



University
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of British Columbia, 2001)
BSc (University of British Columbia, 1998)

“Through a Glasse Darkly”:
Secrecy and Access to Arcane Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century
England”

Department of History

Monday, September 10, 2018
3:00 P.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B007

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Andrea McKenzie, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Simon Devereaux, Department of History, UVic (Member)
Dr. Erin Campbell, Department of Art History and Visual Studies, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Lori Anne Ferrell, School of Arts & Humanities, Claremont Graduate University

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Derek Fraser, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria

Abstract

In seventeenth-century England, pursuits of knowledge were shaped by two seemingly paradoxical, yet interwoven beliefs: a persistent belief in the devastating effects of the Fall on human reason, and a growing trust in human ability to sharpen understanding and pierce the seemingly impenetrable. This dissertation explores how writers of works of physiognomy, shorthand, astrology and secret history simultaneously presented human conjecture and intuition as limited and flawed but also capable of providing ordinary people with access to privileged information. The authors of these “do-it-yourself” manuals made distinctions between God’s secrecy and human secrecy and provided tips on how each could be tapped. Physiognomy inspired constant searching for hidden sources of insight; shorthand encouraged the sense that there was often more than met the eye; astrology emphasized the usefulness of uncertainty: it denied hubris and was thus a source of strength and perhaps even a marker of godliness. Secret histories suggested that the very skills which the practices of physiognomy, shorthand, and astrology honed could be used to unveil the secrets of carnal monarchs, ministers, and royal mistresses. Over the course of the seventeenth century, the limits of attainable knowledge – and who could reliably present and access it – were being defined and redefined. To leading philosophers and political figures, human uncertainty necessitated the weighing of probabilities and the idealization of transparent and empirical approaches to information. To writers of physiognomy, shorthand, astrology, and secret history, it reinforced the suggestion that access to types of arcane knowledge that mattered to people’s daily lives depended upon personalized, conjectural and intuitive approaches to knowing. In short, secrets that were once divine and impenetrable were actually up for grabs.