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978-0-521-10796-9 - Secret Rites and Secret Writing Royalist Literature, 1641-1660

Lois Potter

Excerpt

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I

‘Secrecie’s now publish’d’: royalists and the press, 1641–1660

There is an Ordinance framed against printing of unlicensed Bookes, Pamphlets, &c, with Fines, and I know not what punishments against the offenders. Then (Gentlemen) I wish you to buy none that are licensed; for, that will be a sure marke to know all Lies and tame Nonsense.

(*Mercurius Pragmaticus*, no. 2, 21–8 Sept. 1647)

Introduction

This book explores the relation between three events of 1641. The first, and best known, is the abolition of Star Chamber, which resulted, indirectly, in the temporary end of licensing and a great increase in the number of works that came off the press. The second is closely related to it. At some point in the same year, George Thomason, a publisher and bookseller, decided to make a collection of contemporary publications. The project became an obsession with him, and one which he carried on into the Restoration, when he attempted, unsuccessfully, to sell it to Charles II. The most important features of this collection are, first, that Thomason collected *all* available publications, without regard either to quality or party line, and, second, that he normally dated each publication on the day he received it. This means that if one wishes to know what was capturing the public imagination at any point between 1641 and 1660, the material is available for this period as for no other. While the collection is not as complete as Thomason hoped to make it (and some of it went missing in the course of its wanderings, before it was finally bought by George III), it consists, in its present form, of over 22,000 pieces ranging from books to pamphlets, newsbooks, broadsides, and manuscripts (Fortescue 1908, p. xxi; Spencer 1958, p. 102 n. 1). It now forms the enormous British Library collection known as the Thomason Tracts.

The third event has a more tangential relation to the other two. Also in 1641, John Wilkins, a clergyman and future Fellow of the Royal Society, published a study of secret writing called *Mercury, or the Secret and Swift*

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2

Secret rites and secret writing

Messenger. The double meaning of this action was not lost on contemporaries. In verses prefixed to the book, one of Wilkins's friends wrote,

*Secrecie's now Publish'd; you reveal
By Demonstration how wee may Conceal.*

It was indeed odd to make secrecy public. One might argue that Wilkins (a Parliamentary sympathiser who was eventually to marry a daughter of Cromwell's) was acting in accord with the spirit of 1641, whose dramatic events had come about partly because of the fear of secrecy, particularly the possibility of Roman Catholic plots framed with the connivance of Charles I, Laud, and Strafford. What Parliament opposed to this secrecy were open forms of protest, the popular demonstration and the petition. In the struggle which had just begun, another Parliamentary weapon would be the publication of intercepted and sometimes deciphered letters, culminating in 1645 with those of the king himself. The printing explosion and Wilkins's book might then seem to be part of the same process of greater openness which is usually associated with the early years of the Long Parliament.

But this is not how Wilkins' friends saw it. What attracted them in his book, at a time when the press was producing more than ever before, was 'how we may conceal'. The paradox can be seen as a microcosm of the period. Thomason's collection includes much which had been secretly published, as it would have been defined as treasonable by one government or another. There are many anonymous and pseudonymous publications, and many which give no imprint, or only a false or nonsensical one ('Printed at Cuckoo time in a hollow tree'). A few of the contents are manuscripts, either because Thomason was copying a borrowed pamphlet or because the work in question was never published. The collection itself, according to Thomason's later statement, had been a carefully guarded secret. His most recent biographer, Lois Spencer, sees no reason to doubt him (Spencer 1959, pp. 13–14). However, there are several unanswered questions about his means of acquiring it. How could the publisher accumulate so much without letting some people into the secret? In 1647 he lent a pamphlet from his already enormous collection to Charles I, then a prisoner at Hampton Court. How did Charles I know that he was likely to have it? Thomason seems to have thought that his activity was risky, and he hid his stacks of volumes under canvas in his warehouse to make them look like covered tables. But most of what we know on this subject is what was written after the Restoration. Thomason and, later, his heirs were desperately anxious to sell the collection, whose acquisition had virtually bank-

rupted him. Although the bookseller's sympathies had become royalist by about 1647, he had begun as a sympathiser with Parliament and a friend of Milton's. He was a Presbyterian in the sense of being anti-Independent; his friendships and professional connections throughout the 1650s continued to be with other Presbyterians; and when he was imprisoned in 1651 it was for involvement with a conspiracy of Presbyterian royalists (Spencer 1959, pp. 18–21). This background would have done him little good after the Restoration, and it would not have been strange if, like many other people after 1660, he and his family had exaggerated and romanticised any events of the two previous decades which might be construed as assisting the royalist cause.

The questions raised by Thomason's collection also arise for other works of the period. Secrecy is published, indeed, when writers shout from the housetops that they are printing illegally or in defiance of the government. This brings me to the other paradox of this book. It is generally assumed that 'secret writing' is the work of popular and radical groups, and that the printing explosion which followed the abolition of Star Chamber was the point at which these voices at last found an outlet. In fact, from 1642 to 1660 the source of the most deliberately and consciously subversive publications was the royalist party. Because the object of both historical and literary study has always been to pick the winners and explain why they won, comparatively little attention has been paid to the writers of this group. Yet their culture survived despite numerous attempts to discredit it, succeeded in imposing its view of events on the age, and probably helped (more than conspiracies or uprisings) to bring about the restoration of the monarchy. This is one reason for studying it. Another is that it offers an opportunity to modify our understanding of 'subversive' literature in the seventeenth century. Most scholars have been primarily concerned with literature which is subversive in the literal sense of the word: coming from below, whether from the lower classes of society or from suppressed religious and political groups. By contrast, the chapters which follow will be primarily concerned with writers who defied censorship while defending censorship, underdogs whose greatest desire was for the re-establishing of a hierarchy.

It was the coming of printing, Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) suggests, that led to the view that 'valuable data could be preserved best by being made public, rather than by being kept secret' (vol. 1, p. 116). In practice, however, the existence of licensing regulations made the interplay between publication and secrecy a complex one. When Charles I gave his assent to the abolition of Star Chamber in July 1641, its main effect was to remove

the cumbersome ecclesiastical machinery which – among other things – meant that books had to be read and approved before publication by an authorised licenser, usually a churchman. The purpose of licensing had only partly been one of censorship. Its other function was to preserve the closed shop of the Stationers' Company and its copyrights of specific works. Unlicensed printing was a direct threat to the livelihoods of Company members; it was this that they tried to control, not the content of what was printed. In fact, the books most often printed illegally were not subversive texts but the perennial best-sellers – psalters, primers, and so on. One reason for the comparative failure to control illegal printing was that it was relatively easy to acquire and conceal a press. Another was that the overmanned and relatively hard-up Company was somewhat divided in its aims; its less successful members were themselves indulging in unlicensed printing and pinching each other's books (see Lambert 1987).

The end of Star Chamber had an immediate effect on the press: 1642 saw a record number of publications, which would not be equalled until the 1690s (Lambert, quoted in Treadwell 1987, p. 144). Much of what was published was in the form of short works, single sheets and pamphlets which could be handled by the limited resources of the smaller and less established printers (Treadwell 1987, p. 167 n. 8). The Stationers had no desire to see this state of affairs continue. It did continue, however, because between 1641 and 1649 Parliament had too much other business on its hands to enable it to set up an efficient alternative to the old licensing system. A number of attempts were made to regularise the situation: the licensing of newsbooks was made compulsory in March 1642, and temporary licensing machinery was set up in August of that year; on 14 June 1643 the licensing of all books and pamphlets was required by a Parliamentary Ordinance (the term used until the king's execution for acts which were passed without his consent). In September 1647 a new ordinance, largely aimed at royalist publications, gave press control to the army; in October 1649 an Act of Parliament, more efficiently enforced, returned control to the state and succeeded in suppressing all but a few of the most determined opponents of the Commonwealth. In the years between 1649 and 1660 it was this Act, renewed at intervals, which governed the press. Only when the machinery of enforcement broke down, in the last years of the Commonwealth, did the number of publications rise again: 1660 was another peak, second only to 1642 (Treadwell 1987).

It was not only the Stationers who disapproved of the printing explosion. Almost no one was in favour of unrestricted publication. The

London Petition (11 December 1640), largely popular and Puritan, complained of 'the hindering of godly books to be printed', but went on to object to the publication of the works of Ovid and the ballads of Martin Parker. What looked to Milton (*Areopagitica* ([1644] 1959, p. 558) like a 'flowry crop of knowledge and new light' was more commonly seen, as in the conservative Kentish Petition of March 1642, as 'the odious and abominable Scandal of schismatical and seditious Sermons and Pamphlets' (Snow and Young 1969, p. 488). The most immediately obvious effect of the end of licensing was a vast increase in the output of topical literature, especially newsbooks or 'diurnals'. (Diurnals were published weekly; their name refers to their presentation of the news in a day-by-day account of proceedings in Parliament.) Though newsbooks had existed in England before 1641, they had always been confined to foreign affairs. The first one to give English news appeared four months after the abolition of Star Chamber. By December, there were three competing ones (Frank 1961, p. 21), while in 1642 there were at least sixty-four. But competition for survival was intense; the most recent bibliographical study of the diurnals has found that of the year's publications, 'thirty titles appeared in only one issue, and only six in more than twenty issues' (Nelson and Seccombe 1986, p. 14).

Having more news meant, for many, not more but less truth. Printers produced hasty, shoddy work; authors and publishers resorted to sensationalism as a means of ensuring sales. The increase in the number of published works meant that each new one had to fight harder to be read. One way of attracting attention was to claim that one had a secret to tell. Misleading titles abound, sometimes trying to make the book sound more exciting than it is, sometimes trying to lure a hostile reader to look at a piece of propaganda by the other side, sometimes trying to conceal the fact that the work is not so new, or so up-to-date, as it purports to be. The press also lied about its own means of production, with false names and dates on the title page, fake imprimaturs, and counterfeits of official statements of permission to publish. The nickname for diurnal soon became 'lie-urnal'. An anonymous pamphlet of 1641 indicates the problem which faced readers confronted by an overabundance of information and propaganda. The pamphlet's eponymous hero, *The Liar*, makes a series of unlikely-sounding claims – women are preaching, Cheapside cross is down, and so on – which are of course perfectly true. Despite the various punishments inflicted on him for these dreadful statements, he carries on talking. Finally the author breaks in:

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Gentle reader, I have heere related under the name of lies nothing but true tales, for if a man doth now speake truth he shall be sure to smart for it now a daies, either heere or in other places; read gentlie, and buy willingly.

The pamphlet's full title – *The Liar: or, a Contradiction to Those Who in the titles of their Bookes affirmed them to be true, when they were false: although mine are all true, yet I terme them Lyes* – is significant. As it indicates, the unprecedented nature of the things that really were taking place in public life made it possible for the wildest statements of the press to win belief. The pamphlet does not take an openly political line, but its implicit ridicule of the events to which it refers indicates a royalist and conservative position (it has in fact been ascribed to John Taylor, a popular royalist writer). Equally characteristic of that position, however, is its stress on the uncertainty of all knowledge: the author hints both at his own danger, which forces him to engage in subterfuge, and at the vulnerability of the reader, unaccustomed to judging between conflicting accounts. Thus, though the pamphlet is unlicensed and illegal, it is not really on the side of illicit publication.

Royalists never embraced freedom of the press as a doctrine; rather, their argument was that the established authority, Parliament, was not a true authority. It is likely that unauthorised publication, as they practised it, was a carefully organised affair. This is difficult to establish, because, although the role of printers and publishers in this period is beginning to be better understood, it still needs much more attention. The fact that many publications have no imprint makes it difficult to analyse the total output of individual publishers, and thus to know how centralised their activity was and how far it was dictated by commercial, as opposed to ideological, motives. Within the Stationers' Company itself, political differences seem to have mattered less than jockeying for position, trying to secure lucrative shares of its stock, and in-fighting between the different branches of the Company. As one might expect, those who had most to lose were the least active. The senior members seem to have tried to stay out of politics as far as possible (Blagden 1958, pp. 14–15). They normally entered at least a proportion of their books in the Register, and sometimes licensed them as well. The less established publishers and printers took more risks, some for ideological reasons, others because they could not afford to refuse any kind of work. In the case of journals and topical satire, particularly, they had nothing to gain by registering their publications (at sixpence a time) in order to establish copyright.

The practice of printing for both sides was obviously common. Even the

Eikon Basilike, the most important work of royalist propaganda in the entire period, includes among its thirty-five English editions of 1649 two by publishers normally associated with parliamentary literature (Madan 1949, p. 42). But it seems to have been felt that publishing should involve more than a purely commercial commitment to an author: hence, the contemptuous reference of a pro-Parliament journalist to 'that Camelion Bookseller, who is of that colour which you aply him next unto' (*Mercurius Britanicus* 11 July 1648), and Milton's disgust that someone who had published Salmasius' *Regii Sanguinis Clamor* should ask to print Milton's reply as well (Spencer 1959, pp. 22–3). In an attempt to give a picture of the royalist literary scene, I shall look at three men whose ideological stance was unquestionably royalist, and who represent three different kinds of 'subversive' publishing. Richard Royston was openly and officially involved in royalist propaganda in London while it was under Parliamentary control; John Crouch and the group associated with him produced a more apparently 'popular' kind of anti-government literature on secret presses; Humphrey Moseley, a highly respectable literary publisher, stayed out of trouble throughout the period, while probably doing as much for the cause as either of them.

Official propaganda and Richard Royston

The first phase of royalist literary activity was completely controlled by the court. The king, from the start, was strongly committed to printing and publishing. He took a printing press with him when he left London for York in 1642, and made sure that copies of his speeches were distributed afterwards for the benefit of those who could not hear them (Thomas 1969, pp. 28–9; Malcolm 1983, pp. 124ff.). The propaganda effort was not wholly in vain: at least one person who chose the royalist side in 1642 apparently did so after reading, among other things, some of these speeches (Hutton 1982, p. 17). One reason for the general belief in the king's authorship of the posthumous *Eikon Basilike* was the fact that he frequently told his close associates of his intention to justify himself in writing. James Howell, the future historiographer royal, obviously knew of this when, in *The Vote*, a poem for New Year 1642, he promised eventually 'To vindicate the truth of CHARLES his raigne, / From scribbling Pamphletors' (p. 5). According to George Thomason, the king also knew, and approved, of his collection (Spencer 1958, pp. 114–15; Spencer 1959, pp. 13–14).

During the war, the centre of royalist propaganda was Oxford. Its circle of writers included aristocrats and members of the king's council. On the

other hand, it also made extensive use of professionals, some of whom were well-known popular figures such as John Taylor (called the Water Poet because he had once been a waterman) and the ballad-writer Martin Parker. The court sponsored an official newsbook, *Mercurius Aulicus* (the court Mercury), which began publication on 1 January 1643. Under the editorship of Peter Heylin, later largely superseded by Sir John Berkenhead, it drew on official subsidies and the talents of a number of courtiers and scholars. The idea of an official newsbook may have come from France, where the *Gazette* of Théophraste Renaudot, started in 1631 under Richelieu's ministry, was taken up again and given increased prestige by Mazarin in 1643 (Grand-Mesnil 1967, pp. 11–12, 31, 50). This absolutist parentage gives a fair idea of what the court expected a newsbook to be: an official version of the news. Licensing, in fact, was never abolished in Oxford. Berkenhead doubled the role of journalist with that of licenser, a function he had also exercised (as one of Laud's chaplains) before the war. Thus, as Berkenhead's biographer points out, printing in Oxford was actually under tighter control during this period than it had been even during Laud's chancellorship (Thomas 1969, pp. 20–1, 124–5). Among those known to have contributed to *Aulicus* were several churchmen who, like Berkenhead, were Laudian protégés (Thomas 1969, pp. 37–40).

Despite (or because of) its slanted if lively coverage of the news, *Aulicus* had enough influence to be a serious threat to public opinion. The Parliamentary newsbook *Mercurius Britannicus* began printing in September 1643, specifically to counter its effect. Efforts were made to keep copies from reaching London. But a well-organised royalist network succeeded both in smuggling Oxford publications into the city and in producing London reprints of them. *Britannicus* in one of its early numbers reports a rumour that the writer of the London version 'hath his Commission under the *great Seale*' (10–17 Oct. 1643). In fact, he was not a writer but a publisher, Richard Royston, originally from Oxford.¹ *Britannicus* may have been right about his official status, since not only *Aulicus* but a number of other works of this period with Oxford imprints are in fact reprints by the London press, many of them under the auspices of Royston (Madan 1912). London printing helped to supplement the resources of the two Oxford printers, each of whom is said to have had only one press and to have suffered from occasional shortages of paper (O Hehir 1969, pp. 62–6). The purpose of the false imprints must have been partly to conceal the difficult circumstances prevailing in Oxford and partly to protect the London publishers from suspicion. Another reason may have been commercial:

London purchasers might pay a higher price for a book which they thought had been smuggled in, at great risk, from Oxford.

Nothing that is known of the early part of Royston's career indicates why he was to become the most energetic royalist publisher of the next two decades. He was already in his forties when the Long Parliament met, a moderately successful publisher with some interest in 'polite literature'. But he made his views apparent from the first. His first publication after the abolition of Star Chamber was a royalist sermon preached on the anniversary of Charles I's coronation. It was licensed. But he then published *Proquiratio Parainetike, or, a Petition to the People* (dated September 1642), which urged Parliament to trust the king and punish those who had driven him out of the city. This pamphlet was not licensed; according to a note which Thomason wrote on his copy of the pamphlet, it was 'scattered up and down in London' over two days, and finally suppressed as 'scandalous', by order of Parliament. Though Royston put his name on the title page, he was not arrested. That his first acknowledged publication should have appeared so soon after the beginning of open war, and should be so openly anti-Parliament, suggests that he already had some official status as the king's representative in London. Among the printers he employed were Roger Norton, the son of the former King's Printer for England, and James Young, the son of the former Royal Printer for Scotland (Williams 1973, p. 102). These were men with an obvious vested interest in the royalist cause. At the Restoration, Royston was referred to as his Majesty's bookseller. Whether officially or not, this appears to have been his role.

From 1642 on, Royston continued to make a small number of entries each year in the Stationers' Register, mainly works by high church Anglican divines like Henry Hammond and Jeremy Taylor. But his real energies were going into unlicensed printing. Though traffic between Oxford and London was prohibited, publications, like other goods, moved illegally in both directions. Royston employed what were euphemistically known as 'adventurous women' to smuggle copies of *Aulicus* with other correspondence. These women travelled 'like Strowlers begging from House to House, and loitering at Places agreed upon, to take up Books (which Mr. Royston had conveyed by stealth among other merchandise into the Western Barges on the *Thames*, and the Bargemen had put on shore there), and sell them to Retailers well known to them' (Barwick 1724, p. 62).

In 1645, Royston was finally imprisoned for a short period. Considering the extent of his anti-parliamentary activities, it is surprising that this had not happened before. It has been suggested that he was in collusion with

the officials of the Stationers' Company (Malcolm 1983, p. 125). Perhaps he also got protection from powerful friends in Parliament and the Westminster Assembly. Though royalists tend to depict both institutions as monolithic structures, they frequently profited from the fact that the members of both were really deeply divided about many issues and contained a number of royalist sympathisers. *The Kingdoms Weekly Intelligencer*, which reported the arrest of 'the great disperser and divulger' of 'Malignant Pamphlets' in its number for 5 August 1645, saw it as a sign that the 'Aulican' party in Parliament was weakening. But Royston was entering books in the Register again within a few months, and even his unlicensed publications often bear his name, defiantly, on the title page. When he was arrested again in 1648, the warrant gave his name as 'alias Allen of St Margaret's, Westminster' (*Calendar of State Papers Domestic* [CSPD], xxii, p. 173). Perhaps this alias is another reason why he eluded capture for so long.

His greatest service to the royalist cause was the publication of the *Eikon Basilike*, the 'king's book' of prayers and meditations on events of the 1640s, which was a best seller in its own time and widely regarded as a major contributor to the sentiments leading to the Restoration. Royston always believed it to be a work of the king's own writing. His story, as told (perhaps rather too frequently) in his old age (Barwick 1724, p. 370), was that he had been in correspondence with Charles about the book in the autumn of 1648 (Madan 1949, pp. 163–7). The printing is said to have been done outside London for fear of interruptions. While all later accounts stress the secrecy of the whole process, a number of people obviously knew something about it – for instance, Jeremy Taylor, who is supposed to have suggested the Greek title when he saw the book in proof at Royston's shop (Madan 1949, pp. 141–2). Because of the close watch kept on the presses, and the intrusion of government searchers who in early January destroyed what would have been the first impression of the work, the book did not reach the public until just after the king's execution. The overwhelming demand for copies of the work probably took everyone by surprise. Royston had to use the services of more than one printer. One of them, the schoolmaster William Dugard, actually put his initials to his verses explaining the book's frontispiece, a fact which suggests some confidence in the safety of the undertaking, though in fact it led to his arrest on 16 March. While the *Eikon* itself was not licensed, some of its later contents were, and the rather confused accounts in the press have been interpreted by the book's bibliographer, F. F. Madan (1949, pp. 169–70), as indicating Parliament's own uncertainty as to whether or not to go against public sentiment