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Time, history and the
transformation of thought

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Chapter 15

Private, Public, Sacred Space

– Why gender studies in Particular Should Consider Sacred Space a Third Spatial Category*

Jorunn Økland

In this chapter I will show how and why it is helpful to triangulate, or supplement, the private-public binary with a third spatial category, the sacred, if we want to understand the space of female speech, agency and activity in the past. In particular, Graeco-Roman Antiquity had more fine-masked categories of gender and space than our modern period. Sacred space was not identical to public space nor any part or subfield of public space, but had its own specific meaning, structure, and position in the socio-cultural order. This argument troubles and undermines the received opposition between public male space and private female space.

I will use ‘private-public’ as the main designation of the binary in question. In my own work, I have often preferred more pragmatic categories (‘domestic’ space instead of ‘private’), just as Joan Scott does (‘familial’ instead of ‘private’). But the degree of semantic overlap with the much more frequently used terms for these spaces, ‘private’ and ‘public’, means that deviating terms are more variations of a theme than genuinely new categories.

Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Spatial Categories in Ancient and Modern History

The feminist thinkers presented in this chapter, mainly Mary Beard (Classics), Doreen Massey (Geography), Yvonne Hird-

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man and Joan Wallach Scott (both History), all take standard distinctions between public and private as their points of departure for further reflections on gender and space.

For theorists coming out of the radical British geography tradition, such as Doreen Massey (and David Harvey), space and time are not static axes along which things take place, rather, space and time are mutually dependent modes of relation. For Massey, “‘place’ is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location.”¹ The set of social relationships constructs and structures the activities taking place there as male or female gendered, and this way the spaces themselves become perceived as gendered. But the activity is not the only thing that genders a space. Doreen Massey states:

Space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover, they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between cultures over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effects back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live.²

The Swedish modern historian Yvonne Hirdman has also written on the interrelation between space, activity and gender. She is concerned with how the “gender system”, the structure of the relations between different genders, is used as a foundation for other social orders and structures.³ The gender system operates according to two dynamics. First, the dynamics of dichotomy or *separation*, that is the taboo against gender blending: masculine

¹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 168.

² Doreen Massey, “17. Space, Place and Gender” in Rendell, Jane, Barbara Penner & Iain Borden (Eds.), *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000: 128–133), p. 129.

³ B: Yvonne Hirdman, Rapport 23. Genussystemet – teoretiska funderingar kring kvinnors sociala underordning (Uppsala: Maktutredningen, 1988).

and feminine should be kept strictly separated. The second dynamic is *hierarchy*: the masculine is norm. This second dynamic is dependent on and legitimated through the first.⁴ Hirdman states: "We know that the "law" of segregation exists everywhere with regard to physical and psychic order. It structures actions, places and characters."⁵

With her background in historical materialism (= Marxism), Hirdman finds that the fundamental expression of the law of segregation is found in the gendered division of *labor* and in notions of masculine and feminine. She shows how character, action and place are intimately linked to one another and "stand in a legitimizing, reinforcing, dialectic relationship with each other: sort 1 performs action 1 on place 1; sort 2 performs action 2 on place 2; since sort 1 performs action 1, sort 1 becomes sort 1. If one is located on place 2, one performs action 2 and is sort 2 etc."⁶ In my own work, this insight has been particularly helpful to illuminate how the distribution of ritual patterns of actions (roles) between men and women serves to represent the sacred space in question as gendered in a particular way. But put the other way around, her theory also helps us see how the placing of people in different gendered spaces is an important way of inscribing gender upon them.

Hirdman does not ask where these dynamics of segregation and hierarchy "come from", but she does underscore their unique structuring abilities (Hirdman actually calls them the two *logics* of the gender system). Dichotomies and hierarchies are tools that always nourish and reward logical thought by ordering the world and leaving an impression of understanding or controlling it. They *make* sense. But referring to Simone de Beauvoir who stated that one cannot be an A without suppressing a B, Hirdman also finds that the two logics or dynamics

⁴ Hirdman, Rapport, pp. 7–9 and 13.

⁵ A: Yvonne Hirdman, "Genussystemet – reflexioner kring kvinnors sociala underordning," (*Kvinnovetenskapelig tidskrift* 1988 3: 49–63), p. 52. my translation.

⁶ Hirdman, "Genussystemet – reflexioner," p. 52.

make power structures: what sort 1 does is legitimated by constructing a contrast with sort 2.⁷

While inspired by the scholars just mentioned, the current chapter takes its special cue from *Sex and Secularism* by Joan Wallach Scott.⁸ Scott uses historical evidence to do several things with the public-private distinction, which she labels ‘politics and economics’ (male) and ‘familial’ (female), respectively: First, Scott presents historical data from the long 19th century when a new, secular realm of society emerged with the separation of church/sacred space from the state. The secular realm was divided further into politico-economic and familial spaces. Thus, secondly, Scott shows (even down to her choice of labels) that what we perceive to be standard in the public-private distinction is in fact historically contingent. Third, she deconstructs the public-private distinction as a clear-cut, spatial distinction relating to historical, material physical spaces (e.g. town halls and market places versus houses people owned or rented, slept and stayed in). Especially when it comes to gender, no such material distinction is stable over time. Instead, she sees the distinction as a sort of spatialized discourse, a classification of concepts and ideas that were associated with each of their material spaces and in turn linked to different forms of (dis-)empowerment. Scott is far from the first to make this argument; Hirdman, mentioned above, argued the same based on social systems theory many years earlier. Fourth, Scott challenges the false notion that secularism is a guarantee of gender equality, arguing instead that this notion has served to divert attention from a persistent set of difficulties related to gender difference. She also suggests that gender equality became a primary feature of the discourse of secularism only in the latter half of the 20th century, with the arrival of Muslim immigrants in Europe.⁹

⁷ For a fuller summary of what I see as the significance of Hirdman’s theory, see overview in Jorunn Økland, *Women in Their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 59–60.

⁸ Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁹ Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, p. 10 and 17.

Thus, Scott demonstrates that gender equality, invoked today as a fundamental and enduring principle of modern, secular societies and their public space in particular, was not originally associated with the term “secularism” when it first entered the lexicon in the nineteenth century. *Inequality* of the sexes was presupposed also in the spatial articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity, or in other words: when religious authority yielded from spaces beyond the walls of churches, religious schools and meeting places, etc., non-sacred spaces were left in a vacuum. In theory, they might have become “neutral” and open to full participation by all people.¹⁰ In historical practice, it was clear that “secular” at the time had little to do with changing religious habits, practices or beliefs among the population, and more to do with changes in arbitration, authorization, and power.

Western nation-states found it necessary to construct a new ground for women’s subordination when it could no longer be grounded in the religious authority emanating from ‘sacred’ spaces (at this time mostly Christian churches). Hence the *secular* sphere was further subdivided into private and public, and women were assigned to the “private”, familial sphere meant to complement the rational masculine realms of “public” politics, economics, institutions of learning, etc. While Scott does not pay attention to important details especially regarding historical religion and how Christianity was embedded historically in Europe (as opposed to Christianity’s function in the

¹⁰ This optimism has never fared well in practice. In his 1999 article “Secularization, R.I.P.”, sociologist Rodney Stark argues that the “secularisation theory” is out-dated, old-fashioned and, as the title suggests, the theory is dead and should be left to rest. To Stark the secularization thesis has failed to be an accurate prediction due to six reasons. Firstly, it is a myth that there has been a decline in religious belief and participation because “there has been no demonstrable long-term decline in European religious participation” and in Europe “levels of subjective religiousness remain high.” Next, he argues that there has never been an “Age of Faith,” as most Europeans did not attend church during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In fact, Stark highlights that many clergy were incompetent and often absent from their parishes. Finally, while there were “periodic explosions of mass religious enthusiasm” (cf. below on the Quakers), these offer even stronger evidence against involvement in organized religion. See Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.” (*Sociology of Religion*, 1999 Autumn: 249–273).

U.S.), she nevertheless constructs a strong argument for an important point.

Secularism – the term itself derives from *saeculum*, *saeculare*, meaning age, time, generation – as opposed to what is eternal, beyond finite time and space, that is, an order of being associated with the gods. Humans inhabit the finite world, which is often subdivided into further spaces roughly equivalent to Western categories of public, private – and “sacred”. While I still believe that in the present, secularism is the best guarantee of gender equality we have (it is much harder to argue with gods or find hearing among their human representatives....), it is important to understand secularism as a contingent *value* of public space in modern Western societies, an ideology excluding gods or their representatives as the final arbiters of matters relating to public space. Secularism is neither a material, objective feature of it, nor a future prediction.¹¹ Further, the autonomy and authority that women have held historically in what I here and elsewhere have labelled “sacred” space – while being excluded from public space – should warn us further from concluding that female agency and authority is *necessarily* linked to a secular public space. It depends on how the religion in question is construed – and how gender is construed in relation to it. It is this latter point that this article will continue to explore through examples from historical societies we refer to as our heritage. I will make the point that sacred spaces have, to a larger extent than both private and public spaces, accommodated female agency and authority.

¹¹ i.e. my opinion is that Stark, mentioned in the previous footnote, partly misses the point in his otherwise important critique of the secularisation theory. We have to study *value theory*, not sociology, to get a grasp of secularism’s relationship to social and material realities. Further, after multiculturalism, pluralism, etc., it has become clearer that state-endorsed and -implemented values cannot be imposed on domestic space without becoming totalitarian.

The Distinction Between Public, Domestic and Sacred Spaces

Gendering the Public/Private/Sacred Distinction in the Ancient World

In scholarship on women's lives in Antiquity, women's ritual roles are often discussed as if they were regular public roles. The rationale is that religion is an inseparable part of culture and society, and such holistic approaches can illuminate e.g., how ancient women's ritual roles were related to their sexual and social status. However, the identification of the ritual/sacred with the public, in the case of women's roles does not explain why, if they could have "public" roles in the cult, women could not have various other public roles. Further, this reductionist identification of religion with public life, render invisible many women's ritual roles.

In ancient public discourse we frequently find gendering definitions of space: the authors state which spaces are "for women", and which spaces are "for men". One example by Philo must suffice:

Market-places and council-halls and law-courts and gatherings and meetings where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air life with full scope for discussion and action – all these are suitable to men both in war and in peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house.¹²

Philo's quote should not be taken as objective description of space, or as descriptions of what actually happens in the spaces in question, as if women were not present in marketplaces and

¹² Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.169 (in F. H. Colson, G. H. Whitaker, et al. [trans.] *Philo in ten volumes* [Loeb Classical library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–1953]). Cf. the striking similarities with approximately contemporary Columella, *De re rustica*: 12, Preface 4–5 (in H. B. Ash, E. S. Forster, et al. [trans.] *Columella, On Agriculture: in three volumes* [Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941–1955]).

gatherings and meetings.¹³ Different values are attached to different spaces according to what gender they are mostly associated with.

Read within Hirdman's frame of reference, one could say that Philo confers importance and power on one space over the other space. One cannot at the outset just assume that society functioned according to these rules. It is exactly because the distinctions were not so clear that it was continually important to reinforce them through discourse.¹⁴ By representing public space as male space, ancient public men legitimized the exclusion of women from power positions, public discourse and processes of decision-making. Women were never forbidden to enter public space even if it was discursively constructed as male.¹⁵

While it is not un-common to see the *public* and *domestic* as distinct, binary spatial discourses, it is rare to consider *sacred* space as a third spatial category, equally discursively constructed through speech and ritual action. Is the reason that our cognitive preference is for binary thought, so that we overlook additional, distinct spaces? Ritual constructs and structures space by drawing on a gendered, divine cosmology that can often be different from the rules governing human interaction in public and domestic spaces.¹⁶

¹³ Among scholars who discuss working women or women who in other ways are present in public space, see especially Susan Treggiari, "Lower Class Women in the Roman Economy," *Florilegium* 1979 1: 65–86; Mary Lefkowitz, Maureen Fant (Eds.), *Women's Life in Greece & Rome. A Source Book in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992): 208–224.

¹⁴ John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire. The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 6: "to know when any such male law-givers – medical, moral, or marital, whether smart or stupid – are (to put it bluntly) bluffing or spinning fantasies or justifying their 'druthers' is so hard that most historians of ideas – Foucault, for all that he is exceptional, is no exception here." For a more recent, nuanced discussion, see Kate Cooper, "Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman *domus*," *Past and Present* 2007, 197: 3–33.

¹⁵ See e.g. Ville Vuolanto, "Public Agency of Women in the Late Roman World, in Jussi Rantala (Ed.), *Gender, Memory, and Identity in the Roman World*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019: 41–62 (DOI: 10.5117/9789462988057_CH01).

¹⁶ Ritual space is just the space that is constructed through ritual, whether it is conceived of as sacred or not.

An important function of certain sacred/ritual spaces was exactly to *transgress* the boundaries of proper behavior in public and domestic spaces.¹⁷ With regard to women, this difference in gendered expectations between public and sacred spaces is telling. It is particularly evident in material from ancient Greece: while the *deme* (commune) in its political aspect necessarily remained an all-male preserve, the *deme* in its religious aspect operated under a different set of imperatives. As John Gould states:

In the sacred and ritual activities of the community the active presence of women in the public world (was) not merely tolerated but required. As priestesses in many of the major cults of the *polis* (priestesses of gods as well as of goddesses), ... *the participation of women is indispensable to the sacral continuity, the ordering of society.*¹⁸

In addition to their priesthoods, Gould also lists a range of other official ritual roles for women: in the great religious processions through the *public* spaces of the city, as “temple servants” of the city goddess Athena (tending her statue and weaving her clothes) and of Artemis at Brauron nearby; as raisers of the ritual, sacrificial scream; their “song” in mourning, at funerals, in the rituals of marriage, and much more. Further, the exclusively female festival *Thesmophoria* took place at Pnyx, the location where the council of (male) Athenian citizens usually gathered. This festival was a rite of reversal, in which women did and said many things that could not be expressed by them outside of the sacred space.¹⁹

We note that among Gould’s examples, women’s loud uses of their voice dominate: In her recent book *Women and Power*, Classicist Mary Beard expands on how authors in Greek and

¹⁷ Winkler, *Constraints*, chapter 7.

¹⁸ John P. Gould, “Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100, 1980: 38–59 (p. 50f).

¹⁹ Cf. Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*, p. 193–196; Gould, “Law, Custom,” p. 51.

Roman Antiquity meant that the sound of the female voice disqualifies its owner from opening her mouth in public space.²⁰ Beard gives several examples of how the female voice is described as equal to the sound of cows, dogs' barking, or other animal sounds. Beard presents these ancient examples of perceptions of women's voices in public to point out that we also find traces of them in modern times, mentioning the habit of female top politicians (e.g. Margaret Thatcher) attending voice education to make her voice stronger, deeper – and more authoritative. But as we have seen, in the ancient world there was another conceptual space (sacred) taking place in the same material environment (e.g. Pnyx) where women could use their different voice, and this was seen as vital to the survival of the community.

Women's Religious Offices

The fact that women could hold sacred offices as priestesses, servants, patronesses etc.,²¹ even if public offices were not open to them, has led many scholars to believe that ritual activity constituted the primary exception to the rule of “seclusion and exclusion” of ancient women from the public sphere.²² Yet, the separation between public and sacred space has functioned differently through history: Compared to ancient Greece, in the Roman period sacred spaces were less liminal with regard to women's place and presence. The female priesthood of Ceres/Demeter at Rome was characterized as a public office. Such a priesthood seems to have represented the greatest public honour

²⁰ Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2017), especially pp. 25–34.

²¹ For further examples of women's religious offices, see e.g. Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, section 10.

²² Cf. Helene Foley, “The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama,” in Helene P. Foley (Ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1981): 127–68, “Women in drama do not confine themselves to the domestic and religious spheres to which they were relegated in reality” (p. 151).

to which a woman could aspire.²³ Even “respectable” matrons²⁴ had to attend rituals in public space to fulfil their sacred obligations. Respectable wives could participate in the festival *Thesmophoria*, but not go shopping in the marketplace.²⁵ Ancient authors could therefore mention even women they considered “respectable” in ritual contexts without bringing shame upon these women or their husbands. Taking place both in sanctuaries and in open, public spaces of the city, the cult activities of women are not all about “seclusion and exclusion” since in a way they took place in some kind of sacred “third space” in the same material environment as “public space”.²⁶ We must therefore reformulate the axiom and say that *what* women were thought to represent, was considered vital in sacred space, whether these spaces were constructed as liminal or in direct continuation with other public spaces – or more conventionally, inside dedicated sanctuaries.

Summing up, there are significant differences in the ways gender categories worked in sacred spaces and in the public and domestic spaces of daily life in the ancient world. Therefore, sacred space should be considered as a separate space in the study of gender, and not be conflated with the public – or domestic – spaces. Surely, ritual is *also* a place for (social) value reinforcement, ritual hierarchies can reflect social hierarchies, but neither in Greek, Roman or Judean religious cultures were

²³ Plutarch, *Bravery of Women*, 262D (in F. C. Babbitt, et al. [trans.]

Plutarch, *Moralia: in sixteen volumes* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–1976).

²⁴ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 13.574B-C (in C. B. Gulick [trans], *Deipnosophists Book 6* [Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009]): “But that the prostitutes also celebrate their own festival of Aphrodite at Corinth is shown by Alexis in ‘the girl in love’: ‘The city celebrated a festival of Aphrodite for the prostitutes, but it is a different one from that held separately for freeborn women.’”

²⁵ E.g., this “rule” applies only to representation of “respectable” women: there must have been lots of women out of doors in Greece before Hellenistic times, too. For a very nuanced presentation, see Gould, “Law, Custom.”

²⁶ I have not drawn further on Soya’s influential work to discuss the spatiality of the sacred as a kind of “thirdspace” due to its lack of attention to gender. For other purposes, his “thirdspace” can be illuminating. Edward Soya, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined-Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

women discursively excluded from sacred space even though they were mostly discursively excluded from public spaces.

In this section I have talked about sanctuary, cultic, ritual, sacred as if they were synonymous. Sacred is the most common term, which I use as the overarching category. Sanctuary, cultic or ritual space, on the other hand, are more precise subcategories. Sacred space can be discursively constructed through either speech, ritual action, or through architecture.

Second Period: Post-Reformation Europe

Although Ancient Greece may be the most pertinent case in point, I will present one more recent example from Europe, in order to show that in spite of constant change, there is still good reason to consider sacred space a separate category when we study the space for women's speech and agency in history.

But first an interlude.

We saw that in the ancient world, women's agency in sacred space often took place within the material environment of public city spaces. In Medieval Europe on the other hand, it was the material provision of a women's *monastery* that provided the infrastructure for women-dominated sacred spaces – although they, too, were ultimately under male-clerical supervision. Running a post-Reformation *vicarage* or *stately home* on behalf of a husband, and with children around one's legs, gave less space and time than the nuns had for reading, visions, letter writing between nuns and between nuns and church authorities, church politics, etc. In other words, the differences in conditions for women's agency in the mentioned three spaces, meant that times changed: It has often been lamented that Protestantism, exemplified by Martin Luther in the 16th century, who married a former nun (Katharina von Bora), practically destroyed the space for female autonomy, power, agency, and literacy when he discursively obliterated the sacred space of the monasteries as a distinct spatial category. Instead, he described society as divided

into precisely private and public spheres (and limiting the space of women to the ‘private’, familial sphere). Aligning the monasteries with the public sphere, was his way of getting rid of the “sacred space” of the monasteries altogether. The side effect was that the realm of the sacred as a more autonomous space for women disappeared, too – for a while.²⁷

The post-Reformation period saw an eruption of sects, and women preachers emerged in their “sacred spaces”. The early period from 1650 is probably more dynamic in Britain, while as we gradually move toward the French Revolution, other European countries began to take the lead. I have previously presented English Quakerwomen Priscilla Cotton and Mary Cole, who were imprisoned for “prophecy” in 1655 after they extended their preaching activity to public spaces,²⁸ here I will present Margaret Fell (1614–1702), founder of Quakerism.

The Quaker movement represented the radical end of the Puritan movement. They believed in the “inner light”, that the light of/or God resides inside each individual; that therefore every Christian, man *and* woman, can speak prophecy, speak for Christ. George Fox, Margaret Fell’s second husband, is often credited as the movement’s founder, but in practice his wife Margaret Fell Fox should be considered the movement’s founder and George Fox its inspiration and earliest advocate: She was 10 years his senior, but survived him by 11 years. They first met when he visited the stately home Swarthmoor Hall, which Margaret shared with her first husband, the lawyer. She had opened up the home for religious gatherings – in our terms, she created a sacred space within the walls of a domestic space. After her first husband died and Fell married Fox, “it was

²⁷ See Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). But see also Katharina Schütz Zell, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, edited and translated by Elsie McKee. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

²⁸ See Jorunn Økland, “4. Donne interpreti della Bibbia nella tradizione protestante”, in Adriana Valerio and Guiseppa Barbaglio (Eds.), *Donne e Bibbia: Storia ed esegesi* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2006): 99–116. From prison the two wrote the pamphlet *To the Priests and People of England*.

Margaret who administered the finances, indeed donated her own fortune, kept track of correspondence at her home at Swarthmore, visited meetings, and spoke out publicly in defense of Quakers. Even after the death of George in 1691 she continued with her vigilant activities.”²⁹

In 1666, Margaret Fell Fox published the tractate *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures*,³⁰ which she had written during one of her many imprisonments (for, among other things, using her home as a space for religious meetings). The text was based on what was practiced within the “sacred space” in her home, where also husband George supported women’s preaching,³¹ and was also based on the preaching practices of other Quaker women during a time when priest-hoods were public offices and reserved for men. The argument was built on quotes from Paul’s letters. Paul the Apostle took for granted that women prophesy and pray in the ritual gatherings (i.e., sacred space) taking place in private homes, but he also told them to be quiet in some instances. In Fell’s own time, the church was a more integrated part of public space. Hence Paul’s silencing of women during some parts of the ritual were read as a general silencing of women’s speech, by conflating the sacred space of the gathering into which they were spoken with the public space of the 17th century. Fell shows how such a reading is wrong and inconsistent. Quakerism quickly grew into a subversive movement protesting that the authority of both the church and the Bible had been abused and corrupted. The Quaker practice of having women preachers and leaders were considered by the establishment as a “monstrous” practice, “condemned as against nature”.³²

²⁹ Fulltext in e.g. Moira Ferguson (Ed.), *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578–1799* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): 114–127. For more on Fell, see Jacqueline Broad, “Margaret Fell,” in Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Spring 2020: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/margaret-fell/>

³⁰ Selvidge, *Notorious Voices*, p. 36.

³¹ See more on Paul’s texts in Økland, *Women Place*, chapter 6.

³² Barry Reay, *The Quakers, and the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1985),

This history was repeated several times over the next centuries. It was a recurring post-Reformation phenomenon that sects tended to be more open toward the spiritual equality of men and women than mainstream churches. Such sects gathered in homes or outdoors and often ended up in conflict when they ventured into “public space”, its establishment and institutions³³ – until the arrival of universal suffrage and women priests. Other sects were quicker to move in a mainstream direction. As they became more institutionalized, integrated into the general public, their radical gender agenda was often discarded.

Space, History, and the Transformation of Thought

As stated above, the way Scott describes the new, 19th century gendered spheres of the ‘familial’ on the one hand, vs. the spheres of ‘politics and economics’ on the other, overlaps largely with the standard designations “private” and “public”. In some form, this distinction can be found in pre-modern societies too, but the configuration of it, which much gender research seems to presuppose, is definitely a product of the Enlightenment: In the modern context, the principal focus for Scott, both private and public are in fact located within the new, autonomous *secular* sphere. Within the church’s sacred space, gender divisions continued to be based on a divinely sanctioned gender *hierarchy*. Hence Scott’s discussion illustrates how the private/public distinction, so fundamental in much gender research, is a historically conditioned distinction, just like male/female. And like the male/female distinction, many historical societies have operated with further categories alongside these two sets of binaries. It is, I propose, as a third category that we should understand sacred space, just like some gender models have operated with a third gender.

When a secular sphere emerged as *independent* of the religious sphere, private and public spaces became subdivisions, but

p. 58, quoting from *Antichrist in Man* by Rev. Joshua Miller (1655).

³³ For a selection, see Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland (Eds.), *Radical Christian Writings* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

the religious spheres continued (as many do still) to follow their inherited sacred space configuration. This is important to point out, because the history toward women's equality has often been written as the history of women conquering public roles in public spaces. Thereby it is overlooked how some sacred spaces in earlier times had women exerting relative power and leadership, as illustrated with the examples given above, and further one could add how women's speech, initiative and knowledge production was facilitated in monasteries in the Middle Ages, and how the first recognized professions for women in the early 19th century were within religious hospitals and schools, where women worked as nurses/deaconesses, teachers and missionaries. The oversight is regrettable from the point of view of historical detail, but it also produces a false narrative. The very powerful female abbesses or prioresses of the High Middle Ages (e.g., Hildegard of Bingen), or the earliest post-Reformation founders of new religious communities (e.g., Margaret Fell), put the progress made in the long 19th century regarding women in public space, into a different perspective. In much of this long century, gender equality progress was mostly about catching up with whatever women had been able to do centuries earlier, in sacred space.

I have tried to show through argument and examples that in the modern world, the public/private distinction pertains to the secular realm, and that if we want to understand gender dynamics in historical perspective we also have to take into account sacred/ritually constructed spaces as a third category. This third category also deconstructs the binary as such, something which is not achieved by just changing names (e.g., from private to domestic, familial, etc.). Thus, when feminist thinkers have taken the private/public binary as a point of departure for criticism and reflection – as if it covered the whole of human activity, they have effaced an ancient space of huge importance for women's agency, for ancient societies – and for our understanding of ancient women in particular.

Before the 19th century that is Scott's focus, women found a certain place for their agency, speech, action and initiative in

sacred spaces, although it was never unrestricted. Neither should it be denied that even the sacred spaces that functioned according to their own rules, were still sub-divisions of a larger whole of general patriarchal society. In periods when sacred space has been more aligned with public space, sacred spaces have still been gendered, but in other ways: seating men and women in separate aisles, balconies, or separate rooms for worship (or even gender-specific rituals); or putting items on display in the worship space that all allude to only one gender.