

# THE SECRET HISTORY IN LITERATURE, 1660–1820

EDITED BY REBECCA BULLARD  
AND RACHEL CARNELL



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# THE SECRET HISTORY IN LITERATURE, 1660–1820

Secret history, with its claim to expose secrets of state and the sexual intrigues of monarchs and ministers, alarmed and thrilled readers across Europe and America from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars have recognised for some time the important position that the genre occupies within the literary and political culture of the Enlightenment. Of interest to students of British, French, and American literature as well as political and intellectual history, this new volume of essays demonstrates for the first time the extent of secret history's interaction with different literary traditions, including epic poetry, Restoration drama, periodicals, and slave narratives. It reveals secret history's impact on authors, readers, and the book trade in England, France, and America throughout the long eighteenth century. In doing so, it offers a case study for approaching questions of genre at moments when political and cultural shifts put strain on traditional generic categories.

REBECCA BULLARD is a Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Reading. Dr Bullard is the author of *The Politics of Disclosure, 1674–1725: Secret History Narratives* (2009) and editor of *The Fair Penitent* and *The Ambitious Step-mother* for *The Plays and Poems of Nicholas Rowe* (2017).

RACHEL CARNELL is a Professor of English at Cleveland State University, Ohio. Professor Carnell is the author of *Partisan Politics, Narrative Realism and the Rise of the British Novel* (2006), *A Political Biography of Delarivier Manley* (2008), and co-editor of the five-volume *Selected Works of Delarivier Manley* (2005).

## Notes on Contributors

ROS BALLASTER is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the Faculty of English, Mansfield College, University of Oxford. She has published widely in the field of eighteenth-century literature (including *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction 1684–1740* (1992) and *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England 1662–1785* (2005)) and has particular research interests in women's writing, the novel, oriental fiction, and the interaction of prose fiction and the theatre. She has edited works by Delarivier Manley and Jane Austen.

EVE TAVOR BANNET is George Lynn Cross Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Her monographs include *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (2000), *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence 1688–1820* (2005) and *Transatlantic Stories and the History of Reading: Migrating Fictions 1720–1810* (2011). Previous essays on secret history include 'The Narrator as Invisible Spy' (2014) and 'Secret History: or Telling Tales Inside and Outside the Secretorie' (2006).

KEVIN JOEL BERLAND, Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University, recently published a new edition of *The Dividing Line Histories of William Byrd II of Westover* (2013). He has published widely on various topics, including British and Early American literature, Socrates in the eighteenth century, physiognomy, and newspaper ballads. He is the founder and moderator of C18-L, the international, interdisciplinary online forum.

DAVID A. BREWER is Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University and the author of *The Afterlife of Character, 1726–1825* (2005). He is currently completing a book on the uses to which authorial names

were put in the eighteenth-century Anglophone world. His essay here is part of a new project devoted to rethinking the relationship between fictionality and reference in eighteenth-century literature, theatre, and visual art.

MARTINE W. BROWNLEY, Goodrich C. White Professor of English, is the Director of Emory's Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. She has written or edited *Reconsidering Biography* (2011), *Clarendon and the Rhetoric of Historical Form* (1985), *Deferrals of Domain: Contemporary Women Novelists and the State* (2000), *Women and Autobiography* (1999), and various articles.

REBECCA BULLARD, Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Reading, UK, is author of *The Politics of Disclosure: 1674–1725: Secret History Narratives* (2009), and co-editor, with John McTague, of Volume 1 of *The Plays and Poems of Nicholas Rowe* Routledge (2017). Her research explores the intersections between literature, politics, book history, and gender during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

MIRANDA BURGESS teaches English at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order, 1740–1830* (2000) and essays on British and Irish Romantic topics such as Wordsworth, Austen, Scott, Owenson, Mary Shelley, nationalisms, mobilities, media, and form. Her current project explores ideas and forms of transport in medicine, technology, and Romantic poetics.

RACHEL CARNELL, Professor of English at Cleveland State University, is the author of *Partisan Politics, Narrative Realism, and the Rise of the British Novel* (2006) and of *A Political Biography of Delarivier Manley* (2008). She is the co-editor of the five-volume *Selected Works of Delarivier Manley* (2005) and the author of articles on Aphra Behn, Samuel Richardson, Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Lennox, Jane Austen, Anne Bronte, as well as several articles on secret history.

ERIN M. KEATING is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Film, and Theatre at the University of Manitoba. Her research, which brings together Restoration theatre, secret history and affect theory, has been published in *Restoration* and the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*.

APRIL LONDON is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Ottawa. She is currently Editor of *The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel, 1660–1820*. In addition to numerous articles on eighteenth-century topics, she is the author of *Women and Property in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (1999), *Literary History Writing, 1770–1820* (2010), and *The Cambridge Introduction to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (2012).

MICHAEL MCKEON is Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of Literature at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He is the author of *Politics and Poetry in Restoration England* (1975), *The Origins of the English Novel, 1660–1740* (1987) and *The Secret History of Domesticity* (2005), as well as fifty essays and articles. He is also the editor of *Theory of the Novel, A Historical Approach* (2000).

NICOLA PARSONS is Senior Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature at the University of Sydney. Her first book, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (2009), focuses on the secret history and the novel, considering texts by Delarivier Manley, Richard Steele, Daniel Defoe, and Jane Barker. She has published essays on the early novel, on Queen Anne's letters, Elizabeth Singer and John Dunton.

MELINDA ALLIKER RABB is Professor of English at Brown University and author of *Satire and Secrecy in English Literature 1650–1750* (2007). She has published on eighteenth-century writers including Swift, Pope, Defoe, Fielding, Sterne, Johnson, Richardson, Manley, Godwin, and on topics such as gender, material culture, and cognitive literary studies.

SLANEY CHADWICK ROSS teaches at CUNY Staten Island and Fordham University. She is completing a study on spy narratives and secret histories in the long eighteenth century.

ANTOINETTE SOL is Professor of French at the University of Texas at Arlington. She recently published three editions in the L'Harmattan series 'Autrement mêmes' in collaboration with Sarah Davies Cordova. They are currently working on a fourth project which will appear in 2017.

ALLISON STEDMAN is Associate Professor of French at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She has published articles on early modern French literary portraits, psalm paraphrases, novels and fairy tales, as well as on pedagogical strategies for teaching French and Italian literature and

culture at the university level. With Perry Gethner, she is the co-editor and translator of *A Trip to the Country* by Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, Comtesse de Murat (2011). She is also the author of *Rococo Fiction in France 1600–1715: Seditious Frivolity* (2013; paperback 2014) and of a modern French edition of Murat's 1699 experimental novel, *Voyage de campagne* (2014).

RIVKA SWENSON is Associate Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her first book, *Essential Scots and the Idea of Unionism in Anglo-Scottish Literature, 1603–1827* (2016), was published by Bucknell University Press in the series 'Transits: Literature, Thought & Culture 1650–1850'. Other recent work includes essays in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660–1800*, *The Cambridge Companion to British Women's Writing, 1660–1789*, and *The Cambridge Companion to 'Robinson Crusoe'*. She has recently co-edited, with Manushag N. Powell, a special issue of *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* ('Sensational Subjects'), and is co-editing, with John Richetti, an edition of Daniel Defoe's *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. She also co-edited *Imagining Selves: Essays in Honor of Patricia Meyer Spacks* (2009).

CLAUDINE VAN HENSBERGEN is Senior Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature at Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Claudine is a volume editor (Vol. 3, The Late Plays) of *The Plays and Poetry of Nicholas Rowe* (2017) and has co-edited two special journal issues on 'Queen Anne and British Culture, 1702–1714' (2014) and the eighteenth-century letter (2011). Claudine has published on wider research interests including Aphra Behn, Rochester and miscellany culture and public sculpture and is currently preparing a monograph on the courtesan in the literary marketplace.

GRETCHEN J. WOERTENDYKE is an Associate Professor and McCausland Faculty Fellow of English at the University of South Carolina. Her research and teaching focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US literature, hemispheric studies, and theories of the novel. In addition to essays in collections on Haiti in the early US and the slave narrative before Frederick Douglass, she has published in *Early American Literature*, *Narrative*, and *Atlantic Studies*. Her book *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre* was published in 2016. She is currently working on a book titled *A History of Secrecy in the New World*.



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# Introduction

## *Reconsidering Secret History*

Rebecca Bullard

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 *Anekdotai*'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'.<sup>7</sup> By keeping his *History* in view throughout *Anekdotai*, 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 *Anekdotai* 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?'<sup>8</sup>

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'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, so effective was Procopius's suppression that *Anekdotai* 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, *Anekdotai*, '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?<sup>10</sup> 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?<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

Responses to *Anekdotai* 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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'.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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'.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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'.<sup>20</sup> When the secret historian



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.<sup>21</sup>

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*.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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