The Politics of Disclosure, 1674–1725
Rebecca Bullard
THE POLITICS OF DISCLOSURE, 1674–1725: SECRET HISTORY NARRATIVES
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THE POLITICS OF DISCLOSURE, 1674–1725: SECRET HISTORY NARRATIVES

BY

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In memory of my grandmothers,
Lena Price (1907–2007)
and
Thelma Rees (1920–1998)
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CONVENTIONS

Texts published before the twentieth century were published in London, unless otherwise specified.

The first letter of each quotation is silently capitalized or lowered according to context. When quoting from prefaces and dedications, italics are often silently reversed.

The Acts of Union (1707) turned Scotland and England into the Kingdom of Great Britain. When discussing texts published before 1707, I generally refer to England; in discussions of texts published after this date or when I make comments that apply to the entire period, I refer to Britain.

Robert Harley became Earl of Oxford and Mortimer in 1711. For the sake of clarity, I refer to him as Robert Harley throughout.
INTRODUCTION

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Britain experienced an extraordinary and unprecedented vogue for texts calling themselves ‘secret histories’. Secret history undermines received or official accounts of the recent political past by exposing the seamy side of public life. As an early commentator on the form puts it, the orthodox historian ‘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.’

Inside the closets and cabinets of those in power, secret historians discover sexual intrigue and political chicanery. They reveal that monarchs and ministers routinely attempt to dupe their people in an effort to extend their own power. Secret history presents itself as a defender of British political liberties at the vanguard of the battle against French-style absolute rule. But secret history is also self-conscious about its status as a literary form. A revisionist mode of historiography, it re-plots received accounts of recent political history along partisan lines. It encourages its readers to consider the relationship between historical narratives and political power and the function of secrecy and revelation in each.

The discoveries that secret historians make in the cabinets and closets of the powerful vary according to period. The first English text to bear the title ‘secret history’ is The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian (1674), an anonymous translation of the Anekdota or ‘unpublished things’ by the sixth-century Byzantine historian, Procopius of Caesarea. This secret history’s revelations about the debauched and tyrannical behaviour of the Emperor Justinian were interpreted by many contemporaries as reflections upon Charles II. Later secret historians were more direct in their attacks on the Stuart monarchs. In the wake of the Revolution of 1688–9, at the height of secret history’s popularity in
England, almost all secret histories reveal the political and sexual secrets of the Stuart kings, Charles II and James II, and the French monarch, Louis XIV. Texts such as *The Secret History of the Reigns of K. Charles II and K. James II* (1690), *The Secret History of the Duchess of Portsmouth* (1690), *The Cabinet Open’d: or, the Secret History of the Amours of Madam de Maintenon with the French King* (1690) and *The Royal Mistresses of France, or, The Secret History of the Amours of All the French Kings* (1695) focus on the power of royal mistresses at both the Stuart and Bourbon Courts. They give their readers a titillating glimpse of kings and courtiers in a state of undress, but they also reinforce important political ideas: in particular, that France gained insidious control over Charles II through his mistress, Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth; more generally, that absolute or would-be absolute monarchs are, in fact, ruled by the women at their Courts. Arbitrary government, secret historians claim, is little more than petticoat government.

Other closet discoveries are more overtly and straightforwardly political. Secret leagues between England and France – to the detriment of the Protestant religion and political liberty – occupy much space in *The Secret History of White-hall* (1697) and *The True Secret History of the Reigns of All the Kings and Queens of England* (1702). Among these conspiratorial leagues to enslave the English people, the secret treaty of Dover consistently generates the highest level of interest among secret historians. Signed by Charles II and Louis XIV in 1670, it annihilated the defensive Triple League between the Protestant nations, England, the United Provinces and Sweden. Within two years, England was at war against the United Provinces on the side of Roman Catholic France. The fact that the Duchess of Orléans, Charles II’s sister, died soon after the treaty was signed led to allegations that she had been poisoned by the French having played her part in the negotiations. Scandal, sensation and polemic are the stuff of post-Revolution secret history, which thrills and shocks its readership into believing that their political liberties had only very recently been in the greatest peril.

During the eighteenth century, the detail of secret historians’ closet discoveries changes, but secret history’s intrusive character and iconoclastic purpose endure. With the Stuart Court in exile at St Germain-en-Laye, Jacobite conspirators, assisted by French finances, represented a new threat to British political liberties. Secret histories of this period focus not so much on the Jacobite plotters themselves as on the intrigues of Queen Anne’s Tory ministers. The Whig opponents of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, and Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, argued that these ministers were secret supporters of the Pretender attempting to undermine limited monarchy in Britain. During the early eighteenth century, then, secret historians shift their attention from monarchs to ministers and they narrow their focus so that sexual intrigue becomes less impor-
tant to their arguments than political scheming. But they continue to oppose the threat of arbitrary government, even when the nature of that threat alters.

The first three decades of the eighteenth century witness not only changes in the typical content of secret history, but also the appropriation and adaptation of this form's generic conventions by writers working in genres other than secret history itself. Between 1709 and 1725, texts as diverse as Delarivier Manley's scandalous roman à clef, *The New Atalantis* (1709), the polite periodical, *The Spectator* (1711–14), and Daniel Defoe's dark, late novel, *Roxana* (1724) – to name just a few – manipulate in a variety of different ways secret history's central claim to disclose previously undiscovered intelligence. Eighteenth-century authors create a range of rhetorical effects out of raw material provided by secret history's revelatory narratives. In each case, however, the act of adaptation can be read as a political statement. Sometimes these writers affirm the connection between secret history and the Whig opposition to excessive royal prerogative but more often they modify, question or even challenge it. During the early eighteenth century, allusions to secret history are used to shore up support for the Tory party, condemn Robert Harley's intelligence-based style of political management, celebrate the triumph of Whiggism after the accession of George I to the throne, decry the ministerial Whigs' abandonment of Revolution principles, and attack the prime minister, Robert Walpole. The sheer range of political uses to which secret history's literary conventions are put reveals the flexibility and enduring appeal of this polemical form of historiography over the course of a turbulent half-century in British politics.

**Secret History’s Cultural Contexts**

The fifty years on which this study focuses are an age of plots and plotting. The later seventeenth century witnessed a cluster of high profile conspiracies, including the Popish Plot of 1679 (an alleged Jesuit conspiracy to assassinate Charles II and install his Roman Catholic brother, James Duke of York, to the throne), the Rye-House Plot of 1683 (a plot to murder both Charles II and his brother, James, by Exclusionists, or proto-Whigs, seeking to prevent the accession of a Roman Catholic monarch to the English throne), and the Assassination Plot of 1696 (in which Jacobite agents were convicted of conspiring to murder William III). Rebellions against the monarch, from the Monmouth uprising in 1685 to attempted Jacobite invasions in 1692, 1708 and 1715, add to the sense that conspiracy was never far from the surface of British politics during this period.

Early modern writers represented the Stuart monarchs not only as potential victims of conspiracy, however, but also as its perpetrators. Opposition polemicists accused Charles II, James II and their supporters of conspiring to undermine the political and religious freedoms of the British people. In his *Account of the
Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government (1677), Andrew Marvell repeatedly describes the parliamentary Court party as ‘conspirators’ against the nation, in league with the French king. The Revolution of 1688–9 was justified not only on the grounds that James II had fled to France and therefore vacated or abdicated his throne, but also that he had conspired to impose Roman Catholicism and arbitrary government upon his subjects and had thus forfeited their loyalty. James, his consort Mary of Modena and their counsellors were popularly believed to have conspired together to procure a supposititious heir to the throne: the infant Prince of Wales, later the Pretender, was allegedly smuggled into the birthing chamber in a warming pan. Even Queen Anne was (albeit falsely) suspected in many quarters of conspiring to make the Pretender her successor, rather than the Protestant Hanoverians. Secret history encourages its readers to believe that their rulers are in league against them and encourages suspicion of Courts in general, arguing that monarchs and ministers operate within a secret sphere of clandestine political activity. If late-Stuart Britain did, indeed, witness the emergence of a ‘public sphere’, then secret history undermines the idea that its foundations were the rational and free exchange of information and opinion. Secret history suggests that the contemporary reading public was both prurient and fearful about what it did not know. Each revelation of previously concealed intelligence increased awareness of the limits of public knowledge.

The political culture of plots and plotting out of which secret history emerges raises difficult epistemic and generic questions about the relationship between fact and fiction and – even more significantly for secret history – about the ways in which historical events are turned into historical narratives. Where the discovery of secret conspiracy is concerned, it is easy to claim that plots have been invented, especially where there are obvious motives for covering up or fabricating evidence. Sceptical contemporaries speculated that Charles II or his supporters or even Whig activists invented the Rye-House Plot in order to damage their political opponents. Reports of Jacobite conspiracies could, likewise, be dismissed as ignes fatui designed by the government to quell a factious public into political submission. The deregulation of the press that occurred as a result of a temporary lapse of the Licensing Act in 1679 and a permanent lapse of this Act from 1695 allowed the proliferation of printed accounts of the recent past. In this milieu it was difficult to tell what to believe, since behind every account of contemporary political history lay the potential for numerous, competing versions of past.

Connections between the epistemic problems raised by late Stuart political culture and contemporary literary interest in the concepts of fact and fiction have been explored in much recent scholarship, most notably by Mark Knights and Kate Loveman. The relationship between political and literary questions about how to determine what to believe and similar enquiries in variety of
spheres – among them the law, natural philosophy, religion and accounts of travels in far-flung places – has also received substantial critical attention over recent decades. It has less often been observed, however, that such questions about belief necessarily lead on to questions about the business of plotting the past. Asserting the credibility of a previously undiscovered piece of intelligence inevitably involves making an adjustment to received historical narratives. Indeed, even if readers refuse to believe that a particular piece of information is true, the rhetorical act of revelation encourages them to consider the ways in which narratives of the past are constructed out of a selected and therefore contingent set of events. The act of disclosure demonstrates that secrets are narratives, created by rearranging sequences of events in such a way as to obscure the truth. It is the connections between secrecy, revelation, narrative and political power, more than questions about fact and fiction per se, that preoccupy early modern secret historians.

Secret history, with its claims to discover previously concealed intelligence, invites from its readers the same kind of scepticism as contemporary political plots. But secret histories differ from most other contemporary accounts of conspiracy and political intrigue because of the highly self-conscious approach that they adopt towards the discourse of disclosure. Secret history not only claims to reveal secrets but also scrutinizes the ethical, epistemic, historiographical and political implications of its own revelatory gestures. Instead of seeking to convince its readers that the claims it makes are unquestionably true, secret histories often acknowledge and even make political capital out of the precarious position that they occupy on the borders of history and fiction. They draw attention to the impact of the disclosure of secrets upon received or familiar narratives of the past. They suggest that all historical narrative, including secret history itself, might be revised or reinterpreted should further information come to light, and that any version of events might be built on fictional rather than factual foundations. Its self-reflexive character makes secret history one of the early modern period’s most complex forms of polemical writing.

In order to understand secret history fully, it is vital that we try to situate its distinctive polemical strategies within the partisan milieu that it seeks to influence. This study seeks to provide the first integrated account of early modern secret history, in which both its literary and its partisan characteristics are considered, in detail, together. And it is also the first account of secret history’s influence upon a particular set of early eighteenth-century texts, each of which engages with both the literary and political conventions of this polemical form of historiography. The following chapters provide a secret history of secret history by revealing the complexity of this form and the central position that it occupies within early modern literary and political culture. But as it discloses secret history’s own secrets, this study also illuminates hidden aspects of the culture of
which secret history forms part. For instance, by demonstrating that many of secret history’s polemical strategies are counter-intuitive rather than logical and straightforward, it suggests the existence of a politicized reading public capable not only of sophisticated analyses of individual texts but also comparing the rhetorical devices used by a variety of different authors within and across genres. It also shows that early modern party politics – the personalities involved as well as the ideas discussed – precipitated tremendous literary innovation during this period by encouraging a highly self-conscious approach towards questions of genre and narrative form. As the next section demonstrates, secret history’s formal characteristics are tailored to its primary political function: opposing arbitrary government. The subsequent two sections explore the more complex and self-conscious rhetorical facets of this polemical form of historiography.

Secret History and the Opposition to Arbitrary Government

Secret history is a form of historiography designed to oppose arbitrary government. It responds to the importance of secrecy in the theory and practice of absolute rule. One recent historian of European absolutism during the early modern period suggests that, ‘under absolutism, the concept of secrecy had become morally neutral, far removed from its earlier association with deceit’. Secrecy-based concepts such as political ‘prudence’, simulation (pretending to be what one is not), dissimulation (pretending not to be what one really is) and arcana imperii, or secrets of state, were central to early modern absolutism. These concepts underpinned raison d’état or ‘reason of state’: the adoption of extra-legal or apparently immoral methods of rule, ostensibly for the good of the country. Some early modern writers castigated reason of state as Machiavellian; in other quarters, however, it was applauded as the best means to establish a strong, stable political system. As well as being crucial to reason of state, secrecy was also an intrinsic element of the theological rationale for absolute rule. Absolute monarchs were deemed accountable to God alone and analogous to God as all-powerful rulers. Their motives and secret purposes were inscrutable. In Britain, the association of absolutism with Roman Catholicism (evident in the collocation ‘popery and arbitrary government’) further added to the perception that mystery sustains arbitrary rule. In absolutist, Roman Catholic states such as France, secrecy appeared to uphold a system of civil and ecclesiastical government in which monarch and priests conspired to control and suppress the people by keeping them in ignorance.

Against the clandestine world of the backstairs and closet, secret history pits the populist medium of print. While secrets are created in private, passed on through whispers or manuscripts that can be destroyed at a moment’s notice, secret historians expose secrets in a printed and therefore highly public form. The
medium in which their texts appear is thus central to their iconoclastic political aims. But if secret history’s general claim to reveal secrets in print is in itself an assault on arbitrary government, then the particular nature of the secrets exposed by secret historians adds weight to the attack. Secret history offer its readers tales of sexual as well as political intrigue gathered from the closets and bedchambers of those who occupy positions of power. The capacity of secret history to titillate was not only commercially advantageous, but also politically significant. Secret history focuses attention on the body of the monarch, thereby compromising regal dignity and undermining the reverential distance between monarch and people. It also presents the foundations of arbitrary rule as unsteady by locating them in the personal whims and appetites of an absolute ruler. When they depict bedchamber intrigues as the root cause of recent political events, secret historians are not necessarily arguing that the king’s sexual appetite is the sole reason behind all political history (although, as we shall see, they do sometimes suggest that this is the case). Rather, salacious secret history reveals what happens when men, rather than laws, govern.

The relationship between secret history and pre-existing versions of recent political history reinforces secret history’s oppositional political aims. Secret history is never a standalone account of past events; it always supplements and revises earlier historical narratives. Procopius’s *Anekdota* was written to undermine his *History of the Wars*, a laudatory account of the battles between the Roman army and the Persians, Goths and Vandals. David Jones’s *Secret History of White-hall* claims to be a ‘Supplemental Part, as well for the detecting of past Fal-sities, as for the perfecting of past Discoveries’ in Sir William Temple’s *Memoirs* (1691) and Roger Coke’s *Detection of the Court and State of England during the Four Last Reigns* (1694). In his *True Secret History*, John Somers prefaces his secret history of each reign with an account of that reign’s ‘General History’, thus highlighting the difference between the two. Yet even when secret historians do not specify particular versions of events that their narratives challenge, secret history is still a revisionist form of historiography. By claiming to bring secrets to light, secret history sets out to undermine prevailing orthodoxies about the character of the reigns that it describes. Secret history’s revisionist tendencies also demonstrate the political role of historians, who create or destroy the narratives that surround absolute rulers. This self-reflexive function of secret history had particular resonance for English historians and readers during the later seventeenth century: secret history represents a concerted effort to highlight the iconoclastic potential of historical narrative at a time when Courts across Europe were introducing the post of royal historiographer to promote official versions of the past. Secret history’s reflections upon its own status as a genre of iconoclastic historiography represent one of its most powerful polemical strategies.
So far, there appears to be a fairly straightforward political rationale behind secret history’s principal rhetorical strategies. In order to attack the aura of secrecy that surrounds absolute rulers, secret history exposes their secrets; in order to highlight the unstable foundations of personal rule and to deprive monarchs of regal dignity, secret history reveals them in a state of undress; and in order to assert the role of the historian in sustaining or undermining arbitrary power, secret history supplements and challenges pre-existing accounts of the recent political past. But such a logical relationship between the political aims and stylistic characteristics of secret history only takes us some of the way towards appreciating the rhetorical strategies of this sophisticated form of historiography. If we look closely at secret histories written during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we often find in them a self-conscious approach towards the central motif of revelation that is more hermeneutically demanding than recent scholarly accounts of this genre have acknowledged.

Given its generic title, secret history might logically be expected to reveal secrets and to make strong claims to historicity. Many of its early critics, however, protest that it fails to meet these expectations. One early, Latin commentary on secret history suggests that it should be classed as common satire rather than the prestigious genre of history, and that the information it contains is more accurately described as gossip than as secrets.24 A later writer likewise observes that the ‘Objection ... generally made to all Anecdotes is that their intelligence is ‘either False or Common’ .25 According to objectors against secret histories, these texts pretend to give their readers intelligence that is both historically accurate and previously undiscovered while peddling invented stories or common gossip. But do secret historians really claim to tell secrets? And do they genuinely regard their texts as history? The next two sections (respectively) address these questions. The answers that emerge reveal the rhetorical complexities of secret history, and the often counter-intuitive ways in which practitioners of this genre pursue their polemical ends.

A Rhetorical Approach towards the Motif of Revelation; or, Does Secret History Really Tell Secrets?

In order to understand secret history’s more complex rhetorical strategies, it helps to begin by asking a simple question: in what sense does secret history tell secrets? The period under consideration does witness the publication of texts which reveal genuine secrets: that is, information never before published and probably unknown to the majority of its readers. Into this category we might place Marvell’s *Account of the Growth of Popery*, which reveals the ongoing ‘conspiracy’ between the Court faction and France to introduce French-style arbitrary government into England through secret leagues.26 Marvell provides
his readers with verbatim reports of speeches from inside the sanctum sanctorum, the House of Commons – a practice that was illegal in and of itself – as well as incriminating documentary evidence of the Court faction’s underhand activities. In the early eighteenth century, Jonathan Swift’s The Conduct of the Allies (1711) also tells its readers secrets. Swift asserts that ‘the true Spring or Motive’ of the War of Spanish Succession, which had raged since 1702, ‘was the aggrandizing a particular Family’ – that is, the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough and the Earl of Godolphin who stood to benefit politically and financially from the war’s prolongation. Swift’s close contact with the Tory Lord Treasurer, Robert Harley, gave him access to privileged information which he exposed, at Harley’s behest, in this propagandist pamphlet. Throughout the period under consideration, writers of polemic clearly understood the importance of putting previously undiscovered intelligence into print as a means of manipulating public opinion.

Many self-professed secret historians likewise claim that their texts provide their readers with genuine, previously undiscovered intelligence. In the preface to The Secret History of White-hall, David Jones asserts that his text is intended ‘to obviate a vulgar Error and Objection that I foresee would be made upon this Subject, That all that could be Writ has been written already, concerning the late Reigns’. Jones challenges the Objector to state where it is he meets with an exact Account of the Private League between King Charles II. and the French King; The Duke of York’s secret Correspondence with that Court; Coleman’s intervention with both for his own Advantage; The Interest the French made both in England and Holland among the several Sects and Parties of Men, to prevent the late Queen’s being married to his present Majesty: The Methods concerted to trapan her into France with her Father’s concurrence, and how prevented; Father St Germain’s attempting King Charles the Second in his Religion, with the King’s Answer, &c. His unseasonable boasting of it, the Occasion of his flight into France, and the Censure he underwent from those of his Order for it; Coleman’s Wife’s Petition to the French King, the Answer, and her destroying her self; Monsieur Le Tellier’s Speech about the Invasion of England; The Duke of York his perversions to the Church of Rome; King James’s Private League with France, when Regnant; the Essay made by Don Ronquillo, the Spanish Ambassador, to draw him into the Austrian Interest, with his Answer, and Refusal in favour of France; How Father Petre came to be made a Privy Councillor; wherefore Mr Skelton was imprisoned in the Tower &c. ... to name no more, though the rest are of equal Curiosity.

This sensationalist preface cum table of contents is designed to advertise the novelty of Jones’s revelations, but its brash tone perhaps raises more suspicions about the freshness and reliability of the intelligence contained in this text than it quells. Indeed, despite Jones’s rhetoric of revelation, much of the information that he claims is new had long circulated in the public domain in printed form. Andrew Marvell had alerted his readers to ‘the Private League between King Charles the Second, and the French King’ – commonly known as the secret
treaty of Dover – twenty years earlier in his *Account of the Growth of Popery*. The secret treaty is the main topic of works such as *An Account of the Reasons Which Induced Charles II, King of England to Declare War Against the States-General of the United Provinces* [sic] in 1672. And of the private league which he entered into at the same time with the French king to carry it on (1689), which in turn was based on Primi Fassola di San Maiolo’s suppressed account of the Third Dutch War, *Historia della guerra d’Olanda* (1682). The conspiracies between the Duke of York and the French Court to which Jones alludes had also been publicized in *An Account of the Private League betwixt the Late King James II and the French King: In a Letter from a Gentleman in London, to a Gentleman in the Country* (1689).

Many texts that proudly display the phrase ‘secret history’ on their title pages deal in similarly recycled material. *The Secret History of the Chevalier de St George* (1714), for instance, rehearses exactly the same stories about the birth of the Pretender that had circulated ever since the warming-pan scandal first broke in 1689, although its author claims to ‘enumerate what others have carelessly or artfully pass’d by’. And as late as 1718, John Dunton asserts in *The Hanover-Spy; or, Secret History of St. James’s* that Charles II and James II’s Roman Catholicism was ‘a great Secret hitherto’, which ‘I positively affirm to be Matter of Fact’ – a claim little short of laughable in the context of political events during the previous thirty years. How are we to interpret the motif of revelation in texts like these, which clearly contain little that might be described, in any ordinary sense of the term, as secret?

In the almost total absence of archival evidence, it is impossible to know how readers responded to the claims made by secret histories to reveal secret intelligence, let alone to evaluate variations in the reception of these texts in metropolitan centres and the provinces, by readers with knowledge of the Court and those outside such privileged circles, or among readers of different political persuasions. Even without firm evidence, however, it is safe to assume that readers of secret histories received these texts in a wide variety of different ways. At least some are likely to have approached the information contained in secret histories as genuine secrets – that is, as information brought to light for the first time. With the benefit of hindsight it is evident that much of the content of secret histories was already available to readers in printed form, and it is easy to suspect that still more was common political gossip in and around the Court and City of London. It is nonetheless reasonable to believe that there were many individual readers who really had never encountered the claims made by particular secret histories. The secret historian John Oldmixon seems particularly conscious of such a potential readership in his *Secret History of Europe* (1712–15) – a text which is comprised not of ‘such Anecdotes, as are no where else to be met with’, but rather of information scattered through so many disparate texts that it ‘prob-
ably would never have fallen into the Hands of one Man’ had Oldmixon not gathered it together.35 On the other hand, there were readers who remained resolutely sceptical about any information conveyed in the form of a secret history because of the genre’s reputation for invented, malicious scandal: as we will see shortly, secret history met with many critics keen to portray its claims to reveal secret intelligence as nothing more than unreliable partisan propaganda and/or profiteering. Most readers probably fell somewhere between these two extremes, evaluating the revelations made by individual texts on their own merits.

If we are to consider the full range of potential responses towards secret history, however, we need to adopt a rhetorical rather than a positivist approach towards the motif of revelation. Instead of attempting to deduce whether secret histories really revealed secrets or to conjecture about how actual readers responded to secret history, this study analyses the authorial strategies that are founded upon the claim to disclose secrets. Such an approach illuminates the possibility that many secret historians did not intend their claims to disclose secret intelligence to be taken as literally true but, rather, that they regarded such gestures as a rhetorical device. For many writers in this genre, the claim to reveal secrets is a statement in support of the Whig opposition to arbitrary government. Whig writers use secret history’s central motif of revelation to present their political party as the party of openness rather than concealment, of candour rather than conspiracy, regardless of the quality of the intelligence contained in the secret histories themselves.

Interpreting the motif of revelation as rhetorical has significant implications for the way in which I approach early modern secret history. It means that I am not concerned to discover the real secrets of late Stuart politics, but rather to analyse the ways in which secret historians handled the discourse of disclosure. In this context, the actual details of the secrets that are revealed in any given text are important only insofar as they illuminate the rhetorical act of revelation. So, for instance, the fact that John Dunton claims to expose Charles II’s and James II’s Roman Catholicism is significant because it connects Dunton’s text with an established tradition of Whig secret history and because, as a revelation made in 1718, its putative status as secret intelligence is so entirely implausible. Chapter 3 demonstrates that, although Dunton’s text does not in a positive sense reveal secrets in the way that it claims to, its engagement with the discourse of disclosure is, nonetheless, politically motivated. Dunton’s approach towards the motif of revelation is far from unusual in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. We will see that, instead of expressing embarrassment or concern at the lack of secrets in their texts, many writers who engage with the conventions of secret history ostentatiously draw attention to the mismatch between their texts’ claims to expose secrets and their contents. Although, at first, Dunton’s claim that the Stuart kings’ sympathy for the Roman Catholic Church is ‘a great Secret