

WOMEN, PRIVACY AND MODERNITY IN BRITISH EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITING

Wendy Gan

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Wendy Gan's thought-provoking book offers a reassessment of the relations between women, the psycho-physical spaces of privacy, and middle-class identity as depicted in a selection of early twentieth-century British novels. Underpinning Gan's approach to these issues are two key assumptions: first, that privacy aids enfranchisement, opening up domains in which alternative kinds of identification become possible; and second, that privacy represents a provisional ameliorative practice, one which allows a temporary escape from the often harsh pressures of domesticity leading to feelings of privilege and independence. Both conjectures derive from Gan's study of the evolution of a primarily bourgeois female demographic during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Women, Privacy and Modernity* relates literary production to the varied shifts in the nature of domesticity, social convention, work, community, and feminism that occurred during the Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian periods. The book examines the 'splinters' of freedom available to women in a patriarchal modernity that their enactment of privacy helps to oppose: 'In

practising privacy [the middle-class woman] engages in being more free, less restricted, and less of a drudge than her working-class counterpart. In experiencing varying levels and sites of being modern through privileging privacy, she establishes her class superiority' (15). Privacy, then, is treated here as a distinctly class-bound concept. The fortunes of women's quests for spaces away from domestic and public gender expectations may vary, but that some form of privacy already is available to them inevitably points back to the hierarchical identities they inhabit within the social sphere *and* to the kinds of seclusion those subject positions make possible.

Women, Privacy and Modernity is noteworthy for its author's encouraging attention to middlebrow literature. If the concept of 'the middlebrow' is contested, those writers who have traditionally been identified by means of its vocabularies receive plenty of consideration in Gan's readings. Nevertheless, that this should be the case in a book indebted to the exploration of women's privacy undertaken by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is something of a curiosity, since so many of the writers Gan includes have been sidelined by critics still operating within the parameters of Woolf's criticism of middlebrow culture in *The Death of the Moth* (1942). A clearer signalling of this tension would have supported Gan's arguments, but, this point aside, her book ought to be welcomed for its interpretations of texts by Elizabeth von Arnim, Elizabeth Cambridge, E. M. Delafield, Rosamond Lehmann, Rose Macaulay, Daphne du Maurier, Jan Struther, F. Tennyson Jesse, and others. Modernism has its say, too, in analyses of Bloomsbury's 'domestic modernism', Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *Orlando* (1928), and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* novels (1915-67). Split into five chapters, *Women, Privacy and Modernity* is a wide-ranging text that includes discussions of privacy in relation to the garden and domestic interiors; the car and the metropolis; primitivism and witchcraft; leisure and recreation; and the dynamics of privacy within adulterous relationships.

Sylvia Townsend Warner makes an appearance in a subsection of Gan's third chapter entitled '*Lolly Willowes: witchcraft as a means to be private*'. Taking the novel as 'the *Bildungsroman* of a witch' (83), Gan accounts for Laura's development from gentlewoman at Lady Place, to spinster in London, to rural 'occultist' in the Chilterns. *Lolly Willowes* is read here in Foucauldian terms. In Gan's understanding, the spatial displacements Laura experiences are inseparable from power relations: her movements equate to a series of attempts to overcome the patriarchal hegemonies that continually creep into her sense of selfhood. There is no easy city/country binary erected in Gan's account. Following Raymond Williams, Gan demonstrates Warner's sensitivity to the variegated ways in which the language used to identify and describe rural space is already saturated with androcentric values. Warner is 'alive to the possibilities of the country for feminist appropriations of identity and privacy, [but] she is also keenly aware of the patriarchal currents that underpin ideas and approaches to the country that may threaten Laura's privacy' (88). Laura's eventual turn to paganism is taken as an ambiguous gesture: on the one hand it signifies a radical kind of freedom by which she can 'contest patriarchy and its patterns of power and oppression' (89); and, on the other hand, in its sheer extremity it discloses the extent to which patriarchal structures form in advance the shape of the resistances to which browbeaten women may appeal. Although in Gan's view *Lolly Willowes* ends happily, 'the novel ultimately reveals the pervasiveness of patriarchy and the difficulty faced by a woman trying to elude the forces of masculine oppression to be her own woman' (90).

Does *Lolly Willowes*, in fact, end on a happy note? This is an important question in the context of Gan's approach to Warner's work, since as Gan would have it *Lolly Willowes* finally folds its 'happy' ending into the patriarchy Laura tries so hard to outflank. A contrary line of argument might contend that the book's ending – in which Laura discovers a kind of serenity in her witchcraft, undisturbed yet owned by Satan – is meant to be taken

ironically, and that Laura's privacy amounts to a brand of false consciousness produced from the outset by her paganism. What I take to be the ambiguousness of this ending is reinforced when one considers that the conclusion published in the Virago Modern Classics edition of *Lolly Willowes* is not Warner's original text, a fact pointed out in the pages of this journal in 2001 (originally, the text lacked the last four paragraphs included in the Virago edition). This addition to *Lolly Willowes* may or may not significantly affect Warner's ending, but given Gan's highlighting of the book's conclusion, and her usage of the Virago text, it is at least worth mentioning. That Gan does not mention the original ending, not even in a footnote, is open to question. In the same vein, Gan's misquoting of Warner's Satan as a 'knight-errant' (84) is an avoidable slip, since in *Lolly Willowes* this description is not narrated but spoken by Laura and is clearly part of a *conversation* between her and her master, one in which the latter affirms viewpoints that nonetheless may not be held by the book's narrator (or, for that matter, by Warner herself). There is more going on in this brief but richly suggestive text than Gan implies.

These problems are symptomatic of Gan's analyses as a whole, which tend to *assert* rather than *explain*. *Women, Privacy and Modernity* is, among other things, a closely reasoned investigation of the various means by which early twentieth-century women – both in, and out of, fiction – sought the privacies denied to them by a patriarchal modernity, but at times it presents an overly-simplified impression of historical materials that a final redraft, in my view, might have addressed. A case in point is Gan's opening chapter, which suffers from too many generalizations and leaps in argument. I find nothing particularly with which to take issue in statements such as: 'The formation of the private sphere through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries perfected [an] alternating pattern of public life and privacy, particularly for men' (4). However, the materials from which Gan draws this insight – and, consequently, the precise points

of overlap between her study and more theory-based readings of the relationship between privacy and public life (those of Jürgen Habermas, for instance) – are left unstated. This also works the other way, insofar as the key points of *difference* between Gan's work and that of a more contentious figure such as Habermas go unremarked. A shortage of footnotes signals these local difficulties at the level of the book as a whole. There are some odd omissions, one particularly noticeable example being Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974). Including some kind of engagement with this seminal work would have given Gan's study a greater theoretical legitimacy. To conclude: Gan's work is never less than stimulating, but if a little more care had been taken in researching – and writing – the finished product, it could have been far superior.

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