

# Social History and Literary Criticism

MICHAEL McKEON'S *The Secret History of Domesticity* is an examination of the fundamental changes in European (but specifically British) society during the early modern period, changes that culminated in the emergence of the "modern." McKeon's focus is perhaps best described as being on how epistemology — modes of knowing — developed in this period, and that focus gives the book an incredibly wide scope, from economics and political theory to pornography and the origins of the novel.

*The Secret History of Domesticity* gets its title from a conjunction of two aspects of the analysis McKeon presents. The secret history is a literary genre whose history McKeon traces in the last third of the book. The defining feature of the secret history is the intent to reveal the arcane mysteries of the high by means of a story set in the low or domestic realm. The secret history works on two registers simultaneously. On one hand its shift from high to low lets the reader's familiarity with the domestic setting serve as a tool for comprehending the secrets of the high. At the same time, the shift from high to low undermines the inherent privilege and authority of the high by revealing its domestic roots, most obviously and frequently by revealing its familial — read sexual — underpinnings. Crucially, the secret history is also secret in a literal sense, for its allegorical form both masks and reveals the truth it tells, turning libel (or sedition) into satire or, more generally, turning the actual or particular into abstraction or principle. Thus, to give examples from the endpoints of the development of the secret history that McKeon describes, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* can be taken as the founding example of a secret history in that its story of princely courtship set in a foreign land — a story that revolves around issues of parental domination — can be understood as a comment on the politics of Queen Elizabeth's court, and specifically her potential match with the Duke of Anjou. In this instance, which is typical of earlier instances of the secret history, the didactic purpose of the secret history is quite explicit in that the high being unmasked is that of high politics, the workings of king and court. By the time we get to Richardson's *Pamela*, there is no intent to reveal secrets of the Hanoverian court, nor, therefore, any particular danger of a prosecution for seditious libel. There is, however, still a devolution from high to low in that Pamela's treatment at the hands of Mr. B invites reflection on issues of tyranny and subjection and on the status of woman as servant as compared to woman as wife.

The secret history is a prime example of what McKeon identifies in the second third of the book as the process of domestication and its outcome, domesticity. As suggested by the nature of the secret history, domestication involves the way in which issues of more public import are examined, explained, and indeed encompassed by the private. Thus Daniel Defoe's extended allegory figures credit — both public and private — as a woman and provides advice to both monarch and merchant about how to pursue and keep credit using metaphors that build on both gender and courtship. Eliza Heywood's *Female Spectator* links civic order to the conjugal order, the latter being both emblematic of and necessary for the former. The relationship between civic and conjugal that Heywood depicts is, like all examples of the domestic, dialectical and self-referential, for the principles and precepts she imparts through particular stories in the domestic realm on one hand serve as points of origin for those narratives and on the other are generated, with both their public and private referents, from those narratives.

McKeon sees domestication as the formal method by which the fundamental epistemological shift from the medieval to the modern takes place, a “devolution of absolutism” discussed in the first third of the book. Central to this devolution is a process of successive separations by which distinctions that were implicit are made explicit. The chain, schematic rather than chronological, runs thus: the royal government as emblematic of the organic whole of society separates into the state and civil society; civil society then separates into politics and the household; the household then separates into economic work outside the home and the domestic sphere within it; which in turn separates into male and female realms; and then to object and subject. The trajectory of the process of domestication — the unfamiliar and unknown to the familiar and therefore known — operates at each stage in this sequence. McKeon's analysis develops a series of related trajectories that capture different aspects of this devolution: from public to private; from positive freedom (freedom to) to negative freedom (freedom from); from personal to impersonal or anonymous; from authority dependent upon status to authority dependent upon empiricism and statistics (thus independent of status); from interest-edness to disinterestedness; and, of course, from secret to disclosed. McKeon shows, however, that working alongside this devolution are processes that act to constitute the increasingly individuated, disinterested, and private actors into a social whole, a public, which is self-constituted.

Any reading of McKeon's argument, as with any summary, can only be partial, for in one sense this book's comprehensiveness defies categorization. Moreover, the book's scope means that any reading is inevitably coloured by one's academic training and historical inclinations (and limitations), in my case the broadly defined field of social history. However, with that caveat, I would argue that one way of reading McKeon's work is as an extended commentary on and extension of Jürgen Habermas's

analysis of the bourgeois public sphere. The similarities are clear. What Habermas describes as the bourgeois public sphere — an extension into the public realm of the private sphere — fits in very neatly as one element in the sequence of “devolutions” given above, and, like Habermas, McKeon assigns crucial importance to the range of new social forms such as sociability and print that emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to the ways in which the public was constituted. What McKeon adds to Habermas is an incredible depth of analysis and example, showing how this fundamental process of explicating the embedded was ramified across a series of social and intellectual fields.

More generally, McKeon’s explicit adoption of a dialectical analysis to show how the embedded becomes explicit offers a more comprehensive way of understanding the transformation from medieval to modern. To take the example of patriarchal theory of government — one of the initial features of the devolution of absolutism — McKeon’s dialectic notes that the very act of explicating the implicit, whether it was James I instructing Parliament not to “dispute what a king can do” or Filmer theorizing the relationship of king as father to his people, creates the platform from which John Pym or John Locke could challenge those ideas. Embedded distinctions are known, but they are known as natural, divinely created and therefore unquestioned. Once subject to analysis, the separation becomes explicit and the authority (political, social, epistemological) moves down a step and stands revealed as a human creation, therefore open to question and challenge. A crucial aspect of this observation is that the devolved authority then reconstitutes itself through a process of — to put it crudely — averaging, which gives rise in different epistemological fields to such things as public opinion, repeatable scientific experiments, or a theory of aesthetics based on durability.

This approach, I think, provides some useful insight into some of the key interpretive problems that confront historians of this period. One example, drawn from the book, concerns the debate over the domestic ideology of “separate spheres,” a two-part problem involving questions about both continuity as opposed to change and ideal as opposed to real. McKeon’s suggestion is that the division recognized by separate spheres ideology was in many respects implicit in existing pre-modern social practices (continuity) but that, as such cultural conceptions became more explicit (change), the process at once affected and was affected by social practice. McKeon’s analysis goes beyond the soft option of solving thorny debates by taking the middle road both because this explication is linked to a range of other social and cultural developments, from political theory to the ethical superiority of women over men, and because it shows how an ideology of separate spheres became useful in the constitution of new forms of social/political authority.

A second observation about the value of McKeon’s study follows from the implications of this last point, for he is, refreshingly, interested in the

big changes that took place in this period — not the least of which was the development of commercial and ultimately industrial capitalism. This focus is evident in his discussion of the emergence of the language of interests, particularly in the Restoration period. Interests, McKeon argues, are rooted in the economic realm (the private) but have implications in the public arena and are particularly crucial to the way in which the King's authority came to be questioned. As always, McKeon's analysis hinges on the complex and self-referential implications of the ways in which these developments occurred. Thus, the King's assignment of authority over printing to the Stationers' Company subjected a public interest — controlling what was printed — to the private interest of the Stationers' profit margins. At the same time, even though the King no longer controlled printing, an author like Defoe could rail against the absolutist authority implicit in the Stationers' privilege as being against the public interest of a free press.

It is, however, precisely in its attempt to grapple with fundamental processes of social change that McKeon's analysis raises questions that, in the broadest possible sense, stem from the inherent difficulty of connecting an analysis of written (and mostly published) texts to the history of the society as a whole. One such question concerns intent and causation, and it has two guises. At the micro level, it concerns the relationship between author and milieu. To give but one example, a very compelling discussion of Eliza Heywood's *Female Spectator* notes how the fictional "editorial board" under which Heywood cloaked her authorial identity had a dual function of claiming the authority of group over individual, but simultaneously softening and domesticating that authority by virtue of the fact that the group met in her kitchen. Neat trick on her part, or was it simply unconscious? McKeon is not clear whether we should see Heywood as an agent driving forward the processes of domestication and devolution or whether she was merely picking up currents in the culture around her. I suppose the latter, but pondering the origins and course of such currents leads directly to the macro-level question of causation. In the first chapter, McKeon gives a convincing analysis of how the very act of warning Parliament not to enquire into the limits of his power invited James I's contemporaries to do just that. But why does James warn in the first place? The search for first movers is, of course, something of a chimera, but this question is an example of McKeon's tendency to focus on process rather than cause. This focus is particularly clear in the first part of the book, which specifically denies that there is any chronology to the cascade of devolutions from king to civil society, to politics, to economics, and so on, and thus denies the possibility of any contingent relationships between these developments.

A second question concerns the limits or endpoints of McKeon's analysis or, to put it another way, the relationship between the epistemological developments he describes and social, political, and economic change in

Britain during this period. In the first few terms in the devolution of absolutism there is a clear correspondence between epistemology and, for want of a better word, reality — the King did have less power, public opinion became more important, household economies changed. However, that correspondence does not persist. Most obviously, women did not come to exercise political and social power in any meaningful sense, despite the crucial role that femaleness came to play in political and social rhetoric. Thus, part way down the chain, the devolution of real authority stops and subsequent separations involve only virtual authority. There is also a social limit to this devolution of authority. Although, in theory, everyone could claim the status of the autonomous individual operating in the public, in fact, the practical exercise of power was limited to those with means. McKeon's analysis thus suggests ample reasons why we might expect to find characters like John Wilkes expressing popular discontent at not sharing in the political and social authority that the epistemological developments of the age had promised; as we know from his followers' gleeful gibes at Bute's domestic relations with the King's mother, they did so using the trope of the "secret history." However, Wilkes and the many radicals who followed him are entirely absent from the book, for, as McKeon moves into the middle and later eighteenth century, he becomes increasingly focused on the interiority of experience, the domestic (the novel).

I raise both of these points not as criticisms but as indications of the kinds of work that this book will engender. McKeon's analysis of the fundamental epistemological changes of the early modern period has raised some very important questions and offered a number of crucial insights, but the final result is open-ended rather than definitive.

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