

Public and Private England, 1600–1800:
The Secret History of Domesticity
Revisited

That grounded maxim
So rife and celebrated in the mouths
Of wisest men; that to the public good
Private respects must yield.¹

WITH THESE WORDS John Milton reminded readers of his mid-seventeenth-century tragedy of the final days of Samson Agonistes as a captive of the Philistines in the Bible's Book of Judges. Echoing too the famed classical work *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, Milton's work is reflective of a Greek tragedy. Yet his prose is arguably more Hebraic than Hellenic in tone.² After the blind and bound Samson reconciles — or seeks to reconcile — himself with his tribesmen, family, and fellow man, the tragic biblical story concludes with Samson's final heroic and suicidal display of strength for his assembled Philistine captors, when he pulls down the pillars of their temple, thereby destroying himself and all inside it (Judges 1:13–16). The tragedy is emblematic, some have suggested, of Milton's own sightless condition and the destruction of his own political dreams with the failure of the Commonwealth in 1660.³ Contemporaries could not but have drawn the connection, too, between the fate of the Philistines, whose corpses lay strewn amidst the rubble in

1 John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (1671), I.865.

2 E. Liebert, "Samson Agonistes and Spiritual Autobiography," *Parergon*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2005), pp. 131–157; M. Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 864; A. Rudrum, "Milton Scholarship and the Agon over *Samson Agonistes*," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3–4 (2002), pp. 465–488.

3 On this voluminous subject, see A. Escobedo, "The Millennial Border Between Tradition and Innovation: Foxe, Milton and the Idea of Historical Progress," in R. Connors and A. Gow, eds., *Anglo-American Millennialism: From Milton to the Millerites* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 1–42; D. Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); T. Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and his Kingdom, 1660–1685* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), particularly pp. 43–84; B. Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and Passions of Posterity* (London: Penguin Press, 2001), pp. 50–58; the essays in D. Armitage, A. Himy, and Q. Skinner, eds., *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and A. Woolrych, *Britain in Revolution, 1625–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 757–796.

Ga'za, and the regicides whose bodies, as well as political aspirations and beliefs, were so utterly dismembered by the Restoration. Milton provides an ironic evocation of the distinction between Delila's betrayal of Samson in the name of Philistine public good and her personal or private loyalties to Samson as her husband. The contrast between the public and the private was indeed blurred by Milton in *Samson Agonistes*, as much as it was in many aspects of social, political, and spiritual life during the tumultuous decades of the mid-seventeenth century in Britain. However, as recent scholarship reveals to specialists of the early modern period, in particular the long eighteenth century, the emergence of modern notions of public-private relations was latent, perhaps "nigh," for seventeenth-century Britons, as Milton published his tragedy about Samson and composed his more famous Restoration era work dealing with the temptations of Christ, *Paradise Regained*.

It is upon modern perceptions of public and private and upon domesticity, rather than John Milton, that this roundtable discussion concentrates. It takes its inspiration not so much from the tragedy of *Samson Agonistes*, but from the publication of the monumental work by Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private and the Division of Knowledge* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).⁴ The sheer size of McKeon's work, impressive as it is, disguises an even greater breadth and depth of learning brought to bear by the author upon a plethora of themes central to our interdisciplinary understanding of the age of enlightenment.⁵ As the contributions by Lisa Cody, John Smail, and Rachel Weil aptly show,⁶ *The Secret History of Domesticity* addresses subjects that engage specialist debates with exacting precision, but also casts such discussions within much wider contexts that ensure

4 The contributors to this roundtable discussion first presented their insights about Michael McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity: Private, Public and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), in a Plenary Session held at the North American Conference for British Studies in Boston, Massachusetts, November 17, 2006.

5 Professor McKeon offered us a glimpse of his thesis in "The Secret History of Domesticity: Private, Public and the Division of Knowledge," in C. Jones and D. Wahrman, eds., *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 171–189, and "Tacit Knowledge: Tradition and its Aftermath," in M. S. Phillips and G. Schochet, eds., *Questions of Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 171–202.

6 As some readers of this journal will recognize, Lisa Cody is author of *Birth of the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-century Britons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). John Smail has published *Merchants, Markets and Manufacture: The English Wool Textile Industry in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999); *Origins of Middle-class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660–1780* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); and "Credit, Risk, and Honor in Eighteenth-Century Commerce," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2005), pp. 439–456. Rachel Weil is perhaps best known for her work *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) and "Gender and the Historians' Eighteenth Century," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 31 (1992), pp. 288–293.

that the book is necessary reading for those interested in the nature of modernity and in McKeon's narrative, or "master narrative," which he argues provides "a conceptual framework broad enough to set the engine of historical inquiry in motion."⁷

Before turning to the detailed explanation and analysis that Professors Cody, Smail, and Weil provide of McKeon's work, it might be helpful to introduce some of the central themes that occupy the pages of *The Secret History of Domesticity*. McKeon's book focuses upon the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and charts the transition from "traditional" to "modern" culture and the processes by which distinctions of public and private become "separated out from each other, a condition that both sustains the sense of traditional distinction and, axiomatically, reconstitutes the public and the private as categories that are susceptible to separation."⁸ One key terminological or categorical indicator of this metamorphosis from tradition to modernity, from relations of distinction to relations of separation, was the division of one hitherto tacit term into two often "oppositional and self-sufficient parts." The vast range of concepts McKeon explores that reflect this historical discontinuity include:

estate, the public state/the private estate; *status*, sociopolitical rank/economic wealth; *gender*, natural sex/acculturated gender; *honor*, family lineage/personal virtue; *propriety*, social appropriateness/private property; *religion*, institutional and cultural/individual and personal; ... *knowledge*, external sense impressions/internal creative imagination; ... [and] *individual*, indivisible and collective/independent and singular.⁹

Beside these linguistic developments, which signify the conceptual and material separation of public and private, McKeon argues that the division of knowledge also informs modern perceptions of domesticity. The reader is reminded that domesticity embodies both modern and individual expectations of privacy and our collective experiences with publicity. Key to charting the evolution of early modern domestication into modern domesticity in McKeon's work is the role of visual and print culture, the apogee of which was reached with the emergence of the novel in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁰ Part and parcel of these processes are a number of major developments that shape and reshape the experiences of Britons

7 McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity*, p. xxvi.

8 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

9 *Ibid.*, p. xx.

10 These themes are considered in Parts II and III (pp. 323–717) of *The Secret History of Domesticity*. McKeon has also considered aspects of this subject in his earlier work, *The Origins of the English Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

in the period. Between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth century, the peoples who inhabit McKeon's *Secret History* witness the formation of civil society at the expense of the state, the rise of Lockean contractual thought, and the devolution of absolutism and authority from the monarch to the individual. Moreover, those same Britons, primarily the "middling sorts" as contemporaries might have known them (the "sort" made familiar to use by such scholars as Julian Hoppit, Paul Langford, Linda Colley, John Brewer, and Roy Porter), also experienced on a personal level the proto-industrial, financial, consumer, and market revolutions, as well as a proliferation of the printed word — secular and spiritual, moral and immoral — and a bewildering number of challenges to established early modern ways of life, livelihood, and lifestyle.¹¹

The Secret History of Domesticity signposts and maps many of the paths Britons and some Europeans took to modernity, and it therefore will resonate with those who have engaged with the various and voluminous works of European scholars dealing with the separate, yet related and interrelated, histories of "private life" and with the "public sphere." Typified by the collaborative volumes of *Histoire de la vie privée*, edited by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, French historians have provided a template of *la vie privée* that includes the importance of privacy or solitude, consciousness of the body and modesty (what Norbert Elias described as the "civilizing process"), the value of intimacy and friendships, and the emergence of autobiography, diaries, and the novel.¹² The realization of these more modern forms of privacy were, according to Philippe Ariès and Roger Chartier, embedded within larger social and political processes such as the rise of the nation-state, increased literacy throughout Europe, and the processes of Reformation that gripped and held Western Europe in its grasp until the age of transatlantic revolutions in the later eighteenth century.¹³ At heart, these studies, inspired in part by the Annales school, focus upon the household, the family, sociability and domesticity, and what German historians call *Alltagsgeschichte* — the

11 See, for example, J. Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England, 1689–1727* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) and *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997); R. Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

12 G. Duby, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée, II. De l'Europe féodale à la Renaissance* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), trans. A. Goldhammer as *A History of Private Life II: Revelations of the Medieval World* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1988); R. Chartier, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée, III. De la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), trans. A. Goldhammer as *A History of Private Life III: Passions of the Renaissance* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1989). See, too, N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1994).

13 Chartier, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée, III*, pp. 7–19.

history of everyday life.¹⁴ From these private experiences — what McKeon describes as “secret histories” — emerged individuals who by the eighteenth century found both space and place within what Jürgen Habermas has famously described as “the public sphere.”

In Habermas’s construction of eighteenth-century society, the public sphere “mediates between society and state [and acts as a space] in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion.”¹⁵ Interested in the changing function and nature of culture — particularly political culture — from the Middle Ages onwards, Habermas concentrated upon the relationship between private and public and concluded that the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere was the culmination of two long and drawn-out historical processes: the formation of the modern nation-state and the advent of capitalist society.¹⁶ Ironically, the rise of nation-states also spawned the emergence of society separate and distinct from the state itself. As states claimed sovereignty over their subjects, monopolized violence and public power, they also surrendered private matters and social activities to society at large, and it was within this arena that “civil society” and a bourgeois public sphere emerged. Among other things, this process required broad participation in politics, success over absolutist governance (as in England after the Glorious Revolution of 1688), increasingly rational rather than arbitrary authority, and the rule of law. The public sphere, Geoff Eley reminds us, was also

linked to the growth of urban culture — metropolitan and provincial — as the novel arena of a locally organized public life (meeting houses, concert halls, theatres, opera houses, lecture halls, museums), to a new infrastructure

14 These themes are considered in D. Goodman, “Public Sphere and Private Life: Towards a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Régime,” *History and Theory*, vol. 31 (1992), pp. 1–20. For a discussion of the Annales school and its influence, see P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–1989* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). On the purposes of *Alltagsgeschichte*, see A. Ludtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Restructuring Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); P. Burke, “Overture: The New History, its Past and Future,” in P. Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University State Press, 1991), pp. 8–12.

15 J. Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” *New German Critique*, vol. 3 (1974), p. 49.

16 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 5–26. The following discussion of Habermas is also drawn from these pages and pp. 27–88. Habermas’s work has inspired considerable scholarship. On that voluminous subject, see H. Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 72 (2000), pp. 153–182; A. J. La Vopa, “Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 64 (1992), pp. 79–116; Roger Chartier, “The Public Sphere and Public Opinion,” in R. Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 20–37; A. Clark, “Contested Space: The Public and Private Spheres in Nineteenth Century Britain,” *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 35 (1996), pp. 269–276; T. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 5–14.

of social communication (the press, publishing companies, and other literary media; the rise of a reading public via reading and language societies; subscription publishing and lending libraries; improved transportation; and adapted centres of sociability like coffeehouses, taverns, and clubs), and to a new universe of voluntary organizations.¹⁷

Many of these developments came in the wake of, and owed much to, the rise of capitalism, which helped further fragment the early modern state and society. According to Habermas, while it remained bound politically to the state, society found increased autonomy and confidence in the advent of mercantile capitalism. The rise of European merchant empires and the expansion of domestic, continental, imperial, and international trade fostered the flow of goods, information, and ideas, which in turn reinforced the pursuit of knowledge and the independence of civil society.¹⁸ The exchange of goods and the exchange of information helped undermine the old order or *ancien régime* and herald the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in which culture itself could also be commodified.¹⁹ Here and elsewhere, Habermas's public sphere intersects with the public and private world revealed in McKeon's *The Secret History*, and it is to that world we must return.²⁰ Habermas, Chartier, and McKeon all share a deep-seated interest in the role that culture, broadly conceived, played in the social and structural transformation of

17 G. Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 291. Also see G. Eley, "Re-thinking the Political: Social History and Political Culture in 18th and 19th Century Britain," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, vol. 21 (1981), pp. 427–457. Habermas discusses these ideas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 27–36.

18 On this voluminous subject, see K. R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480–1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); D. Loades, *England's Maritime Empire: Seapower, Commerce and Policy, 1490–1690* (London: Pearson Education, 2000); R. Brenner, *Merchants and Revolutionaries: Commercial Change, Political Conflict and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); N. Zahedieh, "Economy," in D. Armitage and M. J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 51–68; C. G. Pestana, *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640–1661* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004); H. Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise and the Making of the British Overseas Empire, 1688–1775* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Press, 1996); J. Tracy, ed., *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

19 N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982); J. Brewer and R. Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993); A. Bermingham and J. Brewer, eds., *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1995).

20 McKeon elaborates on the place he sees for Habermas's public sphere in his vision of the eighteenth century in his text. See *The Secret History of Domesticity*, pp. 44–48, 70–76.

society and domesticity during the eighteenth century and in the consequences such processes had upon the course of modernity we inherited.²¹

Before turning to our specialist and detailed commentaries on Michael McKeon's work, I would suggest that *The Secret History of Domesticity* skilfully combines the particular and experiential aspects of *la vie privéé*, of the histories of private life inspired by Duby and Chartier, with the broader, abstract, and associational activities of Habermas's bourgeoisie in the eighteenth-century public sphere. In synthesizing and uniting these disparate schools of thought, McKeon has produced an invaluable work that will require as much attention as that already given by British historians to Chartier, Ariès, and Habermas. *The Secret History of Domesticity* helps us to understand more fully the meaning of public and private in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and to appreciate the public and private worlds that distinguish, and more accurately separate, Milton's age from ours. That is a feat worthy of Samson himself!

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21 Useful for a discussion of modernity are the contributions of S. Hall, P. Hamilton, D. Held, V. Brown, H. Bradley, and R. Boccock in "Part I: Formations of Modernity," in S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert, and K. Thompson, eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), pp. 1–228. For an alternative perspective, see B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : essais d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), trans. C. Porter as *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).