary imprisonment of convicts, supported by religious instruction...* (London, 1781), p. ix.

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**Citation:** Dana Rabin. Review of Spacks, Patricia Meyer, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

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