

# The Secret History of Imagination

BY ANY STANDARD, Michael McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* is a monumental achievement, not least because of its penetrating insights into innumerable topics and eighteenth-century problems, including sex, the body, and the history of subjectivity. It is endlessly rich in its examples, creative in its often unexpected analyses, learned in its vast authority over an astounding array of topics and terrains: aesthetics, alchemy, architecture, onanism, cookbooks, capitalism, *Pamela*, pastoral landscapes and literature, pornography, *Pride and Prejudice*, Protestantism, Stuart monarchies, spinning, scientific methods, secret cabinets and their keys, *Tristram Shandy*, tyranny, Tory feminism, and much more. Dividing the book's 700-plus pages into three parts — "The Age of Separations," "Domestication as Form," and "Secret Histories" — McKeon moves from historical categories of politics, economics, architecture, and publishing in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to the ways in which scientific knowledge and aesthetic genres were divided in the eighteenth century, to analyses of domestic fiction from the Restoration to Austen. McKeon simultaneously interrogates fundamental western dyads, including "before" and "after" and "public" and "private." Though he explores the distinctions between a not-yet-modern moment and the beginnings of modern consciousness and social organization, McKeon, to invoke one of his own literary subjects, moves like the structure of *Tristram Shandy*, with neither Laurence Sterne nor Michael McKeon following the straight line from here to there. While Sterne's construction of Tristram's inability to conform to a linear narrative playfully reflects Tristram's putative failures (p. 679), McKeon's eschewing of a positivist, linear narrative is structurally and argumentatively necessary: the project presents itself as a multi-layered network of connections describing a historical period in which numerous categories and concepts divided.

The density of theoretical analysis and the sheer magnitude of topics are hermeneutically controlled and dictated by McKeon's pursuing of the polyvalent, multiple meanings of the private and privacy, the domestic and domestication, the secret and secrecy, the public and publicity. The private and privacy can variously reference property, solitude, secrecy, intimacy, the not-public, sexual organs, sexual matters, and so forth. While Jürgen Habermas had argued that public matters were "emancipated from the constraints of survival requirements" and thus non-corporeal, his critics have noted that "public" derived etymologically from "pubes,"

indicating that the proper participants in this independent space were limited to adult, free males.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, McKeon keeps a close eye on how persistently the private, the secret, the domestic, and the sexual informed public matters and were viewed as requiring publicizing for the public to access underlying, true “secret histories.” *The Secret History* pursues connections, vacillates between the material and the abstract, and motors through the multiple layers of meanings, the concrete and the abstract, diachronic and synchronic aspects of time. However, the revealed “secret” for several of these categories and topics across this monumental work — whether in the sub-definitions of the private, public, domestic, and secret or in the specific topics of bedrooms, *romans à clef*, Dutch genre paintings, natural law theory, or microscopes — is the sexual, particularly the “secret” of sex.

In keeping with the spirit of any good “secret history,” author McKeon does not give the secret away early, nor does he reveal the history of this genre until we are thick in the mystery, over halfway through the volume. As modern readers might realize, hundreds of books in English have included a “secret history” or “secret histories” in their titles, from the Restoration onward. McKeon explains that the genre becomes familiar to English readers with the 1674 translation of Procopius’s *Anecdota* from the sixth century ACE, which purported to unveil secret, “unpublishable things” (quoted on p. 470). These unpublishable things often involved a whiff of sex, and, as McKeon emphasizes, these matters were hardly considered marginal or peripheral in relation to state and public matters: “the significance of the trivial and the private in secret histories is first of all that they bear a causal relation to great and public happenings” (p. 471). Scholars of the long eighteenth century have considered how contemporaries’ suspicions that secret (often sexual-reproductive) scandals revealed the truth behind public, political actions. Whether in the case of the “Warming Pan Scandal,” when it was said that the newborn son of James II in June 1688 was really an Irish Catholic bastard sneaked into Mary of Modena’s lying-in chamber at St. James’s Palace in a warming pan (pp. 549–557), or in the French cases of the sexual misdeeds and perverted desires of Bourbon kings, wicked aristocrats, and Marie Antoinette and her coterie in the last years of the *ancien régime*, historians have noted how the sexual was able to relay the political in an age of censorship and secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 160. On the etymological importance of “pubes,” see Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 114.

2 Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Lisa Forman Cody, *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

McKeon helps us better understand the importance of these secret sexual-political narratives in relation to new “explicit doctrines of disclosure,” which included “Protestant conscientiousness and its imperatives of self-examination and enlightenment; the new philosophy, whose language of surface and depth was only the most powerful figure for the scientific excavation, demystification, and desublimation of secrets” (p. 469). There were secrets (and secret histories) before the late seventeenth century, to be sure, but before McKeon’s shift into modernity

secrecy [was] . . . a category of traditional knowledge, not a privative privacy but that which *distinguishe[d]* an elite from the deprived majority [my emphasis]. . . . This [was] the abstruse and esoteric knowledge that mark[ed] the exclusivity of “secret societies,” the “mysteries” of guild practices known only to initiates, and the “receipts” of natural magic that eventually were published in “books of secrets” — also the arcane motives and purposes of ruling sovereign elites, whose authority [was] bound up with their essential unknowability. (p. 469)

In other words, beginning in the late seventeenth century, the secret ceased to be arcane and to become, despite its potential perversions in, say, John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), utterly mundane. Secrets, in the eighteenth century, became, in a word, democratic, the domain of everyone; as everybody’s property, they could be seen as becoming a part of human subjectivity. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* chases — endlessly and to little conclusion — Tristram’s unveiling of his secret history, but can never move really beyond his birth. The prosaic and the political criss-cross in that novel, but only because the story is about Tristram’s cognitive associations, not because, for instance, his father’s impregnating his mother “really” says anything particular about political patriarchalism. Thus the significant cultural shift in the eighteenth century is not simply that private spaces emerged where secret or private things could be cordoned off from public or communal spaces, but also that over the course of the eighteenth century the secret and the private could be increasingly conceptualized as distinct (but overlapping) and that the category of the secret was imagined as increasingly interiorized, as a part of each human subject. The secret marked the interior emotional and psychological drives of individuals.

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For the linkage later in the century and into the nineteenth, see Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). French historians have long been receptive to the historical connection between the private and the political; see, for instance, Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Sara Maza, *Private Lives, Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Much of desire, manipulation, and sexual activity of course took place in private spaces in this age and beyond, but the real “secret,” “private,” “domestic,” and “domesticated” categories referenced human subjectivity as much as enclosed architectonic spaces.

Certainly there was private, secret sex in the “before” of this book. McKeon begins the story in the early modern logic of analogy, microcosm, and macrocosm dominating epistemology: in this patriarchal, status-conscious world, the individual body was understood as representative of and connected to the body politic. Hence “protopornography,” including the sexually scabrous works of John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, were largely political and in their day understood as such (pp. 303–312). What eighteenth-century Britons might consider private, domestic, and sexual served instead in the seventeenth century as an analogy for the state, politics, and public matters. For seventeenth-century writers, one was small and the other large, but private-domestic and public-state matters were imagined as persistently representative of each other. In the eighteenth century, inner, interior, intimate, and individualized spaces and articulations arose, divided from public and state matters, no longer inherently imbricated as they had been before.

Not only were bedrooms considered private and private experiences fundamentally separated from public matters; pornography and the sexual also emerged as categories in themselves, no longer serving primarily as coded critiques of “secret” political analogies. John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, for instance, is rich with reference to politics and rule, as McKeon analyses, but this “pornography is public not because its intimate privacy refers to political actuality but because it refers to imaginative virtuality” (p. 672). That is, an aspect of its titillating power — and indeed the book’s status as pornography — resulted from making the intimate public, but Cleland ultimately accomplished something quite different from authors of Restoration politico-religious critiques that used sex to reveal elites’ secret designs. Instead, Cleland reveals the inner, interior reaches of imaginative desire in the minds of Fanny and of her partners, both male and female. This type of secret history, compared to the secret histories of Procopius and his Restoration and Augustan imitators, had as its final goal revealing the subjectivity of desire of ordinary and distinct actors, not revealing the “truth” of great players’ secret designs.

In addition to John Cleland, Samuel Richardson, and all the other literary lions of the eighteenth century who explored the interior recesses of subjectivity, Adam Smith stands as a pivotal figure. *An Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations* (1776) addressed the modern divisions of knowledge, historical epochs, public and private spaces, and of course labour itself; Smith also was interested in the division between human subjects when he asked how individuals behaved both rationally and ethically given that, as he explained in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759),

every person is fundamentally limited in fully “experience[ing] . . . what other men feel” (quoted on p. 376). Instead, as Smith argued, “it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [another man’s] sensations” (quoted on p. 376). By naming the sympathetic subject theatrically “the spectator,” McKeon emphasizes that sympathy is not an act of emotional fusion, but one in which the fundamental division between individuals remains omnipresent, mediated only by each subject’s imagining the other. This is not alienating, but instead civilizing: “because we project onto others an image of ourselves and introject within ourselves an image of the other” (p. 379), we behave both self-interestedly and responsibly, or “impartially,” as Smith put it.<sup>3</sup> In this vacillation between projection and introjection, combined with the awareness that our imagination cannot fully replicate the precise sensations that another feels, Adam Smith established that the other is never fully, entirely knowable, or at least sensible to anybody else. Selves were separated, and now they knew it. The Smithean understanding of the self is that one is fundamentally divided from others and exists in a world of divisions between “high and low, outside and inside, public and private in all dimensions of human life” (p. 379), with only the imagination to mediate these divides.

Though McKeon does not explicitly tell the story of the historical emergence of the imagination, his argument shows the imagination’s appearance with Protestant theology, with the rise of the new science, and as a tool to negotiate the multiplicity of growing divisions between public and private, the self and the other, and so on. By the eighteenth century, imagination had even become a subject in its own right in the visual arts, literature, and of course philosophy. As a site of solitary, interior creativity and pleasure, the imagination could be (perhaps surprisingly initially) represented as or signified through masturbation — and in turn masturbation was divided from other forms of sexual behaviour as a particularly pernicious vice that resulted from the dangers of the imagination in such works as John Marten’s *Onania* of the 1710s. As recently argued by Thomas Laqueur, masturbation was discovered or invented as a solitary vice and thus social evil for sapping the reproductive potential of the masturbator, plus seducing him or her into utterly unproductive and secret activity.<sup>4</sup> In addition to acknowledging this strand of the anti-masturbatory discourse, McKeon locates an alternative set of representations in which masturbation served quite surprisingly as a category of

3 For a critical earlier investigation of these problems, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4 Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2004).

the imagination that enabled the subject to greater understanding of the self and the other.

When describing a specific visual sub-genre of the story of Christ in the house of Martha and Mary, McKeon offers the unexpected possibility that female masturbation was intertwined with spiritual contemplation. The Mary and Martha genre was based on the gospels' story of Christ visiting the home of Lazarus's sisters. One sister, Martha, served him bread, yet became angry with her sister Mary who simply sat rapt at his feet; rather than ordering Mary to help prepare the meal, Jesus instead rebuked Martha for not attending to the "one thing needful" of spiritual devotion (p. 423). Both northern and southern artists represented the image through similar conventions, which McKeon construes as instructing the lay viewer to balance "the devotional and the worldly, faith and works" (p. 424). One late-sixteenth-century depiction (used as the cover illustration of *The Secret History*) by Vincenzo Campi dramatically magnifies the role of worldly works. In this version, the artist places a "buxom



**Figure 1:** Cover illustration (Vincenzo Campi) of McKeon's book *The Secret History*, reproduced with permission of Johns Hopkins University Press.

cook” in the foreground, whose left hand lifts a great basket of carrots, turnips, gourds, tomatoes, plums, and grapes — all symbols for both sexes’ genitals and female breasts — and whose right hand plunges into the centre of an enormous slab of salmon, “a suggestive symbol, scholars tell us, of the female genitals” (pp. 432 and 804, n.109).

Fingering the salmon, looking directly at the viewer boldly, the cook here signals — of all unexpected acts in such a scene — female masturbation. McKeon situates this painting chronologically as public and private, inner and outer beginning to divide. In the context of McKeon’s larger argument about imagination serving as the conceptual space to bridge different categories, we might read the reference to masturbation here as signifying not so much a solitary sexual act, but as the category of the imagination itself. How does this equation work? Campi’s depiction of the house of Martha and Mary places in the foreground a cook, who appears to be a stand-in for Martha, who is otherwise not clearly delineated in the painting. Her sumptuous, cornucopia of a kitchen dominates the entire two-dimensional surface, but in the upper-left corner, the viewer’s eye is drawn by dramatic two-point perspective into deep space to a distant room housing Christ and Mary at his feet. The scene might at first seem to be a tiny tableau positioned immediately behind the cook’s right shoulder, next to her head. The scene resembles an opened cabinet or closet, one of the interior spaces that McKeon shows to have prominent positions in eighteenth-century literature for being able to house “secret histories.”

While the painting as a whole is dominated by the almost leering female sexuality of the cook — of course, this was still the period in which women were viewed as the lustful sex — its real subject is the story of revealed spiritual truth in the upper corner. To clarify that the scene is not a tableau in the kitchen, but rather a room divided from the kitchen, Campi establishes deep space by placing in the mid-ground of the painting a skinned and prepared fowl on a spit. This bird is perhaps a cock — an unlikely dish to eat, but with its comb still hanging from its neck, it may instead remind us of the “cock’s crow” of the gospels. Compositionally, with the skinned fowl, the cook’s head, and her hand holding the salmon, Campi creates an inverted triangle that contains Christ and Lazarus’s sister Mary at the centre. Given this visual placement, the tableau might almost appear (in our modern terms) as a sort of “thought bubble” of what should or could be in the mind’s eye of Martha the cook, as she attends to the very worldly and carnal world of the kitchen and her meat. Although the painting is densely redolent with multiple symbols for sexual organs and pleasure, from phallic pars-nips to aphrodisiac artichokes, from salmon, squids, and carp slit open with their intestines arranged like genitals to a bowl full of ripe cherries, the erotic, including the masturbatory, instead appears to signify desire itself. Whether Campi was proposing that the desire of the lustful and

masturbating gourmand is in opposition to and thus divided from divine matters or that the masturbatory imagination and Christian contemplation are ineluctably intertwined in the human interior, I leave to others to ascertain.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, imaginary desire becomes this Christian painting's central subject, and this through symbols of masturbation.

While it might be difficult to establish for certain whether it was a causal, rather than oppositional, relationship that Campi established between "low" sexual imagination and "high" spiritual-ethical insight, John Cleland was more explicit (and playful) about the positive potential linking sexual desire and higher knowledge. McKeon reads Fanny Hill's masturbatory scenes as embodying the best moments of Smithean self-hood: "This is the limit case of Adam Smith's theory of imaginative identification. . . . Fanny is Smith's 'spectator', theatrically detached from the 'persons principally concerned' and moved to the extremity of vicarious sensation" (p. 669). Fanny was not alone among eighteenth-century figures in being represented as being imaginatively and impartially transported to another person's social position, pain, or pleasure and in the process coming to know herself all the more thoroughly. McKeon illuminates how the domestic novel indeed dwelled on this pivotal imaginative exercise as the narrative highpoint in characters' coming to have sympathy for others (often former antagonists) and in the process developing greater self-knowledge. McKeon ends his study with a close reading of this process in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The protagonist Elizabeth Bennett initially rejects Fitzwilliam Darcy in person, but through acts of re-imagination — seeing his portrait, reading his letters, visualizing others' points of view about the tangled narrative — she is able to project herself into a different subject position and comes to realize that Darcy is hardly a cad, but actually kind. The repetitive imagining of seeing him anew, again and again, in her mind's eye leads her to fall in love with him. At this high point, she exclaims: "Till this moment, I never knew myself!" (quoted on p. 717). The imagination, revisited over and over, results in climactic self-awareness and social connections: "Like Adam Smith, Austen would have us understand that both self-knowledge and ethical sociability require the sympathetic internalization of the other's point of view as if it were own" (p. 717).

5 A text that might help us argue for the necessary interconnection between sex and salvation is Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Günther Irmscher, "Ministrae Voluptatum: Stoicizing Ethics in the Market and Kitchen Scenes of Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer," *Simiolus*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1986), p. 226, which McKeon cites (n. 109, p. 804). See also Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and its Symbols*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), for a variety of fruits and animals that had simultaneous Christian significance and folk associations, making such objects as apples and cucumbers possess morally polyvalent meanings.

The process of literary characters (and modern human subjects) projecting themselves into each other had become so commonplace by the early nineteenth century that we might lose sight of an extraordinary feature here: male and female characters project and introject across the divide of gender. McKeon does not mention the reference, but perhaps one of the most stunning examples of eighteenth-century sympathy exploiting, but also transcending, the divisions of the sexes was expressed by Diderot in praise of Richardson: “Who would wish to be Lovelace with all his advantages? Who would not rather be Clarissa, despite all her misfortunes? I have often said, as I read him: I would happily give my life to be like this woman; I would rather be dead than be that man.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in several examples of domestic fiction discussed by McKeon, developing awareness of the other (and the self) is enabled through not only what Madeleine Kahn has called “narrative transvestism,”<sup>7</sup> but also a depiction of literal transvestism in which male figures hid or disguised themselves, sometimes even in the clothing or entering the private closets and spaces of the opposite sex. This eighteenth-century psychological transcendence despite the physiological divisions between the sexes should be seen as marking the height of modern subjectivity. The sexes had become, to use Thomas Laqueur’s words, “incommensurable opposites,” but paradoxically both sexes were also imagined as being able to project themselves into the other. In McKeon’s eighteenth-century world, they could imagine themselves across that divide in a way that they never could in the early modern world before all subjects, not just the great and male, were imagined as having an interior life, a “secret history” of their very own.

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6 Denis Diderot, “In Praise of Richardson” (1762), in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 84.

7 Madeleine Kahn, *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).