Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Secrecy and Divinity in Early English Literature

Institution: California Institute of Technology

Project Director: Benjamin Saltzman

Grant Program: Fellowships

Research and Contribution

For medieval Christians, the experience of secrecy was inextricably tied to the belief that God knows all human secrets and that God's secrets remain fundamentally unknowable to human beings. This double-edged conception of secrecy and divinity profoundly affected the ways in which believers acted and thought as subjects under the law, as religious within monasteries, and as readers before books. In *Bonds of Secrecy*—a cultural and intellectual history of secrecy and concealment in England between the years 600 and 1100—I argue that two of the period's major institutions (secular law and monastic life) produced a culture of scrutiny that relied heavily upon and sometimes came into tension with this belief in God's omniscience, shaping the ethics of literary interpretation in the process.

The impossibility of human concealment—keeping or possessing secrets—in the face of God's prior and complete knowledge paradoxically made secrets into possessors (rather than possessions) that bound and enslaved those who sought to conceal them. This logic of secrecy is reflected in the rhetoric of bondage and servitude that, as I show, pervades Anglo-Saxon laws, monastic rules, hagiography, and riddles. More importantly, it produced a distinctive ethical relationship between the self and the world: to attempt to hide from God was not only to attempt the impossible, but to commit a sin. For example, in his commentary on Genesis, Bede (d. 735) calls attention to Cain's decision to kill his brother in a secluded field (*agro*), exposing the exceptional faithlessness of his attempt to evade the notice of God. Yet it is striking that Bede should describe the field as a *locus secretior*, rendering that place of sin with language identical to that used by hagiographers (including Bede himself) to describe the holy places that saints visit to pray alone, the remoteness of which can separate them from the scrutiny other human beings, but never from God. This linguistic overlap, I suggest, reveals two sides to the early medieval ethics of secrecy: while attempting to hide from God was considered a sin, hiding from the world with deliberate openness to God's constant observation was a hallmark of spiritual virtue.

This ethics of secrecy becomes particularly fraught in Anglo-Saxon literature, as the hagiography and poetry of the period establish their own systems of hermeneutics that confront the limits of human perception and the potency of God's knowledge. The hermeneutics that I recover ultimately turns on a crucial distinction between Anglo-Saxon approaches to reading and present-day assumptions about literary criticism: if God already knows the secrets hidden beneath the surface of a text, then for a human reader to divine those secrets requires either an act of humble piety or a potentially dangerous act of presumption—not merely, as for most modern readers, an exertion of hermeneutic force.

Chapter Outline

Following an introduction that lays out the book's argument and presents some of the complex historical and theological background, the first section explores the treatment of secrecy in the expansive and diverse corpus of Anglo-Saxon secular law codes. Chapter 1 uncovers a deep cultural preoccupation with crimes that entailed secrecy, such as murder (distinguished from manslaughter by the concealment of the act), theft (etymologically and pragmatically linked to secrecy), and perjury. In these codes, acts of concealment converge into a criminal category that not only demands intense legal proscription, but also threatens the limits of sovereign power. At those limits, legal procedure turned to rituals such as the judicial ordeal, which established a distinctive legal hermeneutic through recourse to God as the ultimate witness and judge. Chapter 2 argues that when death interfered with logic of testimony, this recourse to God's omniscience became particularly powerful. I examine an extraordinary law from King Ine (§53), which concerns the theft of a slave and the death of his previous owner. Because this dead owner would severely impede the chain of testimony, the law requires that his grave be vouched in his place: I argue that by undermining this most absolute form of secrecy—symbolized by the grave—the law enforces the silence of the slave, whose knowledge is always contested and contingent on his relationship to a master. This chapter ultimately illustrates important legalistic conceptions of death, theft, and servitude that inform the monastic and literary notions of secrecy discussed in subsequent chapters.

The second section of the book turns to Anglo-Saxon monasteries, where secrecy could be even more strictly regulated and the authority of God's omniscience more thoroughly imposed. Chapter 3 examines the varieties of monastic traditions and practices in Anglo-Saxon England, from the *Rule of St. Benedict* to the *Regularis concordia*, from Cassian's *Conferences* to the *uitae* of Anglo-Saxon saints. Together these texts reveal one side of an underlying tension in monastic life, where secrecy is strictly regulated through requirements of confession, numerous interdictions against keeping thoughts to oneself, and even the employment of a *circator* who weasels out secrets and infractions among the brethren. However, as I argue in chapter 4, these normative regulations operated alongside a remarkably different concept of secrecy—what I call "spiritual secrecy"—in which a monk separates himself from other human beings in order to communicate openly with God, a point I demonstrate through a study of Anglo-Saxon church architecture and new readings of several saints' lives (such as the Old English *Guthlac* poems). This form of secrecy, which reflects its etymological root, *secernere* (to separate), requires us to readjust our conception of the term in order to accommodate and understand the full range of its medieval antecedent. Upon doing so, we discover that the monastic tension between the regulation of secrets (chapter 3) and the encouragement of spiritual secrecy (chapter 4) centers around concerns of ownership and possession: monks and nuns, as servants of God (*serui Dei*), forfeit their proper servitude to God and become slaves to sin when they try to conceal a secret from the abbot. This is one way such secrets were thought to possess the monk, rather than be possessed by him.

Chapter 5 initiates a transition from a study of law and monasticism to one of literary interpretation by arguing that saints and their hagiographers offer a model for the way secrets governed by God could be negotiated and disseminated by humans. This chapter is pivotal to the book's argument, since it shows how the moral distinction elucidated in the first half of the book applied not only to acts of concealment, but also to acts of discovery and interpretation. In it, I examine several hagiographic episodes (e.g., from the *uitae* of St. Cuthbert and St. Columba) in which the saint is secretly spied upon while praying alone and orders the spy to keep silent about it for the remainder of the saint's life. The initial secrecy of the spy (motivated by doubt) is the type forbidden by the monastic rules, while the spiritual secrecy of the saint and the saintly injunction to silence are championed as exempla of humility. The work of the hagiographer who writes a saint's *uita*, I argue, surprisingly parallels that of the secret spy who seeks to uncover and disseminate the unknown activities of the saint—activities the saint would want to conceal for the sake of humility. (In his *Vita* of St. Anselm, for instance, Eadmer of Canterbury confesses to disobeying the saint's command that he destroy his draft of the work.) The difference, however, is that while the spy is motivated by doubt and believes his actions are unseen by God, the hagiographer is motivated by faith in his submission to God's overarching omniscience.

The last three chapters show how these legal and monastic mechanisms of secrecy insinuate themselves into the production and consumption of literature. Chapter 6 argues that the Old English *Apollonius of Tyre* and the *Riddles* of the Exeter Book use legalistic images of servitude to relate the solving of a riddle to the loosing (*soluere*) of the fetters that bind a servant to a master. Like the knots of a riddle, the bonds of servitude—often also a metaphor for "binding fast" (*fæste bindan*) the mind in secrecy—become subject to hermeneutic pressure and are never as strong as the master presumes, unless of course the master is God. The riddles thus further challenge the notion that a human being can fully possess and control a secret, which—so long as it is bound to language—is open to interpretation and unlocking.

Literary concealment, moreover, served to teach the reader how to approach the unknowable mysteries of divinity. When Aldhelm (d. 709), for example, explains that the purpose of his *Aenigmata* (a collection of 100 riddles) is to reveal the *aenigmata clandistina* (secret mysteries) of God's creations, he grants poetry, as one form of enigma, the capacity to reveal through its own decipherable concealment those divine *aenigmata*, which are in themselves beyond the immediate hermeneutic reach of human observers. Sometimes, this process of unlocking is conspicuously linked to a hermeneutic of faith. Chapter 7 offers a new reading of Cynewulf's poem *Elene*, where faith in God's omniscience is understood as an integral precondition for the interpretation of hidden meaning. As she searches for the True Cross in the poem, Elene exegetically digs into the minds of the Jews and exhumes her desired answer from beneath layers of concealment (psychological, temporal, and geological). On the one hand,

the poem implies that Jewish secrecy, if pressed hard enough, will eventually break. On the other, Elene's interrogative hermeneutics are muffled by God's role as the ultimate keeper of secrets, for some (such as the precise location of the Cross) only God himself can reveal.

Finally, chapter 8 returns to an investigation of Anglo-Latin and Old English riddles, an extremely popular genre during the period. By examining their manuscripts, I have discovered that the riddles often accompany reflections on the Day of Judgment and the revelation of all secrets at that time. The interpretation of texts and of human acts of concealment thus falls into cosmic perspective, demanding that they be engaged not with proud suspicion, but rather with humble faith (as we see in *Elene*, which ends with Cynewulf's hidden runic signature amidst an eschatological reflection). Yet at the same time, some Anglo-Saxon readers seem to have missed the point. As one scribe, for instance, incorporates cryptographic glosses in the margins of Aldhelm's *Aenigmata*, he betrays a certain playfully interpretive pride that I see as falling into the trap Aldhelm has laid for those *inflatos sophos* (inflated philosophers) who try to solve his final *Aenigma*. In those margins, we thus witness these two modes of interpretation—the skeptical and the faithful—chafing against one another in highly revealing ways.

In my afterword, I formulate the larger stakes of this project and look ahead to later periods. Why do riddles, for instance, go out of fashion in the twelfth century? What happens when the judicial ordeal shifts to a trial system in the thirteenth? How does the theology of secrecy change in the fourteenth? These are questions primarily designed to provoke future research and to situate the discoveries in this book within a longer historical context, putting it in dialogue with important works such as Maus's *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* and McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity*, among others.

At stake in this project is the way we understand our own relation to the texts we study. If the process of interpretation and reading in Anglo-Saxon England was subject to the logic of divine secrecy, as I argue, then perhaps purely secular approaches to these texts risk delusion. More broadly, the project raises the question of how modern scholars can begin take into account the interpretive logic built into their sources and whether or not it is even possible to recuperate that logic. These are important questions, which have long preoccupied philosophers of hermeneutics (e.g., Gadamer), and I propose that by investigating the way a past culture thinks about secrecy we gain insight into how it thought about the interpretation of those secrets and our place in relation to them. In the particular case of Anglo-Saxon thought, it seems to command intellectual humility. But the approach is broadly portable, for as students of the humanities, we all attempt to discern that which is not immediately apparent. In the words of Aldhelm, we share a "certain natural curiosity about hidden things."

Final Product, Dissemination, and Work Plan

The privilege of a twelve-month NEH Fellowship will enable me to complete this project and prepare the manuscript for submission to academic presses. It has been solicited by Cambridge Univ. Press.

As the first major study of secrecy in the early Middle Ages, *Bonds of Secrecy* moves well beyond my 2014 UC Berkeley dissertation. Reconceptualized for a broader interdisciplinary scholarly audience, the book comes to grips with the larger methodological stakes in historicizing interpretive methods. I expect it will be of interest not only to specialists of the Middle Ages, but also scholars wishing, for instance, to understand fundamentally different mental architectures, scholars who study secrecy in later periods and want to learn about its earlier forms, and scholars grappling with the tensions between our own interpretive moment and those of the pasts that we study.

Over the past two years, I have completely rewritten the material that has become chapters 1-5. In the coming year, I plan to revise chapters 6 and 8. And I will then use the NEH fellowship to complete the book:

- Research and write chapter 7 on the Old English poem *Elene*.
- Research and write the afterword, a substantial (*c.* 7,000-word) chapter that brings the project into a wider historical perspective and broadens its relevance to scholars across the humanities.

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