Spaces on Ships

Secrecy and Privacy in the Dutch East India Companies[1]

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Abstract

Djoeke van Netten examines the interplay between privacy and secrecy in the ships of the Dutch East India Companies (1595-1799). Space aboard a ship was scarce and privacy a rare privilege. Van Netten starts with a discussion of the sources available as well as those lost to history. She then continues by examining what can be known about the protection of and access to (secret) information and (private) belongings aboard ships. Cases where privacy was violated and secrets revealed emerge as some of the most informative historical events to be examined in this context. As she engages her historical examples with relevant theoretical and historiographical concepts, she concludes by raising important questions for further research on privacy and secrecy aboard ships.

Introduction

Next to the National Maritime Museum (*Het Scheepvaartmuseum*) in Amsterdam floats a replica of an eighteenth-century Dutch East Indiaman (illustration 1). This replica was built in the 1980s and modelled after a real ship also called the *Amsterdam*, which had set sail in 1749.

1 This article has emerged in the context of my research project entitled 'Hide and Leak: Secrecy and Openness in Overseas Companies in the Dutch Golden Age' which has been generously funded by the Dutch Organization of Scientific Research (NWO). I would like to thank all the participants in the seminar 'Zones of Privacy in the Early Modern Netherlands' organized at Copenhagen 21-22 March 2019, and particularly Natália da Silva Perez for all her tireless editing work. Thanks are also due to the anonymous peer reviewers and to Marianne Groep, Danielle van den Heuvel, and Erling Sandmo † for their support, feedback, and guidance.

Illustration 1 Replica of the eighteenth-century VOC-ship the Amsterdam (source: Wikimedia Commons; photographer: Eddo Hartmann @Het Scheepvaartmuseum).

On the model ship, the attentive museum visitor encounters two types of toilets (illustrations 2 and 3). These toilets hint towards the fact that privacy, aboard a ship like the *Amsterdam*, might have been an issue. The first type of toilet was meant for the use of the captain, and two such toilets were placed on either side of his cabin at the very rear of the ship. Here, one could sit down in an enclosed space, hidden behind curtains, and use some rags to wipe off. This toilet is not so dissimilar of what nowadays we expect of toilets: a place where one can do one's business in private.

However, not everyone on the ship had the right to use these toilets; in fact, they would have never served more than a dozen privileged people – the captain himself, merchants, first mate, preacher, doctor, officers, and possibly some elite passengers. On the other side of the ship, the 203 sailors and 127 soldiers aboard the *Amsterdam* also had two toilets at their disposal, but privacy there was severely lacking. These toilets could be found on the outside of the ship and had to be climbed onto from the forecastle, the highest deck on the forward part of the ship. It was at this spot that most of the crew would gather, at least when they were not sleeping or engaged in work elsewhere.[2] For these

2 Dutch East India Man *Amsterdam*, 19 [internal communication Het Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam]. See also https://www.hetscheepvaartmuseum.com/whats-on/east-indiaman-amsterdam [accessed March 2021].

Illustration 2 and 3 Two types of toilets at the Amsterdam (Photographs courtesy of Ernst van Keulen, Het Scheepvaartmuseum).

people, excretion would have had to take place in public. A length of rope was used as toilet paper; its end would hang in the salty ocean water. Tellingly, this rope was called *het allemansend*, the all-men's-end.

The spaces of ships embody the plausible impossibility of preserving privacy or keeping secrets – or both. A closer look will provide new and curious insights into early modern issues of privacy, secrecy, and their interplay. In this article, I consider these issues in the context of the ships and shipping activities of the Dutch East India Companies, taking together the so-called early companies from 1595 onwards and the United Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC) established in 1602, and ultimately dissolved in 1799. In two centuries, almost 2,000 Dutch ships were built to sail to Asia, making over 8,000 voyages and carrying almost one million people from the Netherlands to the Far East.[3] This article focusses on some of the notable practices of secrecy and issues concerning privacy on board these ships, which can be pieced together from various historical materials.

For the purposes of this study, privacy is defined as the 'ability to regulate access to oneself or to one's material or immaterial resourc-

3 Based on 'De VOC site' (https://www.vocsite.nl/schepen/) and the 'Dutch-Asiatic Shipping' database (http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/das, both accessed March 2021). The amount of individual travels is higher, considerably more so when the Asian employees who did not leave Asia are also taken into account.

es' (for further elaboration, see Silva Perez, this volume). This working definition, supported by the historiographical and theoretical overview by Silva Perez, will be used as a lens to examine the flexibility of use of spaces in ships. As will be shown, space aboard was in high demand and quite restricted, making privacy a rare privilege.

I start with a discussion of how we can find out what happened on board, then I discuss the protection of and access to (secret) information and (private) belongings. As will be shown below, we can learn much from cases where privacy was violated and secrets revealed. In the penultimate section my findings deal with several relevant theoretical and historiographical concepts. I conclude by raising some important questions for further research on privacy and secrecy aboard ships.

Reconstructing life aboard an early modern VOC ship

Most scholarly works offering overviews of the history of the VOC are rather silent about what happened on board the ships.[4] They focus on the organization of the company, on trade, and on what happened in the places where the ships landed, from South Africa, Japan, and New Zealand to, in particular, the islands of the Indonesian archipelago. Curiously, these gaps in the historiography echo the lacunae in the primary sources.

The ships themselves would seem the most obvious start for finding out what happened there. However, most of the material, visual, and textual sources on Dutch East India Company ships defy a look inside, which makes it difficult for the historian to study the possible strategies practiced by people aboard for regulating access to their bodies and their belongings. Not even one single VOC ship has survived, and shipwrecks on the ocean floor (such as the *Amsterdam,* which was wrecked on its maiden voyage on the south coast of England, near Hastings) mostly do not even have the hull intact. Nevertheless, by analyzing and interpreting wrecks and all the archaeological findings in and around them, it has at least proved possible to connect ships with the socio-economic context of the places where they had been built and from which

4 Amongst many more on this subject: Femme Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company. Expansion and decline* (Zutphen 2003) or Ron Guleij and Gerrit Knaap (eds.), *The Dutch East India Company book* (Zwolle 2017).

they set sail.[5] The use of spaces aboard, though, does not get much attention in these studies.

To have an idea of the measurements and the interior arrangements of early modern ships, it might be insightful to examine early modern models of ships and manuals about shipbuilding, such as Nicolaes Witsen's *Aeloude en hedendaegse scheeps-bouw en bestier* (1671) or Cornelis van Yk's *De Nederlandsche scheepsbouw-konst open gestelt* (1697).[6] Drawings with regard to shipbuilding, however, seldom show ships at sea, let alone the people and practices on board. Other visual sources, such as paintings, engravings, and woodcuts in travel journals, present nothing but the exterior of Dutch East India ships.[7] The interior remained curiously invisible, not only to the contemporary viewer and reader, but also to the later historian.[8]

When it comes to studying privacy aboard, the historian has to combine careful attention to the traces left in other extant documents with a little bit of imagination about how people might have used spaces to protect themselves and their belongings. Ship's logs or journals, written *en route*, generally contain remarkably little information concerning what happened on board. In fact, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these daily written texts display an almost exclusively outward gaze. Once in a while, during the long months of sailing, they narrate encounters with sea monsters or other ships, but mostly just courses taken, wind, weather, sea, and land in sight.[9] Some (published) travel texts have more exciting stories to tell, though these texts tend to focus

5 Jerzy Gawronski, 'Ships and cities in maritime archaeology: The VOC-ship Amsterdam and a biographical archaeology of eighteenth-century Amsterdam', in: W.H. Metz (ed.), *Maritime archaeology. Symposium ter gelegenheid van het 75-jarig bestaan van de Stichting Museum voor Anthropologie en Praehistorie in het kader van de zesendertigste kroon-voordracht* (Amsterdam 2017) 79-108.

6 Drawing by G. Hoekstra in Gawronski, 'Ships and cities', 93; A.J. Hoving, *Nicolaes Witsen and shipbuilding in the Dutch Golden Age* (College Station 2012). For an example of research on a model, see Jeroen van der Vliet, 'The curious case of the De Witte Oliphant of 1755', in: Jerzy Gawronski, André van Hok, and Joost Schokkenbroek (eds.), *Ships and maritime landscapes. Proceedings of the thirteenth international symposium on boat and ship archaeology, Amsterdam 2012* (Eelde 2017) 245-248. More research applying this sort of close reading of ship models is definitely recommended.

7 See for example *The Willem van de Velde Drawings in the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum* (3 vols; Rotterdam 1979).

8 Herman Ketting's *Leven, werk en rebellie aan boord van Oost-Indiëvaarders (1595–±1650)* (Amsterdam 2002) is illustrated with drawings by Ketting Sr. These illustrations are not only beautiful but also necessary since there are no contemporary examples available for use.

9 The enormous archive of the Dutch East India Company, kept in The Hague, contains hundreds of ship's logs. These logs can be accessed digitally at https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/1.04.02. Over the last century, several travel texts have been published as part of the series of the Linschoten Vereeniging and can be found at https://www.linschoten-vereeniging.nl/nl/werken.

on the periods spent on land, not at sea. The compilers of these texts seem to have felt no need to comment on what surely seemed to them to be the self-evident day-to-day routine, and the practices, especially those related to privacy on board, are only mentioned in case of unusual events such as feasts or lawsuits. Lawsuits especially spurred some interesting source material, of which we will encounter several examples in the following sections. They can give us a glimpse of how sailors and officers regulated access to themselves and their resources.

How occasional snippets from written and printed documents can help to find out how the society on board ships worked is shown by the exceptional work of Herman Ketting. His invaluable *Leven, werk en rebellie aan boord van Oost-Indiëvaarders* (2002) reconstructs work and social life on board ships during the Dutch voyages to the East Indies until the mid-seventeenth century.[10] The present article owes much to Ketting's meticulous research. His book yields new insights by combining descriptive sources, written during or after a voyage, with prescriptive documents, composed before the trip. These *instructies* and *artikelbrieven* for a ship's authorities and its crew convey some awareness of the risks of many people living closely together, as demonstrated by the clauses on what we would today call hygiene, as well as on unity – to quarrel and to disagree were explicitly prohibited.[11] The Company's instructions however, did not really care for individual members of the crew. They focus only on trying to discipline the crew, telling them what they could or could not do, as well as what they could or could not tell. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, regulation of access to resources and information belonging to the company was a high priority, whereas enabling sailors to regulate access to their own bodies or belongings was not.

Secret information on ships

The story of Dutch travel to the East Indies began in the 1590s. People from the flourishing cities on the North Sea were motivated by the

10 Ketting, *Leven*. For a comparable reconstruction of the English navy in the eighteenth century, see N.A.M. Roger, *The wooden world. Anatomy of the Georgian navy* (London 1988).

11 Many of these documents are in the archives of the early companies and the VOC. The remarks made here rely on research carried out by the author, which is forthcoming as 'Performing instructions' in the context of the collaborative research project 'Creating a Knowledge Society in a Globalizing World'.

desire to personally establish long-distance trade with Asia, to commercialize spices and other Asian luxuries, to make profit, and to undermine Portuguese-Spanish monopolies, since the Dutch were in the midst of their revolt against Philip II of Spain.[12] In Holland in the early 1590s, capital, crew, and ships were available; however, the merchants who gathered in the companies that would send out the very first Dutch fleets to the East were uncertain about routes and sailing directions. The valuable knowledge that they wished to obtain was called 'secrets'. *Portugese secreten*, concerning maps and navigation, were actively sought after and acquired through spying and buying.[13]

An important source of navigational information for the Dutch was Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who had served as a clerk to the Portuguese archbishop in Goa in India. He had secretly copied Portuguese charts and other documents, bringing all this information to his hometown of Enkhuizen in Holland upon his return.[14] These practices of pilfering information were carried out in the name of *public* service. In the domain of trade, the *particuliere* ('private') trade of Asian food and objects (as opposed to the official trade monopolized by the VOC) was understood in opposition to the official status enjoyed by the companies. Especially the VOC repeatedly tried to control and limit this private trade, although it existed simultaneously throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[15]

The debate about whether private trade or private traders (designated in sources as *particuliere*) would be more beneficial than a state-sponsored business had already taken place in the 1590s. Balthazar de Moucheron, a Dutch merchant and shipowner, argued that it would be better to make the expeditions attempting to find a north-east-

12 Jonathan Israel, *Dutch primacy in world trade, 1585-1740* (Oxford and New York 1989); Djoeke van Netten, 'The richest country in the world. Dutch knowledge of China and Cathay and how to get there in the 1590s', in: Thijs Weststeijn (ed.), *Foreign devils and philosophers. Cultural encounters between the Chinese, the Dutch, and other Europeans, 1590-1800* (Leiden and Boston 2020) 24-56.

13 Djoeke van Netten, 'Sailing and secrecy. Information control and power in Dutch overseas companies in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries', in: Ida Nijenhuis et al. (eds.), *Information and power in history. Towards a global approach* (London and New York 2020) 157-171, 159-160; María Portuondo, *Secret science. Spanish cosmography and the new world* (Chicago 2009).

14 Roelof van Gelder, Jan Parmentier, and Vibeke Roeper (eds.), *Souffrir pour parvenir. De wereld van Jan Huygen van Linschoten* (Haarlem 1998). See also Isabel Casteels, *De wereld in Enkhuizen. Kennis van overzeese gebieden tussen 1580 en 1600* (Master's thesis; University of Amsterdam 2018).

15 Stoyan V. Sgourev and Wim van Lent, 'Balancing permission and prohibition. Private trade and adaptation at the VOC', *Social Forces* 93 (2015) 933-955; Filippo Carlo Wezel and Martin Ruef, 'Agents with principles. The control of labor in the Dutch East India Company, 1700 to 1796', *American Sociological Review* 82 (2017) 1009-1036.

ern passage to China a private (*particulier*) trading mission. The reason behind Moucheron's proposal to own ships privately is an interesting one, linking private with secret. According to him, trading privately would guarantee greater secrecy, observing that private trading ships would not insult the king of Denmark, stir up the king of Spain, or warn the rulers of Moskovy and Tartary.[16] It thus follows that, in some cases, private trade was an enabler of keeping information secret.

After spying and purchasing the aforementioned secrets of Portuguese or English origin, the Dutch in turn developed an interest in protecting their own information. They established practices that can be interpreted as secret intelligence, mostly with regard to warfare,[17] which meant keeping secrets at state level. Regulations were written down so secrets would not be leaked. Such prescriptions of behaviour were often quite detailed as to what everyone on the ship must keep secret, that is, information that they must protect on behalf of the company. Instructions for the entire crew repeatedly stressed that everything associated with the voyage, including 'all logs, charts, sketches or drawings of lands, towns, rivers, harbours, promontories and coastlines, courses and everything dependent on this', were to be kept a secret and were not to be copied or made public under any circumstances.[18] Moreover, the authorities on board a ship, especially the admiral of a fleet and his council, were also expected to keep certain information secret from the crew.

Carving out spaces for privacy aboard ships

While there is no doubt that secrecy towards company information was an important concern, we can ask whether personal privacy existed for people on board an East Indiaman at all. Given the modern understanding of 'privacy' as an inviolable human right tied to individuals, it could be argued that 'there was no privacy' on board such a ship.[19] This

16 Gerrit de Veer, *Reizen van Willem Barents, Jacob van Heemskerck, Jan Cornelisz Rijp en anderen naar het Noorden*, ed. by Samuel Pierre l'Honoré Naber (The Hague 1917) 184.

17 Van Netten, 'Sailing and secrecy'.

18 'Dat wy alle journalen, caerten, schriften, off teyckeningen van landen, steeden, stromen, reden, havenen, capen ofte hoecken, hemelteyckenen, coursen ende alle dependentien van dese […] gemaect, geannoteert, geschreven ofte vercregen […]' 'Dat wy oock alles […] dese voyage belangenden […] secreet sullen houden'. The Nationaal Archief Den Haag, Voorcompagnieën, inv.nr. 1.04.01, I.B.2.a.34. See also Van Netten, 'Sailing and secrecy', 161.

19 Michel Ketelaars, *Compagniesdochters. Vrouwen en de VOC (1602-1795)* (Amsterdam 2014) 36.

assumption seems obvious to make, given the fact that more than 300 men (a number which sometimes rose to almost 400) occupied a ship forty metres in length. Even when ships sailed in fleets, members of the crew were assigned to individual vessels and did not leave their place of assignment for weeks – sometimes months – on end.

However, privacy, not as a *right* but as a *need*, did exist for the people living on board, even though this need was only partially fulfilled. It would be more accurate, from the historian's perspective, to state not that 'there was no privacy in such a ship' but, rather, that privacy was a very difficult need to fulfil, which only required slightly less effort of those who had a more privileged social standing within the strict hierarchy on board. This hierarchy followed a spatial arrangement, which contributed to the privacy of the higher-placed officers when compared to sailors and other lower-ranking crew members.[20]

On VOC ships such as the *Amsterdam*, people belonging to the privileged social groups spent most of their time at the rear of the ship, behind the mainmast, where the rest of the crew was not allowed to dwell. People of lower rank (such as the hundreds of sailors and the dozens of soldiers) slept and lived in the area in front of the mast. Between the rear and the front of the ship thus existed an invisible yet sharply drawn border, permeable only from one side.

Unlike the common sailors and soldiers, the more important people on board a Dutch East India Company ship additionally had their own enclosed spaces which included not only toilets but also beds, occasionally placed inside cabins which sometimes even had doors. Still, even when officers were allowed to sleep in beds and cabins, they were mostly required to share these. For instance, a coxswain on board the *Ambon* in 1640 had to share a small cabin with the preacher and his pregnant wife.[21] The captain, highest officers, and some privileged passengers had access to secluded spaces of their own, though their activities could still be observed, especially heard, as in the case of the bookkeeper aboard the ship *Huis te Foreest,* who in 1747 harassed some young slaves and was heard by a colleague.[22]

The common sailors on board VOC ships did not have secluded spaces at all. From the 1640s onwards, the majority of the crew slept in

20 For more on how the spatial configuration of a ship impacted social relations and hierarchy, see Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh's bad language. Passion, power and theatre on the Bounty* (New York 1992).

21 Ketting, *Leven*, 85.

22 Matthias van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld. Globalisering, arbeid en interculturele ontmoetingen tussen Aziatische en Europese zeelieden in diens van de VOC, 1600-1800* (Hilversum 2014) 324.

hammocks, all hanging on the same deck.[23] Like the activity of sleeping itself, these hammocks were mostly not private in the sense of being exclusive: they were placed in an open space and were meant to be shared. Two sailors slept together in a hammock, besides others slept in the same hammock when they were working, since a continuously sailing ship had men working shifts 24 hours a day. Until the 1640s, sailors seem to have had a little more sleeping space of their own since they slept in berths, called *kooien* (literally 'cages') in Dutch. These berths, though, could not be locked, and curtains seem to have been very rare.[24] Moreover, the berths were also shared, both spatially as well as over time, which did not exactly make them a place for privacy.

During the period in which ships were built with berths, it seems that one of the most private possessions of sailors was their own mattress to sleep on, a so-called *bultzak* (bump sack) made of canvas and usually filled with moose hair. There is extant evidence indicating that a sleeping berth was a place to keep some private possessions such as tobacco, pilfered wine rations, some spices to trade privately, knives, and money.[25] The very few personal possessions belonging to sailors and soldiers could also be kept in small chests or inside sacks within bigger chests. Although a chest or a sleeping berth was the closest to a private space that the sailors and soldiers of lower rank had access to, their private possessions were neither secret nor secure. Several sources indicate that the contents of berths and chests were in many instances known by fellow mates, as demonstrated by the case of the Scottish sailor in 1623, who frantically took a knife from someone else's berth to fight with.[26] We also find accusations levelled against people who had secretly saved up wine, hidden stolen tobacco, or gone to bed with maps and navigational instruments.[27]

Violating private spaces and revealing secrets

Generally, the higher someone stood in the hierarchy on board, the more property they owned.[28] The captain, for instance, had not only his

23 Ketting, *Leven*, 72.

24 *Ibid.*, 72, 84.

25 *Ibid.*, 83-84.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, 83; Lucas Jansz Waghenaer, *Nieuwe thresoor der zeevaert* (Amsterdam 1609) xix.

28 See Roger, *The wooden world*, 64-66.

own bed but also his own desk and some other furniture. The officers also kept their private possessions in a chest of their own, and some (such as the doctor on board) had extra chests on account of their profession.[29] However, in all cases, these small personal spaces could be invaded in moments of turmoil.

The kind of turmoil that was most feared was probably mutiny. While the authorities were expected to keep some secrets from the crew, the crew members keeping secrets from the officers on the ship was seen as one of the biggest dangers. Rules for preventing mutiny, warnings of what would happen in cases of transgression, and court cases on mutiny provide several clues into practices of secrecy and even offer some information on spaces of privacy. As even just planning a mutiny could result in capital punishment, privacy was sought to enable keeping the plans secret and to improve the chances of a successful rebellion. Only a few dozen of cases of mutiny or strikes on VOC ships are known, although these are considered to be the tip of the iceberg.[30] Since mutiny is by definition a collective action, those involved must have been able to selectively protect information and keep it secret. Talking in low voices about mutiny and making plans in private must have been possible, at least to a certain degree. Matthias van Rossum, who extensively researched mutinies on board Dutch East Indiamen in the 1780s, discusses a case where Javanese mutineers revealed that they were *quietly* advised on how to proceed.[31]

We have to guess where and when the discussions of mutiny took place on board a ship. Presumably, crowded and open spaces such as those on the foredeck or during the changing of the guard were ideal places or moments, given the frequency and intensity of communication that occurred, which could provide distraction. Spatially, high up on the mast seems likely to have been the most suitable location for a secretive conversation, since the authorities on the ships usually did not climb and, especially when windy, the sailors on the mast must

29 Iris Bruijn, *Ship's surgeons of the Dutch East India Company. Commerce and the progress of medicine in the eighteenth century* (Amsterdam 2009) appendix 5.

30 Jaap Bruijn and Els van Eyck van Heslinga, 'De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie en het verschijnsel muiterij', in: Idem (eds.), *Muiterij. Oproer en berechting op schepen van de VOC* (Haarlem 1980) 9-26; A.C.J. Vermeulen, '"Onrust ende wederspannnigheyt":Vijf muiterijen in de zeventiende eeuw', in: *Ibid.*, 27-43. Vermeulen counts eleven cases of mutiny in the first half of the seventeenth century and eight cases (or plans to do so) in the second half, regarding this as probably only the tip of the iceberg. See also Ketting, *Leven,* 256-266; Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld,* 351-362.

31 Matthias van Rossum, '"Amok!". Mutinies and slaves on Dutch East Indiamen in the 1780s', *International Review of Social History* 58 (2013) 109-130, 124. Italics DvN.

have been visible but not audible. Of a planned mutiny on board a VOC ship in 1675, the sources mention that it was 'mostly discussed in the masts'.[32]

Mutineers attempted to seize authority and reverse power structures. Invading the private spaces of the authorities on board a ship was a powerful way of demonstrating this reversal. Van Rossum writes, for instance, of insurgents who marched into the sleeping quarters of their officers.[33] He further talks about a mutiny on board the *Mercuur* in 1782, where a mate tried to flee the mutineers by breaking into the captain's cabin, while the mutineers opened the chests of officers, drank their liquor, and donned their clothes.[34]

Clothes also played an important part in another issue concerning secrecy and privacy on board VOC ships, namely, in the cases of women who tried to live like men during their service in the Company. At least 70 such women have been identified by Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol.[35] Though it might seem unlikely that a woman disguised as a man would go undiscovered in such a crowded space, the Dutch proverb *kleren maken de man* ('clothes make the man') gives us a clue that in these times, there was a way round. Dressing up as a man might have been a way for some women in the early modern period to become someone else and seek another type of life. Someone who had short hair, wore male clothes, and did men's work could pass as a man in the eyes of contemporaries. The most private kind of information – that is, the most private parts of the human body – remained mostly out of sight on a ship.

Most of our knowledge of women passing as men stems from those cases which were found out and where secrets were revealed. Although some women were identified already when they tried to enrol as a sailor, others were only discovered after weeks or even months, something that suggests the possibility that there could have been cases that were never found out. Most cases of discoveries of men on ships who actually turned out to be women consisted of the literal act of uncovering, when clothing was removed, as, for instance, when someone was sick or wounded. Uncovering and discovery also occasionally hap-

32 Vermeulen, '"Onrust"', 40.

33 Van Rossum, '"Amok!"', 128.

34 *Ibid.*, 122, 125.

35 Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol, *Frauen in Männerkleidern. Weibliche Transvestiten und ihre Geschichte* (Berlin 2012). This work appeared in English as *The tradition of female transvestism in early modern Europe* (London 1997), although the German edition contains more cases. See also Ketelaars, *Compagniesdochters*, 27-59.

pened when urination was done less secretly than usual (after drinking alcohol, for instance).[36] At this point, the reader is asked to recall the exposed toilets with which this article began, which provided very little in the way of privacy.

Privacy and secrecy on ships: Theoretical characterization and comparisons

Ships surprisingly share many characteristics with the *Utopia* sketched in Thomas More's eponymously titled work of 1516. In More's ideal city, no private property was allowed, but in all other aspects, the similarities are striking – doors were never locked, everyone could enter, personal space did not exist, everyone was constantly open to inspection and 'under the eyes of every man'.[37] These were worlds with almost no privacy as we understand the concept today. A ship, however, was not an ideal or idealized place but a real space that existed in reality.

In that respect, ships can more appropriately be viewed as 'heterotopias' as theorized by Michel Foucault. For Foucault, heterotopias approximate utopias with the difference that whereas utopias are ideal and virtual, a heterotopia forms a physical reality. As a heterotopia, ships were simultaneously a part of society as well as located outside society; they were confined spaces that functioned as the microcosm of a society, a physical representation reflecting society's values and ideals. Foucault even characterized the ship as a *heterotopia par excellence*, the ultimate 'other place'.[38] Even though it was quite impossible not to be watched on a ship, it must be noted that a ship was not exactly a panoptical device, to use another of Foucault's favourite metaphors. The ever-watchful eyes were not by definition the eyes of the authorities.

Although service on board was, at least in most cases, voluntary and paid, VOC-ships (or their counterparts from other countries) have frequently been compared to prisons. Both can be described as heterotopias, and both can also be seen as 'total institutions' in Erving Goffman's formulation, that is, as places where many similarly situated people

36 Dekker and Van de Pol, *Frauen in Männerkleidern*; Ketelaars, *Compagniesdochters*, 41-46.

37 Thomas More, quoted in Robert Huebert, 'Privacy: The early social history of a word', *The Sewanee Review* 105 (1997) 21-38, 21-22.

38 Michel Foucault, 'Des espaces autres', *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984) 46-49, translated by Jay Miskowiec as 'Of other spaces. Utopias and heterotopias', *Diacritics* 16 (1986) 22-27. The original text is part of a lecture given by Foucault in 1967.

were cut off from the rest of society, enclosed, and administered.[39] Lack of privacy and lack of knowledge (in the case of secrets kept by the authorities) amongst the inmates are obvious features prompting such a comparison. To build upon the comparison, a ship can actually be regarded as worse than a prison, since there were fewer escape routes at sea than in the most strictly guarded prison.[40] As Samuel Johnson allegedly observed with reference to space, 'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned. [...] The man in a jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company'.[41]

On land, people of a social standing comparable to those of sailors also had to deal with shared rooms and beds and did not enjoy much privacy as the legal right that we enjoy today.[42] However, in houses, attics, or basements in towns, people usually slept with family members or other familiar people, whereas in a ship that was mostly not the case. On land, whether in the town or the country, personal possessions could be kept somewhat private, unlike in a ship. Even officers had less privacy aboard a ship than if they had lived on land. The same is probably true for the captain, despite the fact that he had his own cabin and occasionally also his own bedroom with a bed. Moreover, a city provided many opportunities to temporarily hide and isolate oneself, whereas a ship was impossible to leave.

Bringing together issues of privacy and secrecy as they related to practices and spaces on early modern VOC ships may seem to be an obvious scholarly strategy, given that the words 'secret' and 'private' are closely related in modern English as well as in many other languages. They recur in overlapping fields of meaning and sometimes one term is used to define the other. Moreover, by virtue of being an opposite of 'public', both secret and private share a common semantic field. However, secrecy and privacy are usually not explicitly researched together in modern historiography on early modern times. Historians working on

39 Erving Goffmann, *Asylums. Essays on the social situations of mental patients and other inmates* (New York 1961). On VOC ships as total institutions, see Karel Davids, *Wat lijdt den zeeman al verdriet. Het Nederlandse zeemanslied in de zeiltijd (1600-1900)* (The Hague 1980) 10; Ketting, *Leven*, 5-6; Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*, 19.

40 At any rate when one wanted to escape alive, that is. See Ketting, *Leven*, 85-86.

41 James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson* (London 1831) 338.

42 See Laura Gowing, '"The freedom of the streets". Women and social space, 1560-1640', in: Paul Griffiths and Mark S.R. Jenner (eds.), *Londinopolis. Essays in the cultural and social history of early modern London* (Manchester and New York 2000) 130-151, 134-135.

secrecy tend to either eschew tackling questions of privacy or explicitly exclude privacy from the ambit of their subject.[43]

As far as available historiographical literature is concerned, secrecy seems to have been everywhere and all-pervasive in early modern times. This period has been explicitly characterized, for instance, as 'the age of secrecy' by such scholars as Perez Zagorin, Jon Snyder, and Daniel Jütte (who has even used the term as the title of his book).[44] However, the question of whether privacy and a private sphere (as opposed to a Habermasian public sphere) already existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is still a subject of debate.[45]

The public realm seems to have been a place of encountering secrecy, ranging from court culture and religious matters to state affairs and "secret" intelligence.[46] Privacy, meanwhile, is in the available literature often linked with private spaces and ideas, such as the home and domesticity. This link comes to the fore particularly in Michael McKeon's work *The Secret History of Domesticity*.[47] Even though his book deals much more with what we understand as the 'private' and the 'public', McKeon also engages with secrecy, especially in the form of so-called 'secret histories', books that claimed to reveal secrets of state and (sexual) intrigues of royals and other celebrities.[48] To be sure, the title of McKeon's book refers to this very genre.

43 See Pamela Long, *Openness, secrecy, authorship. Technical arts and the culture of knowledge from antiquity to the renaissance* (Baltimore 2001) 7, following Sissela Bok, *Secrets. On the ethics of concealment and revelation* (New York 1982) 6.

44 Perez Zagorin, *Ways of lying. Dissimulation, persecution, and conformity in early modern Europe* (Cambridge 1990); Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the culture of secrecy in early modern Europe* (Berkeley 2009); Daniel Jütte, *The age of secrecy. Jews, Christians, and the economy of secrets, 1400-1800* (New Haven and London 2015).

45 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Berlin 1962) For other critical works on the subject, see Massimo Rospocher (ed.), *Beyond the public sphere. Opinions, publics, spaces in early modern Europe* (Bologna and Berlin 2012); Arjan van Dixhoorn, Jan Bloemendal, and Elsa Strietman (eds.), *Literary cultures and public opinion in the Low Countries, 1450-1650* (Leiden and Boston 2013).

46 See footnote 43. For more on this subject, see Jacob Soll, *The information master. Jean-Baptiste Colbert's secret state intelligence* (Ann Arbor 2009); Nadine Akkerman, *Invisible agents. Women and espionage in seventeenth-century Britain* (Oxford 2018); Ioanna Iordanou, *Venice's secret service. Organising intelligence in the renaissance* (Oxford 2019).

47 Michael McKeon, *The secret history of domesticity. Public, private, and the division of knowledge* (Baltimore 2006).

48 *Ibid.*, part three. On this genre, see also Rebecca Bullard and Rachel Carnell, *The secret history in literature, 1660-1820* (Cambridge 2017). Curiously enough, Bullard and Carnell do not refer much to McKeon's use of secrecy, while most reviewers of McKeon tend to focus only on private and public and on domesticity. See for example the Special Issue of the tenth volume of *History compass* published in 2012 and edited by Brian Cowan and Leigh Yetter.

However, apart from the publication of what should have stayed private in secret histories, the research methodologies used to analyze historical secrecy do not seem to be equipped to take issues of privacy into account, since they focus mostly on regulating access to only one type of important resource in people's lives: information. Moreover, although the word 'secret' or derivations thereof (*secreet* or *geheim*) can be found in various Dutch early modern sources, the words 'private' (*privé*) or 'privacy' rarely figure in such sources, a fact which warrants more detailed research.[49]

Conclusions

How can privacy on ships be researched when the word itself was not used? Should historians conclude that, because of the absence of the word in the sources about VOC ships, this subject was not of much concern for contemporaries? We do not find extant evidence of explicit reflections or emotions suggesting that privacy or the lack of it (as we conceive of these terms today) were perceived as problematic or adding to the suffering on board. Furthermore, the stress or fear that could accompany the keeping of secrets is also not commented on in the sources that survived in the archives. The implications of such omissions for the study of early modern emotions aboard ships is less easy to answer. First, it must be mentioned that the documents which are still extant were almost never written by common sailors, who constituted the less-privileged majority on the ships. Second, we can neither conclude that sailors or others on board a VOC ship did not suffer, nor should we downplay the possibility that they might have suffered from lack of privacy or the pressure that accompanies the keeping of secrets.

I hold that the absence of historical evidence about the thoughts of sailors on privacy does not mean that they lacked an interest in privacy itself, and I definitely do not want to convey the impression that these concepts or practices are not interesting subjects for present-day historians. Research on early modern privacy aboard ships can rely on traces – we must look for separate words, practices, spaces, silences, and re-imagine the (im)possibilities in obtaining privacy for entire companies and individual sailors on ships.

49 For more on these words, see Bok, *Secrets*, 6-7 and for the specific Dutch case, see Djoeke van Netten, 'Geheime praktijken?! Zeventiende-eeuwse geheimen en waar ze te vinden', *Jaarboek Zeventiende Eeuw 2018* (2018) 9-21.

Even if the historiographical debates on early modern secrecy and privacy have remarkably little in common and do not often speak to one another, it is useful to study them in tandem, as this article demonstrates. This volume clearly shows that secrecy and privacy are partially (though by no means completely) overlapping notions – both share connections with practices of concealment and exclusion, and both are an opposite of 'public'. As shown above, private trade was regarded as a more secret kind of trade, and private information was in many instances identical to secret information (although not necessarily the other way around).

On the ship, we can discern a proportional relationship between the level of authority and status on the one hand, and access to personal space and the possibility of secluding oneself on the other, something we recognize as privacy today. The strict hierarchy on board a VOC ship was visible spatially, as can be concluded from the zones on either side of the mainmast. However, even for the captain and other officers, it was very hard to go unnoticed – let alone unheard – on a ship. As in the 'total institutions' theorized by Goffman, remaining anonymous was quite impossible on board, given that there was always someone awake and on guard, both officially and unofficially. In cases of mutiny, the relatively private spaces and private possessions of the authorities on a ship were the first to be violated, as a demonstration against their power. Here, it becomes very clear that private spaces were by no means secret spaces.

Analytically, it is helpful to distinguish between vertical and horizontal secrecy. Horizontal secrecy refers to secrecy against other companies or other nations and includes such things as information about routes, navigation, trade, and warfare that the Dutch tried to pilfer from the Portuguese or the English, while at the same time trying to protect this valuable information from enemies. Vertical secrecy existed between people of different hierarchies within the ship and could mostly be discerned top-down – officers and captains could not only withhold information about their goals and destinations from the rest of the crew but also had the prerogative to search the belongings and spaces of sailors and soldiers. Bottom-up secrecy – the crew concealing information from the authorities on the ship – represented one of the biggest dangers to the success of an expedition, as exemplified by the cases of (alleged plans for) mutiny.

Insofar as access to privacy is concerned, an early modern ship seems to have been one of the worst places imaginable, possibly even

worse than prisons, especially since the crew members of a VOC ship went on board, in principle, voluntarily, unlike a prison where incarceration was involuntary. We can ask to what extent they were aware that they would be giving up their capacity to regulate access to themselves, and that they would be giving up privacy. Indeed, the ship seems to have been a heterotopia that reflected (though did not celebrate) More's utopian value of lack of privacy. Writing about heterotopias in the seminal essay 'Of other spaces', Foucault concludes with the warning, inspired unmistakably by the horrors of Stalinist repression, that in 'civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of pirates'.[50] I would like to conclude by observing that three-and-a-half centuries earlier in the Dutch Republic, it appears that a civilization built on boats went hand-in-hand with espionage *and* adventure, with lack of privacy *and* pirates as well as dreams.

About the author

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50 Foucault, 'Of other spaces', 27.