Introduction

Secrecy and Surveillance in Medieval and Early Modern England

Annette Kern-Stähler and Nicole Nyffenegger

We demand our citizens' right to secrecy – secrecy of the ballot, of communication, of medical information. Yet we embrace an increasing use of surveillance technology for the sake of heightened security and comfort: we acquiesce to ever-increasing CCTV coverage and the use of facial recognition systems; we happily use virtual assistants like Alexa, even though we are fully aware that they harvest information about us; and we sacrifice our right to secrecy in exchange for faster wireless networks, calling for 5G despite its susceptibility to identity-theft and data breaches. We are surrounded by those who endeavour to unveil our secrets and who encroach upon our private lives – be they curious neighbours, spies, or data miners. The state, which insists on classifying sensitive material in the interest of national security, is itself not immune to disclosures by whistleblowers, who leak classified material to expose state abuses and secrets (Sagar 2-7).

Our present, we may sometimes feel, has caught up with dystopian scenarios familiar from science fiction; that we live in the Orwellian nightmare of *1984* has become something of a cliché. Yet neither the desire for secrecy and the perceived need for surveillance nor the urge to challenge either are entirely of our own, or any imagined future, age. As the past is framed in response to preoccupations of the present, it should not come as a surprise that scholars are becoming increasingly

interested in historicising the practices, acts, and technologies of secrecy and surveillance. The present volume makes a contribution to this burgeoning field of scholarship by exploring the dialectic of secrecy and surveillance in the medieval and early modern periods.

Like our own, the medieval and early modern world was replete with secrets and secretive operations, be they the closely guarded secrets of guilds, conspiracies hatched at court, textual riddles and verbal *integumenta*, encryption, secret chambers or trap doors, the Mysteries of the Church, or the so-called "secrets of women." While secrecy in the medieval and early modern periods has been the object of scholarly inquiry for some time,[1] the study of surveillance has predominantly been inflected towards modern technologies. The term "surveillance" originates in the late eighteenth century (from *surveiller*: "to watch over," *OED*), and in the wake of Michel Foucault, especially his work on the penal system (1977), the practice of surveillance has largely been studied as a modern phenomenon (Lyon 4-9; Zedner 78), one associated with the emergence of the disciplinary power of the state in the eighteenth century (Foucault, "Body/Power" 58). The Surveillance Studies Network regards "surveillance society as a product of modernity" (Wood 2), and the majority of scholars working in this proliferating academic field, which is dominated by the disciplines of political science, legal studies, communication theory, and sociology, are concerned with contemporary technologies and practices of surveillance. Yet a number of historians, literary scholars, art historians, and criminologists have recently drawn our attention to premodern surveillance practices.

The Church emphasised that from God nothing could be concealed. God searches the hearts (Jeremiah 17:10), and, as Isidore of Seville maintained, penetrates all secrets (*Synonyma* 2.60; see Dutton 248 n. 11). As God's earthly representatives, kings and clergy considered themselves responsible for watching over the lives and morals of those committed to their care and were keen to search out their secrets. "It is appropriate," Pope Gregory advised in his *Book of Pastoral Rule*, "that those who lead should have eyes within and around them so that they can [. . .] detect what should be corrected in others" (95). Acute hearing, too, came in useful. In his *Dialogues*, Gregory praises Benedict of Nursia's ability to hear "the sounds of the unspoken thoughts of others" (29). In his *Rule* (ca. 540), Benedict not only emphasised God's watchfulness and that of his reporting angels but also put safeguards in place against secretive acts among the members of the monastic community:

---

[1] E.g., Lochrie; Groebner 2001, 2004; Kramer.

he ruled that they should "confess humbly to the abbot all the wicked thoughts that spring to mind" as well as any wrongdoings (Chapter 7); he also prescribed communal sleeping arrangements (Chapter 22) and stipulated supervision, which was enforced by one or two monks serving as roundsmen, patrolling the monastery and reproving transgressions (Chapter 48; Feiss 348-49).

Surveillance was in fact manifest in many forms throughout the medieval and early modern periods. The bull *Ad abolendam*, issued by Pope Lucius III in 1184, enjoined bishops to identify and persecute heresy in their dioceses, and the inquisition practices in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required the gathering of local knowledge concerning both lay and clerical offences (Forrest); other examples include extensive peer-monitoring and reporting in late medieval towns, which Christian Liddy recently labelled "surveillance societies" (312), and interurban intelligence networks, which had become commonplace by the end of the fifteenth century (Groebner, *Der Schein der Person* 57). Kings, from Charlemagne to Richard III and Louis XIV, acted with vigilance and employed spies.[2] As Richard Wilson notes in his contribution to this volume, the thousand eyes of Argus decorated the robe worn by Elizabeth I. The vigilance this symbolised was echoed in the motto *Tutto vedo* ("I see all"), which appears in the Plimpton and Siena "Sieve" portraits of Elizabeth. In the Venetian Republic, the Council of Ten, who were responsible for Venice's state intelligence, encouraged its citizens to post denunciations in the *bocche dei leoni*, stone letterboxes in the shape of lions' mouths (Madden 189ff.), which by the sixteenth century had replaced the simpler movable wooden boxes (the *casselle*) (Rospocher 354). In fifteenth-century Florence, the so-called *tamburi* had the same function (Groebner, *Schein der Person* 112; Terry-Fritsch). These measures are just a few examples of what Sylvia Tomasch in her opening contribution to this volume calls expressions of an "impulse towards surveillance."

The direction of power in surveillance situations may also be reversed. As David Rosen and Aaron Sentesso put it, "the notion that in a surveillance situation power flows outward from the observer to the (utterly abject) observed is plainly inadequate" (13). "Sousveillance," a term coined by Steve Mann to refer to "watchful vigilance from underneath," captures such a reversal of power. When we employ body or mobile-phone cameras to document the abuse of power by the police, for example, the target of surveillance becomes the surveillant.

---

[2] Dutton 135; *The Crowland Chronicle* 172-73; Bély 55-84.

However, sousveillance was practiced long before the advent of digital technology. Annette Kern-Stähler (forthcoming) has recently explored sousveillance practices in medieval monastic houses, and in the present volume, Karma Lochrie shows that Margery Kempe employs strategies of sousveillance when, in a reversal of the "direction of scrutiny," she critiques "the very persons surveilling her."

In most cases, however, surveillance was informed by power asymmetries. The king employed spies, yet his own secrets were well guarded. Charlemagne, for example, was reputed to be *vigilantissimus*, but he and his court carefully protected their secrets (Dutton 132-35). In the monastic context, the abbot appointed roundsmen to patrol the monastery but was himself exempt from their watch (Bruce 84). The annual auricular confession of every Christian to their parish priest, mandated in Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council, was a one-sided affair, too. The power to interrogate rested with the priest, who, aided by confessional manuals, skilfully discerned the penitent's secrets: "the agency of domination," according to Foucault's understanding of the power dynamics of confession, "does not reside in the one who speaks, but in the one who listens and says nothing" (*History of Sexuality* 62). Yet even the best-trained priest could be tricked and thwarted in his attempt to extract incriminating material from a reticent penitent. There was nothing, however, that could be hidden from what Paul Strohm in his closing contribution to this collection refers to as the "arch-snoop": every individual's own conscience. In the medieval and early modern imagination, Strohm argues, the self-monitoring activities of conscience left no secret unobserved and unreported.

The aforementioned Canon 21 of Lateran IV warned the confessor to use discretion and to keep the penitent's secret concealed from others, thus binding confessor and penitent while walling them off from others. As Georg Simmel has shown in his ground-breaking 1906 study on secrecy, secrets are both inclusive and exclusive: they create bonds and boundaries. Secrets exclude the initiated from the uninitiated, the learned from the unlearned. As such, secrecy is designed to protect knowledge (Lochrie 95), a function exemplified in works of the so-called secrets literature, such as the tenth-century Arabic treatise *Sirr-al-Asrar*, which was translated into Latin in the twelfth century and widely circulated under the title *Secretum Secretorum* (*Secret of Secrets*). The secret knowledge gathered in this treatise was couched in figurative language that was impenetrable to the unlearned reader. As Lochrie (98-99) has shown, the Franciscan friar and philosopher Roger Bacon defended such strategies of concealment, explaining that "the wise have always

been divided from the multitude" (Bacon I: 11). The segregating and obfuscating functions of secrecy are at the root of the etymology of a number of terms related to secrecy: *secret* (from *secernere*: "set apart"); *arcane* (from *arcere*: "confine, separate, ward off"); *mystery* (from the Greek *myein*: "to close, shut"); *occult* (from *occultare*: "hide, conceal").

The contributions to this volume show how medieval and early modern writings in a variety of genres conceptualised and imagined secrecy and surveillance, and they also draw attention to literary strategies of concealment and disclosure. Exploring material ranging from Anglo-Saxon riddles, medieval romances, and *The Book of Margery Kempe* to Tudor dream poems and Shakespeare's plays and poems, these contributions seek to fill a gap in the long overdue historicisation of secrecy and surveillance that Tomasch calls for in her opening article "Surveillance/History."[3] Spotlighting eleventh-century post-conquest England, the thirteenth-century church, fifteenth-century female English mystics, eighteenth-century revolutionary France, and nineteenth-century occupied Ireland, she explores surveillance practices across the ages and argues that such historicisation will help transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Samuel Röösli's, Laurie Atkinson's, and Charlène Cruxent's contributions engage with the tensions between concealing and revealing, and they do so at both ends of the temporal spectrum of this volume. Röösli's contribution, "The Pot, the Broom, and Other Humans: Concealing Material Objects in the Bern Riddles," investigates the Bern Riddles, a collection of early Medieval Latin riddles that, rather than concealing their solutions, reveal them in their very titles. Atkinson, in his "'Vnder Coloure I Dyuers Bokes Dyde Make': 'Obscure Allegory' in the Dream-Poems of Stephen Hawes," explores the poetics of "obscure allegory" employed by the poet Stephen Hawes in response to the cultures of secrecy and display at the Tudor court. Cruxent explores secret identities not of poets but of characters in Shakespeare's plays in her contribution "'A Rose by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet': Names and Secret Identities in Shakespeare's Plays." Paying particular attention to gender in the choice of aliases and nicknames, Cruxent argues that self-chosen names help conceal a character's identity from the other characters while at the same time revealing the character's "true identity" to the audience.

---

[3] Significantly, a recent study of literature and surveillance (Rosen and Santesso), which takes into account a period of 500 years, leaves out medieval literature altogether.

Shakespeare is also at the centre of Wilson's contribution "To Make the Fox Surveyor of the Fold: Foucault on Shakespeare, Sovereignty, and Surveillance," which shifts the focus from secrecy to surveillance. Wilson's Foucauldian reading of Shakespeare draws our attention not only to the playwright's dramatisations of the figure of the "great observer," such as the Dukes in *The Tempest* and *Measure for Measure*, whose vigilance replaces the "spectacular manifestations of power," but also to those of the "clownish irrationality of power" wielded by a grotesque ruler.

Strohm's article "'As a Keeper Joined to Man': Conscience and Early Modern Self-Surveillance" takes us from external surveillance to the self-monitoring practices of every individual's conscience. Leaving no secret unobserved and scrutinising every aspect of its subject's activities, conscience appears in medieval and early modern writings as a secret agent, gathering evidence for the final reckoning before God. The impact of such "inner" surveillance, Strohm argues, was augmented by its collaboration with "outer" forms of disciplinary surveillance in both the religious and secular spheres, such as confession and inquisition practices, or the snooping of sheriffs and curious neighbours.

Surveillance, as Lochrie argues in her essay "Margery Kempe and the Counter-Surveillance of the Medieval Spectacle," could also be subverted. Lochrie shows that Kempe's spectacle of weeping disables the surveillance efforts she is so often subjected to. Another strategy employed by Kempe is the reversal of the direction of scrutiny, which turns the surveilling agent into the object of surveillance. Kempe's "hyper-visibility and hyper-audibility in public places," Lochrie argues, challenges the gendered, domestic surveillance suggested in medieval conduct books for women. Gendered surveillance is at the centre of Kara Stone's essay "Secretly Sinful Mothers and the Surveillance of Women in *Sir Gowther* and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*." Stone shows that the women (especially the mothers) in these two romances are depicted as secretive and potentially sinful. Their secrecy, she argues, gives rise to suspicion and surveillance. The intersection of gender and secrecy is also explored in Aleida Auld's contribution entitled "Gendered Secrecy in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," which considers not only Shakespeare's *Lucrece* but also eighteenth-century responses in print to the poem, such as the little known *Tarquin and Lucrece, or The Rape: A Poem* (1768).

The essays presented here do not claim to present the full range of strategies of concealment, disclosure, and surveillance utilised in the medieval and early modern periods. They may nevertheless contribute to a better understanding not only of these historical practices but,

moreover, help us better understand our own "surveillance culture." No less important, it is hoped that the variety of approaches taken by the authors of these essays will stimulate further research on premodern practices of secrecy and surveillance.

References

Bacon, Roger. *Opus Majus*. 2 vols. Trans. Robert Belle Burke. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962.

Bély, Lucien. *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV*. Paris: Fayard, 1990.

Benedict of Nursia. *The Rule of St Benedict*. Trans. with an introduction and notes by Carolinne White. London: Penguin, 2008.

Bruce, Scott G. "'Lurking with Spiritual Intent.' A Note on the Origin and Functions of the Monastic Roundsman (Circator)." *Revue Bénédictine* 109 (1999): 75-89.

The Crowland Chronicle Continuations, 1459-1486. Ed. Nicolas Pronay and John Cox. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1986.

Dutton, Paul Edward. *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Feiss, Hugh. "Circatores. From Benedict of Nursia to Humbert of Romans." *The American Benedictine Review* 40.4 (1989): 346-79.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1978.

——. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, 1977.

——. "Body/Power." *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Trans. Colin Gordon et al. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 55-62.

Forrest, Ian. "The Transformation of Visitation in Thirteenth-Century England." *Past and Present* 221 (2013): 3-38.

Gregory the Great. *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great. Book Two: Saint Benedict*. Trans. Myra L. Uhlfelder. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.

Gregory the Great. *The Book of Pastoral Rule*. Trans. with an introduction by George E. Demacopoulos. Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007.

Groebner, Valentin. "Describing the Person, Reading the Signs in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe. Identity Papers, Vested Figures, and the Limits of Identification, 1400-1600." *Documenting Individual Identity. The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*. Ed. Jane Caplan and John C. Tropey. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. 15-27.

——. *Der Schein der Person. Steckbrief, Ausweis und Kontrolle im Europa des Mittelalters*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2004.

Isidore of Seville. *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Synonyma*. CCSL 111B. Ed. Jacques Elfassi. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009.

Kern-Stähler, Annette. "The Bishop's Spies: Surveillance and Sousveillance in Late Medieval Monasteries." Forthcoming 2020.

Kramer, Susan R. *Sin, Interiority, and Selfhood in the Twelfth-Century West.* Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2015.

Liddy, Christian. "Cultures of Surveillance in Late Medieval English Towns: The Monitoring of Speech and the Fear of Revolt." *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt.* Ed. Justine Finhaber-Baker with Dirk Schoenaers. London: Routledge, 2017. 311-29.

Lochrie, Karma. *Covert Operations. The Medieval Uses of Secrecy.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011 [1999].

Lyon, David. "The Search for Surveillance Theories." *Theorizing Surveillance. The Panopticon and Beyond.* Ed. David Lyon. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011. 3-20.

Madden, Thomas F. *Venice: A New History.* New York: Viking Penguin, 2012.

Mann, Steve. "Sousveillance, Not Just Surveillance, in Response to Terrorism." *Metal and Flesh* 6.1. http://wearcam.org/metalandflesh.htm. Accessed 25 July 2019.

Rosen, David and Aaron Santesso. *The Watchman in Pieces. Surveillance, Literature, and Liberal Personhood.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Rospocher, Massimo. "'In Vituperium Status Veneti.' The Case of Niccolò Zoppino." *The Italianist* 34 (2014): 349-61.

Sagar, Rahul. *Secrets and Leaks: The Dilemma of State Secrecy.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions. Ed. M. A. Manzalaoui. EETS 276. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Simmel, Georg. "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (1906): 441-98.

Terry-Fritsch, Allie. "Networks of Urban Secrecy. Tamburi, Anonymous Denunciations, and the Production of the Gaze in Fifteenth-Century Florence." *Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe.* Ed. Timothy McCall, Sean Roberts and Giancarlo Fiorenza. Kirksville: Truman State University Press 2013. 162-81.

Wood, David Murakami et al., eds. *A Report on the Surveillance Society. For the Information Commission by the Surveillance Studies Network.* September 2006. https://ico.org.uk/media/about-the-ico/documents/1042390/surveillance-society-full-report-2006.pdf. Accessed 27 July 2019.

Zedner, Lucia. "Policing Before and After the Police." *British Journal of Criminology* 46 (2006): 78-96.