Chapter 3

Toward a Theory of Satire II: Secret History

‘Secret Springs’

Gossip and slander are not the only means of releasing competing stories into the world. ‘Secret histories,’ ‘memoirs,’ and ‘anecdotes’ are another way of giving birth to a succession of hidden possibilities. “Truth is the daughter of time, was the saying of old” is Thomas Hooker’s nostalgic observation (A2r). But truth now propagates haphazardly because sometimes God “opens and shuts the womb of truth from bearing, as he sees fit.” Hooker gropes for a justification of the relativism of representations of the past: “Not that there is any change in the truth, but the alteration grows, according to mens apprehensions, to whom it is more or less discovered, according to Gods most just judgement, and their own deservings.” Noting that Hooker cannot separate “the notion of historical ‘truth’ or ‘fact’” from “mens apprehensions” of it, Anthony Kemp argues that by the eighteenth century “Western comprehension of historical time reversed itself, from an image of syncretic unity…to one of dynamic and supersessive change spawning schism after schism from the inherited text of the meaning of the past” (v). Textuality is central to this change: “History can be no more than conceptions recorded in an immense palimpsest of historical texts: literary inventions, reinterpretations, attempted erasures” (vi). Skepticism and even contempt for the past tend to “increase as the past history and present society multiply competing ideologies until the faintest remnants of the ideal unity in objective truth are lost” (178). In such aggressive, competitive circumstances, texts of secret history flourish.1
The late Stuart and early Georgian periods produced many texts that promise special insider information. Considerable historical evidence corroborates the frequency with which alternative versions of the same event compete for readers’ credibility. Controversies associated with late Stuart politics (court intrigues, wars, succession) coalesce in this experimental form, which allows print culture to give derogatory talk another marketable and literary shape. Between 1650 and 1800, more than 500 editions were published with ‘secret history’ (or with the related terms ‘secret memoirs’ or ‘anecdotes’) in their titles. This new category of historiography permits special license: ‘memoirs’ are partial and personal; the words ‘anecdote’ and ‘secret’ literally mean unpublished or unpublishable [Greek, *anecdota*: ‘things unpublished,’ secret, private; or, ‘any item of gossip’; Latin, *secernare*, to separate, “kept from knowledge or observation” (*OED*)]. Secret history often rewrites the past with hearsay, gossip, and slander; it becomes performative by relying on sex acts and speech acts, seductions, and promises. Authority figures like Charles II have much to hide: “Twas his Practice to be a Papist in his Closet, and a Protestant in his Chappel” (Phillips, 150). At court the symbolic ‘father’ of his people, he was under the covers, the careless procreator of bastards. Secret history’s popularity beginning in the seventeenth century follows closely “the very time,” according to Michael McKeon and others, “when patriarchalist theory was receiving its fullest airing in England” (“Historicizing,” 30). Along with other experimental modes, it participates in the national crisis of authority.

Just as gossip and slander require rationalization and excuse, so do secret histories. Fernand Spence both defends and apologizes for his translation of Antoine Varillas’ *Les Anecdotes de Florence, ou L'Histoire secrete de la maison de Medicis* which contains “such matters as were neglected and flung aside by the Historian” but which nevertheless “have been the Origine or occasion of the greatest Matters” (a7). What others have cast aside as waste and chaff—unsubstantiated rumors, sordid love affairs, petty jealousies, private obsessions, bodily habits and taboos—the secret historian “gleans.” Not only subject matter but also methodology is idiosyncratic: “I have here not followed any exact method of Chronology in this Treatise, not proposing so much to give an idea of facts as that of men” (Oldmixon, 66). In *The Secret History of White-Hall*, the author promises “new Discoveries of State-Mysteries” while he anticipates and rejects “the Objection that I foresee would be made upon this subject, That all that could be writ has been written already, concerning the late Reigns, I should dismiss it.” The text will “promiscuously... call to mind” a “Private League,” a “secret correspondence,” a “Wife’s petition [and suicide],” the prevention “of the late queen’s being married,” “unseasonable boasting,” “censure,” and other