Chapter 5

Satire and Secrecy: Rereading
*The New Atalantis*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Dunciad*

But oo must not know zees sings, zey are Secrets, & we must keep them from naughty dollars.

—JS 2:503

I shall now... desire the Reader to compare this Key with those upon any other Pieces, which are supposed to be secret Satyrs upon the State....

—Alexander Pope, *The Key to the Lock*, 88

Is Satire a Manly Genre?

Gossip, slander, and secret history challenge “the limitations of traditional theory [of satire]” (Bogel, vii) with strategies of aggression made possible through covert rather than overt attacks. Manley, Swift, and Pope share a conspiratorial imaginary that shapes their ironic fictions and engages the reader in strategies of concealment and discovery. Manley makes a good starting point because her production of secret histories was explicit. Her secret-revealing gossips forge a relationship between literary speech acts and the “scandalous speaking body.” Her fusion of politics with sex, while often derogating women, shows how women writers could appropriate the

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very terms in which they have been abused (as secondary, changeable, irrational; subject to seductive promises, secrets, and broken vows) and redeploy them in authoritative acts. In this way, language directed against ‘the feminine’ also interpellates and constitutes the female satirist and empowers her to “wound with words.” Understanding a text like The New Atalantis as a paradigm for the relationship between secrecy and satire changes the way we read Swift and Pope.

Traditional theories of satire rely on authoritative figures of masculine aggression: blasts from Saturn, Roman god of winter; thrusts of libidinous satyrs; cannibals and warriors; slashes, stabs, barbs, and stings from battling soldiers, swordsmen, wits, and moral scourges. “All satire kills, symbolically at any rate,” argues Robert Elliott (4). Since the Greek Archilochus (seventh century BCE) first “dipt a bitter Muse in snake venom,” Ben Jonson claims, verse satirists have hoped to “rime ‘hem [their adversaries] to death” (Poetaster, “To the Reader,” 163). The spelling ‘satyr’ conjures up a lustful brute that menaces nymphs, dryads, and mortal women. Responding to the crisis of authority accompanying the civil wars, some early modern commentators favor a heroic paradigm. John Milton asserts that the weapon of satire “ought . . . to strike high and adventure dangerously” (Apology for Smectymnuus 1642). John Oldham writes, “Strait to Thrusts, / And pointed Satyr runs him thro’ and thro’” (“Satire upon a Painter,” Works 1:250). And Samuel Butler observes in “Wit and folly”: “Among all Sports and shews that are usd [by the satirist] none are so delightful as the Military; that do but imitate and Counterfet Fights” (S. Butler, 60). His manuscripts contain this definition:

A Satyr is a kinde of Knight Errant that goe’s upon Adventures, to Relieve the Distressed Damsel Virtue, and Redeeme Honor out of Inchanted Castles, and opprest Truth, and Reason out of the Captivity of Gyants, and Magitians…(215)

Jonson distinguishes masculine satire from more feminine speech acts like gossip and slander: “Each slanderer bears a whip…Which to pursue, were but a feminine honour, / And farre beneath the dignitie of a man” (Poetaster, 176–179). In the Earl of Mulgrave’s Essay on Poetry (2nd edition, 1691), war-like aggression “Distinguishes [male] Satire from a [female] Scold” (Spingarn 2:296). Joseph Warton praises the potency of Pope’s satire because it made English “depravity and corruption” seem in contrast “emasculated and debased” (An Essay on the Genius and Writing of Pope 2:357).

Dryden is an often-cited figure for understanding satiric theory at the beginning of its ‘rise’ in England. The editors of Discourse