



***Notions of Privacy at Early Modern
European Courts. Reassessing the
Public and Private Divide, 1400-1800***

**Edited by Dustin M. Neighbors,
Lars Cyril Nørgaard, and Elena
Woodacre**

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In the realm of early modern European court culture and politics there is no clear public/private dichotomy, as demonstrated by this collection of ten scholarly papers. In the lengthy introduction, Dustin M. Neighbors challenges this binary view, proposing instead a contextual lens for understanding privacy. Using the early modern court to show how the boundaries between the public and private realms are not only blurred but also subject to continuous negotiation, he suggests that privacy may be located in smaller, less conspicuous moments, marked by subtle transitions and thresholds.

The introduction outlines the key themes: architecture, spaces and access; patronage, art, and literature; religion; and politics. This arrangement underscores the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to both privacy and court studies, exemplified by the different methodological approaches—terminological, heuristic, and semantic—developed at the Centre for Privacy Studies.

Chapter One, by Mette Birkedal Bruun and Lars Cyril Nørgaard provides essential background on the differences between early modern and contemporary concepts of privacy. Although the term “privacy” appears in early-modern sources, its meaning differs from today. The authors offer tools for exploring privacy contextually and address anachronism by engaging with contemporary debates surrounding digital privacy.

In Chapter Two, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger proposes replacing the public/private dichotomy with a frontstage/backstage framework. She gives an excellent critique of how the terms “public” and “private” were used differently in an early modern context, noting that the ruler’s body was of public importance, whereas political activities were often private. Although the suggestion to replace one dichotomy with another has its limitations, Stollberg-Rilinger acknowledges that the frontstage/backstage dichotomy actually represents a broad spectrum. She illustrates these concepts with two images from Empress Maria Theresa’s Viennese court, highlighting the performative nature of privacy.

Chapter Three explores privacy through the organization of space, material culture, and the royal body. Dries Raeymaekers expands on the fluid organization of space, which shifted between ceremonial and informal depending on time of day, occasion, or people present. Privacy, he argues, was flexible, rather than strictly opposed to the public. Using

examples from the English court and the Low Countries, he highlights how textiles such as wall hangings affected visual access, emphasizing privacy's ephemeral nature. While the royal body was never truly alone, he argues that this constant visibility does not preclude the possibility of privacy, as "the purpose of visibility was to maintain the illusion of majesty, and for that, one needed to be prepared," (p. 112) a statement that aligns well with the frontstage/backstage framework.

Chapter Four provides an architectural and social analysis of the *Frauenzimmer*, a courtly space for women. Using a painting depicting Electress Henriette Adelaide's ladies-in-waiting, Britta Kägler explores privacy and gender, noting that privacy did not mean solitude, as the women were never left alone. Her analysis leaves some ambiguity regarding the definition of privacy, but it seems that it related more to controlled access, with the *Frauenzimmer* locked at night. Privacy might have been easier found outside court and ego-documents reveal that leisure, reading, and illness were considered private activities.

In Chapter Five, Fabian Persson examines the Swedish court *entrées*, a hierarchical list regulating access to the king's rooms. This system elevated the status of those included, but did not guarantee influence, as access to a space does not equal access to the king. Influenced by Versailles, the court's spatial organization created architectural segregation with a distinct temporal dimension. Rooms could shift along the public-private spectrum depending on the context. Persson also notes that satellite residences, like Drottningholm, offered better opportunities for privacy than the main palace in Stockholm.

In Chapter Six, Oskar Rojewski highlights how function outweighed status in court access by comparing artists at the Burgundian and Castilian Courts. Artists, responsible for shaping the ruler's image through state portraits, gained access to the monarch's body and were included among the *valets de chambre*, a group of servants with access to the ducal chambers. Rojewski notes that the Castilian court strictly followed official access documents, while the Burgundian dukes employed artists from outside their immediate circle, like Rogier van der Weyden, who sometimes accessed inner chambers despite not being on the official list.

In Chapter Seven, Marta Wojtkowska-Maksymik explores sixteenth-century Polish literature, showing how privacy was often linked to public service and *raison d'état*. Writers like Łukasz Górnicki viewed private interactions as serving the public good, while Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski and Mikołaj Rej saw courtly privacy as a distraction from state duties. The chapter contrasts privacy, associated with entertainment and intimate conversations,

with public duties, highlighting tensions between courtly service and the freedom of country estates, as seen in Kochanowski's writings.

Chapter Eight, by Mette Birkedal Bruun and Lars Cyril Nørgaard, explores the concept of devotional privacy at the court of Versailles through the lives and piety of Mademoiselle de Montpensier and Madame de Guise. Drawing on Altman's concept of boundary control, privacy is related to solitude, highlighting how both terms reflect a withdrawal from the collective. The chapter presents privacy as a spectrum rather than binary, introducing "pockets of privacy" to describe various scales of religious withdrawal, from small gestures to larger retreats.

In Chapter Nine, Jonathan Spangler shifts the focus to the political dimensions, examining how Duke Léopold of Lorraine's efforts to administer public justice were frequently undermined by the nobility, who prioritized their private interests through private justice. The duke balanced maintaining relations with transnational nobles and ennobling loyal locals. The chapter highlights the significance of personal connections in shaping public justice. When Lorraine was annexed by France, the nobles' private interests took precedence, though some followed Duke Léopold to Tuscany, demonstrating the strength of personal bonds.

In Chapter Ten, Dustin M. Neighbors and Elena Woodacre explore the concept of privacy politics through two distinct case studies: Maximilian's visit to the Dresden court of August of Saxony in 1564 and the court and household of Joanna of Navarre, Queen of England in the early fifteenth century. Both case studies reveal how political privacy was intricately shaped by individual agents navigating their personal—or rather private—interests and needs.

Notions of Privacy at Early Modern European Courts offers a thought-provoking exploration of privacy as a multifaceted and dynamic concept at early modern European courts. The contributors effectively challenge assumptions about privacy, emphasizing its historical specificity and fluidity. While the broad chronological scope (1400–1800) allows for comprehensive coverage, more attention could be given to how notions of privacy evolved over these four centuries of profound social and political change. Most chapters focus predominantly on privacy experienced by monarchs and high nobility, with Rojewski's examination of court artists being a rare exception that addresses other court staff. This omission suggests a potential gap in exploring privacy within the broader spectrum of court society, that included many categories of the "Other" based on gender and class, as Bruun and Nørgaard argue in their chapter "Considering Privacy at Court".

The volume would also benefit from more images, especially in chapters addressing complex spatial organizations and sequences. The absence of such images limits the reader's ability to grasp these spatial dynamics fully. This collection is a valuable resource for scholars of early modern history, court studies, and the cultural history of privacy, inviting further research and reflection on how privacy has been constructed and contested across different historical and cultural contexts.

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