Introduction

In the autobiographical introduction to “Secret Societies” (1847), idiosyncratic English author Thomas De Quincey admits that a precocious fascination has prompted his essay on this “highest form of the incredible” (178). He remembers that between the impressionable ages of seven and ten, he engaged in numerous debates with “a stern lady” over Abbé Barruel’s Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism and John Robison’s Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of the Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies. Both texts appeared in English in 1797, amid the threat of French invasion and the looming presence of the French Revolution, and, from a Catholic and a Protestant position, respectively, they attack Freemasonry and Illuminism as the secret authors of European unrest. The Abbé’s “awful shape of four volumes octavo” established a particularly powerful hold over the young De Quincey (175), who recognized a certain sympathetic attractiveness in Barruel’s conspiratorial villains, even as he remained somewhat perplexed by their fantastical role in recent history:

This plot, by the Abbé’s account, stretched its horrid fangs, and threw out its fore-running feelers and tentacles, into many nations, and more than one century. That perplexed me, though also fascinated me by its grandeur. How men, living in distant periods and distant places—men that did not know each other, nay, often had not even heard of each other, nor spoke the same languages—could yet be parties to the same treason against a mighty religion towering to the highest heavens, puzzled my understanding. Then, also, when wickedness was so easy, why did people take all this trouble to be wicked? The how and the why were alike incomprehensible to me. (174)

Rather than feeling repugnance as a result of Barruel’s cephalopodic figuration of the societies’ wickedness, De Quincey instead found himself “fascinated” by their international commitment to resist “a mighty religion” for over a century. In fact, the societies’ very “wickedness” in the Memoirs invested them with a “grandeur” they never would have had on their own, while the incomprehensibility of the “how” and
the “why” of this wickedness “did but sharpen the interest of wonder that gathered about the general economy of Secret Societies” (177–78), thereby making De Quincey increasingly vehement in his debates. These often ended with a “violent exertion of authority” by his adult opponent, who was forced to assert that while logic might find flaws in Barruel’s argument, “experience” showed it to be essentially unassailable (176). Such conclusions were deeply dissatisfying to the young De Quincey, who desperately wanted to be proven wrong so that his logic and his secret belief in Barruel could be reconciled.

Elsewhere in the introduction, De Quincey acknowledges that his childhood engrossment with secret societies was unusual. However, he maintains that a similar interest is only natural among thoughtful adults:

Generally speaking, a child may not—but every adult will and must, if at all by nature meditative—regard with a feeling higher than vulgar curiosity small fraternities of men forming themselves as separate and inner vortices within the great vortex of society; communicating silently in broad daylight by signals not even seen, or, if seen, not understood except among themselves; and connected by the link either of purposes not safe to be avowed, or by the grander link of awful truths which, merely to shelter themselves from the hostility of an age unprepared for their reception, are forced to retire, possibly for generations, behind thick curtains of secrecy. To be hidden amidst crowds is sublime; to come down hidden amongst crowds from distant generations is doubly sublime. (173)

This passage builds upon the sense of secret societies’ historical continuity expressed above even as it more precisely accounts for the “why” of their prolonged secretive behavior. For De Quincey, secret societies serve as repositories of purposes and truths too advanced for the culture at large. In a tacit challenge to the prevailing middle-class standard of Victorian manliness as transparent and open, he approves and even celebrates the secrecy practiced by these “small fraternities of men.” In fact, their clandestine community of truth is described as “doubly sublime,” a label that grants them both spiritual and aesthetic status. “Secret Societies” thus invites its readers to practice the same kind of secrecy as its subject by appealing to a set of imperceptible standards of value accessible only to the “meditative” and too advanced for the middle-class “great vortex of society.” In other words, De Quincey attempts to overcome the presumed hostility to secret societies sparked by Barruel’s accusation of “treason” by abandoning the Abbé’s external political register in favor of his own discourse of interiority.

“Secret Societies” neatly captures the complex dialectic between exterior political condemnation and interior subjective attraction at the heart of Victorian
England’s multivalent rhetoric of secrecy. *Plots of Opportunity* offers an extended reexamination of this dialectic that seeks to clarify the unanswered questions of “how” and “why” from De Quincey’s original investigation of secret societies. Instead of accepting the ahistorical sublimity of these “small fraternities” or attempting to uncover their “purposes” and “awful truths,” however, this book strives to situate De Quincey’s “general economy of Secret Societies” within the specific confines of just over forty years of English culture, from 1829 to 1870. Although this period from Catholic emancipation to Italian unification contains many factual secret societies—the Freemasons, the Thugs, the Carbonari, the Fenians, etc.—it is the productive function of the secret society as a rhetorical figure that serves as my main object of analysis. Concentrating on the functions rather than the forms of secret societies at once obviates the tendency towards ferreting out the secret of a specific society and locates secret societies in general within the recently burgeoning critical discourse on nineteenth-century secrecy. Once within this discursive field, the secret society as a fact becomes less significant than the secret society as a figure that generates its own “facts” according to the particular historical agents involved.

These agents occupy a broad spectrum of class, religion, race, and nationality, ranging from aristocrats to trade unionists, Establishment clergy to Roman Catholics, British bureaucrats to Indian rebels, and Irish nationalists to Italian brigands. Their party affiliations and political positions similarly run the gamut from ultra-Tory to Liberal to radically Radical, from constitutional monarchist to red republican. Even these agents’ ideological investment in accusations of conspiracy ranges widely from an apparently genuine belief in the presence and danger of secret plots to more opportunistic denunciations for the purposes of propaganda. They are held together, however, by their common connection to a rhetoric of secrecy centered on the figure of the secret society and by their collective contribution to Victorian democratic debate through this connection. The central project of this book is to trace this rhetorical intersection of secrecy and democracy during several crucial moments of debate over the character of England’s emerging democracy. I approach these moments of democratic crisis by focusing, first, on the explicitly political reaction in Parliament, the periodical press and elsewhere to attempts by an under-enfranchised constituency to gain more equitable representation; and, second, on a network of more literary texts that absorb this initial political rhetoric and use it to construct a field of aesthetic possibilities that offers potential insights into and consequences for the original crisis. Due to the increasingly close connection between Britain’s domestic and imperial policies during the period under consideration, my investigation interrogates the productive functions of the figure of the secret society both at home, where it was often initially deployed in an effort to stop “the lower orders” from securing social and political equality, and abroad, where it served as a
useful tool for preserving the “natural” inferiority of the “non-English races.” In both cases, the figure of the secret society allows De Quincey’s dialectic between condemnation and admiration to become especially perspicuous, inflecting the parliamentary, periodical and literary discourses that, together, constitute Victorian England’s larger democratic debate.

I

My approach to this debate draws equally from the historicist and formalist branches of contemporary critical theory and, with respect to the most recognizably literary of the texts I address, the Victorians’ own expansive conceptions of the novel and novel-writing. Working out of a tradition of Marxist analysis established by Fredric Jameson and Raymond Williams, as well as developments in post-colonial theory following the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), I examine texts, both literary and nonliterary, within the material and imperial contexts in which they occur. I do not argue that these contexts can be used to reduce every text to a simple matter of class conflict or colonial exploitation, but rather that they provide a field of historical possibility that the text helps to construct. This field of possibility adds an ideological dimension to my close readings of particular texts’ formal strategies of characterization, narration, structure and signification. I share with deconstructive critics the practice of seeking out the internal contradictions of such methods of self-presentation in order to expose the host of inevitably fractured, competing and even contradictory meanings within the text. I then use these intra-textual contradictions as a principle point of entry into the ideological fissures already present in the text’s field of historical possibility, paying particular attention to their role in the intersection of a uniquely Victorian rhetoric of secrecy and the ongoing debate over the character of England’s emerging democracy through the figure of the secret society.

Victorian theories of the novel allow prose fiction a large role in this debate. For example, Fitzjames Stephens, writing in 1857, asserts that “contemporary novelists” are “the most influential of all indirect moral teachers” (125). Overall, this power of influence disturbs him, especially when it is exercised by writers like Charles Dickens to satirize the upper classes, the government and others in authority through such fictional constructs as the Circumlocution Office. In fact, he spends a great deal of time criticizing *Little Dorrit* for its lack of fidelity to legal and historical precedent, thereby revealing his own equation of novel writing and history. Two years later in “Popular Literature—The Periodical Press,” English critic E. S. Dallas extends Stephens’s argument, asserting that literature “is now a complete representation of society, from
the crown on its head to the buckle on its shoe, from its highest aspirations to its meanest want...a perfect index of the innumerable processes at work throughout the whole frame of society" (96–97). Indeed, for Dallas, literature “is not only the expression of public opinion and the index of contemporary history, it is itself a great force that reacts on the life which it represents, half creating what it professes only to reflect” (97). Paradoxically, Dallas’s theory of reciprocal representation at once elevates literary works to an extraordinarily prominent cultural position even as it divests them of the exclusive aura of literariness that sets them apart from texts often seen as the province of history. It is this Victorian sense of disciplinary slippage that I have tried to reflect in my own choice of texts.3

My investigation into the crucial role of the figure of the secret society works against the hint of ridiculousness that the subject has elicited following De Quincey’s 1847 essay. Certainly among twentieth-century scholars denigration of research into secret societies has a long history. As early as 1937, in his otherwise positive review of Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones’s *An Introduction to Freemasonry*, John Saltmarsh observes that the investigation of secret societies frequently leads one into “a department of history which is not only obscure and highly controversial, but by ill luck the happiest of all hunting grounds for the light-headed, the fanciful, the altogether unscholarly and the lunatic fringe of the British Museum Reading Room” (103).4 An entire field of what might be more moderately called para-scholarship on secret societies written for a mostly popular audience demonstrates the continued currency of Saltmarsh’s observation. Some of the best of this work, like Marie Mulvey Roberts’s *British Poets and Secret Societies* and Roberts and Hugh Ormsby-Lennon’s *Secret Texts: The Literature of Secret Societies*, hovers uneasily between the lunatic fringe that it strenuously repudiates and a more rigorous academic culture whose standards of evidence it struggles to meet.5 Even J. M. Roberts’s *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*, which more than any other book has brought secret societies within the pale of acceptable scholarship, describes itself as “a reconnaissance in an area of organized nonsense” (1).

Unfortunately, Roberts’s self-deprecating label of his own subject matter as “nonsense” may encourage a misleading presentist dismissal of what, in the nineteenth century, was a widespread belief in and practice of De Quincey’s “general economy of Secret Societies.” As Roberts himself notes, “For about a century and a half large numbers of intelligent Europeans believed that much of what was happening in the world around them only happened because secret societies planned it so... More believed such nonsense, probably, between 1815 and 1914 than at any other time” (102). One important example of the way in which this general “nonsensical” belief in the power of secret societies might translate into a more serious matter appears in Michael Ragussis’s *Figures of Conversion*. Throughout his compelling exploration
of the role that the idea of Jewish conversion played in England from the 1790s through the 1870s, Ragussis demonstrates how the historical idea of the Iberian “crypto-Jew” allowed for the figuration of English Jews as members of a potentially subversive secret society. In the case of the Jews, this kind of belief was catalyzed largely by the public prominence of Benjamin Disraeli. However, even the effect produced by Disraeli owes something to the existence of actual secret societies in the nineteenth century, as well as the presence of less-easy-to-define organizations like trade unions that employed secretive practices.

Such practices were not confined to revolutionary or working-class groups, however. James Eli Adams has shown how secretive practices analogous to those employed by the above societies were operative at Dr. Thomas Arnold’s Rugby School and John Henry Newman’s retreat at Littlemore. In addition, as the following account from Bernard Becker indicates, institutional secrecy was clearly operative even in the Royal Society at the time of his visit in 1875:

It will be seen that a visit to the halls of the Royal Society is not an expedition to be undertaken lightly, or in an irreverent spirit. He who seeks to be admitted to the sacred penetralia, where science sits enthroned among her chosen votaries, feels very much as he did on his first visit to the House of Lords, an institution which has much in common with the Royal Society. The would-be visitor must first look up a friendly F. R. S., who, if the applicant be deemed worthy, will introduce him to the acting secretary, Mr. White, who will enter his name on the book, bracketed with the name of the introducer, and he will now only have to present himself at the fashionable hour of 8.30 to be at once admitted to the Upper House of Science. (23)

Once admitted, the visitor would have been able to observe some of the ceremonies still operative at the time, including the ritualistic transferal of a silver mace from one speaker to another. Even more intriguing than Adams’s and Becker’s accounts of the divide between outsiders and initiates operative at Rugby, Littlemore and the Royal Society, however, is the following passage from Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*:

The meetings are not only secret in theory, but secret in reality. By the present practice, no official minute is kept of them. Even a private note is discouraged and disliked. . . . The committee which unites the law-making power to the executive power—which, by virtue of that combination, is, while it lasts, the most powerful body in the state—is a committee wholly secret. No description of it, at once graphic and authentic, has ever been given. It is said to be sometimes like a rather
disorderly board of directors, where many speak and few listen—but no one knows. (15–16)

One may be surprised to learn that the covert organization Bagehot so mysteriously describes is none other than the British Cabinet; however, this surprise is itself an indication of just how successful practices of secrecy, often reinforced by rituals like those witnessed by Becker, could be when institutionalized by respectable British organizations. In addition, Becker and Bagehot’s accounts indicate the degree to which secretive, even seemingly conspiratorial, practices were acceptable when confined to the protected space of the elite public. The presence of such elite public secrecy adds yet another dimension to De Quincey’s earlier fascination with the general economy of Secret Societies; secrecy was fascinating not only because it could be illicit and revolutionary, but also because it could be acceptable and indicative of public authority.

Among other things, the possible overlap of praxis from the Carbonari to the Cabinet documented in the above texts indicates the need for a less esoteric and more fluid definition of “secret society” than has yet been offered. For the purposes of this book, I propose defining a secret society as “a social institution for which the practice of concealment forms an essential part of its praxis and/or self-definition.” Such a definition has four distinct advantages. First, it removes the aura of bizarre para-scholarship from my investigation by allowing me to focus on more than just esoteric and occult societies like, for instance, the Rosicrucians. Second, this preliminary definition breaks down the false binary of secret/open society by allowing for a continuum of secrecy, with those societies which are invested exclusively in securing their own official nonexistence at one end and more public institutions with secretive practices at the other. Third, its value-neutral focus on institutional practices of concealment avoids the morally laden language of either condemnation or admiration with which the figure of the secret society was invested in Victorian England. Fourth, such an elastic definition better reflects the Victorians’ own confusion about what exactly was meant by “secret society.” The very flexibility of this definition also indicates the pressing need for a nuanced theory of secret societies as they functioned specifically within nineteenth-century English society.

II

This society, it is generally agreed, placed an exceptionally high premium on forthright honesty. In Victorian fiction one need look no farther than Bulstrode in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* to see how the public revelation of a simple act of concealment
can help to transform a prosperous banker into a social outcast already convicted of murder in the court of public opinion. Once one encounters more villainous characters—i.e. Uriah Heep, Sir John Chester, Sir Percival Glyde, even Becky Sharp—it becomes clear that what makes them morally questionable is their penchant for dishonesty. In his series of lectures at Harvard University on the subject of *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling traces this narrative convention of the dissembling villain to the Early Modern period of English history:

The original social meaning of the word “villain” bears decisively upon its later moral meaning. The opprobrious term referred to the man who stood lowest in the scale of feudal society; the villain of plays and novels is characteristically a person who seeks to rise above the station to which he was born. He is not what he is: this can be said of him both because by his intention he denies and violates his social identity and because he can achieve his unnatural purpose only by covert acts, by guile. (16)

Trilling also acknowledges that the value of personal honesty reached an historically unprecedented level in Victorian England, becoming “an element of personal autonomy” and “a progressive virtue” (47). Recently, John Kucich has gone a step further by exploring the class implications of this “hyper honesty” (6); Kucich’s argument is complemented by Adams’s contention that the Victorian period was devoted to a “civic ideal of manhood defined above all as an ideal of honest, straightforward conduct” opposed to “subtlety and obliquity of any kind” (65).

However, both Adams and Kucich also argue that this extreme emphasis on openness and truth-telling is only half of the story, that there was simultaneously an equally strong valuation of secrecy and lying. For Adams, the underlying elevation of secrecy in Victorian culture is tied to the concept of “manliness”: paradoxically, even as Victorian men were encouraged to live up to the civic ideal of manhood outlined above, their status as gentlemen depended on their ability to subtly indicate that they were reserving an essential part of their characters from the public gaze. This performance of reserve leads Adams in *Dandies and Desert Saints* to reinsert the subversive and unstable figure of the dandy back into such popular Victorian constructions of manliness as the priest, the prophet, the soldier and the gentleman. In *The Power of Lies*, John Kucich offers a similar argument for the productive power of socially sanctioned lying, especially for elite middle-class professionals, cultural intellectuals and writers. For these groups, Kucich argues, lying could be ethically justified by ideals of self-development and social privilege. Since such justifications were most often used in Victorian fiction to underwrite the actions of middle-class characters, rendering them sympathetic despite their dissembling, Kucich concludes that middle-
class claims to cultural authority were grounded not only on a stable ideal of truth-telling, but also on a symbolic logic of transgression, signified by lying.

There are a number of potential explanations for why secrecy and lying came to occupy such a prominent role in Victorian culture. In terms of symbolic logic, Kucich points to “the inevitable interdependence of oppositions between honesty and dishonesty in any symbolic system that reserves so prominent a place for issues of truthfulness” (15). In other words, truth-telling and openness only make sense when defined against lying and secrecy, which are thus elevated to a coequal position in a culture so obsessively concerned with personal integrity. In “Declarations of Independence,” Jodi Dean historicizes Kucich’s logical imperative using Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, observing that what “Habermas conceptualizes as the bourgeois public sphere has early roots in secret societies; indeed, he allows that publicity itself, as a norm of reason, might require secrecy” (290). Dean’s argument receives support in the work of Alexander Welsh and David Vincent, who in George Eliot and Blackmail and The Culture of Secrecy, respectively, identify the pressures that the dramatic development of a modern information culture placed on the private individual as an important incentive for personal secrecy. Welsh observes that Victorian novels with blackmail plots often endorse not a revelation, but a reconcealing, of the truth as the proper end of ethical behavior, whereas Vincent uses the Post Office scandal of 1844—when it was discovered that the Post Office regularly opened suspicious mail, including potentially that of Radical MPs—as an introduction to ways in which certain forms of information were concealed from public view in the name of national security. This practice often encouraged individuals to keep secrets from government inspectors and statisticians in an effort to preserve their privacy. This notion of individual privacy, and the private sphere more generally, was institutionalized by the Victorians, many of whom uncritically maintained a sharp distinction between secrecy and privacy. However, as numerous critics—including Adams, Kucich and Welsh, but also many feminist critics following the publication of Leonore Davidoff and Catharine Hall’s Family Fortunes (1987)—have shown, the public and private spheres were never very separate. If the spheres in which they occur cannot be distinguished from another, then neither, I would argue, can secrecy and privacy be so neatly segregated. Therefore, since privacy was held in sufficiently high esteem to merit lying to government officials, it follows that secrecy enjoyed tacit valorization as well.

Together, these critics provide a compelling theoretical underpinning for the sort of multi-dimensional discourse of interiority to which we have already seen De Quincey appeal in his panegyric in honor of secret societies. Adding to the attractiveness of clandestine behavior was the legacy of Romantic individualism, with its overwhelming valuation of the secret self and the poetic soul, as well as the pressures of political
and economic instability, the shift from parish relief to government workhouses, and an increasingly extensive network of commercial relations that threatened to take the capacity for autonomy away from unreserved individuals. As Adams concisely notes, “Victorian obsessions with secrecy are manifold and powerfully overdetermined” (13), forming a pervasive rhetoric of secrecy operative during the Victorian period.

Within this larger rhetoric of secrecy the figure of the secret society occupies an intriguing position, linking individual secrecy with institutional practice. In thus moving secrecy from an individual to an institutional level, the figure of the secret society may initially appear amenable to Foucauldian methods of analysis. Foucault never discusses secret societies per se, but his elucidation of the individual secret of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* and of the social secret of the disciplines and panopticism in *Discipline and Punish* leaves ample room for the inclusion of secret societies and the rhetoric of conspiracy they help to foster under his explanatory rubric. Not only would secret societies foster the same type of disciplinary instruction encouraged by the larger society—loyalty, docility, normalization, an emphasis on the center point of secrecy—but public suspicion and fear of their existence would provide the perfect excuse for the productive extension of universal surveillance.

This second function is exactly the point of E. P. Thompson’s assertion that, in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, “the Government needed conspirators, to justify the continuation of repressive legislation which prevented nation-wide popular organization” (485). If anything, secret societies work even better than secretive individuals for maintaining social order because, whereas it is theoretically possible to incarcerate all individual subversives, it can never be unambiguously ascertained whether a given society has been definitely eradicated or has simply enveloped itself in a deeper shroud of secrecy, thus allowing for the spatial and temporal expansion of government surveillance.

However, such a Foucauldian account of secrecy and its implications for the productive function of secret societies would leave one with an insufficiently complex understanding of how secret societies actually functioned in nineteenth-century England. While it is true that many political invocations of the figure of the secret society were made to serve conservative ends, a purely Foucauldian explanation, by making the secret society just another ruse of power, fails to account for individual resistance to such rhetorical maneuvering. That resistance can take place through the formation of secret societies is exactly the point of nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel’s observation that in general “the secret society emerges everywhere as the counterpart of despotism and police restriction, as the protection of both the defensive and the offensive in their struggle against the overwhelming pressures of central powers—by no means of political powers only, but also of the church, as
well as of social classes and families” (347). In fact, such resistance to “the overwhelming pressures of the central power” was the primary aim of many actual secret societies in nineteenth-century Britain, with the numerous secretive associations in Ireland providing the clearest example of just how effective sustained practices of secrecy could be for producing real social change—i.e., Catholic emancipation, the disestablishment of the Irish Church, and the eventual nullification of the Act of Union.14

In order to appreciate this potential for resistance, one must look beyond the idealized political perspective of those already in positions of power. Government officials and many prominent social and scientific figures would be at great pains to dampen the revolutionary potential of secret societies by containing it within their own hegemonic system, often by practicing secretive behavior themselves. Again, Simmel is instructive here when he observes that there exists “the peculiar attractiveness of formally secretive behavior irrespective of its momentary content. In the first place, the strongly emphasized exclusion of all outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong feeling of possession” (332). Among the social group possessed of a secret, these shared senses of exclusivity and possession promote solidarity and fuel the kind of fascination with secretive behavior evinced by De Quincey. Depending upon its members and their social position, the group may also accrue either social prestige or social disapprobation if the existence of the secret is made more widely known. In other words, once a secret society has entered the political realm, once it has become a figure in the exterior middle-class rhetoric of secrecy, its publicity can be used to undermine whatever revolutionary potential the society might originally have had either by implicating it within a system of social authority based on the exclusion of others or by fostering public condemnation of its dangerously secretive practices. From the perspective of those in power, neither strategy of publicity is risk-free: socially sanctioned practices of institutional secrecy look suspicious if they are made too public and may destabilize the binary opposition between acceptable and unacceptable forms of secrecy on which the condemnation of potentially revolutionary societies relies. This binary opposition is further threatened by the aesthetic, spiritual and intersubjective enthusiasm such societies may inspire. Nevertheless, for those interested in the uneven distribution of social power, the figure of the secret society remains an attractive way of preserving their own position.

III

In Victorian England, the uneven distribution of social power became the major focus of the century-long debate over democracy. Derived from the Greek words demos, or “people,” and kratia, “rule” or “power,” democracy was under enormous pressure
in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the American and French Revolutions had revived democracy as a political theory uniquely suited to the modern state. On the other hand, democracy as it had been originally conceived, if not actually practiced, in ancient Athens was no longer possible, mainly because of the impracticable number of potential voters. Representative democracy mediated by institutions, what Robert Dahl refers to as polyarchy, seemed the logical answer to an enlarged population, but the fundamental question remained: who were the “people” and how much “power” ought they to have? The various positive answers given to this question in the nineteenth century can be broken down into two main “pro-democracy” positions: 1) radical or ideal democracy, in which the principle of guaranteed total equality among persons, often but not always translated as the political advocacy of universal suffrage, was considered “self-evident” and inherent in what it meant to be human; and 2) guardianship democracy, in which equality was something to be earned, often through education, by the lower orders, whose interests would be looked after in the meantime by middle- and/or upper-class guardians who would govern in their stead. The implications of these two positions for the terms “people” and “power” are fairly evident. Radical democracy interprets both terms in as literal and as broad a manner as possible—all residents over a given age constitute the people, whose power, equally distributed among these individual residents, should immediately be the will of the nation. Seen in the most sympathetic light, guardianship democracy might allow for a similar definition of these key terms, but only as a future ideal. A less sympathetic reading influenced by historical precedent, however, would probably agree with C. Douglas Lummis that “As a general rule when middle- and upper-class people in whatever country say that they support ‘people’s power,’ what they mean by ‘the people’ is themselves” (15), with a correspondingly truncated definition of power.

These implications for the terms “people” and “power” also lead to more theoretical implications about the goals of democracy for England’s domestic and international policies. Radical democracy again conceives of itself in comprehensive terms; it seeks not particular social institutions, but a social ideal of empowered individual equality. Within England this meant working to overturn the centuries-long domination of national affairs by the landed Protestant aristocracy, whereas abroad it could lead to a repudiation of British imperialism. By contrast, guardianship democracy limits itself to institutional forms, including popular education, open election of representatives, and perhaps legal guarantee of certain democratic rights (i.e., free speech) even as it preserves traditional divisions of people along, in the case of Victorian England, class, religious and racial lines. These divisions were especially strong in the colonies, where the strict maintenance of a rigid social hierarchy was the foundation of Britain’s imperial policies. In their extreme forms, then, radical and guardian-
ship democracy differ substantially on key issues, and this difference is important to maintain if one is to understand what was at stake in the Victorian debate over democracy.

In some ways the terms of this Victorian debate had already been established by earlier public confrontations over democracy, most noticeably those between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, and between James Mill and Thomas Macaulay. The substance of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1791) and Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791–92) are well-known: the principal point at issue between them was whether Britain should retain its constitutionally validated social hierarchy of the people and their upper-class guardians, or whether the people ought to take a more active and radical role in their own republican democracy. More recently, James Mill’s “Essay on Government” (1820) had provided an equally radical Utilitarian argument for representative democracy. Specifically, after rejecting an Athenian-style model of democracy as unsuited for the much greater size of the modern electorate, Mill’s “Essay” proposed a representative democracy founded on universal suffrage and frequent elections as the best way to insure that the greatest happiness principle would be perpetuated by the government. Macaulay successfully repudiated Mill’s conclusions on two grounds. First, he criticized Mill’s lack of tangible evidence, declaring that “We have here an elaborate treatise on Government, from which, but for two or three passing allusions, it would not appear that the author was aware that any governments actually existed among men” (“Mill’s Essay,” 161–62). Second, in what would become a staple of guardianship theories advocated by both those in favor of and those in opposition to some version of democracy, he argued that the forces of public opinion and personal reputation are sufficient to guarantee that the aristocracy will always govern with everyone’s best interests in mind, and that the only thing universal suffrage could achieve would be a despoliation of the rich by the poor, resulting in social chaos and a worse life for all.

The crucial addition to these earlier debates, and perhaps the single most influential work on democratic theory written in the nineteenth century, is Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. This two-volume magnum opus offers nothing less than a comprehensive overview of the political and social practices, individual and societal effects, and practical and theoretical implications of democracy as suggested by its implementation in the United States of America. Tocqueville begins by explaining that his purpose is neither to advance nor to prevent the spread of democracy to Europe—a spread that he believes inevitable in any case because it is the will of God—but rather to suggest ways in which the democratization of Europe might learn from the American example before it is too late: “Christian peoples in our day appear to me to offer a frightening spectacle; the movement [toward social
equality] that carries them along is already strong enough that it cannot be suspended, but it is not yet rapid enough to despair of directing it: their fate is in their hands, but soon it will escape them” (7). Democracy requires guidance because, although it remains for Tocqueville the best way of both insuring individual freedom and fostering a sense of mutual interdependence or community, it is also susceptible to a number of dangerous tendencies. Theoretically, democracy produces an inherent tension between individual equality and individual liberty; taken to its extreme, this tension can actually result in the sacrifice of liberty in order to maintain equality. Such a sacrifice becomes practically evident in what Tocqueville identifies as a “tyranny of majority” operative in the United States at the levels of legislation and, most insidiously, of public opinion. In other words, the numerical majority tends to pass laws and prompt judgments that are despotically homogeneous in that they silence minority opposition. In addition to these two primary dangers, democracy’s focus on individual equality also risks producing both atomistic individuals and oppression of the wealthy, as well as allowing for the formation of despotic sects that purport to represent the majority even as they pursue their own self-serving goals. None of these tendencies is unavoidable, says Tocqueville—in fact all can be effectively combated by publicity in a free press—but it is up to those nations progressing inevitably toward social equality to determine whether “equality leads them to servitude or freedom, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery” (676).

Immediately translated into English in 1835 and 1840, Tocqueville’s evenhanded and thoughtful appraisal of democracy and its dangers exercised enormous influence over English reformers struggling to cope with the growing popular demand for more direct political representation in Britain. Two reviews of Democracy in America written by John Stuart Mill give some indication of Tocqueville’s English reception. Both reviews agree that the book ranks “among the most remarkable productions of our times” (Essays, 198), with Mill’s second review going so far as to declare that Democracy in America heralds “the beginning of a new era in the scientific study of politics” and that “nothing on the whole comparable in profundity . . . had yet been written on democracy will scarcely be disputed by anyone” (Essays, 232, 275). In addition, whereas his first review had attempted to palliate somewhat Tocqueville’s fears about a “tyranny of the majority” (Essays, 220–25), Mill’s second, considerably lengthier review not only endorses Tocqueville’s conclusions, but goes on to offer evidence for the relevance of Democracy in America for an English audience. Mill writes,

If America has been said to prove, that in an extensive country a popular government may exist, England seems destined to afford the proof, that after a certain stage in civilization it must; for as soon as the numerically stronger have the same advantages, in means of combination and celerity of movement, as the stronger
number, they are the masters; and, except by their permission, no government can any longer exist. (Essays, 243)

He then points out numerous similarities between England and the United States (Essays 278–82), arguing ultimately that in order to guide democracy in England away from the tyranny of the majority, self-absorption and love of wealth evident in America, there should be established a separate “social support for opinions and sentiments different from those of the mass” (Essays, 284).

As one might expect, neither Burke’s and Macaulay’s early successes nor Tocqueville’s Democracy in America silenced advocates of radical democracy. However, those earlier debates, and Tocqueville’s warning that democracy could produce a conflict between equality and liberty and a “tyranny of the majority,” provided a set of terms within which to advocate more limited forms of democratic guardianship. In order to illustrate the range of specific opinions that could fall under this general term, I will present four versions of guardianship democracy proposed by Thomas Macaulay, Walter Bagehot, W. R. Greg and John Stuart Mill. Each of these men characterized himself as “pro-democracy” in the sense that each argued that his political position offered the best method for securing the rights of “the people,” and all believed that England remained unsuited for radical democracy in the form of universal suffrage. However, their reasons for this common belief are strikingly different. Macaulay’s History of England (1848–61) presents the English Constitution as sufficiently adaptable not to require dramatic revisions of the kind the Chartists proposed. Bagehot’s The English Constitution (1867) also endorses the effectiveness of the present Constitution, not because of its adaptability but because of its “effective secret” of the Cabinet. By contrast, W. R. Greg in “Representative Reform” (1852) cautions against universal suffrage on the grounds that sufficient education is the necessary precondition for the franchise. Finally, John Stuart Mill’s Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform (1859) and Considerations on Representative Government (1861) agree with Greg that education remains the necessary precondition for the franchise and propose an elaborate system of political representation designed to limit the ability of the under-educated majority to exercise tyranny over their intellectual superiors. What unites these diverse writers is their shared conviction that some form of guardianship would be necessary to save democracy from its own excesses.

For Thomas Macaulay, whose public career was launched by his early opposition to James Mill’s “Essay on Government” and to Utilitarianism more generally, radical democracy is rendered unnecessary by the adaptable excellence of the Constitution of 1688. As portrayed in The History of England, this Constitution manages to answer the demands of the future by preserving the best of the past: “The
main principles of our government were excellent. They were not, indeed, formally and exactly set forth in a single written instrument: but they were to be found scattered over our ancient and noble statutes; and, what was of far greater moment, they had been engraved on the hearts of Englishmen during four hundred years" (History, III: 282).27 For Macaulay, the continued worth of these principles is demonstrated by the resulting peacefulness of England:

The highest eulogy which can be pronounced on the revolution of 1688 is this, that it was our last revolution. Several generations have now passed away since any wise and patriotic Englishman has meditated resistance to the established government. In all honest and reflecting minds there is a conviction, daily strengthened by experience, that the means of effecting every improvement which the constitution requires can be found within the constitution itself. (History, III: 287)

Since the Constitution of 1688 provides within itself the mechanisms for its own revision, radical proposals to alter it by introducing the points of the People’s Charter are without merit. The balance already in place between the monarchy, the House of Lords and the House of Commons as presently constituted would ensure that the rights of the people are being preserved by the competing interests of the crown, the aristocracy and the commons, and that England would never suffer the kind of “destroying revolution” already witnessed in France in 1789, 1830 and 1848 (History, III: 288).28

Walter Bagehot also endorses the excellence of the Constitution of 1688, though for somewhat different reasons. Bagehot divides England into “the educated ten thousand” and everyone else, and observes that the “lower orders, the middle orders, are still, when tried by what is the standard of the educated ‘ten thousand,’ narrow-minded, unintelligent, incurious” (7). For Bagehot, the excellence of the Constitution of 1688 is that it accounts for this division of England by providing a portion of the government suitable for each group. He theorizes that the venerable, “dignified” parts of the constitution—mainly the monarchy, and to a lesser extent the House of Lords—are there to impress and motivate the lower orders through theatricality. For the educated ten thousand, the Constitution provides for the union of the executive and the legislative branches via the cabinet, which Bagehot describes as “the efficient secret of the English Constitution” (12). In other words, the queen secures the loyalty, respect and deference of the masses for the government as a whole, while only a small part of that government, the cabinet, does all of the important work behind closed doors.29 Bagehot believes that the cabinet is uniquely positioned to govern effectively because it is not subject to direct democratic control. Instead, it is elected by the country’s elected representatives,
who, on the whole, are considerably wiser than their electors. In fact, he identifies the process of electing the Prime Minister, who selects the cabinet, as the single most important function of the House of Commons. Bagehot also considers and rejects what he calls the “ultra-democratic theory” of universal suffrage for two reasons: first, “Such a Parliament could not be composed of moderate men” (182); second, “A country of respectful poor, though far less happy than where there are no poor to be respectful, is nevertheless far more fitted for the best government. You can use the best classes of the respectful country; you can only use the worst where every man thinks he is as good as every other” (54).

In contrast to Bagehot, W. R. Greg’s opposition to universal suffrage stems from what he perceives as the fundamental principle of the Reform Bill of 1832. According to Greg, the First Reform Bill established a precedent that “the elective franchise was not a right inherent in every man by virtue of his residence in a free country, but an instrument for the attainment of a national end” (454). As he sees it, this precedent means that whereas the 1832 Bill was “at once conservative and popular,” subsequent attempts to expand the franchise “would be assuredly at once democratic and retrogressive” even if “just wise and necessary (as to which we here offer no opinion)” (457). In essence, universal suffrage would be retrogressive because it would lower the standards required to vote. Greg approves of the enfranchisement of the intelligent and educated middle class, but is distrustful of similar working-class goals, mainly because he sees education as the fundamental condition for the suffrage. As he recognizes, enfranchising the working classes “would throw the entire of the preponderating control over that representation—in other words, the supreme power of the State, into their hands” by virtue of their superior numbers (460–61). However, without proper education, these new voters would have the potential to exercise a “tyranny of the majority” (465–69). For Greg, making the franchise dependent on education would preserve the principles of the First Reform Bill by acknowledging both that the right to vote is something “endowed,” not something inherent, and that its endowment depends upon one’s ability to “exercise it for their country’s good” (471). Presumably this ability would be rated by those who had already achieved the proper level of education to assume the mantle of guardianship.

Finally, there is John Stuart Mill, whose ultimate allegiance to either radical or guardianship democracy is a bit more complex. On the one hand Mill’s position on electoral reform has certain affinities with Macaulay’s, Bagehot’s, and Greg’s. Like Macaulay, Mill is concerned to preserve a balance of power among England’s diverse social orders and to inculcate in individuals the habit of obedience to recognized authorities (Considerations, 74). Like Bagehot, Mill wishes to insure that England’s leaders are the best available and he believes that “No progress at all can be made towards obtaining a skilled democracy, unless the democracy are willing that the
work which requires skill should be done by those who possess it" (Considerations, 117). Finally, like Greg, Mill values education:

I regard it as wholly inadmissible that any person should participate in the suffrage, without being able to read, write, and, I will add, perform the common operations of arithmetic. Justice demands, even when the suffrage does not depend on it, that the means of attaining these elementary acquirements should be within the reach of every person, either gratuitously, or at an expense not exceeding what the poorest, who earn their own living, can afford. (Considerations, 167)

On the other hand, Mill also supports expanding the franchise, and this support may make his argument initially more difficult to classify. In Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform he argues that “It is important that every one of the governed should have a voice in government” (Essays, 338). He would expand on this argument two years later:

There is no difficulty in showing that the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty or supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community; every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty, but being, at least occasionally, called on to take actual part in the government, by the personal discharge of some public function, local or general. (Considerations, 53)

Mill even goes so far as to recommend suffrage for women as well as men, a position far in advance of his time.

At first, this conviction that all of the governed ought to have a voice in their government looks like radical democracy; however, Mill’s fears about a potential conflict between liberty and equality and a “tyranny of the majority” lead him to place limitations on such popular sovereignty. These fears are best expressed by Mill’s attempt to define the concept of democracy: “Two very different ideas are usually confounded under the name democracy. The pure idea of democracy, according to its definition, is the government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented. Democracy as commonly conceived and hitherto practiced, is the government of the whole people by a mere majority of the people, exclusively represented” (Considerations, 132). This second conception of democracy Mill sees as prone to “the domination of sectional or class interests, pointing to conduct which would be dictated by impartial regard for the interest of all” (Considerations, 120). In thus characterizing the common conception of democracy, Mill leaves himself open to criticism from at least three kinds of radical democrats: 1) working-class radicals might reply
that a government of the whole people by a mere majority is probably less prone to sectional or class interests than the extant government of the whole people by a mere minority has shown itself to be; 2) utilitarians would argue that the function of government is to secure the “greatest happiness principle” and that majority rule achieves that by definition; 3) contemporary Marxist radicals could reply that the current mode of capitalist production renders all claims to govern according to the “impartial regard for the interest of all” suspect on a number of grounds, the most charitable of which is false consciousness. For Mill, however, the threat of a tyranny by newly enfranchised manual laborers is real, leading him in Thoughts to append to his conviction that everyone ought to have a voice the question, “But ought everyone to have an equal voice?” (Essays, 339). In fact, Mill believes that one’s voice ought to be determined by one’s “individual mental superiority” (Considerations, 175), and he proposes an elaborate electoral scheme designed to insure both that the educated minority would remain a potent force in every election, and that Parliament would contain “the very élite of the country” (Considerations, 145). Even allowing Mill the most sympathetic meaning of “élite,” one cannot help but place him among the many supporters of guardianship democracy, since these élite and their super-enfranchised, intellectually superior supporters would serve as guardians for a common good only they would be equipped to determine.

As these four thinkers make clear, there were many reasons in the nineteenth century for opposing radical democracy. Tradition, effectiveness, education, and the maintenance of independent minorities might all lead one to advise against such radical goals as universal suffrage, at least for now. However, alongside these reasons should be placed another, somewhat less disinterested motive. As Alexis de Tocqueville asked in 1835, “Does one think that after having destroyed feudalism and vanquished kings, democracy will recoil before the bourgeoisie and the rich?” (6). At its most radical, democracy would do away with all of the sources of social inequality, including those founded on the uneven distribution of wealth. This is not to say that all radical democrats in the nineteenth-century were socialists, although many, like William Morris, did seek to fundamentally change the way industrialism worked. Instead, what I mean to suggest is that nineteenth-century advocates of guardianship democracy realized that once the principle of equality found social acceptance, there was no telling where it might lead. Jon Roper lucidly summarizes the efforts of many to control democracy’s possibilities: “In a society which recognized the antagonisms of class, therefore, there were those who argued that democracy—as it implied an equal right to liberty—would disrupt the habits of social deference. They searched for alternative methods of checking the social ideal” (15), or limiting democratic reform to such an extent that the principle of equality would not come into conflict with Victorian England’s well-established social hierarchies.
One such “alternative method” was the strategic political invocation of the figure of the secret society. To understand how the figure of the secret society could play a role in “checking the social ideal,” one must consider the specific actors involved in each invocation, a task I will take up in detail in the following chapters. In the context of the debates over democracy, the figure of the secret society was often deployed by advocates of guardianship democracy to discredit those whose actions furthered more radical ends. This is not to say that there were no “true believers” in the influence that secret societies could have on England’s political future, but rather that even the apparently sincere belief of such Victorian “conspiracy theorists” as Charles Newdegate and David Urquhart differed little in results from the more opportunistic accusations of conspiracy leveled by political propagandists concerned only with preserving the status quo. That, to borrow J. M. Roberts’s formulation, such an interested “delusion of the directing class . . . was able to have great political and practical effects” (8), securing public condemnation and governmental repression, is due to the ways in which the figure of the secret society effaces the gap in social power that enables its deployment. Once it has been invoked, several loosely affiliated individuals striving for democratic social change become the leaders of a powerfully unified conspiracy whose clandestine goals are subject to the wildest speculation. Certainly the secretive and hierarchical nature of the secret society itself demonstrates that these goals cannot be radically democratic: not only must the group have something unsavory to hide, but the fact that it is being led by a select group of individuals smacks of a form of despotic guardianship. If allowed to prosper, such a group would create an even worse balance of power than already exists. What is needed is a strong, open democracy governed by guardians equipped to counteract this kind of “un-English” behavior.

Such, at least, was the reaction the figure of the secret society was supposed to elicit towards those groups whose acts threatened the current delineation of social and political authority. Once fully public, however, the figure of the secret society never remained so monologically stable. Within the political realm, radical critics tended to question its tautological collapse of secrecy and despotism and to point out that such conspiratorial paranoia was self-perpetuating, even without a legitimate object. Many more moderate critics also remained uncomfortable with a standard of meaning that claimed to differentiate between “English” and “un-English” institutions purely on the absence or presence of secretive practices. Some were themselves members of “respectable” organizations like Parliament, the Royal Society,
or the growing number of professional associations, all of whose methods for dividing outsiders from initiates were difficult to separate from similar practices by less acceptable groups. Ironically, perhaps the most far-reaching political critique of the figure of the secret society and of guardianship theories of democracy was already present in Democracy in America itself. At the end of Volume Two, Tocqueville worries that the greatest danger inherent in democracy is its vulnerability to the despotic influence of “an immense and tutelary power . . . which takes charge of assuring their [the people’s] enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild” (663). As an antidote to this almost Foucauldian vision of despotic guardianship, Tocqueville advocates the need for powerful private associations dedicated to securing everyone’s equal right to liberty, in other words for those organizations of the under-enfranchised that were often pejoratively represented by the figure of the secret society.

Outside of these objections to monologically negative invocations of the figure of the secret society were a host of less overtly political reasons why institutional secrecy might meet with qualified approbation. Practices of secrecy offered not just an avenue for social and political resistance but also a retreat from the public pressures of society and politics. Within this extra-political space, secrecy could provide a means for and a measure of spiritual and aesthetic self-development. Moreover, when such secrecy was institutionalized to govern the collective practices of a group of like-minded individuals, it could promote a sense of intellectual community and historical continuity. This positive dimension of the figure of the secret society remains in constant tension with the political pressures of the ongoing debate over democracy, thereby producing a complex dialectic on the subject of institutional secrecy in the Parliamentary debates, the periodical press, and the popular fiction of the Victorian period.

My first chapter establishes the allure of secrecy, especially for the more privileged members of Victorian society, by, first, examining the rhetoric surrounding one particular secret society, English Freemasonry, and, second, tracing the related political implications of Thomas Carlyle’s praise of secrecy in Sartor Resartus (1833–34). Specifically exempted from the restrictions placed on private associations in the Combination Acts of 1799, the Masons enjoyed noble, even royal, patronage for the whole of the nineteenth century. They held parades, published journals and provided charitable assistance to widows and orphans, all while carefully cultivating an image of institutional secrecy. Public approbation of their activities suggests that, so long as it remained the protected space of the elite public, secrecy enjoyed widespread acceptance in Victorian England. In fact, secrecy could be not merely accepted, but valorized, as it is in Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus, which presents the reader with a metaphysics of heroic signification that is built on the positive valuation of
silence and secrecy. Carlyle’s theory of secrecy is important not only because, as George Eliot admitted in 1855, “there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle’s writings, and especially by *Sartor Resartus*” (187–88), but also because his theory, together with the example of the Masons, shows that positive valuations of secrecy and vehement opposition to democracy could be mutually supportive.

The next three chapters illustrate how this positive valuation of secrecy complicates attempts to pejoratively label as secret societies constituencies supposedly unfit for democratic representation by virtue of their class, religion or race. Chapter 2 reexamines accusation that trade unions were dangerous secret societies by focusing on the 1838 trial of five Glasgow cotton spinners for conspiracy and murder. During the trial and its aftermath in Parliamentary and periodical debates, these men, and through them the working classes, were condemned as dangerous conspirators akin to the Indian Thugs. Intended to demonstrate the working class’s unfitness for full participation in English democracy, this invocation of the figure of the secret society did not go wholly uncontested. I trace some of the implications of this resistance through the arguments of a small number of MPs and periodical writers, as well as through Charles Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845). Both novels absorb the range of debate over the trial in their representations of trade unions as secret societies; however, both also extend this method of representation to middle- and upper-class associations as well. This extension suggests that secretive practices operate at all levels of English society and therefore that such practices cannot serve as a reliable indication of any group’s fitness for democratic enfranchisement.

Both novels also locate their representations of trade unions within the social context of English anti-Catholicism, itself a prolific source of secret society references. In fact, charges similar to those made against the Spinners were also applied to English Catholics, only instead of being labeled Thugs, Anglo- and Roman Catholics were represented using the figure of Jesuitism. Chapter 3 concentrates explicitly on Protestant fears of various Catholic and Catholic-like conspiracies as articulated during 1) the debate over Catholic emancipation, 2) the Tractarian controversy of the 1830s, and 3) the public uproar prompted by the reestablishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Britain in 1850. By interrogating responses to these manifestations of the Catholic Question in a wide range of Victorian nonfiction prose, I reveal the extent to which Victorian anti-Catholic and nationalist rhetorics become increasingly conflated through the figure of Jesuitism. In 1829, the vast majority of English anti-Catholics vilified foreign and domestic Papists alike, but by 1850 their denunciations had become much more particular, excoriating only the papacy for the international threat it posed to all patriotic Englishmen, both Catholic and Protestant. In thus collapsing reli-
gion and politics together, however, anti-Catholic nationalists left themselves open to ideological critique by both moderate Protestants committed to catholicity and Roman Catholic apologists quick to reverse conspiratorial accusations by appealing to the aesthetic and spiritual attractiveness of secretive practices. In addition, by using accusations of conspiracy to denounce only foreign Catholics, mid-century anti-Catholic propagandists began to weaken the connection between the figure of the secret society and democratic reform, thereby sacrificing one of their central arguments, that Catholics did not deserve equal citizenship. The result of counter-offensive texts aware of this rhetorical shift, like John Henry Newman’s *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (1850), is similar to the implication of Dickens and Disraeli’s novels: that secretive practices cannot diminish one’s entitlement to English democracy.

In Chapter 4, I investigate the similarly strained marriage of politics and religion through the figure of the secret society that took place during England’s response to the Indian Mutiny. As one writer for *The British Quarterly Review* wryly noted, “Never before, in any era of its Parliamentary history, had this country to decide upon a case of such magnitude, with so little of the preparation necessary to decide upon it wisely” (“India as it is—India as it may be,” 203). In the absence of wisdom, many English statesmen and writers fell back on the familiar rhetoric of secret conspiracies to explain how the Indian army’s religious objections to a new rifle could lead to armed rebellion. From religious differences, English attempts to explain affairs in India quickly turned to questions of race, with the figure of the secret society neatly eliding the difference. This strategy of refiguring the rebellion as a conspiracy efficiently 1) silenced those advocating direct representation for the Indians by demonstrating their unsuitability for open democratic institutions; 2) limited the spread of the rebellion by confining it to the actions of a few conspirators; 3) generated a rhetoric of Carlylean heroism to justify the English and their rule in India; and 4) supported a burgeoning rhetoric of British racism. These results of secreting rebellion come under critical scrutiny in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868). Collins’s novel employs several techniques, including temporal and spatial doubling, to return British heroes to earth and reveal their complicity in and responsibility for the Indian rebellion, thereby undercutting any blanket assertions about Indians, or any other “dark race’s,” inferiority to their light-skinned colonial “guardians.”

When, only months later, English attention turned to the unification of Italy, the combined rhetoric of democracy and secrecy became increasingly implicated in ideological conflict. Chapter 5 navigates among the competing claims of politics, trade, class, religion, race and empire raised by the Italian Question to show how the Victorians’ resulting ideological relativism combined with their divided attitudes towards secrecy to frustrate any attempt to assert ideological order by invoking the figure
of the secret society. Everyone involved in reunifying Italy, from the Pope to Napoleon III to Victor Emmanuel to Garibaldi, seemed complicit in a wide range of plots and conspiracies, making it difficult for their supporters in England to retain any ideological high ground on the subject of secrecy. Two literary texts that appeared during the messy resolution of the Italian Question deploy the figure of the secret society in their critiques of England’s ideological confusion. Published in 1859–60, during the first period of Italian unification, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* represents the ambivalent attractiveness of the Italian figure of the secret society through the character of Count Fosco, an Italian conspirator and arch-villain who nevertheless remains one of the most problematically charismatic figures in the novel. Benjamin Disraeli’s *Lothair* (1870), which appeared the same year that Italian unification was finally achieved, presents Italy and England as overflowing with the conspiratorial machinations of an explosion of factual and fictional secret societies. Both novels help to dramatize the chaotic rhetoric surrounding Italian unification and to reveal the kind of ideological relativism brought on by English responses to the Italian Question. In addition, *Lothair* offers evidence that, since 1850 and certainly by 1870, the significance of England’s rhetoric of conspiracy had begun to change, an issue I take up briefly in my final Afterword.

Ultimately, I intend to establish that, far from being a mere “aberration of maturing bourgeois society” (J. M. Roberts 2), the figure of the secret society actually played an ideologically central and largely overlooked role in the ongoing development of that society. In the first two-thirds of the nineteenth-century, the ongoing connection between accusations of secrecy and the period’s tumultuous debate over the character of England’s emerging democracy means that the figure of the secret society can serve as a useful barometer for Victorian England’s failure to manifest its promise of universal political subjecthood. Liberal interpretations of the post-Enlightenment doctrine of “natural rights” simultaneously appealed to universalist notions of equality in order to justify electoral reform and the preeminent status of the Commons even as they sought to keep undesirable constituencies perpetually disenfranchised by branding them secret societies. These accusations were intended to deny groups like trade unionists, English Catholics and colonized peoples the chance to assert themselves as citizens by representing them as non-subjects—they could not be trusted to vote, for example, because their ties to clandestine organizations precluded their ability to function as autonomous individuals. What I will argue throughout this book is that such “plots of opportunity” should be viewed with extreme suspicion, since they usually indicate that the ideals of democratic equality and political universalism are being circumvented in an effort to perpetuate an uneven distribution of social power.