

Introduction
Reconsidering Secret History
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In 1674, a small octavo volume became the first work published in English to bear the title ‘secret history’. *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian* was an English translation of a French translation (*Histoire secrète de Procope de Césarée* (Paris, 1669), trans. Leonor de Mauger) of a Latin translation (*Arcana historia* (Lyon, 1623), trans. Nicolò Alemanni) of a Greek text: *Anekdotia*, meaning ‘unpublished [things]’, by the sixth-century Byzantine historian, Procopius of Caesarea. Commentators across Europe expressed an immediate interest in this new form of history writing. In 1685, the French historian Antoine Varillas attempted to define it according to the model presented by Procopius and in contrast with orthodox neoclassical history. The orthodox historian, according to Varillas, ‘considers almost ever Men in Publick’, whereas the secret historian ‘only examines ’em in private’:

Th’one thinks he has perform’d his duty, when he draws them such as they were in the Army, or in the tumult of Cities, and th’other endeavours by all means to get open their Closet-door; th’one sees them in Ceremony, and th’other in Conversation; th’one fixes principally upon their Actions, and th’other wou’d be a Witness of their inward Life, and assist at the most private hours of their Leisure: In a word, the one has barely Command and Authority for Object, and the other makes his Main of what occurs in Secret and Solitude.¹

Secret history peers into secret spaces and allows its readers to see their rulers (and, later in the eighteenth century, a broader social range of subjects) in a metaphorical and literal state of undress. A kind of printed gossip, it soon became a target for critics, who attacked both its ethical and literary credentials.² The sustained popularity of secret history over the course of more than a century provoked critics who condemned these ‘immodest Productions’ as ‘abusive Forgeries’, ‘Foolish Toys’, and ‘Libels’.³

It may have been easy to attack secret history on grounds of bad taste and bad faith but, as the essays in this volume show, the genre is nevertheless a complex historical form that demonstrates, over the course of a century, sustained and serious political engagement and a sophisticated awareness of its own rhetorical and literary characteristics. Secret historians from Procopius onward acknowledge that their revelations might ‘seem neither credible nor probable’, condemning them to be read as ‘narrator[s] of myth’ rather than writers of history.⁴ But they also expose the failings of neoclassical ‘perfect history’, which prudishly and mistakenly prioritises the battlefield over the bedchamber in detailing the causes behind historical events.⁵ They suggest that the ‘secret springs’ behind the visible events of history are part of a complex machine – that each revelation is ‘a Wheel within a Wheel’ which potentially exposes still more closely concealed secrets.⁶ Writers including Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Daniel Defoe, and Eliza Haywood (to name just a few of the better-known secret historians) elicit a range of responses – prurience, scepticism, fear, and outrage among them – as they re-plot familiar narratives of the past, often along partisan lines.

This volume of essays explores the relationships between secret history and other literary genres in Britain, and it sketches out the contours of secret history as it developed in France and America over the course of the long eighteenth century. This introduction to the volume delineates the genre at the moment of its emergence in Western literary culture during the later seventeenth century. It examines secret history’s classical inheritance, its engagement with other kinds of contemporary polemical literature, and its connections with the European romance tradition. By outlining the key features of this form – still relatively unfamiliar, even within eighteenth-century studies – it helps to illuminate the ways in which writers within and outside the secret history tradition engaged with its literary conventions and political associations, which are the subject of the essays that follow.

Secret History from the Classical to Neoclassical Era

Written some time in the mid-sixth century, *Anekdotia* offers a scurrilous reinterpretation of the characters and actions that were the subject of Procopius’s earlier *History of the Wars of the Emperor Justinian*. While the *History of the Wars* highlights the personal and strategic prowess of the empire’s leaders, *Anekdotia* peers into cellars, closets, and bedchambers to reveal the personal and political weakness and corruption of the Emperor

Justinian and his General Belisarius. Both men, the secret history claims, committed outrages against their subjects while under the control of wives (the Empress Theodora and Antonina, respectively) who exercised tyrannical power through a combination of sexual and magical force. Procopius highlights *Anekdotia*'s supplementary status by repeatedly referring readers back to his published texts, while insisting that, in those earlier narratives, 'it was not possible, as long as the actors were still alive, for ... things to be recorded in the way they should have been', and that 'in the case of many of the events described in the previous narrative I was compelled to conceal the causes which led up to them'.⁷ By keeping his *History* in view throughout *Anekdotia*, Procopius emphasises the lasting power of historians to shape public interpretations of events – a power that they wield even over tyrannical, but transitory, rulers. 'For', as *Anekdotia* puts it, 'what man of later times would have learned of the licentious life of Semiramis or of the madness of Sardanapalus and of Nero, if the records of these things had not been left behind by the writers of their times?'⁸

Yet at odds with this apparently powerful revelatory impulse is Procopius's decision to suppress his text at the moment when it was written because 'neither was it possible to elude the vigilance of multitudes of spies, nor, if detected, to escape a most cruel death'.⁹ Indeed, so effective was Procopius's suppression that *Anekdotia* remained unpublished, a 'secret' text, until it turned up in the Vatican library in the early seventeenth century. Early commentators noted a crux in the title of Nicolò Alemanni's 1623 Latin translation, which turned Procopius's Greek title, *Anekdotia*, 'unpublished [things]', into *Arcana historia*, or secret history. Does the adjective 'secret' refer to Procopius's text, as well as to the events revealed in it?¹⁰ In what sense can any published information really be described as a 'secret', since the act of publication itself necessarily undermines any claim to secrecy?¹¹ The model that Procopius bequeathed to later secret historians is a complex one. It suggests that secret history, apparently a genre designed to disclose secret intelligence, in fact involves acts of both revelation and concealment. The tradition of *roman à clef*, in which the identities of public figures are concealed under assumed names, offers just one instance of the ways in which later secret historians engage with a tension also evident in their ancient forebear.¹²

Responses to *Anekdotia* in early modern Europe were as ambivalent as Procopius's text itself. Many commentators were outraged both by the Greek original and by Alemanni's Latin translation, condemning them in literary terms as low satire or gossip rather than history, and in moral terms as an affront to decency.¹³ Not all commentators or translators

emphasised this text's shocking characteristics. Several attempted to incorporate *Anekdotia* into a neoclassical canon, publishing it in prestigious versions licensed by the state censor, and highlighting its continuity with the work of Roman historians including Plutarch and Suetonius.¹⁴ Procopius's example may have disconcerted some early modern secret historians – even Antoine Varillas, his greatest champion, follows Procopius only 'seeing I cannot find any other Guide' to the genre – but it provided an important classical precedent for this apparently new historiographical tradition.¹⁵

The majority of writers who reworked *Anekdotia*, however, saw it not as an antiquarian object of interest, but as a potent weapon in a literary campaign against the twin threats of 'popery and arbitrary government'.¹⁶ In the wake of the Revolution of 1688–89 that brought William and Mary to the English throne, Whig supporters of the Revolution and a smaller and more clandestine group of writers in France used the genre to attack the regimes of James II, James's (dead) brother Charles II, and his (living and powerful) ally Louis XIV. Secret history became a means of asserting the end of one political era – that of the would-be absolutist Stuart kings – and the beginning of a new one under the mixed monarchy of William and Mary.¹⁷ By exposing Stuart secrets, secret historians 'let all the World judg of the Furberies and Tyranny of those Times, and the Integrity, Sincerity, and Sweetness of Their Present Majesties Reign'.¹⁸ Against the secrecy and silence of arbitrary power, secret history pits the publicity and populism of print.

Of course, secret history was not the only form of seventeenth-century polemical literature to demonstrate an ideological commitment to print. Fuelled by 'discoveries' of plots and counterplots, writers of all political persuasions participated in a public sphere characterised as much by suspicion and fear as by the rational exchange of opinions and ideas.¹⁹ Polemicists opposed to a perceived threat of arbitrary government had discovered the propaganda value of publishing the secrets of those in power long before the first vernacular translations of Procopius. During the English civil wars and interregnum, the King's putative correspondence was made available for public inspection in texts such as *The Kings Cabinet Opened* (1645), which offered its readers 'certain packets of secret letters & papers, written with the Kings own hand, and taken in his cabinet at Nasby-Field, June 14. 1645' containing 'many Mysteries of State', and *Cabala, Mysteries of State* (1654), in which readers could find 'LETTERS of the great MINISTERS of K. James and K. Charles WHEREIN Much of the publique Manage of Affaires is related'.²⁰ When the secret historian

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David Jones reflected in 1697 that ‘*there is a very engaging part naturally couched under such a method of bringing State-Arcana’s to light, by way of Letters, which, in the very Notion of them carry something of Secrecy*’ he was situating his own epistolary text within a seventeenth-century tradition of published opposition to a perceived threat of arbitrary rule.²¹

At the same time as they merged with and participated in an already well-established English polemical tradition, however, secret historians also drew on the more exotic set of literary conventions that constitute early modern romance. French *histoires amoureuses* and *histoires galantes*, which reveal noble characters in a state of undress, ‘veiling’ them only in Italianate or oriental pseudonyms, are very close relatives of *histoire secrète*.²² Indeed, whether or not they were meant as reflections on particular characters in public life, many romances were read *à clef*, while others, published with an accompanying key, demanded this kind of referential reading practice that connects them with *anecdota*. Romance shares with secret history an emphasis on the importance of love as a controlling passion in public as well as private affairs, an interest in the private motivations behind public actions, and a commitment to exploring the most secret space of all: the interior world and the hidden passions and motivations of individual agents.²³ Whether they offer us a glimpse into private life through letters (as do the first two parts of Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684, 1685, 1687)) or through omniscient narration (as, for instance, in *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zarazians* (1705)), romance-inspired secret history exploits the pleasures involved in putting minds as well as bodies on display. The opportunity to glimpse into private affairs – of rulers and of lovers – was politically effective because it aroused an affective as much as an intellectual response.

As the always-plural synonym for secret history suggests, *anecdota* embody multiplicity. In part, this is because secrets have a gossip-like tendency to grow and spread; secret historians uncover ‘wheels within wheels’ and new discoveries supplement one another. *Anecdota* are also plural, however, because, like so many other characteristically eighteenth-century genres, secret history is a mixed form, created by and through competing influences and impulses.²⁴ Alongside and in relationship with other eighteenth-century prose genres, including the fairy tale, the oriental tale, and the realist novel, secret history engaged in extended dialogue with the classical past, a wide range of European literary traditions (including traditions that seek inspiration outside Europe’s borders), and domestic political contexts. From the classical exemplar of Procopius (a writer from

Caesarea working as an official in Byzantium) onwards, secret history displays the kind of hybridity and polyvocalism that Srinivas Aravamudan associates with Enlightenment Orientalism.²⁵

And yet in spite (or perhaps because) of its hybridity, secret history's early modern commentators sought to delineate this genre for their readers. Several practitioners of the genre offer prefatory discourses on secret history as both a radical and neoclassical form of historiography: the self-styled 'Anecdoto-grapher', Antoine Varillas in his *Anekdotia heterouikiaka, or, The Secret History of the Medicis* (1686) as well as his translator, Ferrand Spence; the anonymous author of *The Secret History of the Reigns of K. Charles II and K. James II* (1690); David Jones, who edited the letters of a spy to create *The Secret History of White-hall* (1697); and John, Baron Somers in his *Secret History of the Lives and Reigns of all the Kings and Queens of England* (1702).²⁶ Perhaps the most incisive analyses of the genre, however, come from its detractors. Early assaults, like *The Blatant Beast Muzzl'd* (1691) – an anonymous invective against *The Secret History of the Reign of K. Charles II and K. James II* in particular, but by extension secret history in general – outline the form the better to undermine it. The characteristics of Enlightenment secret history that these commentators – both negative and positive – highlight might be summarised as follows:

- Secret histories make a claim, whether or not substantiated, to reveal secrets – hidden facts, concealed motives, and the mysterious operations of government – that will supplement and change their readers' perception of the recent past.
- They are iconoclastic, both towards those in positions of power, and towards orthodox or official historiography.
- They privilege the perspectives of marginalised and conventionally unreliable groups and individuals, including women (especially courtesans), spies and servants (especially treacherous ones), objects such as shoes and pennies and non-human animals like dogs, both as subjects and also as sources of intelligence.
- They often exhibit a high degree of self-consciousness towards the concept of secrecy, and the ethical and epistemological implications of claiming to reveal secrets.
- They manifest a deep interest in fragmentary forms of documentation – letters, incomplete manuscripts; anecdotes (in the later eighteenth-century sense of notable story, as well as the earlier sense of previously concealed information) – and a keen awareness of the implications of different forms of mediation: oral, manuscript, and print.

- They exist in proximity to and in relationship with non-literary, including non-written, forms of discourse such as news, partisan polemic, gossip, and scandal, as well as to recognisable literary genres including history writing and romance.

Secret history's most distinctive features make a number of demands of their readers, the most consistent of these being the demand that we keep more than one object in view as we read. Secret history asks us to compare the version of events that we think we know with the new one that it offers. It requires us to interpret romance names and to understand that an exotic island, a distant land or a fairy kingdom represents familiar territory such as France or England. It asks us to recognise the relationship between secret history and other genres and to collate the familiar with the strange. Secret history solicits what we might think of as 'transverse' reading practices. These texts ask us to read *across* boundaries: between texts, literary traditions, cultures, and geographical territories. They require us to treat secret history as a genre that has a set of recognisable and distinctive conventions and characteristics, but also to recognise that those conventions and characteristics generate close relationships between secret history and other, related species of discourse. Like many genres that developed during this period, then, secret history responds better to a 'both/and' approach to generic characteristics than to an approach that seeks to impose rigid boundaries around its representative formal features.

The Aims of this Volume

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a growing recognition of both the sophistication and complexity of secret history, and also of its importance to eighteenth-century political, intellectual, and literary culture. A number of recent publications, including brilliantly concise essays by Eve Tavor Bannet and Peter Burke, delineate the genre, emphasising its distinctive characteristics and making a bid for its coherence as a recognisable form of Enlightenment historiography.²⁷ Some studies situate secret history within the frenzied partisan struggles of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, highlighting its importance to liberal or Whig writers and its appropriation by their conservative or Tory opponents.²⁸ Others explore secret history's longer trajectory, as a form that both pre-dates and survives the particularly fraught political atmosphere that prevailed from the late 1670s until the late 1710s. According to Michael McKeon, for instance, secret history both facilitates and indexes the

emergence of separate domains of public and private over the course of the early modern period and the eighteenth century – a process of separation that, for McKeon, characterises modernity itself.²⁹ Secret history's literary and political characteristics continue to have resonance well beyond the particular political moment that first engendered the form.

As a genre that straddles and interrogates the boundary between fictional and historical modes of writing, secret history has been particularly important within analyses of both the early novel and eighteenth-century history writing.³⁰ Research in these overlapping areas highlights the peculiar challenges that secret history poses to its near relatives, including realist fiction and neoclassical history. Like Tacitean historiography, secret history explores the motives of those in power and the mechanisms of government. Unlike its more respectable counterpart, however, it identifies those motives in sexual desire and the mechanisms of government in backstairs intrigue, and consequently accords significant political power to female agents.³¹ The exploration of hidden motives, intimate physical spaces and female agents connects secret history to simultaneous developments in 'realist' fiction, but at the same time it retained a strong interest in the fantastic and the exotic and in monarchs and ministers as well as their mistresses and servants. Some recent analyses of the form contend that secret history was 'erased' and 'overwritten' by realist fiction over the course of the eighteenth century; others emphasise its ongoing resonance as an alternative tradition that implicitly and sometimes explicitly challenges the domestic or national novel.³² Scholarly debates, as well as the primary texts themselves, reveal the power of secret history to resist and disrupt neat taxonomical categories and critical shorthands – ancients v. moderns, realism v. romance, the rise of the novel, and so on. Just as secret history directed its iconoclastic energy against orthodox or public history in the late seventeenth century, so research on secret history today challenges some of the teleological assumptions, critical categories and norms that can structure our consideration of eighteenth-century literary culture.

The essays in this volume adopt a range of critical approaches to their central subject. Taken together, they reveal the ways in which secret history moves through and across wide tracts of generic, cultural, and also territorial terrain over the course of the eighteenth century. Part I focuses on the period during which secret history emerged in England, up to and including the 1690s when, following the Williamite revolution, secret histories of the Stuart and Bourbon courts proliferated rapidly. This section investigates the relationships between secret history and other genres – including

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close relatives, such as spy narratives and amatory fiction and also more culturally distant forms, such as heroic poetry and Restoration drama. Part II addresses eighteenth-century Britain when, as the febrile political and literary culture that had fostered secret history gradually cooled, the conventions of secret history began to be deployed inventively in different partisan and also non-partisan contexts. Even as it became less strongly rooted in polemical discourse, the fact that this genre privileges the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups and individuals gave secret history an inherently subversive political bent. Its self-conscious interest in peering into postbags and closets, in anecdotes (in the sense of both secret intelligence and personal stories), and in narration ‘from below’ enable it to cross-fertilise with other traditions – adapting and hybridising even as it remains a visible form in its own right. Part III explores the ways in which secret history travelled across geographical terrain by focusing on two countries – France and America – with a tradition of producing secret history that was both related to and distinct from that of the British Isles. These essays reveal that secret history’s partisan and literary characteristics developed through an international network of texts and ideas, even as they responded to national and domestic concerns and priorities.

The essays in this volume suggest that, although secret history interacted with many generic traditions over the course of the eighteenth century, the nature of those interactions varied considerably one from another as writers responded to secret history’s characteristics in a range of ways. Essays by Nicola Parsons on periodicals and Claudine van Hensbergen on amatory fiction, for instance, emphasise secret history’s interest in sex and scandal as well as its self-conscious approach to the temporality of revealing secrets. Parsons demonstrates that the absorption of tropes from secret history in periodicals sexualised the serial nature of this kind of publication, while van Hensbergen argues that Aphra Behn deliberately sought to distance political secret history from amatory fiction during the first two parts of the serially-published *Love-letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* in order to ‘stag[e] their subsequent collision in the work’s final volume’ (77). Secret history’s association with sexuality could be used, it seems, to generate new kinds of reading pleasure based on novelty and revelation but also – as Erin Keating’s essay on Restoration drama demonstrates – to create an impression of affective intimacy between celebrities and their audiences. These essays suggest, then, that since early readers of secret history responded to this genre’s key tropes in complex and varied ways, we too should recognise and respond to their nuances in our analysis of this tradition and its legacy.

The complexity of secret history becomes apparent not only in its relationships with other genres but also, as many essays in this collection demonstrate, in its self-conscious approach towards its own conventions and characteristics. Several essays, including those by April London and Allison Stedman, reflect on evolving responses to and uses of anecdote (a synonym for secret history at the start of the century, a stand-alone human interest story by its end) as a flexible narratological tool that allows authors to engage with secret history even as they address apparently domestic or orthodox historical concerns. Others focus on the attention that secret history directs towards its own narrating subjects – spies in the case of Slaney Chadwick Ross's essay, coins and dogs in Rivka Swenson's. Secret history in this vein asks its readers to consider the ethical, epistemological, and phenomenological implications of making a claim to reveal secrets – often to the extent that it knowingly challenges the reliability of its own revelations. In an essay that situates this genre within the broader tradition of history writing in early modern England, Martine Brownley argues that secret history's sceptical, self-reflexive tendency is its hallmark: 'the primary authority that secret history destabilized', she asserts, 'was its own' (41). It is surely significant that the double-voiced parodies of secret history which form the focus of Melinda Rabb's essay in this collection externalise many of the self-conscious tendencies that secret histories themselves exhibit.

Because of its complex relationship with other genres and its self-conscious approach towards its own generic characteristics, secret history trained its readers in new forms of textual engagement. Many of the essays in this collection take as their subject the transverse reading practices that secret history encourages. Michael McKeon, for instance, reads across different generic traditions – secret history, heroic poetry, sacred scripture – to suggest that even texts not usually designated *anecdota* (like *Paradise Lost*) nonetheless elicit methods of reading that are also associated with this genre, while David Brewer pays attention to tensions between allegorical designations and their 'secret' extra-textual referents. Brewer's essay, as well as those by Eve Tavor Bannet and Ros Ballaster, draws attention to the difficulties and dangers that, as contemporaries were well aware, attends any attempt to read for secrets. Bannet and Ballaster suggest two quite different ways in which secret historians and their readers responded to these difficulties. Bannet (like Keating in her essay in this volume) highlights the affective closeness and reliance on a shared common sense that secret historians attempted to develop with