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

Lois Potter

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Secret rites and secret writing
Royalist literature, 1641–1660

This book is a study of the various kinds of royalist writing during the period of the English Civil War and the Interregnum, when printing and publishing were largely controlled by Parliament.

Lois Potter examines the effectiveness of this control and the means by which writers evaded it: illicit publication; the use of various kinds of code, such as ciphers, emblems, secret languages, symbolism and allegory; the exploitation of genres such as romance and tragicomedy; the submerging of personal identity through literary quotation and allusion.

A final chapter considers the place of Charles I in royalist literature, with particular emphasis on the effect of the *Eikon Basilike*, once believed in, and revered, as his work.

By looking at a very wide sample of texts, ranging from anonymous pamphlets to the works of well-known ‘Cavalier poets’, the book brings greater precision to the controversial subject of the relation of literature to politics and of the relation of both to the psychology of secrecy.

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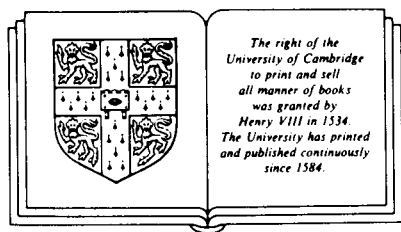
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Secret rites and
secret writing
Royalist literature,
1641–1660

LOIS POTTER

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IN MEMORIAM

J. C. HILSON

Sensus. Amicum perdidit.

Ratio. Iam eum te habuisse certum est.

Seneca, *De Remediis Fortuitorum*

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PREFACE

Until recently, it was the habit of literary historians to leap rapidly from 1642 to 1660, on the grounds that the intervening period belonged to the history of politics and religion, not literature. One of the chief factors encouraging the creation of this Great Divide was the way in which writers themselves tended to refer to it. Milton's autobiographical asides (e.g. in *Reason of Church Government*) frequently remind the reader that his political activities are an interruption of his true vocation, writing an epic poem. Dryden's splendid phrase for the pre-war dramatists, 'the giant race before the flood' ('To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve'), not only encapsulates his *fin de siècle* view of their successors, it also makes the closure of the public theatres between 1642 and 1660 part of a general catastrophe from which only a few survivors were left to begin a new world. The Age of Dryden, on this account, begins only in 1660.

All three of these statements need qualification. Milton's poetic career did not come to a complete stop during the 1640s and 1650s. Dryden's was already beginning in 1649. Theatrical activity continued in various forms. Writers had reasons for creating their particular images of the period. In Milton's case, to emphasise the effects of civil war on a pastoral poet was to stress the resemblance between his life and Virgil's, which was one of his personal myths. Dryden, like other writers who had gone into print in praise of Cromwell, had every reason to represent the period before 1660 as an aberration best forgotten. And the concept of the 'reformed' or refined stage, already in use in the 1650s, meant that the new theatre managers who received their patents from Charles II found it in their interest to play down those elements of the pre-war drama which had managed to continue during the previous eighteen years.

In fact, one of the main reasons why literary historians have avoided the period is not that there is too little material, but too much. A great deal of this material, however, poses problems of definition. It is often meaningless – and even, so to speak, genre-less – without an understanding of its context. Few scholars any longer argue for a belletrist definition of litera-

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ture; it is obvious that we read everything in a context of some sort. There is no real reason why a work which assumes a knowledge of how metaphors work, how one is supposed to talk about love and women, and how an English garden looks in the spring, should be superior to one which assumes, say, the ability to recognise an ironic tone and some knowledge of the proceedings of the Westminster Assembly. But the territory where literature and history meet is frightening enough as it is without the added hazards created by the existence of more material of both kinds than any one person can assimilate.

This book began with the intention of surveying the relation between literature and public events throughout the period. This seemed not only an important but a feasible study, since writers themselves frequently represent the civil war as a conflict about language. The dispute over the Prayer Book and the liturgy of the Church of England, for instance, is to some extent a dispute as to whether words create devotion or devotion creates words. Writers also comment on each other's vocabulary. Clarendon notes 'the new phrase' which the Scots had brought to England with the Covenant (Hyde 1888, vol. III, p. 456); a Parliamentary newsbook describes the word 'sanguine', used in one of the king's captured letters, as 'a new coyned expression at Court': the fact that it means both 'merry' and 'bloody' proves to him that the royalists 'are never merry or jocund but when they are sanguine, bloody, glutted with the blood of faithfull subjects' (*Mercurius Britannicus*, 28 July–4 Aug., 1645).

It seemed possible, then, to follow these signposts towards a study of the extent to which ideology influences literary style. Was there such a thing as a specifically royalist or parliamentarian aesthetic? Some scholars have tried to find one. The historian S. R. Gardiner linked Edmund Waller's political views to his 'subordination of independent thought and fancy to the severest artificial laws of style' (Gardiner 1897, vol. 1, p. 8). Joan Webber (1968) distinguishes (with respect only to writers of non-fictional prose) what she calls 'conservative Anglican' – meditative, anti-historical, obscure and ambiguous, symbolic' (p. 7) – from 'radical Puritan' – 'active, timebound, as simple and visible as possible' (p. 8). The problem with this kind of analysis, however, is that the terms keep shifting. Anti-Episcopal sentiment, in the sense of a dislike of the political role played by some bishops, and suspicion of the pro-Catholic direction which the court was thought to be taking united much of England in the period 1637–42. By the outbreak of the war, some of those who had been 'Puritans' in this wide sense had already joined the royalist camp. The war in its early years, and especially at the time of the Scots' entrance and the taking of the Covenant

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in 1643, could have been described as Anglican versus Presbyterian. Taking the Covenant had vastly different meanings for different people: by 1647, there were 'Presbyterians' who would have accepted not only monarchy but modified episcopacy (McCormack 1973, pp. 146–9), or who used the term, as one of them put it much later, 'not in the sense of anti-Episcopal but anti-Independent' (Wallis MS, Letter of 29 Jan. 1696–7). Many who supported Parliament in the war were royalists after it ended; many who loathed the Long Parliament were willing to accept Cromwell's rule. Waller, court poet and member of the Long Parliament, exiled for his part in a royalist conspiracy, later wrote a panegyric on Cromwell; he was attacked for this by a Presbyterian clergyman, Robert Wild, who was also a 'cavalier poet'. Both men wrote poems welcoming the restoration of Charles II. Are they turncoats, and, if so, at what point did they turn them? Given these shifting alignments, it is only with reference to a specific date that one can safely describe a writer as belonging to one party or the other. Moreover, the background of controversy, though it may make writers hyper-conscious of their opponents' style, also makes them totally unscrupulous as literary critics. Few of them stick to their theories about style and vocabulary when by abandoning them they can score a point.

In view of the problem created by the overabundance of material and the complexity of the situation I was trying to analyse, I finally made two decisions. One was to concentrate on royalist literature. It has the advantage of being easier to identify than any other of the period. Cromwell may have said that he knew what he did not want, but not what he did; the royalists, however, knew exactly what they wanted: Charles I, and, after his death, Charles II. My second decision followed from the first. It was to look particularly at the concept of secrecy and encoded meaning, which is essential to any party whose opponents control access to the media. Finally, I hoped to find out what purpose this literature, and its elliptical presentation, was serving. It was easy enough to see the connection between secrecy and political absolutism: the concept of *arcana imperii*, the idea that, as Solomon said, 'it is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter' (Proverbs 25:2). But how did the royalist writers reconcile these abstractions with the events of the 1640s? Was their own secrecy really protecting them from danger, and, if so, of what kind?

It will be evident that my approach implies a sense of the hermeneutics of literature similar to that of Annabel Patterson's brilliant *Censorship and Interpretation* (1984), which has as its central thesis the idea 'that it is to censorship that we in part owe our very concept of "literature," as a kind of

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discourse with rules of its own' (p. 4). My book differs from hers in being confined to a smaller time span and exploring it in more detail, with perhaps more emphasis on the factual than the theoretical. Whereas Patterson sees censorship as *creating* a psychology of secrecy, my concentration on the royalists has led me to see the threat of censorship as only part of a psychological *need* for secrecy whose motivation I shall be trying to clarify in the chapters that follow.

In order to understand the process by which experience is encoded as literature, one obviously has to know what events have been in the public consciousness at any given period. This is one reason why I have made so much use of pamphlets and newsbooks, which, being brief, were usually published quickly and can be dated relatively precisely. In my first chapter I describe the means of production and distribution of this literature, with special emphasis on the publishers and newsbooks whose names will recur throughout this book. Readers who prefer a less factual and more critical approach might prefer to start with the second chapter. Here and in chapters 3 and 4 the subject of secret writing moves from the literal to the metaphorical. I look at the various kinds of code available to writers, from ciphers to pictorial and verbal tricks, to the more subtle effects of genre, allusion and quotation. In a study of royalism it seems important above all to take account of the effect of the personality and writings (real or supposed) of Charles I himself. This is why my final chapter deals with the way in which the image of the king, in the arts, on the scaffold, and in the *Eikon Basilike*, comes to embody, but also to exhaust, the complex of royalist images and beliefs.

The writers discussed here in some detail include Cleveland, Davenant, Fanshawe, Lovelace, Marvell, Waller, Vaughan, and several other canonical figures; Milton is very much present as a voice of opposition, and an important aspect of the book is its study of the practice of quotation from earlier authors, particularly Jonson, Webster, Shakespeare, and Burton. It is also true, however, that many of the works referred to are anonymous or pseudonymous, and that others are by writers who are scarcely household names, if indeed they can be called writers at all: John Crouch, George Digby, Samuel Sheppard, Robert Wild. This book is marginal in the strictest sense of the word, since it is concerned not only with the margins of literary history but, fleetingly at least, with the margins of books: the acknowledgement of sources, the marginalia of readers. I also discuss some odd non-literary episodes: the case of the Sussex Picture, the Abingdon double-cross, the curious affair of the substitute frontispiece. If these sound like the titles of unwritten Sherlock Holmes stories, it is not surpris-

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ing. 'The Musgrave Ritual' does in fact deal with a secret code dating from the civil war, and T. S. Eliot incorporated some lines from it in *Murder in the Cathedral*, a 'mystery play' which is also a play of martyrdom. There is probably some meaning in this conjunction of events, but I shall not pursue it here.

Because this book quotes from a large number of brief and obscure works, many of which are mentioned only once, I have tried to streamline its documentation as far as was consistent with clarity. Where possible, I have adopted the author–date method of citation after quotations; in the case of anonymous works, I have used a short title instead. For manuscripts, I have used whatever abbreviation seemed easiest to recognise. A single alphabetical list gives the full references; it is confined to works cited in the text. This method of documentation means that it is difficult to explain the complicated problems of text and authorship that often occur in unedited works of this period. Where I felt that such information would be interesting or essential for readers, I have given it in a note; otherwise I have left it out.

I quote the Bible in the Authorised (King James) version; Shakespeare quotations are taken from the Oxford *Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Milton's prose from the Yale *Complete Prose Works*. With other authors I have tried where possible to use standard editions, but often I have had to quote from an original, badly printed edition. This has inevitably resulted in inconsistencies between old and modern spelling. Except where the appearance of a passage is significant for my argument, I have removed or reversed italics in passages where they were heavily used, and altered spelling and punctuation whenever they seemed erroneous or likely to interfere with clarity. I have not given page references for quotations from single quarto pamphlets or where I have quoted from a brief Preface or Dedication. Many of these are inaccurately or irregularly paginated in any case. Unless otherwise indicated, dates of performance of plays are taken from *Annals of English Drama* by Alfred Harbage, revised by Samuel Schoenbaum. Where I give a precise date for a pamphlet in the Thomason collection, it is the one noted by Thomason himself on the title page.

When a book synthesises the results of research carried on for a variety of projects and over a long period of time, this part of its preface inevitably becomes awkwardly self-referential. An earlier version of chapter 3 appeared, as 'True Tragicomedies of the Civil War and Commonwealth', in *Renaissance Tragicomedy*, ed. Nancy Klein Maguire (AMS Press, New York, 1988). A version of chapter 5 was presented on 13 March 1986 at the

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Folger Institute Center for the History of British Political Thought, which is supported by grants from the Research Programs Division of the National Endowment for the Humanities (an independent federal agency), the John Ben Snow Memorial Trust, the George Washington University, and the Exxon Education Foundation; another version was given at Merton College, Oxford. Some of the material in chapters 1 and 4 is based on work done for an edition of *The Four Mistress Parliament Plays* (*The Journal of Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, n.s., 1, 1987, pp. 101–70). Material from other sections of the book has formed part of papers to the Society for Theatre Research, the Modern Language Association, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the first International Conference on the European Emblem, and graduate seminars at the University of Leicester.

This book has, in every sense, many sources. Its research has been aided by grants from the Board of Research Studies at the University of Leicester and by the kindness of the librarians at the Leicester University Library, the Bodleian Library, the libraries of the universities of Cambridge, Nottingham, Harvard, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Huntington Library, the Union Theological Seminary, and, especially, the library of Worcester College, Oxford, and its librarian, Lesley Montgomery. I am grateful for permission to reproduce the Lely painting of Charles I and the Duke of York, in the possession of His Grace the Duke of Northumberland at Sion House. For permission to reproduce illustrations from books in their collections, I thank the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Leicester University Library, the Cambridge University Library, and the Libraries of Magdalen College, Oxford, St John's College, Cambridge, and Trinity College, Cambridge.

I have benefited from the advice and encouragement of A. R. Braummuller, James Knowles, D. F. McKenzie, Katherine F. Pantzer (who helped me track down the early career of Richard Royston), Richard Proudfoot, Dale Randall, Matthew Seccombe, Peter Smith, and P. W. Thomas. Sheila Lambert read chapter 1 at an earlier stage, was very helpful on the subject of printing in the mid-seventeenth century, and saved me from a number of inaccuracies. Eric Sams gave me some useful information about ciphers. Claudine Majzels taught me a great deal about looking at pictures. John Pitcher, Isabel Rivers, and Nigel Wood kindly read and commented on parts of the book; Robin Biswas read the whole typescript and was both critical and encouraging. Sarah Stanton and Victoria Cooper, of the Cambridge University Press, were most supportive and helpful in the final stages of the project, and I am very grateful for Charles Hieatt's scrupulous and patient copy-editing.