



Defoe's Masterful Characterization in the *Secret History* Pamphlets

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Like many great writers of centuries past, Daniel Defoe refused to restrict his writing to the genre of fiction. Despite being most widely recognized now for writing the great novel *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe wrote countless pieces of nonfiction that were often highly political. These writings are rich sources for studying persuasive language, as Defoe expertly commands the English language to achieve a specific political goal. In many instances, his use of language in these nonfiction pieces reflects his skill as a fiction writer as well. In *The Secret History of the White Staff* and *The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff*, Defoe presents alternate secret histories, each with a complex cast of character, in order to challenge the public's assumptions about the former Lord Treasurer Robert Harley's unpopular actions. In a piece of highly political nonfiction like this, Defoe's skill as a fiction author shines through his purposeful characterization.

Defoe's participation in political writing arose largely due to the time period he lived in. The 18th century saw the rise of political parties in England with the growth of the Whigs and the Tories. The two parties were created under Charles the Second in response to the Exclusion Bill which attempted to exclude the King's brother, James, from taking the throne because he was Catholic. The Whigs supported the

Exclusion Bill, and the Tories did not. Defoe personally sympathized with the Whigs, but his own position on party politics was often in direct conflict with the political stance he had to write for. After being thrown in prison in 1703 for writing *The Shortest Way with Dissenters*, a piece satirizing the high church Tories, Defoe agreed to write for Tory politician Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer, who posted bail for Defoe. Defoe wrote numerous pieces and pamphlets for Harley, the then Speaker of the House of Commons, expressing ideas supporting the Tory politician that often conflicted with his own personal beliefs. His persuasive pieces helped advance Harley's political career, enabling him to serve as Northern Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and ultimately Lord High Treasurer beginning in May of 1711.

In 1714, Harley left the office of Lord High Treasurer days before the death of Queen Anne. Harley's reign was generally unpopular with many, including the Jacobites who were upset with Harley for initially expressing sympathy for their cause, then failing to keep promises he'd made to them. But his settlement of the Treaty of Utrecht that ended the War of Spanish Succession was the action that ultimately led the public to call for his resignation. In that treaty, Harley returned portions of Spain and France in order to win the war, a settlement that the Whigs

saw as pro-French and therefore despicable. His previous friendship with Secretary of State Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke, turned into resentment as a result of the treaty, as his involvement in it forced him to resign alongside Harley. In response to this general discontentment, Defoe anonymously wrote *The Secret History of the White Staff*, the White Staff referring to the emblem of the office of Lord High Treasurer, to provide the public with what he framed as a more complete account of Harley's actions in office. He released the piece in three installments in 1714.

The anonymous author coupled with the sympathetic nature of the pamphlets immediately raised public suspicion that they were written by Harley. In numerous published responses to *The Secret History*, writers accused Harley of either writing or commissioning the writing of the pamphlets, despite Harley's numerous public declarations that he had no knowledge of them. In his book *Robert Harley and the Press*, J.A. Downie argues that Harley *must* have had some idea of that Defoe was writing the pamphlets. Interestingly, though, Harley complains of the pamphlets even in his private correspondence, passionately denying having any hand in composing or conceiving of them (188). Downie assesses Harley's efforts to dissociate himself from the piece, in both private correspondence as well as public forums like the *Gazette*, as "unduly critical of Defoe's unbidden efforts on his behalf" (188). Regardless of how Harley felt about the pamphlets, Defoe seemed to be genuinely determined to clear Harley's name. To refute the accusations that Harley or Defoe authored the piece, Defoe wrote a second essay, *The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff*, in which Defoe adopts yet another persona (separate from the narrator of the first secret history) in order to present the secret history of the writing of *The Secret History of the White Staff*.

The tone of *The Secret History* is conciliatory, as Downie describes, with a theme of "moderation" because "it was intended to remind the Whigs of the leniency with which they had been treated by the quondam lord treasurer" (186). The piece was distributed in three parts: the first covered the struggle between Harley and Bolingbroke, the second discussed how Harley was "far from condoning Jacobitism" and was instead "the sworn enemy of all Jacobites," and the third part explained why the public "became 'haters of the staff'" (187). Defoe's narrator frames his purpose in terms of general political trends in the opening of the *Secret History*:

General and Prime Ministers have this peculiar Fate, That as they have the Honour of other Mens Merit, so they bear the Guilt of other Men's Crimes; nothing is more certain than that neither the one or the other, in those high Stations, can act without the Agency and Councils of such Seconds who, as they, ought to share in the Glory. So they have oftentimes such Influence in the Conduct of Affairs, and are so far Masters of the Schemes and Councils of the whole, that they cannot be clear of the Blame where Miscarriages in Management are to be accounted for. [...]

How these things have been acted, from what Principle, to what End, and in what manner in the Mines of State have been blown up, and the Mischief prevented, will be seen with great Clearness in the following History. (265-266)

The style of this excerpt is characteristic of the entire pamphlet: formal, eloquent, and detached. In the following pages, the narrator adheres to the goal of illuminating the secret history, largely by exposing the true nature and motives of the characters involved. He refrains from discussing his own motives for writing or

revealing anything about himself at all, which may have contributed to readers' growing suspicions that Harley penned the pamphlets.

The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff adopts an entirely different narrator who writes openly about himself and his actions while maintaining anonymity. By presenting a secret history of a secret history, the narrator's primary goal is to prove to the audience that neither Daniel Defoe nor Robert Harley wrote the first secret history, an attempt that was successful and effectively ended public suspicion. The narrator first summarizes the reception of the first secret history as he observed it: enemies of the White Staff recognized the sophistry, friends believed it was done by a friend, and the writer had a good laugh about the foolishness he lured people into believing. The remainder of the piece focuses on the narrator's interaction with a Quaker, a "friend of the truth," who reveals to the narrator that the first secret history was written by an employee of a bookstore paid to write the piece so that the bookstore could sell it for profit.

The use of "secret history" is a form of satire, a genre Defoe is not unfamiliar with. In her book, *Satire and Secrecy in English Literature from 1650 to 1750*, Melinda Alliker Rabb discusses the genre of satire and Defoe's *The Secret History of the White Staff*, examining the role satire plays in advancing its argument. Rabb points out that challenging the authority of those who present the "truth" has been a central theme of print culture, and the period Defoe wrote in that "saw the rise of satire in England also saw the proliferation of books of history, as well as the development of a subgenre called 'secret history' or 'secret memoirs'" as another means of questioning that "truth" (577). The secret history trend was also closely related to the newly developed political parties, with "Whig, Tory, Anti-Catholic, Jacobite, and anti-Jacobite writers trying to highlight, 'spin,' or maintain silence on

selective details," often through the use of this genre (578). Defoe's secret histories fit this trend of political parties presenting alternate histories. In *The Secret History*, the narrator attempts to "spin" the details of a particular politician's time in office in a way that would seem favorable to the general public. In crafting these secret histories as an alternate to the history initially visible to the public, Defoe must also "spin" the personality of the individuals involved in the histories, requiring him to create characters that the public did not observe either. This calls for Defoe to use his skills as a novelist in crafting a nonfiction work.

Defoe's secret histories also expertly use other elements of narrative in a manner that only a novelist could. Noelle Gallagher explores these elements in her article "Point of View and Narrative Form in *Moll Flanders* and the Eighteenth-Century Secret History." Gallagher draws attention to the fact that though Defoe frequently clears Harley of guilt by exposing the "truth" of what actually occurred, this is often not enough, requiring the emergence of first-person accounts like that of the Quaker in *The Secret History of the Secret History*. The Quaker's first-person account is indeed so detailed that it even incorporates a line-by-line transcript of a dialogue between the Quaker and a neighbor. Though much of Defoe's work is masterful, Gallagher does draw attention to one instance in which his utilization of narrative elements, in this case, character, is ineffective. The narrator of the first secret history goes so far in defending the White Staff that he is often less than sympathetic to his audience, particularly when asserting that "those who were duped by [Harley's] machinations *deserved* to be deceived," referring to the Jacobites (150). This lack of sympathy did not go unnoticed and, according to Gallagher, may have led to the overwhelming suspicion that Defoe or Harley wrote the pamphlet. Gallagher ends her

discussion of Defoe's secret histories by pointing out that they are riddled with historical inaccuracies, as many previous scholars have suggested, resembling more of a narrative than a report.

Many other scholars have recognized these narrative qualities in *The Secret History of the White Staff*. One of these is Maximilian Novak, who in *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions* draws attention to *The Secret History* as an important precursor to Defoe's fiction – a bridge between more political or historical writings and fiction. Despite the first secret history often being considered a failure of a piece due to the widespread suspicion that Defoe wrote it, Novak argues that it contributed to Harley's being found innocent in the House of Lords in 1717, calling the piece "Defoe's best writing as a pamphleteer" (467). Another scholar critical of the historical inaccuracies of the pieces is Geoffrey Sill, who in *Defoe and the Idea of Fiction* dismisses the pamphlet as wholly fiction. Sill argues that the only difference between *The Secret History* and Defoe's obviously fiction works is that it is written in the third person rather than the first person.

Indeed, one of the elements of *The Secret History of the White Staff* and *The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff* that makes it a "transitional piece" is Defoe's inventive use of characters to effectively appeal to and persuade his audience. In both creating fictional characters and recasting individuals in the secret history, Defoe is exceptionally talented at developing characters to achieve his purpose. He demonstrates that skill throughout both pieces.

The first installment of Defoe's *The Secret History of the White Staff* serves as a justification for Robert Harley's conduct when he served as Lord Treasurer from 1711 to 1714. Defoe's goal in publishing the piece was to

lessen the negative perception the public had of Harley after his abrupt exit from office by issuing an anonymous account of the true history surrounding his time in office. Because many suspected the anonymous author to be Defoe or Harley, some dismiss the piece as wholly unsuccessful. As Gallagher correctly identifies, a significant part of the failure of the piece has to do with the narrator, who isn't adequately developed and is often too harsh toward his audience. Defoe fails to sufficiently construct the character of the narrator, avoiding any discussion of the narrator's own involvement in Harley's affairs or his motivation for writing. This failure to construct an ethos for the narrator led to Defoe being met by an audience unwilling to trust the wholly anonymous author, causing them to suspect the worst about the pamphlets.

Defoe's characterization of Robert Harley is one of the most effective narrative techniques in the piece, though. He calls Harley as "the White Staff" from the title page on, never referring to him as "Harley" or "Lord Treasurer." Harley is not the only one depicted in *The Secret History* given a nickname; very few characters are referred to by their common names. Though this may have been done to avoid accusations libel, these new names are also a tool by which Defoe characterizes these individuals as different from the original public understanding of them. By giving Harley a new name, Defoe creates a character entirely separate from the Lord Treasurer the public knows and has judged. Of course readers of the pamphlet would be aware that Harley was the White Staff, but they are not continually reminded of that because Defoe avoids calling him "Harley" or "Lord Treasurer." Instead, readers are told about an unfamiliar character named White Staff who had the misfortune of falling prey to unkind individuals and being forced to engage in actions he disapproved of. The same can be said about the characters he chooses to portray negatively. He

alters his audience's conception of them by replacing them with an entirely new character with an entirely new name. The new name is a means of intentionally characterizing Harley's true character in a secret history intending to expose truth.

The depth to which he characterizes the White Staff is rather impressive. Novak comments that the White Staff may "be said to be Defoe's first well-developed character," noting that "since Defoe knew that every word and every innuendo would be carefully scrutinized, he wrote with a purity of style that was almost unique for a writer accustomed to rushing out copy to reflect upon each passing event" (467). The first secret history is carefully crafted to give us a specific, in-depth look at the influences that pushed Harley to act as he did. We often see the White Staff as one who is unable to control his own destiny, frequently falling victim to fate or to sinister individuals. This is perhaps no clearer than in the ending of *The Secret History*, when Defoe laments that "had her Majesty liv'd" longer, it would be evident "that the late *Staff* had rescued both the Queen, and her Kingdoms also, from the Danger that hung over their Heads" (292). Here the narrator argues that had the Queen not suddenly died, the public's negative conception of Harley wouldn't exist. The Staff's name would be cleared, and he would be celebrated for the hero that he was.

The events that the White Staff did control, however, are presented as brilliant successes. Harley's actions described in the pamphlets illustrate good intentions, skill and intelligence in action, and an overall understanding of patriotic duty. He is praised for destroying the October Club, a name bestowed on a group of hot-headed men responsible for the all the country's ills (according to Defoe), in a manner that is both clever and appreciated: "the White-Staff, who knew that these Precipitations tended to ruin, not the Constitution only, but themselves, soon found

out methods to unty this knot, and by silent, quiet Steps, in a little time, he so effectually separated these Gentlemen, that in less than Six Months, the Name of the *October-Club* was forgotten in the World" (273). Harley's actions here, like through the rest of the piece, are cunning yet furtive. Beyond that, they are furtive for a reason. The White Staff doesn't secretly separate the October Club because of his humility and his desire to not flaunt his achievements; he does so to ensure that the Club is soon "forgotten in the World" (273). In the White Staff, Defoe creates a perfectly innocent character – one who is only forced into the wrongs that he commits and keeps silent about his accomplishments. The undesirable actions are the product of unfortunate circumstance. The admirable actions are the product of his genius and often go unseen.

Though *The Secret History* primarily characterizes and describes the actions of the White Staff, Defoe casts a number of villains to play brief roles throughout the piece. At the close of the piece, Defoe references "That Female Buz," a name given to the influence of Queen Anne's favorite females: Sarah Jennings, Abigail Masham and Adelaide Paleotti. Like referring to Harley as "the White Staff," giving this group a specific name serves first to differentiate the public conception of them from what *The Secret History* reveals their character to be. Because this name refers to three individuals, giving them this name establishes a group identity, suggesting that their interests were aligned and that they made an organized effort to harm the reputation of the White Staff. The name itself, "Female Buz," is also telling. Buzz is generally considered to be something invaluable or distracting – it certainly isn't "discourse" or "advice." In the time period, "female" didn't suggest that something was particularly valuable or insightful either. Simply by assigning them this specific name, Defoe characterizes Marlborough, Masham, and

Paleotti as malicious women making a concerted effort to harm Harley, describing how “that Female Buz which had, for many Years past, too much influence in publick Managements, began now to work” against him (281).

In *The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff*, Defoe continues to rely on character development to effectively convince the public that neither the author of this nor the prior piece was affiliated with Harley or Defoe. The first character the reader encounters is the narrator of the piece, who, unlike the previous narrator, refers openly to himself, his role, his knowledge, and his actions. From the first pages, the narrator calls attention to the “Two little Pamphlets, publish’d for a long Time past, which have made more Foolish Noise in the World,” saying that he finds it necessary that “the World should know something of the HISTORY of these Two *Secret Histories*,” which he himself is aware of “having this Matter search’d a little into” (297). This narrator, like the narrator of the first secret history, reveals that his intentions are to share the knowledge he has with his audience who knows nothing of it. In this case, that knowledge pertains to the writing of *The Secret History*. After pointing out that both supporters and haters of the Staff were duped by the pamphlets, the narrator launches into a line-by-line recounting of a dialog held at “a Publick Coffee-House” with a Quaker discussing these pamphlets – a dialog that “put [the narrator] upon further enquiring into the Matter, than [he] had done before” (299). Through this strategic wording, Defoe characterizes the narrator as an individual that is knowledgeable about the situation surrounding the pamphlets but only because an overheard dialog sparked his interest. The narrator is thus cleared of the ulterior motives that could be associated with having passion for the cause of defending Harley. The narrator of the first secret history did not identify

motives, one of several flaws that led the public to raise questions about the true author.

Defoe has created a narrator very different from the previous ineffective narrator – one that uses a more informal tone, frequently using “I” and adopting a style that is more narrative than argumentative. This narrator doesn’t hide his thought process, which characterizes him as a truly observant, critical, and curious individual, not merely a reporter or a creator of propaganda as the first author was thought to be. This is evident early on when the narrator comes to the Quaker with his own set of notes about the pamphlet:

I told [the Quaker] that I had read over the Books call’d *The Secret History of the Staff*, &c. And that I had frequent Thoughts about them, That I observ’d a great many Things, which in my Opinion look like Romances; that I often thought the whole was a continu’d Fiction; that some Things were put in, which if they were true, no Body could know, but those whose Interest it was not to make them Publick; That other Things were mention’d, which were not probably, sundry Speeches fram’d which I believ’d were never spoken. (301)

The thoughtful and curious narrator that Defoe creates in *The Secret History of the Secret History* is perfectly suited for the job at hand: revealing the true events surrounding the distribution of the first secret history pamphlets. The ideas he presents in his first one-on-one interaction with the Quaker are continually supported and elaborated on by the Quaker’s inside knowledge, creating a back story for the pamphlets that is both supported logically by the narrator and evidentially by the Quaker who spoke with the writer of the pamphlets. Defoe thus crafts a near-perfect narrator who is unbiased, curious, knowledgeable, well-intentioned, and a gifted writer.

The use of the Quaker is perhaps Defoe's most interesting choice of character in *The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff*, and it's an effective one. As Thomas Wright reveals in *Life of Daniel Defoe* (1715), Defoe, ill with apoplexy, "was visited by a Quaker whose kindness made a great impression on him, and he never after neglected an opportunity of speaking well of the religious body to which the good man belonged" (197). On the surface, Defoe's use of the Quaker as a vehicle of truth in the second secret history can be seen as another instance of him speaking well of the Quakers. Yet Ezra Maxfield argues in his article "Daniel Defoe and the Quakers" that it is "unreasonable to believe that [Defoe] could have cared a straw about a sect not his own," providing extensive evidence that Defoe failed to take any serious action to support or publicize the Quaker's cause despite possessing the position and power to do so (181). Defoe's use of Quakers in his work is done primarily for rhetorical purposes. Such is true for the Quaker in the second secret history.

Defoe first introduces and describes the Quaker in *The Secret History of the Secret History* in a rather strange way. His narrator remarks, "I found One Man who appear'd as a Quaker, and spoke as a Quaker, altho' as I afterwards understood, he was not a thorough Quaker" (299). The first time we hear the Quaker speak, he tells a neighbor, "I am a friend to the Truth, and a Lover of those, that speak uprightly" (300). Despite having one fundamental disagreement with the church that keeps him from being classified "a thorough Quaker," he is continually referred to as "the Quaker" and characterized as an upright individual. By naming him "the Quaker" but revealing that he is not a thorough Quaker, Defoe effectively creates a character that not only possesses the positive attributes associated with the Quakers (as those who emphasize friendship, truthfulness, and trustworthiness) but is also comfortable with

straying from church doctrine that he finds fault with. Though morally grounded, he is thus equally thoughtful and questioning as the narrator is, not bound to believing only what falls within the church's definition of what is right and good.

The Quaker's multi-faceted personality makes him an ideal character for receiving and presenting the information about *The Secret History of the White Staff* that he is privy to. He reveals that the true author of the pamphlets is not Defoe or Harley but employees of booksellers who were paid to write the pamphlets to bring money in to their bookstore which he discovered after visiting that bookstore and hearing the employees discussing their actions. Given the complexity of this explanation, it could seem suspect if coming from a potentially biased individual. The friend of truth, though, is an ideal source for this information. Beyond that, the Quaker also possesses the power of judgment as one that does not blindly follow *all* church doctrine. Thus, his decision to share this information with the narrator indicates that the source and logic of the explanation has been weighed and tested rather than blindly trusted. By associating this character with a specific religious group, then qualifying his allegiance to that group, Defoe crafts an ideal character for revealing the *real* secret history of the pamphlets. This truth is then sifted again by a highly analytical narrator, who then brings the truth to the readers.

The Secret History of the White Staff and *The Secret History of the Secret History of the White Staff* are unique, complex pieces for a number of reasons. They were published anonymously, though many suspected Defoe or Harley of writing them even after Harley declared publicly and privately his disapproval of them. Despite being penned by the same author, they use two different narrators, one of which is critical of the other. They even employ the

complex satirical strategy of secret history to reveal truth surrounding an unpopular politician. Defoe had to employ a good measure of skill to create two effective political pamphlets, including skills typically reserved for fiction forms. Defoe's careful characterization in these two pieces is commendable. He crafts the perfect characters for the task at hand in a way that only a fiction writer could, criticizing his own words in the second secret history to diffuse public suspicion about its author. Though Harley served two years in jail for his actions as Lord Treasurer, the pamphlets are often credited with contributing to his release. That contribution would not be merely as magnificent, though, without the characters that compose it.



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