Vermeer's Secret Sphere: Privacy, Publicity, Sexuality

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Her body hemmed in by a table and chairs, a young woman dressed in a voluminous blue bed jacket stands reading a letter (fig. 1).¹ Lips parted slightly, the woman is absorbed in contemplation and does not see us watching her. Light from an unseen window illuminates the room, picking out details of the large wall map behind her as well as the glimmer of pearls on the table and a folded piece of paper that has been dropped on top of them. The letter, the map, and the woman's apparent pregnancy intimate worldly activities beyond this frozen moment and this confined space. Indeed, the enduring attraction of this painting lies in the unresolved tension between what it shows and what it hides: how it strangely makes us see what we cannot see. Mainly focusing on the personal domain of women, Johannes Vermeer was a meticulous painter of the visible world; yet the painter's painstaking attentiveness draws awareness to the invisible mysteries of bodily privacy, to inner feelings and intimate secrets. As viewers, we are positioned as voyeurs who spy on a personal moment that we cannot quite decipher.

People have not always been so intrigued by the hidden aspects of private life. To the contrary, the private body has a long history of denigration and disregard. In ancient and medieval understandings, a private person was one who lived in a state of privation. As Hannah Arendt explains: 'In ancient feeling, the privative trait of privacy . . . meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man's capacities. A man who lived only a private life . . . was not fully human.'² Underlying this brief passage about man's capacities for full human personhood is the tacit assumption that women—who lived only in private—could never become fully human. Dispossessed of political participation and basic freedoms, private bodies were subjected to the decisive actions made by men of higher status. Private people did not enter the public sphere; their opinions were of no consequence. The everyday experiences of private life, especially women's thoughts and activities, were implicitly understood to be of little import.

This devaluation of privacy began to shift in the early modern period.³ The Dutch Republic, for instance, witnessed an outpouring of close, almost obsessive, interest in a

DOI: 10.21552/edpl/2020/3/5

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1 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c. 1663. Object number: SK-C-251. To view a colour image see, <<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6420>>

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 38.

3 On this shift, see Paul Yachnin, 'The Reformation of Space in Shakespeare's Playhouse,' *Making Space Public in Early Modern Europe: Performance, Geography, Privacy*, ed. Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph Ward (Routledge 2013) 262-80; and Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

sphere that hitherto had gone unnoticed as visual images of domesticity proliferated in the seventeenth century. Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* is just one representative example of this larger visual trend. Significantly, there were no analogous visual traditions in the rest of Europe. The realm of Dutch visual culture is thus an important arena where unprecedented fascination with home life signaled a reassessment of bodily privacy. These were the nascent days of global capitalism. As men voyaged out on long and lucrative overseas journeys, women stayed behind. While husbands were the heads of households, in their absence, wives took charge. Dutch art defines the home as the domain of the housewife, often accompanied by her sidekick, the housemaid; these two stock characters come under scrutiny in hundreds of paintings even though their homely activities do not, at first glance, seem to merit particular notice. The lady of the house and her maid engage in a variety of mundane tasks: they sew and make lace, fold and put away laundry, read and write letters, instruct and care for children, sweep floors and make beds, prepare food and pour milk. Male householders rarely appear in these cosy scenes of private life. In fact, men only make an entry in pictures of dissolute women who sleep, drink wine, play music, eat oysters, ignore their children, flirt with soldiers, seductively solicit money, and generally neglect their household duties. Historians of Dutch art and culture have tended to interpret this imagery in broadly moralizing terms: by offering a wide range of both positive and negative examples, genre paintings of private life provided behavioural guidelines for Dutch women who were charged with the task of overseeing the home. Mainly displayed on the walls of middle-class houses, imagery of domesticity represented private life as a meaningful moral terrain. Moralists described the Dutch household as a microcosm of the nation: its well-ordered structure was the foundation of a well-governed republic.⁴

By paying close attention to the details of home life, these paintings served to make visible—and thus make public—the changing status of private bodies. The widespread production and consumption of images of the home separated out domesticity for explicit and self-conscious examination within the home itself, indicating that private life was no longer tacitly assumed to be the sphere of privation. Via the medium of painting, private moral behaviour was urgently brought forward as a matter of national concern, and private space was opened up to observation and debate. Genre paintings of domestic interiors transformed the home into a discursive realm, and thus a new kind of public space, which afforded possibilities for its occupants, including women, to participate in redefining the importance of everyday life.⁵

Pictorial fixation on the interior of the home emerges as a significant episode in the complex and intertwined histories of private and public life in early modern Europe.

4 For important interpretations of Dutch domestic imagery, see: Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Knopf 1987); Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-century Dutch Art* (Cambridge University Press 1993); Richard Helgersson, *Adulterous alliances: Home, State, and History in early modern European Drama and Painting* (University of Chicago Press 2000); Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-century Dutch Art* (University of California Press 2002).

5 Angela Vanhaelen, 'Public and Private Intercourse in Dutch Genre Scenes: Soldiers and Enigmatic Women / Painters and Enigmatic Paintings,' *Forms of Association: Making Publics in Early Modern Europe*. Eds. Paul Yachnin and Marlene Eberhart (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015) 115-132.

Figure 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c. 1663.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Jürgen Habermas has flagged the seventeenth century as a crucial turning point in the structural transformation of the public sphere, a moment when the opinions of private people began to matter and could influence the shape of public life. Notably, Habermas did not define the private and public spheres as opposites: the home, as a space of conversation, afforded ordinary people the opportunity to weigh in on matters of public concern. Habermas writes of a public sphere 'within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself.'⁶ Habermas's claim—that communication allowed the family to attain clarity about itself—resonates with the generally accepted interpretation of domestic paintings as moral mirrors for private people to contemplate their own behaviour.

With its intense focus on bodily privacy, Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* calls into question the ideal that communication leads to clarity and thus complicates the assumption that paintings reflect daily life. The motifs within the painting—especially

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6 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press 1994) 51.

the letter and the map—indicate how the home is both separate from and interconnected with the outside world. The letter has crossed the threshold, penetrating the sanctum of the housewife and commanding her inner thoughts, creating intrigue. Is she a pregnant wife eagerly receiving news from her seafaring husband? Or does the missive come from a lover who has taken advantage of the husband's absence? Because we cannot read the white page or hear the words formed by the woman's open mouth, we can never fully resolve this painting. By focusing on how messages are conveyed, this work interrogates the efficacy of communicative media: like an illegible dispatch or inaudible speech, the painting too is indecipherable.

Visual codes of secrecy are readily apparent in many Dutch genre scenes. Nicolaes Maes, for instance, made multiple paintings of eavesdroppers: figures in domestic interiors who smile out at us while holding a finger to their lips in the quintessential gesture of the secret-holder.⁷ These interlocutors invite complicity: we suspect that they know something about members of the conjugal household, having espied some backstage behaviour with potentially negative consequences. Agents in the transmission of messages, Vermeer's letter readers and Maes's eavesdroppers paradoxically make beholders see a secret by concealing it.⁸ By insinuating secrets, these paintings complicate the public/private dyad. For it is secrecy, rather than privacy, that is the true opposite of publicity. A secret is defined as something that is not publicized; secrets are not seen, discussed, or known by others. Thus, even as the intimate details of domestic life were being made visible and public by painters, the imagery indicates that besides the private sphere and the public sphere, the social structure also included a secret sphere.

When applied to the changing valuation of the private body, secrets are particularly titillating, since bodily secrets tend to be sexual. Related in theme to *Woman Reading a Letter*, Vermeer's painting *The Love Letter* (fig. 2)⁹ can likewise be appreciated for its experimentation with pictorial codes of intrigue. Here, the viewer is situated within a dim antechamber looking into a brighter inner room. At the left of the dark foreground space we can just make out a wall map. On the right, a raised curtain creates a suspenseful moment of revelation. The exposed scenario features familiar characters: the housewife, who holds a lute and wears a stylish fur-trimmed yellow jacket, has just been handed a letter by her maid, who stands above her in a domineering pose. The servant looks knowingly at the mistress who returns the look with an anxious glance. Like Maes's eavesdroppers, this housemaid is privy to knowledge that we cannot see. Providing further clues are two paintings on the back wall of the inner room. Framing the maid's head is a seascape painting; above it hangs a landscape featuring a lone male traveller walking along a road. The women's expressive faces and gestures together with the map, landscape, seascape, traveller, and letter hint at how mobility and geographical distance facilitate secrets.

7 See, for example, Nicolaes Maes, *Eavesdropper with a Scolding Woman*, 1655: <https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/maes/eavesdro.html>

8 Beryl Bellman, 'The Paradox of Secrecy' (1981) 4 *Human Studies*, 1-24.

9 Johannes Vermeer, *The Love Letter*, c. 1669-70. Object number SK-A-1595. Persistent URL: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6418>>

Figure 2. Johannes Vermeer, *The Love Letter*, c. 1669-70. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

If public interest in domesticity was motivated by the emerging ideal that social order depended on—indeed was determined by—the moral behaviour of private individuals, then it was the sexuality of middle-class women that most came under scrutiny. Domestic paintings repeatedly imply that abstinence and self-control were difficult for the women left behind by merchant husbands. The reiteration of this coy joke insistently locates marital infidelity in the housewife's domain, effectively deflecting notice away from other realms of sexual secrecy. By obsessively drawing attention to the home as the main locus of sex, genre paintings have managed to make us overlook the vastness of sexuality's locations as the Dutch Republic expanded its seaborne empire. To my knowledge, there are no interpretations of these paintings that interrogate the sexual activities of conspicuously absent male householders. Global travel provided all sorts of possibilities for sexual experimentation in part because it did not come under the close surveillance that occurred in domestic and civic settings.¹⁰ There are few paintings that publicize what happened when merchants were on the road or onboard ship or staying in colonial ports and trading posts for long months and years. Dutch

10 Anjali Arondekar, 'The Voyage Out: Transacting Sex under Globalization' (2007) 33 *Feminist Studies* 2, 338.

husbands no doubt had sexual secrets; and they likely did not write home detailing the various forms of adultery, prostitution, concubinage, miscegenation, rape, and sodomy encountered and experienced on their travels. Georg Simmel has noted that secrecy 'secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world.'¹¹ The secret sphere exists together with the public sphere of rational informed debate and alongside a private sphere where communication brought clarity to conjugal life. By keeping trans- and cross-cultural sexuality out of sight, Dutch genre paintings preserved a secret sphere of bodily privacy, which was essential to the geopolitics of the early capitalist nation state.

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11 Georg Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies,' *American Journal of Sociology* 11:4 (1906): 462.