

3.1. Exchanges of Knowledge at the Private–Public Divide in Smeeks’s *Krinke Kesmes*

Liam Benison

Abstract

Privacy and the private are central problems of utopian thought. Although utopian speculations are typically focused on the public realm, paradoxically, the operation of the utopian imagination requires a setting in a private space, separate from the world. In the early modern period, in particular, utopian social visions are typically set on islands or other isolated parts of the earth, and envision social models that abolish private property and even eliminate privacy altogether, as in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, first published in Latin in 1516. Yet as capitalism pervaded European societies with ever more privatized spaces, utopia also embraced more materialism and privacy. In this essay, I explore traces of early modern shifts in the conceptualization of privacy through a comparison of More’s influential work and the first Dutch utopia, Hendrik Smeeks’s *Krinke Kesmes* (1708). I compare utopia’s austere, anti-private, Morean inheritance with the more positive valuation of privacy that may be seen in Smeeks’s work, published in the context of the buoyant mercantile capitalism of the Dutch Republic.

Key words: utopia, early modern privacy, dissimulation, *Krinke Kesmes*

Utopian attitudes to the private are ambiguous. The utopian imagination focuses on the public realm, on envisioning models of enhanced sociability (Claeys, 2013). In Thomas More’s *Utopia*, “there is nothing private anywhere ... [the Utopians] live in the full view of all” (2018: 48). Private property is typically abolished in many literary utopias. We might therefore expect utopias to be unlikely sources of evidence for conceptions of privacy or the exchange of knowledge between the public and private realms. However, utopias are themselves private places. The setting on an island or in another isolated location is necessary to protect

the enhanced society from outside corruption. More's Utopians are self-sufficient in knowledge and know little of European philosophy, but, for readers to acquire knowledge of this ideal society, the narrator Raphael Hythloday must breach the ideal society's isolation.

The tension between public and private becomes more complicated in later utopias, as the social and economic changes associated with early capitalism, such as the enclosure of the commons (a target of savage critique in Book I of *Utopia*), become more entrenched. As European trade with the world grew, spurred by the profitable growth of the early joint-stock trading companies, most predominantly, the English East India Company and the Dutch United East India Company (VOC), the volume of foreign commodities available to European consumers increased. Historians of material culture highlight the social impact of the availability of a profusion of new and exotic objects, in particular, among the "middling sort" (Jardine, 1997; Hamling & Richardson, 2017). The impact of this materialism on households is noticeable in the visual art of the Low Countries, epitomized by the painting of interiors by artists such as Vermeer (Weststeijn, 2008). It can also be seen in works of literature such as the utopia written by a surgeon from Zwolle, near Amsterdam, Hendrik Smeeks. His *Beschryvinge van het magtig Koninkryk Krinke Kesmes* (*Description of the Mighty Kingdom of Krinke Kesmes*), first published in 1708, includes elaborate descriptions of the architecture of utopian palaces, and the furnishings and statuary of their interiors. Their beauty and luxury are far from the austerity of More's *Utopia*, published two centuries earlier, in which gold is considered suitable for toilets.

How might the shift from More to Smeeks be understood, given that the structures and objects of a utopia encode signs and symbols of its ideological "landscape architecture" (Leibacher-Ouvrard, 1989: 93–125)? What kind of privacy does Smeeks envision in utopia, and what are its implications for shifting conceptions of privacy in premodern Europe? In this paper, I examine the tension between private and public in the context of utopia's austere Morean inheritance, highlighting some findings from my research into changes in the conceptualization of privacy through the lens of utopian literature.

There is no explicit abolition of privacy or private property in *Krinke Kesmes*. The narrative is recounted by Juan de Posos, a Dutch merchant whose ship loses course during a storm en route from Panama to the Philippines, and is beached on an island of the Southland (as the Dutch then referred to the continent of Australia). There De Posos and his companions are arrested by soldiers and taken to the utopian city of Taloujaël. De Posos meets the Garbon, the overseer of aliens, who explains the Kesmians' history, politics, laws, religion, ethics and social customs. Their conversations tell much about their different attitudes to private and public knowledge. The Garbon introduces De Posos to a fellow Dutchman

called the El-ho, who takes him on his first tour of Taloujaël. The El-ho arrived in Krinke Kesmes as a boy after becoming separated from the crew of a Dutch ship during a landing on a remote coast. Marooned alone, like Robinson Crusoe *avant la lettre*, he learned to survive by his wits and defend himself against “savage” coastal dwellers, before he was rescued and welcomed into Kesmian society.

On his tour of the City Hall, De Posos is confronted with a custom that he had read about in More’s *Utopia*, the premarital examination of the prospective marriage partner’s naked body, as a buyer would inspect a horse. The earliest source for this practice is Plato’s *Laws* (More, 2018: 83 n99). In *Utopia*, the ritual’s aim is to prevent either party to the marriage from deceiving the other about flaws in their bodies:

Whether she be widow or virgin, the woman is shown naked to the suitor by a responsible and respectable matron; and similarly, some honourable man presents the suitor naked to the woman. ... If some disfiguring accident takes place after marriage, each person must bear his own fate; but beforehand everyone should be legally protected from deception. (83–4)

There are no details in *Utopia* about where the inspection takes place. Smeeks’s reinterpretation of the practice highlights a significant difference in the two authors’ evaluation of privacy. In *Krinke Kesmes*, the ritual takes place in a room in the City Hall called the “wedding chamber”. De Posos reports that a male relative of the groom and a female relative of the bride escort the prospective partners to the wedding chamber:

Having arrived in the chamber and closed the doors, these each undress their relation and display them to one another quite naked, who then scrutinize each other behind and in front, moving standing, stooping &c. ... if both are well and sound, then the marriage is concluded and must proceed. (Smeeks, 1995: 88)

De Posos confesses that the custom strikes him as “peculiar [and] at odds with honour and modesty”. He adds that he had read “something like this in More’s *Utopia*, yet believed that to have been a fiction; but now I found it to be the truth, which amazed me greatly”. De Posos’s visit to the wedding chamber is interrupted by four people who enter all “covered in silk” to perform the nuptial inspection, so that “we had to depart, the door was closed” (88).

Two striking aspects of Smeeks’s narrative adaptation from More’s *Utopia* is instructive of differences between the conception of privacy in the two utopias.

First, the Kesmians attempt to preserve the marriage partners' "modesty" by holding the ritual in a private room. In Utopia, we may assume that the inspection ritual could be observed by anyone, given Hythloday's report that the Utopians "live in the full view of all" and the doors of their houses "open easily with a push of the hand ... so there is nothing private anywhere" (48). By contrast, in *Krinke Kesmes*, the ceremony is witnessed by only the couple themselves and their chaperones. The ritual's relative privacy is emphasized in Smeeks's narrative by allowing De Posos to view the room where it takes place, but forcing him to leave it when the couple arrives. The episode is bookended by references to closing doors: "Having arrived in the chamber and closed the doors" and "we had to depart, the door was closed" (88).

Another detail of Smeeks's narrative is equally instructive of the two works' different attitudes to property and material goods. The couples of *Krinke Kesmes* wear silk to the ceremony, a fabric which More considered extravagant and, like private property, eliminated from Utopia. Erasmus observed that, in life, More preferred "simple clothes" and never wore silk "except when it is not open to him to lay it aside" (55 n42). Likewise, Hythloday reports that, in Utopia, "fine clothing was not respected ... silk was despised, and gold a badge of contempt" (65).

A critical problem raised by the necessity for utopian isolation is how such a separate, self-sufficient society might acquire the resources and knowledge to flourish. Francis Bacon addressed this question in his utopia *New Atlantis*. The Bensalemites send "merchants of light" to the outside world to travel incognito gathering "the books, and abstracts, and patterns of experiments of all other parts" to inform the ongoing scientific research and inventions produced in Saloman's House (Bacon, 2008: 486). The merchants of light travel like spies, dressing as the locals do, speaking their languages and telling no one where they come from. This practice of dissembling or dissimulation may be considered as an important form of early modern privacy. Baldassar Castiglione, Niccoló Machiavelli and Torquato Accetto advocated dissimulation in the sixteenth century as a necessary art for effective princely rulers. During the seventeenth century, manuals of conduct literature such as the highly popular *Art of Worldly Wisdom* by Baltasar Gracián, first published in 1647, recommended dissimulation more widely as part of the culture of display and self-fashioning (Snyder, 2009). For example, aphorism 179 warns: "A breast without reserve is an open letter. Have depths where you can hide your secrets: great spaces and little coves where important things can sink to the bottom and hide" (Gracián, 1995: 275). Gracián's work was a major source for *Krinke Kesmes* (Smeeks, 1976: 40). A version of aphorism 179 appears in the maxims of the Kesmian philosopher, Sarabasa: "A heart without secrecy, is like an open Letter and a disclosed resolve, and is like a game given away, which is held in low regard" (93–4).

The merchants and captains of the VOC were also expected to use dissimulation to identify profitable trading opportunities in new commodities during their voyages and in meetings with local peoples in foreign lands. Abel Janszoon Tasman was the commander of one of the VOC's first planned expeditions to explore the Australian continent, in 1642–43. Tasman's instructions for the voyage state:

[Let civilized men] know that you have landed there for the sake of commerce, showing them specimens of the commodities which you have taken on board for the purpose, ... closely observing what things they set store by and are most inclined to; ... inquiring after gold and silver whether the latter are by them held in high esteem; making them believe that you are by no means eager for precious metals, so as to leave them ignorant of the value of the same; and if they should offer you gold or silver in exchange for your articles, you will pretend to hold the same in slight regard, showing them copper, pewter or lead and giving them an impression as if the minerals last mentioned were by us set greater value on. (Heeres & Coote, 1898: Appendix E)

A like form of dissimulation by the merchants of light creates a "filtered" utopian insularity for Bensalem, which ensures that only useful knowledge and virtues are imported, and not corrupt ideas and practices that would undermine its utopian society. As Paul Salzman observes, Bensalem "is carefully protected from the outside world but not insular" (2002: 38).

In *Krinke Kesmes*, the filter that allows knowledge from the outside world to reach the isolated utopia is structured differently. The Garbon tells De Posos that there is no exception to the rule that no Kesmian may travel abroad on pain of death. In a pointed reference to *New Atlantis*, the Garbon states, "We do not send out people in *Persian* clothes to find out what is going on in *Europe* or *Asia*" (34). As a result, he admits that the Kesmians "have very little intelligence of our own" (41). However, they do have a means to allow knowledge of the world to reach them, in books that are brought ashore from shipwrecks. In fact, the prevailing religious principles of *Krinke Kesmes* were adopted from books that arrived in this way. In AD 1030, a Persian ship was wrecked on the coast carrying three hundred passengers, including Persians, Indians, Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Italians and Dutch, as well as a cargo of many books "in divers Languages and on various Topics", including Bibles and Qur'ans. Young Kesmians were selected to learn all the languages so that the books could be studied. However, tumultuous dissension ensued between supporters of the sects of different religions, and the philosopher Sarabasa introduced

a simplified religious code based on two Christian principles: the golden rule (*Matthew* 7:12) and the “render-unto-Caesar” rule (*Matthew* 22:21) (36–8).

The Kesmians’ rejection of dissimulation as a means to obtain knowledge does not deprive their society of useful knowledge. Enough books wash ashore that, unlike More’s Utopians, they are familiar with the latest European philosophy, including the questioning of Cartesian thought and the microscopic discoveries of Antoni van Leeuwenhoek. Krinke Kesmes has two separate academies for men and women, which reside on two smaller islands called Nemnan and Wonvure. Some books washed up on the coast of Wonvure enable the women academicians to write letters to their male colleagues arguing for the existence of a vacuum, although the academicians of Nemnan are content with the old ideas.

De Posos’s identity exemplifies the dissimulatory approach to trade and knowledge used by the VOC. Although born Dutch, his Spanish-sounding name, Juan de Posos, is adopted from an Andalusian friend to improve his chances of mercantile success in Panama. De Posos is therefore the inverse of the merchants of light: instead of leaving utopia to gather knowledge from the outside world, he travels in the opposite direction. He returns to Europe with a trove of information about Krinke Kesmes that the trusting Garbon shares with him, including information about its religion, laws, customs, geography, animals, birds and fish, cereals and vegetables, metals and architecture (128).

De Posos maintains a constant dissimulatory mask in response to the Garbon’s candidness. This is exemplified in an early conversation in which they compare their two societies. After admitting that the Kesmians have “little intelligence of our own”, the Garbon shares a striking critique of the hypocrisy of Kesmian priests:

what causes wise [Kesmian] Southlanders to laugh is, that our Divines here, despise all Faiths, and swear, indeed curse, and forever are at odds with one another; in their Sermons they admonish us or the common people to peace, and reject it themselves, constantly waging war amongst themselves. (41)

In reply, De Posos sighs, “Alas! foolish *Southlanders*, ... in *Europe* there is a quite different state of affairs; there we live as Christians ought to, in love, peace, and unity.” The Garbon accepts this statement and shows no awareness of its value as satire on the violent religious conflicts of the Reformation. De Posos does not point it out either, being pleased to deceive his host.

Krinke Kesmes has a carefully filtered privacy that offers protection to both the wider society and its individual members. Kesmians cannot travel abroad for themselves, but foreign books can be freely read and their contents discussed

and shared to improve the Kesmians' understanding of the world. They also allow knowledge of themselves to be freely shared. The doors of Krinke Kesmes do not all open at the push of a hand, unlike Utopia's. The Kesmian version of the marriage inspection ritual shows how a balance is achieved between public responsibility and individual dignity. However, practices of unethical dissimulation such as the deceit of Kesmian priests and De Posos's dishonesty in his dealings with the Garbon, remain a social problem even in Krinke Kesmes, and a sign of Smeeks's awareness of the risks and moral dilemmas posed by colonial strategies to cheat and dominate other peoples. Smeeks offers an inventive critical response to the utopian imaginaries of More and Bacon which furnishes an excellent source for the study of changes in the conception of privacy in early modern Europe.

Note

1. Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal, *Historische woordenboek Nederlands en Fries*, q.v. 'boekspiegel', <<https://gtb.ivdnt.org>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

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