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Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self (review)

Scott Paul Gordon

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BOOK REVIEWS

PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS. *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self*.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. vii + 242 pp. \$36.00.

Reviewed by **Scott Paul Gordon**

Ever since Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) provocatively offered a genealogy of a phenomenon that most had thought part of "nature" rather than of "history," scholars have produced fascinating histories of items or concepts that once seemed timeless. We have histories of childhood, of dirt, of envy, of zero, of pain, of rape, of various body parts (*The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* [1997]), even two histories of tears: Anne Vincent-Buffault's *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France* (1991) and Tom Lutz's *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (1999). The new field of the history of emotions, bolstered by New York University Press's "History of Emotions" series, has historicized the passions in the new world (*Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America* [1997]; *An Emotional History of the United States* [1998]) and in the old (*Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* [2004]). Ten years ago Patricia Meyer Spacks contributed *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (1995) to this project, and her most recent book marks another entry into this field.

The foundational strategy of *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* involves estranging a concept with which we have become too familiar: what "we assume as our due," Spacks notes early on, "our forebears considered a danger" (2). The later chapters of Spacks's study do attend, it is true, to eighteenth-century texts that "value" privacy for its "defensive function" (196), for enabling "subtle forms of self-protection" (113) or for permitting "people [to] construct narratives about themselves that express their fears and hopes" (184). The moments when Spacks considers the "yearning for privacy" (141), however, seem to me less interesting than those in which she analyzes the anxieties provoked by privacy or argues surprisingly for its conceptual absence from texts, such as *Fanny Hill*, that seem obsessed with exposing the private and the personal. Throughout the study, Spacks shows

eloquently how threatening the possibility of privacy was in a culture still committed to communal or social forms of understanding.

In a culture that depends on “social relations” for “moral discipline,” for instance, privacy “embodies danger,” since those who wish to be alone or to keep things to themselves elude such discipline: “what cannot be observed cannot be controlled” (88, 124). Eighteenth-century representations of private reading, similarly, typically expose how this practice “separat[es]” individuals “from the values of the community” (44). Although the eighteenth-century “worry over what it might mean for people to read in solitude” (27) is somewhat familiar ground, Spacks’s re-traces it with superb analyses of individual texts that, as a whole, counter the too-easy assumption that scenes of reading celebrate privacy, the personal, or individuality. Spacks’s fine reading of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, contends that to call Elizabeth a “‘private’ reader fails to acknowledge the degree to which she understands the necessary participation of the private in the social” (34), while her account of *Tom Jones* explores Fielding’s conviction that “privacy in reading ... threatens the vision of a feeling community of readers or of friends” (41). These sections of Spacks’s study confirm the contentions of Thomas Lacqueur’s *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Zone Books, 2003), which also explores the early modern anxiety over “solitary” practices in which the imagination’s products might come to seem more desirable than, and even replace, reality itself.

The other strength of Spacks’s study of privacy resides in the readings of individual texts themselves. Each chapter, offering a particular “angle of vision” (14) on the notion of privacy, is comprised of readings of six or seven eighteenth-century texts. (The chapters, in sequence, address reading, sensibility, dissimulation, “conversation,” sexuality, the “trivial” or humdrum, and enabling self-concealment). Many of these readings, brilliantly condensing a long career of thinking, help us see familiar eighteenth-century modes, such as sentimentality, in a new light. The discourse of sensibility, Spacks argues here, depends on “systematic violations of privacy” (133) in that it requires individuals to display publicly their sensibility, which may constitute “an imposition” rather than offer “a mode of freedom” (63). Other readings build on accounts offered by Spacks’s earlier studies such as *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* (1991). Spacks draws on the last decade’s considerable critical attention given to Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote*, for instance, to show how different eighteenth- and twenty-first-century communities have construed the text, and she avoids positing a single “correct” reading by invoking (and exploring productively) “readers’

unruliness, the fact that writers cannot dictate responses in those willing to commit themselves to textual perusal" (42). Anybody who writes on any of the texts Spacks discusses will benefit from consulting her subtle, beautifully written, and always acute readings.

I am not sure, however, that all these readings help us think in equally interesting ways about the notion of privacy. The primary weakness of Spacks's study lies in the book's structure. Spacks notes up front that her readings offer "a series of speculations" rather than a "systematic history" (14). But this warning cannot excuse the way in which some of the five- or six-page readings that, linked together, form the chapters of this study seem to lack any connection with privacy at all—until Spacks uses the reading's final sentences or paragraphs to make (or to try to make) this link visible. Spacks tethers her account of the *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* to her study, for instance, by proposing that, while Frances Sheridan deploys the conventions of the sentimental novel, "behind such conventions the author conceals her intentions, preserving a privacy of meaning. That is, she relies on the reader's imagination to fill out the narrative and its import" (108). The function of the phrase "privacy of meaning" is clear: it justifies the inclusion of this reading in this study. But how that phrase differs from the phrase "deliberate ambiguity," which Spacks uses in the next paragraph, is unclear; more uncertain is how this reading of Sheridan's text fits into a chapter focused on how eighteenth-century heroines negotiate the "contradictory demands" of propriety, which requires them to "reveal what needs to be revealed" while preserving their status as "modest women" (100–01). A similar problem arises when Spacks suggests that any writing that "emanates . . . from a particular consciousness" constitutes a "record of privacy" (192), which seems more a rationale for talking about any text that one likes rather than for selecting texts that advance our understanding of how the eighteenth century explores the ambiguities of privacy. Too often, I think, Spacks replaces terms such as "ambiguity" or "point of view" with the term "privacy" not to illuminate unexpected relations between these concepts, but merely to fuse readings that explore the former concepts into a study about the latter. Spacks always provides interesting and compelling readings of texts, but some of these readings seem only marginally related to even an *unsystematic* history of the concept of privacy.