

# The Public, the Private, and Feminist Historiography

IN JANUARY 1711, Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, was fired as Groom of the Stole to Queen Anne, even though her husband, the Duke, retained his position as commander of Queen's forces. The friendship between Sarah and the Queen had collapsed, and Anne had bestowed her affections, as well as a position in the bedchamber, on Abigail Masham, who happened to be a Tory. For Sarah, this replacement of her Whig self by the Tory Masham was a political event. In her campaign to retain her office, she used distinctions between "public" and "private" in multiple ways. Sarah asserted that the bedchamber was a public space, that she held public office in it, and that her presence there served the public because she was a disinterested statesperson devoted to the public good. Masham was a mere favourite, driven by private interest, conjuring up private passion in the Queen. Sarah also conflated public and private in certain ways. Anne's bad behaviour, disloyalty to a friend, and "passion" for Abigail Masham portended and invoked political tyranny. Other people, though, insisted the dismissal of Sarah Churchill was a purely personal event. The bedchamber, they argued, was Anne's private space to do with as she pleased. Contested definitions of public and private were thus offered to advance political agendas. For Sarah, to treat the dismissal as a political event was to legitimate herself as a political actor. For Tories who defended Anne's choice, the goal was to get Masham into the bedchamber, which they thought would advance their party. For Whigs other than Sarah, including Sarah's husband, it made sense in this one instance to agree with the Tories that the affair was indeed just private because it let them deny that they were falling out of Anne's favour. Public and private as categories were deployed all the time in the eighteenth century, yet meanings are contradictory, distinctions fluid.<sup>1</sup>

Feminist and other historians have long puzzled over the problem of public and private in the course of the eighteenth century. It was once common to say that, sometime in that period, public and private were separated and women relegated to the private sphere, but that narrative of

<sup>1</sup> The story is told in Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England 1680–1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), chap. 8; it is also discussed by McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity*, pp. 562–565.

separation, and its gendering, has been questioned in recent scholarship. We now know that women were up to their necks in financial transactions, that the domestic dinner parties over which they innocently presided were actually political cabals, and that Sarah Churchill thought she was a stateswoman and not a favourite. These insights and many others challenge the idea that women were relegated to the private, or even that the public and private ever split neatly apart.<sup>2</sup> This complication of the previous narrative, however, raises new questions. First, is it possible to construct a new narrative about the meaning of public and private? Secondly, given that categories of public and private were (as my opening anecdote suggests) endlessly manipulated, conflated, and switched around, we still need to explain why the terms were so important to people in the period. McKeon's book opens up interesting lines of thought on these questions.

Part I of McKeon's book, "The Age of Separations," makes what looks like the conventional argument: the relationship of the public and private changes from being one of "tacit distinction" to one of "explicit separation." McKeon examines a large number of categorical dyads whose relations were glossed in terms of "public" and "private" in this period: state and family, marriage for interest and marriage for love, positive liberty ("duty") and negative liberty ("freedom"), sex as part of a social matrix and sex as such, the political subject and the ethical subject, the political public sphere and the aesthetic public sphere, particular (private) and general (public), libel (an attack on a particular person, hence private) and satire (an attack on a general vice, hence public).

"The Age of Separations," however, is a somewhat misleading title for the opening section. Much of McKeon's discussion suggests that the period was marked not by a simple division of things public from things private, but by the instability of the labels public and private as they were applied to particular experiences or phenomena. Take, for example, the distinction between orality and literacy. One can argue that "literacy" is more public in that the written word reaches a wider, less personal audience. However, the written word also has connotations of "privacy": it can be read in the closet, be a better vehicle for the communication of "innermost thoughts," and allow for a more personal communication of author and reader than can a speech or sermon. In McKeon's account, the "public" term of one dyad can become the "private" term of another. A good example of this phenomenon is the term "economic." The "economic" was classically seen as the opposite of the "political,"

2 For the above points, see, among others, Elaine Chalus, "Elite Women, Social Politics, and the Political World of Late 18th-century England," *Historical Journal*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2000), pp. 669–697; Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Weil, *Political Passions*.

aligned with base bodily needs, the private, and family. In more recent times, however, the “economic” has been aligned with the rough, rude world outside the household, and hence with the public.

Moreover, McKeon argues that the drawing of a line separating two terms on a public/private axis was always accompanied by a replication of the division within the “private” side of the term. The well-known mapping of family/state onto private/public was thus, McKeon compellingly shows, subject to further refinements. Although the family was considered “private” in relation to the state, McKeon demonstrates that state-like relations of power and force were soon seen to appear inside the family, associated with the power of parent over child; these state-like aspects of the family were then contrasted with the more freely chosen and intimate (hence “private”) relations of husband with wife. The conjugal relationship, as opposed to the parent/child relationship, thus came to be understood as the truly “private” relationship within the family. This alignment of conjugal with private and parent-child with public was further complicated by the perception that there were different kinds of marriages (marriages for money versus marriages for love) and different kinds of husbands (tyrants versus companions) and that these distinctions too could be mapped onto a public/private dichotomy.

The notion that inside every “private” there can be found a new public and private connects the first part of McKeon’s book — a very broad socio-cultural-intellectual-political survey — to the second and third, which are concerned with the genealogy of literary forms. The end point of the story is the birth of the “domestic novel,” in which what has been formerly seen as “public” is incorporated entirely inside the “private,” so that it becomes possible to see the world, if not in a grain of sand, at least in the daily round of family life. For McKeon, the domestic novel is a result, perhaps unintended, of the formal practice of “domestication,” a technique for teaching or understanding high things (God, politics) by way of low, common things. An allegory like the *Pilgrim’s Progress* would be an example of formal domestication; so is the *roman à clef*, in which a story of love stands in for and reveals a story of politics. In all of these, that which is small, unimportant, common, and private is the signifier, while the big thing (God, the state) is the signified and is, of course, what we really want to know about. McKeon argues that over time writers who undertook to use domestication as a formal strategy got more interested in the signifier than the signified. Eventually, they ceased to need to justify their writing about the low, humble, and “domestic” by pretending it was about something more important than “private life.” But private life came to contain all the ethical and political possibilities that “politics” as a subject used to contain. As McKeon puts it, “The rich lode of domesticity that is deposited by the slow withdrawal of domestication over the course of the early modern period has at its core a conviction of the adequacy of the private to sustain and entail those ultimate human ends

to which it had seemed until then no more than a hermeneutic and pedagogic means” (p. 715).

*The Secret History of Domesticity* accordingly ends with a reading of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, through which McKeon seems to offer a wider defence of the “domestic novel” as a serious ethical and political project. *Pride and Prejudice*, he insists, is not political in the sense of supporting Jacobins or Conservatives, but it does explore issues of positive and negative freedom in the way, for example, that it sets up but then complicates the apparent difference between marriage for duty and marriage for love or between aristocratic and meritocratic notions of worth. Moreover, McKeon links Austen to the Adam Smith of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in that *Pride and Prejudice* takes on the problem of how an individual comes to reconcile public and private by internalizing the perspective of “the other” or of society as a whole. “Like Adam Smith,” McKeon writes, “Austen would have us understand that both self-knowledge and ethical sociability require the internalization of the other’s point of view as if it were one’s own” (p. 717).

McKeon thus puts Adam Smith, Jane Austen, and the “domestic novel” into the context of a rich body of eighteenth-century ethics, aesthetics, and social psychology that is all concerned with how an individual might be expected to attain the perspective of disinterestedness or objectivity. This body of thought in turn emerged, he suggests, because of two political developments. First, as a result of the seventeenth-century revolutions, political authority devolved from the monarch to something called “the public.” Secondly, ideals of negative liberty (meaning personal freedom, including freedom to pursue self-interest) emerged strongly in this period. The attractions of “negative liberty” meant that the question inevitably raised by the devolution of authority onto “the public” — namely, “what does the public want?” — could not be answered by recourse to a Rousseauian notion of the “general will.” Nor could it be answered, as Mark Knights has recently shown, by equating “the public” with Parliament or voters.<sup>3</sup> Nor, contrary to well-known claims by J. G. A. Pocock and Steven Shapin, could it be answered by deciding that a certain socio-economic group (landed gentlemen) was alone capable of disinterested objectivity and virtuous public-mindedness.<sup>4</sup> Instead, McKeon insists, it had to be acknowledged that the “public” was constituted by “diverse actual particularities” — that is, real people

3 Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4 Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

or at least real groups of people who were not all the same. How to conceive of those people as “a public” was the problem that everyone wanted to solve, and eighteenth-century attempts to do so tended to focus on the development of the individual, the cultivation of individuals who could at once be “free” and yet internalize a perspective that transcended their particular interest.

One of McKeon’s most valuable contributions, I think, is to put issues of domesticity and privacy that gender historians tend to think of as being about gender into a wider political and historical context. It is healthy and challenging to be reminded that the categories of public and private did not, or not just, come into being as weapons in a class or gender-political struggle. They did not exist solely to confine women to the household, or to expel women and the working class from the public sphere, or so that Whigs could avoid extending the egalitarian implications of contract theory into the family, or to let the middle class separate itself from the working class (by setting up a definition of legitimate privacy that the latter was unable to attain). The public/private distinction was used to all those ends, of course, but we cannot understand why the distinction was compelling unless we see how it grew from and played out in the context of a larger problem of politics and ethics.

Nonetheless, aspects of McKeon’s approach to the problem of public and private raise concerns for me, and I offer them here as an invitation to further dialogue. First, historians (and not just feminist historians) may wonder whether McKeon risks evacuating questions of power, gender, and society. Causality and agency are elusive in McKeon’s account. It is striking that some of his most compelling sentences have subjects that are not human beings but abstractions. A case in point is the sentence quoted above regarding the “rich lode of domesticity that is deposited by the slow withdrawal of domestication.” This turns on a very visualizable geological image. In fact, much of what McKeon says in this book can be very easily visualized, often in terms of images drawn from the natural sciences. His account of the splitting up and then re-splitting and recombining of the private and public, for example, calls to my mind images of cell division and embryonic development. This raises questions for me about the mode of persuasion — does visualizability substitute for explanation here? In any case, I am not sure in the end how McKeon would explain the recession of domestication or the endless process of splitting and re-splitting that affects public and private. Similarly, I am not sure how McKeon would account for what he repeatedly offers as his central narrative of modernity, the movement of thought from the making of “tacit distinctions” to the making of “explicit separations,” unless the agent is thought itself.

The absence of identifiable agents is especially problematic because the history of the public/private distinction is so deeply connected to the history of power. The act of labelling something as public or private is

deeply political, because these terms have defined access and legitimacy. To know what is public and what is private is to know who can say what about what, who can pry into who else's business, where legal action would be appropriate and where not. Speech or knowledge that crosses the boundary, mixes the categories, is deemed scandalous and hence not legitimate. Therefore, power resides in control of the definitions of public and private. That was the point about the story of Sarah Churchill: everyone involved decided whether the Queen's bedchamber or the Queen's friendship was a public or private matter in accordance with political needs. This is, admittedly, an instrumental interpretation of how public and private were defined in that particular context, but it has the virtue of having agents, people who make and apply the labels for a reason.

If the labelling of things as public and private carries with it a politics, so too does "domesticity." A final question for McKeon, and for cultural historians more generally, turns on the relationship of the domestic novel (of which McKeon offers a powerful defence) and domesticity, understood in terms of the legal, educational, ideological, economic structures that limit women's concerns to the home. If Edward Said was wrong, as McKeon argues, to condemn Jane Austen as lacking an ethical/political engagement with the wider world, does that mean that Mary Wollstonecraft was wrong in condemning the narrowness of the education and life course open to middle-class women?

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