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**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**McCall, Timothy, Sean Roberts, and Giancarlo Fiorenza, eds.**  
**Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe**

**Kenneth Borris**

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[See table of contents](#)

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the radical reformers. On the other hand, they disclose the social, cultural, and economic aspects—topics that are of paramount interest in recent Reformation scholarship.

The introductory essay in each section is crisp, clear, and concise. The success of this work is the ability to distill complicated theological controversies and divergent contents into nuances that are accessible to a wider audience—of both systematic and historical theology. Readers will also appreciate how Luther tried so hard to chart his narrow course, constantly facing challenges from all sides. However, in the heat of battle, Luther neither disdained tradition nor denied experience but put both under the scrutiny of the Bible. In short, he extolled the ontological priority of God’s word. Thus, Helfferich writes accurately: “To Luther the Bible was clear, and thus the proper nature of the church and of Christian life is also clear, and it frustrated him to no end that not everyone saw it his way” (xxiv).

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**McCall, Timothy, Sean Roberts, and Giancarlo Fiorenza, eds.**

*Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe.*

Early Modern Studies 11. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2013. Pp. x, 238 + 73 ill. ISBN 1-61248-092-3 (paperback) \$49.95.

The Renaissance was a secretive era in the arts, thought, and culture. This book, as its introduction explains, seeks to investigate not so much the secrets of that time and their contents as the European “intellectual, visual, and social conditions” of secrecy from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (1). Much influenced by Karma Lochrie’s *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (1999) and by Michel de Certeau’s *Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1982), this collection seeks to ascertain the early modern “rhetorics of secrecy” in the sense of the performances of secrecy and their apparent rules. Thus it aims to distinguish itself from former inquiries into verbally and visually hidden meanings of the Renaissance by socially contextualizing the activities and means of creating and revealing secrets, and by treating these behaviours as significant topics of inquiry in themselves. Secrecy consists, then, in “operations,

performances, and processes, as well as objects”; it fashions audiences and responses, and functions through the dialectical interactions of “keeper/teller, hidden/revealed, and excluded/included” (7). The ostensible binary of public and private spheres is resisted because they could, as these investigations of early modern secrecies show, be surprisingly porous. Apparently personal matters of amorous attractions, study, and prayer could readily serve various purposes of display or be managed as more or less open secrets.

Art history is the main disciplinary perspective of this volume, since almost all the contributors are specialists therein. Beyond the introduction it provides nine chapters on exceedingly diverse topics. Patricia Simons broadly considers the visual dynamics of (un)veiling in early modern visual art and the former usages of fabric or other covers in its display. William Eamon, a historian of science, addresses the secretive medical marketing practices of empirics and charlatans in Italian piazzas. Lyle Massey’s “Alchemical Womb” examines the illustrative flap sheets of Johann Remmelin’s strange *Catoptrum microcosmicum*, a mixture of Vesalian anatomy with alchemical and cabbalistic resources. In “Secrecy and the Production of Seignorial Space,” Timothy McCall explores the curious ornamental wooden *coretto* or stall apparently created for the use of Pier Maria Rossi when attending his chapel at Torrechiera castle. In Michelangelo’s ardent Platonizing pursuit of the much younger Tommaso Cavalieri, Maria Ruvoldt informs us, the splendid drawings created for Tommaso encoded the complexity of the artist’s desires, and Michelangelo constructed their relationship as an open secret by using friends as go-betweens. Sean Roberts considers the technical secrecies of engraving, and Henry Dietrich Fernández the Vatican apartment of Pope Leo X’s *segretario domestico*, Cardinal Bibbiena, his keeper of secrets. Giancarlo Fiorenza tells of Ludovico Mazzolino’s usage of Hebrew and hieroglyphs to suggest secrets of divine wisdom in his devotional paintings, and Allie Terry-Fritsch traces Florentine networks of secrecy expressed through usage of *tamburi*, public receptacles designated for making anonymous denunciations.

The wide range of matters addressed in this volume makes it a fascinating and varied read for anyone interested in Renaissance culture. The essays are well written and profusely illustrated with seventy-three black and white pictures, many full page. Contributors provide extensive and helpful bibliographies, so that this book will benefit anyone investigating topics that impinge upon early modern secrecy. Also, the introduction identifies various prior studies

that assist the development of informed and current analytic approaches in this field.

However, we may still want more from work in this area that is so intriguing and important for Renaissance studies. It is a period wherein many delighted in creating impressions of portentous esotericism and profound special knowledge, often in conjunction with witty, serioludic whimsicality and a taste for the bizarre. These enthusiasms of the time found many outlets, from the fashionable visual grotesques and the vogues for hieroglyphs, emblem books, and *imprese*, to the proliferation of verbal and visual allegorism, symbolic handbooks, allegorical mythographies, and ingenious conceits in the verbal and visual arts—as well as the dense clouds of irony in Erasmus's *Encomium moriae* and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, or the enigmatic playfulness of the Florentine Platonists. Inquiry into secrecy gets at something essential about the Renaissance. At around thirteen pages of verbal text (not including bibliography and illustrations), the introduction to this book thus seems insufficient. What is it about the period that produced these fascinations with veiling and unveiling knowledge and insights? The volume is not much help on that point. It promises clarification of the “intellectual” as well as visual and social conditions of secrecy, but does not sufficiently deliver in that respect (1). To make progress there, we would need to go elsewhere and investigate humanism, the Platonic revival, early modern theories of literature, art, and emblematics, and the interest in certain ancient writers and philosophers such as Democritus and Lucian. John L. Lepage's *Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance* provides helpful guidance in some of those areas (2012). Though involving some incidental mentions of primary sources relevant to them and acknowledgments of related scholarship, *Visual Cultures of Secrecy* still needs at least one chapter focusing on early modern intellectual history as it bears on Renaissance secretcies, whether in the philosophy of the time, or its art theory and emblematics, or its literary theory, or some combination thereof—supported by some further discussion of these matters in the introduction. This book is a nonetheless a highly rewarding addition to our scholarly repertoire.

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