'Harley, Political Narratives, and Deceit in Defoe's Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff'

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BORN OUT of the necessity to contain and counter the polemics generated by his defense of Harley, in the first two volumes of the *Secret History of the White-Staff* (September-October 1714), Defoe seemingly decided to act upon his detractors' accusations and, indeed, "to raise a Dust that he may be lost in the Cloud" (Defoe 5).[1] As a result, there is a constant, and engineered, confusion at play within the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff* (January 1715). The whole piece functions as a meta-narrative of the *White-Staff* series, a parallel universe in which "Daniel De Foe" and "Lord Oxford," as characters, are enabled to deny their implication in the series (10). This is mainly done through the intermediary of a mysterious Quaker and his enquiring friend, for the benefit of the narrator, a "Person of Honour", who functions as a one-way intermediary between the reader and all the parties involved (title page). But if this is essentially Defoe's objective as regards to his safety, and Harley's, it is not the objective communicated to the readers. From the very beginning, the *White-Staff* series is revealed to have been a hoax, and the readers are enjoined to follow the narrator of the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff* in his quest for truth and denunciation of manipulation and slander. Deceit and revelation are the two faces of the coin Defoe constantly spins in this pamphlet. It is therefore vital to keep in mind Defoe's objective as not only a political writer, but also a story-teller, to understand the subversion of the political commentary he elaborates in this pamphlet.

When trying to characterize Defoe's *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff*, several images might come to mind: Chinese boxes, halls of mirrors, or maybe even a Möbius strip. There is a story within the story structure that makes for cascading narratives: the narrator's chance encounter with the Quaker opens the door to the Oxford and De Foe digression, which itself allows for and substantiates the revelation that the *White-Staff* series is a hoax, which in turns brings about the case study of William Pittis' answer, leading to the narrator's reflection on slander. All

these stories are absolutely interdependent—were you to remove one, the whole edifice would crumble—and self-confirmatory. They are constantly looping on one another, in a succession of enquiries that promises an "Eclaircis[s]ement"—quite literally an enlightenment, a clearing up—but never really deliver on this promise (35). The hoax story is a case in point: it is first revealed to the reader at the beginning of the pamphlet—by whom, we are not exactly sure, as the first-person narration starts five pages later. The readers are told that

> the First and Second Part of the *Secret History of the White Staff* [...] have made Foolish Noise in the World [though] there has been no Substance, or Foundation in the Matters of Fact for them, [having been] prepar'd either on Purpose to get a Penny [...], or to Deceive the People, or both. (4)

The same story resurfaces ten pages later when revealed by the Quaker, but this time it is experienced through the eyes of the first-person narrator, presumably the "Person of Honour" referenced on the title-page. He confesses that "[he] was surpriz'd with [the Quaker's] Account [...] altho' it was nothing, but what [he] had always believ'd" (14). When, a couple of pages later, the story is put to the judgement of "Daniel De Foe," the character, the latter "answer[s that], He did verily believe it was so" (17), and so on till, eventually, the only conclusion given to the readers is that "no Man may question the Truth of what is here affirm'd" (22). This is reminiscent of the Quaker's precedent justification. When pressed to prove his point by his inquisitive neighbor at the beginning of the pamphlet, the Quaker answered: "let it [...] suffice thee, that I know what I have said to be Truth, the which is more than saying, I believe it" (12). The characters constantly bounce back on each other but actually add very little, apart from an artificial sense of validation for the readers. This sense of validation amongst the confusion is, however, key as it is its knocking down that constitutes Defoe's greatest *coup* in the pamphlet.

In the first few pages of the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff*, we are told of an "*Ignis Fatuus*", a great delusion that justifies the very writing of the pamphlet (4). The *White-Staff* series, and the pamphlets answering it, are revealed to have been a money-making venture, the mind-child of overtly-pragmatic booksellers and publishers, known

> to employ one Man or Sett of Men to write a Book upon this or that Subject [...] without any other Design [than] the vending or selling [of] their Books; [...] and if that Book succeeded, that is to say, if it Sold well, then [they] employ[ed] others, or perhaps the same Hands to write Answers to the same Book. (19-20)

The hoax sold to the general public, this fake secret history of Harley's conduct and the public debate it generated, is thus presented to the readers as a solely commercial venture. But this cheekily, and disturbingly, implies that, if the whole scheme is ruled by the laws of supply and demand, then the readers are the very artisans of their own deception. It is their very own obsession with secret histories that therefore justifies the commercial viability of such "bubbles" or "Romances" (6). More than this, it is the readers' gullibility, and their wishful thinking, their "Folly," which "g[i]ve[s] Weight to [the pamphlets], when they had not any in themselves" (21). Defoe—the writer—argues that the only truth and weight carried by the written word is that which is inferred by the person who reads and interprets it. As beauty is in the eye of the

beholder, faith is in the mind of the believer, he seems to say, and the hacks of Grub Street are crushed by the weight of their readers' beliefs. If the writers supply secret histories to meet the reader's demand for scandal, it is the reader's own responsibility not to inflate weightless pieces of fiction by elevating them to the rank of facts. This is purely sophistic on Defoe's part—and it is extremely ironic as it completely overlooks the fact that he, himself, owed part of his living to the production of such pieces. But it is brilliant for two reasons: first, it articulates a defense frequently invoked by satirists and propagandists: it is a logic that shifts the onus of responsibility—of say, seditious thoughts—not onto the writer who pens the words but the reader who infers meaning, and who chooses to give credit to this inference. Delarivier Manley invoked something similar when she pleaded "invention" to wriggle herself out of the scandal generated by her treatment of the Marlboroughs in the *New Atalantis*: she argued that, as her portraits of a degenerated aristocracy were only fictional, whoever chose to recognize specific individuals would be more guilty than herself. The second reason is that it adds another layer to the mind game Defoe plays with his readers. It functions as a warning, a nudge to pause and reflect on the very nature of what it is that they are reading, and why is it that they are reading it. It playfully raises the possibility that they themselves may well be guilty of doing precisely what the readers of Grub Street pamphlets are accused of doing: to give far too much weight and credence to a further bubble, the tale of a tale of a tale. If the readers of the *Secret History of the White-Staff* have been imposed upon, what prevents the very same readers, now being catered for with the tale of the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff*, to be further deceived, or bubbled, by the same scheme? This smokescreen leaves the readers dazed and confused while Defoe's pointed insistence at the ideologically-devoid, financial motivations of the booksellers and publishers allows him, paradoxically, to criticize party politics and partisanship.

Defoe's clever snare is fueled by the realization that readers are willing to believe any story as long as it fits into their pre-existing views about the world. The readers, even once alerted to the fictional nature of the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff*, are alienated by their own incapacity to disengage with the story. In this respect, they mirror a behavior anticipated in the pamphlet itself. The readers were previously told that "the few Friends of the Staff [...] were very soon drawn into the Snare" and that the element which "bore no small Share in their Credulity" was the writers' treatment of the Staff's enemies in the series, the Friends of the Staff "being very willing that all imaginable Indignities should be offer'd to those who had been so successful in their Opposition to the Staff" (6-7).[2] Similarly,

> the Enemies of the Staff [...] could not let slip so fair an Opportunity [...] to load [the Staff] with farther Infamy; and tho' at first View they found themselves capable to detect the Falsity and Sophistry of the Books themselves [...] they could not avoid the Snare of taking the Books for Genuine. (7-8)

Here, factionalism is explicitly set as a contributing factor to the reception of the pieces, though ideology is not part of the writers' intent, Defoe claims. Similarly, Defoe suggests, it is the readers' pre-conditioning by their factionalist beliefs that make them liable to the "Writers of the Books" ploy (8). These are left to contemplate the success of their endeavor "and to see with what eagerness the Party Writers on

every Side carried on the Paper War which [the Writers of the Books] had rais'd; [...] causing the deceiv'd People to Dance in the Circles of their drawing" (8). This forced passage through a hall of mirrors constitutes the core argument of Defoe's Harleyite propaganda in this piece. If the variation on deceit satisfied the writer's creativity and protected the satirist, it is the denunciation of alienation that fed into the political commentator's urge. Harley's demise confronted Defoe with much more than the loss of a patron. In addition to a very real, and pragmatic, fear of retaliation for years of service as one of Harley's apologists—as demonstrated by the defensive positioning he took in the *Appeal to Honour and Justice* (February 1715) and all that wriggling about he set in the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff*—Defoe was moved by his commitment to a Williamite, and Harleyite, model of governance that saw the preservation of an equilibrium between parties as the sole means to guarantee the monarch's independence from the dictate of partisan dogmatism. The preservation of moderate principles is the common thread that runs throughout all of Defoe's writing in defense of Harley. By forcing the readers of the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff* to reflect on the extent of their own fascination for the scandal surrounding public personae, and their participation in a society that had become obsessed with marketability, Defoe urged them to exercise caution and restraint. But he also tried to argue that the world of politics had become so polarized, and was charged with so much affect, heat, and passion, that it had effectively become a valid vector for "Romances," and as such had been debased to the point of being commodified by unprincipled mercenary writers who switched the positions they defended according to the laws of demand and supply.

The *Secret History of the Secret History* is, in many ways, symptomatic of Defoe's powerlessness in his various endeavors to defend Harley, after the fall of the Minister. Paula Backscheider has emphasized the personal nature of the task, arguing that "the idea of lingering in the hope of serving his superior or of regaining influence made sense" for Defoe (Backscheider 354, 356). This proved an extremely solitary and thankless task. If Defoe's pro-ministerial work had largely been performed anonymously before, it rested on the relative protection of the ministry, the financial and moral encouragements of Harley, and on the assurance of addressing a large echo chamber. At this juncture, none of these previous warranties were at Defoe's disposal, and the writer was bound to a series of careful stances that attempted to clarify and reconcile, but mostly failed to convince. Backscheider's assessment that "[t]hese pamphlets serve more to provide an explanation than to defend successfully" rings true on many occasions, and if the rebound of genial creativity that represented the *Secret History of the Secret History* has to be commended for the audacity of its arguments, and the modernism of its meta and experimental structure, it essentially provided a further explanation, and a further denial, but hardly a convincing defense of what, by 1715, had become indefensible (Backscheider 354).

Harley—worried of his association with these texts or, as surmised by the Quaker, shocked at the idea that he may have publicly attempted to justify a conduct he deemed righteous, and at the baseness of both the act and the result—sought to publicly and privately disassociate himself with Defoe's efforts. A week before he was

sent to the Tower, Harley arranged for an advertisement in the *London Gazette* for 5-9 July 1715, in which he publicly disowned several of Defoe's pieces, arguing that

> Neither of the said pamphlets have been written by the said earl, or with his knowledge, or by his direction or encouragement, but on the contrary he has reason to believe from several passages therein contained, that it was the intention of the author or authors to do him prejudice, and that the last of the said pamphlets is published at this juncture to that end.[3]

The part of this statement relating to Harley's ignorance of the *White-Staff* series is manifestly false, as demonstrated by Defoe and Harley's correspondence during August 1714, but hardly surprising in a public notice.[4] The fact that in his private correspondence Harley had previously written that the project was designed "to vent [...] malice and spite" seems, however, to translate a genuine feeling of resentment.[5] Alan Downie's assessment that Harley "was being unduly critical of Defoe's unbidden effort [as, though] they may not have had the desired effect [...], they display at the very last a willingness to help an old patron" has to be mitigated by the fact that, indeed, the effect and the scale of Defoe's project had become overwhelmingly detrimental to Harley's cause, and that the Earl had seemingly never felt comfortable with justifications of his conduct, as corroborated by Swift and Defoe's own portrayal of Harley (Downie, *Harley and the Press* 188, Defoe 15, Swift 74). It is possible that Harley had grown to feel betrayed by Defoe's pamphlets, or that he wished to maintain professions of ignorance inside his personal circle. But Harley's professed outrage—whether genuine or not—was probably only temporary as Downie marks him as the source behind all of Defoe's insider's knowledge displayed in the *White-Staff* series, but also, later, in *An Account of the Conduct of Robert Earl of Oxford* (July 1715) and the *Memoirs of Mesnager* (June 1717) (Downie, *PEW* 402). In other words, Harley seems to have carried on feeding into Defoe's defense frenzy up to the point of his arrest in July 1715, and possibly later, even though, to current knowledge, no existing correspondence between both men past these points have survived.

Looking back at Defoe's characterization of Oxford in the *Secret History of the Secret History*, we are given a vision of Harley that naturally strengthens the denial of authorship—a depiction of Harley as a gentleman who thought that "Vindications were useless Things, and injurious to the Persons, they would pretend to serve [and who] knew nothing he had done that needed any Vindication" (15). This is also very similar to what Swift wrote in the *Four Last Years*, describing Harley as having "an Easiness and Indifference under any imputation, although he be ever so Innocent; and, although the strongest Probabilities and Appearance are against him" (Swift 74). To Swift, this was held as a fault, something reinforcing the general public's received opinion of "Robin the Trickster," and he lamented that his patron was "not only very retentive of Secrets, but *appeared* to be so too" (74). This very same association between Harley and secrecy is something Defoe constantly plays with, and utilizes, in the *White-Staff* series. He mostly tries to justify and normalize this paranoid tendency to neutralize Whig criticism, and yet, what Defoe depicts as the amoral practices of Grub Street is strikingly close to Harley's very own secretive manipulations of writers, be it Defoe, Swift, Manley, Prior, or others, during his mandate. If the core motives were this time ideological, and not financial, the similarities are too obvious to be

missed. Surely there was ground for Harley to take offence, but one wonders to what extent the *Secret History of the Secret History of the White-Staff* was not also part of a joke between both men, or whether there could be yet another ironic and self-reflective mirror play contained within it, but this time centered around Harley and Defoe themselves. Or, if Harley felt genuinely let down by Defoe's delivery in the first two volumes of the *White-Staff* series, then to what extent the *Secret History of the Secret History* pamphlet was actually bravado on Defoe's part, trying to woo Harley and convince him that, as a political writer, he was still very much on top of his mystifying propagandistic game. Or was it, more prosaically, yet another example of Harley's own doctoring of his public image, once more portrayed, as in the Guiscard crisis, as a gentleman in control of his passions, always above the fray of partisan frenzy?

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NOTES

The reference is to William Pittis' statement that "[Defoe had] been hired to raise a Dust in order to blind People's Eyes from seeing clearly into the White Staff true Character" (Pittis 3), and to John Oldmixon's subsequent reprise that "a parcel of *Scriblers* [were hired] to raise a little Dust bout them [so that] they should escape in the Cloud" (Oldmixon 2).

[2] Throughout the *White-Staff* series the "Staff", referring to the thin white rod emblematic of the Lord High Treasurer's position, metonymically stands for Harley.

[3] The advertisement refers to the *Secret History of the White-Staff* and the *Conduct of Robert Earl of Oxford*. Quoted in Downie, *Harley and the Press*, 188.

[4] Defoe shared his intentions with Harley on two occasions. See Healey, 443-445.

[5] Harley to Dr. William Stratford (Edward Harley's tutor), 22 March 1715. Quoted in Downie, Harley and the Press, 187.

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