



Introduction

Ann Marie Rasmussen
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

A secret is a social event. Knowledge of a secret can create community; ignorance of it can cast out the uninitiate. As a means of exchange between individuals, secrets create networks—social (gossip), religious (confession), political (diplomacy), intellectual (magic, medicine, natural philosophy). A secret is an ethical event. To possess it can create obligation, antagonism, and conflict. The transfer of secrets—whether voluntary or coerced—can make visible conflicting definitions of secrecy, as well as individual, community, and institutional beliefs about the nature, value, and power of that which is held secret, whether by oneself or by others. A secret is a psychological event. Foucault argued—in part ahistorically and nostalgically, as Karma Lochrie shows in her recent study of the medieval uses of secrecy—that the medieval practice of confession was formative of Western notions of sexuality, creating notions of secrecy and desire that together sculpted the contours for that quality of inner life which we in the West call subjectivity. Confession is said to have created, in Lochrie's terms, “a site of privacy in the depths of the Christian subject.”¹ Much of the modern world continues to believe that the verbalization of secrets is therapeutic; a belief in the power of the undisclosed secret to fester and do harm is but the inverse of the belief that the verbalization of secrets can heal. Yet a secret can also be a mortal event. In northern Europe the early modern witch panics were complicated, uneven, and often deadly struggles between juridical, clerical, and community belief systems about the nature and effects of hidden knowledge. The struggle to own, to control, the representational force of the secret was a matter, literally, of life and death.

For scholars who engage the distant past, exploring medieval and early modern notions of secrecy is also a historical event. Etymological evidence suggests that medieval and early modern notions of secrecy differed

Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 30:1, Winter 2000.

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from our own. In early medieval terminology, the Latin *secretum* was “that which is set apart or hidden.” In medical literature it defined a physical state, referring primarily to the internal organs, which cannot be seen and are physically inaccessible. The Old French adjectives *privi*, *privance*, and *priveti* meant “familiar” as well as “clandestine.” The Middle English term *privete* “designated both the condition of being private and concealment, or secrecy.”² The most common Middle High German term, *heimlich*, is only imperfectly translated as “private,” “personal,” or “secret”; its field of meaning connotes primarily that which is familiar, intimate, protected, and sheltered. The referential overlap between notions of domesticity and protection on the one hand with notions of privacy and concealment on the other suggests that scholarship can profit from looking again at the social aspects of secrecy, at the notions of authority demarcated by means of different representations of secrecy, and above all, at the ways in which notions of gender are fundamentally implicated in that which is concealed, hidden, effaced, or silenced.

The essays in this special issue of *JMEMS* explore the operations of gender in the construction of social, intellectual, linguistic, sexual, and literary modes of inclusion and exclusion in the medieval and the early modern eras. Monica Green’s essay looks at medical manuscripts to trace medieval uses of gynecological texts. From the thirteenth century onward, writings on gynecology were assimilated into the tradition of speculative natural philosophy, where they were used to buttress writings on human generation and reproduction. These new combinations of texts divorce medical lore on the diseases of women from its curative contexts; indeed a number of compilers prune pragmatic material from their gynecological sources. A new kind of natural-philosophical compilation came into being, one concerned with women’s role in generation, reproduction, and sexuality. Entitled the “Secrets of Women,” a label unknown before the mid-thirteenth century, these widely transmitted texts align women, women’s bodies, and women’s sexuality more closely with the natural world, making them objects of natural-philosophical speculation. Predating the *Secreta mulierum*—indeed providing the intellectual context in which the *Secreta* must be understood—these compilations created a new, learned discourse of misogyny, that of “women’s secrets.”

Helmut Puff provides our readers with a full transcription and translation of a fragmentary fifteenth-century document from the city of Speyer in Germany on the trial and execution of a lesbian. In discussing the trial transcript, he coins the term *female sodomy* as a way of understanding

the assimilation of medieval concepts of female same-sex desire to a masculinized understanding of sodomy. In attending carefully to the rhetoric of the fragmentary trial record, Puff raises crucial issues regarding the silences of medieval evidence on female same-sex desire. The Speyer material highlights how gendered constellations of the familiar and the strange, the domestic and the communal, had to collide for female same-sex desire to attract the kind of attention that resulted both in a woman's death and a textual trace. Puff also reminds us that the scarcity of texts about female same-sex desire in the Middle Ages may in some measure be dependent on the rhetorical and pragmatic conventions governing the uses of writing in the medieval world.

Working on ordinances issued by the aldermen of the city of Douai from roughly 1231 to 1403, Ellen E. Kittell and Kurt Queller use linguistic methodologies to explore the rise and fall of the usage of linguistic dyads: paired terms that explicitly specify both genders such as *borgois u borgoise* (citizen [m.] and citizen [f.]) and *taneres u taneresse* (tanner [m.] and tanner [f.]). Kittell and Queller's analysis of this common usage suggests that in conceiving of the activities of Douai in gender-inclusive terms the aldermen thought of the social, political, and economic world they inhabited in terms of workers, not households. The shift away from gender-inclusive terms coincides with the ascendancy of Burgundian authority. The new official preference for referring to occupations in singleton masculine forms may well articulate new forms of political subordination and social control that accompanied the Burgundian administrative practice of thinking of the city in terms of households rather than workers. The new gender-exclusive forms, which Kittell and Queller link to the imported foregrounding of the household with the male worker at its head, efface from the documentary record women's material contribution to Douaisian society.

Randall Ingram's essay explores the interlacing assumptions about writing, subjectivity, and gender at work in the seventeenth-century creation of that public sphere of intellectual representation and reputation which modern shorthand terms "the book." Comparing prefatory material by Margaret Cavendish and by Humphrey Moseley, Ingram suggests that modern critical assumptions about the book as a seamless, objective performance were not yet standardized in the seventeenth century. In his prefaces for male poets, Moseley follows a classical commonplace. He imagines fame as being perpetuated through a monumental book that endures far beyond the author's lifetime and that provokes a uniform response among worthy readers. In this model of the book's authority, the personal and the subjective are

set aside, becoming inadmissible and remaining private. By contrast, Cavendish's prefatory material overflows with revelations of the subjective, the experiential, the specific. Her notion of the book promotes individuated readings. Her definition of fame (a fame which Cavendish well knows cannot escape the influence that her readers' gender schemata will have on their judgment) as "nothing but a great noise" conceives of fame as a volatile and changeable social and cultural process set in motion by the book.

All of these essays demonstrate that the use of gender as a category of scholarly analysis is central to any reexamination of medieval and early modern notions of secrecy, domesticity, and subjectivity. Their methodologies may also encourage scholars to revisit the historical evidence with an eye to reexamining the material and rhetorical practices by which notions of secrecy are created, maintained, or overthrown. These studies have focused on language, on rhetoric, and especially on the manuscripts and legal documents themselves as intellectual constructs whose study rewards scholarly attention, but other cultural forms such as images, artifacts, and even buildings promise equally challenging insights and conclusions. What there is to be observed and rethought should be worth the efforts of further investigation.

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Notes

- 1 Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), chap. 1, and p. 135.
- 2 Ibid., 136.