

Examining Privacy in Early Modern Letters

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Speakers

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Natália da Silva Perez 00:18

Hi, my name is Natália da Silva Perez, and this is the Privacy Studies podcast. In today's episode, I talk with Dr. Michaël Green from the Center for Privacy Studies. Michaël is a historian of early modern religious culture, who specializes in early modern education, Dutch culture, religious minorities, and legal documents. Check out his book, *The Huguenot Jean Rou*, published in 2015 with Honoré Champion. Michaël's current project deals with privacy in the correspondence of huguenot Paul Rapin-Thoyras. Michaël is preparing an edited volume of the letters produced by Paul Rapin-Thoyras and his pupil, the Viscount Woodstock during an educational journey they did together across Europe, which is known as The Grand Tour. During this journey, both tutor and pupil wrote letters to the Father, the Earl of Portland to recount details of their trip. In my conversation with Michaël we'll hear more about traveling as an educational activity in the early modern period, as well as what we can learn about privacy from examining personal letters.

Michaël Green 01:29

My book actually is an edited correspondence. So I'm going to edit, actually edited and now it's in the final stages. I'm going to publish a correspondence between three people, father and son and the tutor during The Grand Tour. The father is a very famous Dutch nobleman, he was aid to William III and his name was Hans William Bentinck. He is a very not well known figure among historians of the early modern period. In 1701, he decided that his son should go on a grand tour around Europe. Together with his huguenot tutor, Paul Rapin-Thoyras, who at the time was not a very famous person, but later, he became well known for his *History of England, Histoire d'Angleterre*, which was the first comprehensive history of England and was modal for English history writing for the next hundred years. The Grand Tour itself is an educational journey, which was undertaken by teenagers, usually around the age of 14-15, or a bit later in their early 20s. And the main goal of it was basically to complete one's education. Most of the travellers are boys, but there are also some girls. The grand tour here, it's a grand

tour the set of son of Hans William Bentinck and his name was Henry Bentinck, Viscount Woodstock. The Grand Tour was undertaken between 1701 and 1703. They traveled along Germany and Italy. And the plans had to be cut short, or some place had to be taken out of the original plan because of the War of Spanish Succession that was happening in the background. And this is why this correspondence is so fascinating. It's not just about experiences, because it was a common thing during the grand tour to write letters home, so the tutor and the son are writing back to the Father, and Father's letters are not preserved. They're writing to him and telling him whom they met. What they saw. They were also telling him about the gossip that they heard about incidents that happened on the road from one city to the other. But you also learn about how they spend their past time, what people are like, the people that they met, so you get sometimes descriptions of those people. You also hear a little bit about celebrations, the carnival comes forward on many occasions, and not just the one in Venice, but also in other places. And I think such correspondence can be a valuable source for exploration, not only of the Grand Tour itself, as an educational journey, but also for everyone who's interested in history of war, because the Spanish Succession is there, you'll learn a lot about different battles that happened at the time and alternative versions of well known events, which might be also of interest. We also know, we also learned a little bit about history of the post because they refer to postal services all the time. And we also learn something about the relationship between noblemen because Woodstock and Rapin both mention *honnêteté*. And what what did it mean for them, how was it manifested? And what actually a young nobleman felt when he was accessing all those courts and meeting all those grand nobels. I think that's what motivated me, and actually thinking about publishing this correspondence, I have to say that it's written in French. And my commentary to it is in English. And it gives some perspective also for the English speaker, because the French is not that difficult. And anyone who has some level French, you'll be able to rather easily understand what is written in the letters. And my commentary also clarifies some difficult words. And in the footnotes, I try to give the context that is completely absent from the correspondence itself. So I'm trying to tell about the people who they were, if they were notable, for one reason or another. I'm trying to provide dates, and sometimes just identify them, because very often, we just have a term emissary of the king to place x and of the prince to place y, but you don't know who they were. And in most of the cases, it was successful, I managed to trace the names, but sometimes it was completely impossible. What is also interesting is that Woodstock and Rapin both actually reflect on some events that are happening in England at the time, for example, the impeachment process against the Earl of Portland. It's also referred to in the correspondence and the death of William III. So I think the text itself could be of interest also for historians of English politics, not just social or cultural historians.

Natália da Silva Perez 06:41

You're using this correspondence to have some insights about the grand tour as an educational journey. Can you tell me a little bit, though, about the way in which this

correspondence was preserved? You found it is a presentation copy at the British Library, correct? Can you tell me about this,

Michaël Green 06:58

I found the copies in the British Library, I found this very nice volume bound and red cover and neatly written letters and I saw that that's always there. But then on the last page, which you didn't notice immediately, I noticed that there was a note in Dutch saying "niet geschreven", which means not written or not copied, and the list of some other letters, and I realized that there must be original somewhere. Initially, I was not that interested in it, because my main interests was education and not really reproducing the entire letter. So what I had was enough for my needs. But later, when I saw that, it might be actually a good idea to publish those letters, because they are much more than just educational practice. I started checking them down, and they found the originals in the library of the University of Nottingham, where they have special archives. I think it's called the Welbeck archive, and they contain documents of the Bentinck family. So the original letters are found there. And when I started comparing between the copied letter book, and the originals I found in the catalog, I realized that many of those originals are not copied. So the letter book misses letters, indeed, those listed on the final page, but also one letter that they found that is not listed, even in the uncopied letters. So I thought that it was very interesting and motivating. So in my book, I'm trying to present originals and copies in their own spelling, so all the letters that were copied I present in the spelling of the copy. But all the letters that were not copied to distinguish them from the ones that are made, as I would say more public. I print them in their own original spelling from 1701. I don't know when the copy was made. But based on handwriting and spelling, I assume that it was done at least 20 to 50 years after the original date of the letters.

Natália da Silva Perez 09:08

And you are interested in studying aspects of privacy in this conversation, right? There is an intimate relationship going on there. So I would like to know a little bit about how you approach privacy.

Michaël Green 09:23

First of all, I would like to address the issue of privacy in the uncopied letters. And the second issue that I would like to address is privacy that I find in the letters themselves, their view of privacy. So there's a distinction between privacy of the family as such, which is reflected in the letters not being copied, and aspects of privacy that they discuss or are mentioned or can be seen or deduced from reading the letters themselves and relevant to the people involved. So the uncopied letters, all of them contain very interesting details. First of all, it's quarrels between the tutor and the father. So the tutor complains to the father about not having the will

to go to continue the Grand Tour because he's been underpaid. Because he thinks that the Earl of Portland, the father is cheap, in not really doing his duty to his son to provide with all necessary things. Then we have the son who's complaining to the father about not wanting to go to the army. Because as I said, the war of Spanish succession that happened at the time was a great opportunity for him to go and prove himself. And the father realized that he should be part of one of the military campaigns, he's trying to convince him to join the German army to fight against the French, but the son doesn't really want to do it. And there's a whole number of letters that actually talk only about this, so only about going to the army only about the dangers that can be in going to the army and waste of time and incompatibility of the personalities of Viscount Woodstock or the son and the Germans. *** proposes to the father to send him to the Dutch army where he would feel at home. And apparently, it did work because the people wasn't sent to the army, but the tutor Rapin-Thoyras actually left in October 1702. And the Grand Tour such basically ended then. Now if we talk about the privacy of the family, and the reason why those letters were not copyrighted, it's because they were portraying this great man, this Earl of Portland, in a very negative light. It was someone who was not known perhaps as being cheap. But he was portrayed as such in the correspondence, and I assumed that the one who copied the letters wanted to protect the image of this great noble, but also maybe the image of the son because the son was to succeed him the son became the first Duke. I think that the main reason was really protection of their image. So keeping everything inside the family, but even inside the same generation of the family. Since we don't know for whom the copied volume was intended, I assume we could perhaps think it was meant for the next generation or the third generation of the family some kind of account of a trip. So they want to take out everything that might have disagreed with this idea. Funny enough, the letter that was not mentioned that's not been copied, is the letter that doesn't contain any private information at all. It was just a very short letter saying that I've arrived in place x. And I will write you later. So I suspect that that letter might have not been copied simply because it was not found by the copyist in the archive. To talk about privacy in the letters themselves. There is a lot of it because we see how Viscount Woodstock and the private homes of various nobles. He's having a private audience with the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I. And he explicitly says that with the Empress you're going to have a public audience because there's the Empress there are ladies that present that are present in the same room, and everyone is checking you and examining you. And then he says, but with the Emperor, you talk on your own in a small and side room, which means that you could have a confidential talk with the Emperor. There are also other aspects of privacy. For example, when he when Woodstock says that he wants to write a letter, he specifies that he needs a certain setting for it. And that's why he was not able to write as many letters as he wanted, because he didn't always have the place to do it. It means that you would not write a letter just in the middle of an inn, or something you would need a certain, and I would say, perhaps a private space to do it. Another interesting reference to privacy is when Rapin-Thoyras writes to the Earl of Portland that one day, some servants from a certain noble came to pick up Viscount Woodstock to go for a hunt. And Viscount

Woodstock was asleep and still in his bed. And it's interesting because we don't know how many rooms they had in the places that they rented. But it shows that there was also some kind of proximity between the tutor and the pupil, but also we are entering this private space of the bedroom. In any case, it's really interesting how learning about privacy and studying privacy can give you a completely different perspective on what you're doing with your source material. So for me, it was really a in a way, a revelation that I discovered that those letters are not copied really because of privacy issues.

Natália da Silva Perez 15:13

I'm curious about the financial discussions that you mentioned. Can you talk to me a little bit more about the financial problems that this family was facing, and that the tutor was complaining about.

Michaël Green 15:24

It's not that the family was facing difficulties, but the father was constantly trying to save money. And the saving money motive is like a red thread through the entire correspondence. Rapin-Thoyras often mentions that he's trying to save as much money as possible. But it's the valet de chambre or the servant of Viscount Woodstock who is the continuous advocate of spending, and he's extremely displeased with this servant, but he won't get rid of him because Woodstock really likes him. We also see very often that Rapin mentions that he spent much less than any other tutor would spend. And he also brings comparisons, how much others did spend on the same kind of Grand Tour. And in the same uncopied letters you have, for example, explanation of Rapin how much it would cost to send Woodstock to the army, and how much expense it would be and how many things one would need to buy, what kind of household Woodstock would need to have, because he was a prominent noble, famous person and he would need to have something that will, he would need to have household that would correspond with his own status. All those things are actually absent from the copied letters. And the letters are copied in full. But all letters that contained any kind of information that could be dubious or unflattering, or financial. Those letters would be left out except with one example. Financial matters or indeed private. Just as nowadays, people don't really like to discuss their salary. Back in the day, people didn't want to know others about their financial concerns they had. I think this idea about saving money probably comes from some difficulties in the family, but I must say that I don't know enough about the financial status of the Bentincks. He was considered to be extremely rich. And Woodstock was considered to be as rich as his father, at least according to Rapin because he says that when they entered a certain city, all the merchants are trying to sell their goods for double price.

Natália da Silva Perez 17:42

Thank you. Would you like to tell me about your next project?

Michaël Green 17:47

At the moment, I'm focusing on Dutch egodocuments and in particular egodocuments in Amsterdam to try to understand how Dutch people viewed privacy in their daily life. I will be giving a talk in at the University of Göttingen on the 16th of July. And I will also take part at the Early Modern Conference at the University of Durham on the 22nd to 24th of July this year.

Natália da Silva Perez 18:15

How can people get in touch with you?

Michaël Green 18:17

By Twitter. My ID is @history_michael. And you can also write me via Academia.edu. I'm there.

Natália da Silva Perez 18:27

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