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SECRET HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA:  
RE-READING *ALL THE KING'S MEN* AND *PRIMARY COLORS*

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at the

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We hereby approve this thesis for Megan Nicole Petraska  
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SECRET HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA:  
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ABSTRACT

There exists a little known connection between the seventeenth-century genre of secret history and contemporary political novels. Secret histories such as Procopius' *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian*, Sébastien Brémond's *Hattige or the Amours of the King of Tamaran*, and Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* have in common three defining structural characteristics of the genre: active narrators, narrative layers, and unusual character names. Two contemporary texts which have long resisted categorizing, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Joe Klein's *Primary Colors*, also contain these characteristics. Re-reading these texts as secret histories allows us to better categorize and understand them. Given this, Warren and Klein not only seem to be borrowing this culturally familiar form, but in doing so, they create texts which demonstrate that the genre truly remains viable in contemporary America, as every political moment makes use of it.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....  | iii |
| ABSTRACT.....   | iv  |
| CHAPTER   |     |
| I. Introduction.....  | 1   |
| II. Secret Histories and Their Characteristics.....                       | 11  |
| III. Existing Critical Interpretations of <i>All the King's Men</i> ..... | 20  |
| IV. Re-Reading <i>All the King's Men</i> as Secret History.....           | 27  |
| V. Existing Critical Interpretations of <i>Primary Colors</i> .....       | 38  |
| VI. Re-Reading <i>Primary Colors</i> as Secret History.....               | 42  |
| VII. Conclusion.....  | 55  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....   | 57  |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Early in Joe Klein's *Primary Colors*, we meet a livid Susan Stanton, wife of presidential candidate Jack Stanton, who is concerned with first impressions and her husband's inability to make good ones. "Jack Stanton could...be a great man...[but] they don't know that" she tells the narrator, Henry Burton, and readers alike, recapping her day spent pretending to enjoy fly-fishing while trying to woo the Democratic town leader of Portsmouth. She reminds her husband that not only is fly fishing "incredibly, indescribably, skull-crushingly boring" but also that "the only shot—the only shot—we have here is perfection" and goes on to chastise him for his imperfections (17). Little does she know, her husband's imperfections have yet to be fully revealed. In fact, blowing off a meeting with a party leader and leaving her to pick up the pieces is just the beginning, and before the ending comes about, there will be many accusations about more inappropriate behavior from her husband, including rumors that he had an affair with Susan's hairdresser. Nonetheless, Susan's own personal desire for power, evidenced

by her statement that the only shot *we* have is perfection, which shows that she wants the Presidential office as much, if not more, than her husband; forces her to stand by her politically charged husband.

Walking a similar tightrope hundreds of years earlier, there was Barbara Palmer, who, like Susan Stanton was hungry for power, but who also had to go through a man in order to gain it. She, too, seems to have no problem asserting herself, though, as in one scene “the King of Tamaran took his Crown from his head and put it on [hers]” which shows her power over him (Brémond 22). While Jack Stanton does not complete such a grand gesture because he has no crown to give, one can infer that if he did have a crown, it would be on Susan’s head for nearly every minute of every day. Such stories are the lifeblood of a genre termed “secret history,” and a style of writing known for its ability to satisfy our seemingly innate desire to know what those in power do behind closed doors and why they do this.

Despite the use of the term “secret history” being pushed to the margins of literary history as the genre of the novel began to take form, secret history “helped inaugurate several narratological features associated with the novel by literary historians” (Carnell 6). Thus, although the genre is easily and often overlooked, its contributions are apparent in numerous contemporary works and merit acknowledgement, as these tropes of political propaganda have survived many hundreds of years despite literary scholarship's disparagement of them.

What is at stake here is a new lens through which contemporary texts can be viewed. This categorization opens a new door for scholars of twentieth century literature which is particularly relevant, as public interest in tell-all texts such as memoirs,

biographies, and the like rises. Such texts seem to blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction and can thus resist categorizing. When we read these texts as secret histories, we can provide labels which are owed to them. Instead of being absolute fiction or nonfiction, there can now be an in-between for such works: secret history, which bases itself in the latter but uses some characteristics from the former. This new label offers to texts an appreciation of the fact that they are more than just “readin’ books” as some critics have labeled them and even more than thinly veiled political novels, but rather part of a genre born from the desire of people to pass along information about those who have power to people who do not. Indeed, such texts take history do not simply reflect its stories exactly, but instead offer us the all-important alternate points of view on which our society thrives. There is never only one side to a story, nor should there be. Secret history provides to us another side of the story. Whether it is right or wrong is not to discuss, because without its presence this discussion could not even exist. By acknowledging this genre and its place in contemporary works, scholars of twentieth century literature can present a more well-rounded analysis of texts and better offer insight into the ways in which their stories are to be read and understood.

Even though authors like Robert Penn Warren and Joe Klein were probably not privy to the eighteenth-century genre of secret history, in writing their own texts of opposition/political propaganda, they create texts which a reader in the 1670’s would have seen as a secret history given the characteristics of the genre. Even if Warren and Klein were unaware of the genre of secret history, they certainly were aware of the ability of authors to point out inconsistencies in history as well as the discourses of political tarnishing that exist within the political sphere; reading *All the King’s Men* and *Primary*

*Colors* with the lens of secret history as our guide allows us a modern glimpse of this genre that has morphed from eighteenth century “anecdotal propaganda” to twenty-first century “creative nonfiction.” While other genres have risen into and fallen out of popularity, secret history has not. It remains ever-present in modern texts, though as the genre has grown, developed, and changed, so has its familiarity. Warren and Klein not only seem to be borrowing this culturally familiar form, but in doing so, they create texts which demonstrate that every political moment makes use of the genre in some manner and the genre truly remains viable in contemporary America, especially as the production of creative nonfiction continues to take the literary market by storm, and the inclusion of political anecdotes can be seen in across many modern genres, from film, to print, to electronic media. While critics have studied many of the key features of these texts, there remains some confusion in terms of their double storylines, disparate parts, narration, and character names, as well as how to categorize them. I have identified the characteristics of active narrators, narrative layers, and unusual character names as the genre of secret history’s defining structural components, and these characteristics align to the confusion critics encounter in reading *All the King’s Men* and *Primary Colors* as ordinary novels. These texts certainly come across as more than just novels, but the question of what they are if they are not novels remains for their readers and their reviewers. The answers to the lingering questions about these texts and the solution to the confusion that surrounds them is indeed not new, but rather centuries old. The answer is secret history.

Secret history is defined as the genre of opposition/political propaganda made popular during the reign of Charles II by authors like Sébastien Brémond. The genre’s defining qualities were its use of anecdotes to reveal little known information, usually

about those in power, to the reading public. Brémond, for example, recounts gossip about the relationship between Charles II and the Duchess of Cleveland, notably surrounding the circumstances through which Barbara Palmer became Charles' mistress while still married to Roger Palmer, the progression of their affair, and her subsequent power over him, as she was made the Duchess of Cleveland in her own right. While Brémond did not term his work as secret history, but rather labeled it as a *nouvelle* (meaning a piece of news or gossip, but translated as "novel"), it certainly fits the qualifications of the genre. Annabel Patterson notes that there are two main styles of political secret history, both of which seem to have made different contributions to the development of the narratological perspective associated with later novels:

the first is a 'tell-all' account of insider secrets without pseudonyms, such as Andrew Marvell's *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* (1677); the second is a keyed account of court intrigue borrowing Tropes of romance, such as Delarivier Manley's *New Atlantis* (186).

To Patterson, Marvell's style of "tell-all account," creates an "air of total authenticity" or at the very least the "evidence ... required of narrative to permit it to signify truth to its readers" (189). While this style of secret history was certainly important to novelistic history, Rachel Carnell argues that the second style of secret history as outlined by Patterson: works which were "structured as a collection of gossipy anecdotes referring to court and public figures through pseudonyms, for which keys were often published separately" (189), were even more important to novelistic history. This second style is perhaps most easily written off as "romance" by literary historians. Nonetheless, Carnell

notes that the “layers of narrators” and “abrupt shifts between third- and first-person narration to diminish their political liability” used in these texts “may be seen as precursors to the complex narrative shifts...that later novelists would begin developing towards the end of the eighteenth century” (7). Thus, the shifts in point of view that critics have praised in nineteenth and twentieth century novels are not a new trend; but rather, originated within the genre of secret history. Furthermore, as time went on, political secret histories seem to have contributed more to the narratological development of the novel than other novelistic fictions, and as a result, by the 1740’s, the novel seemed to have taken on the creative energy and narratological innovations of earlier political secret histories. Given this, it could be said that the modern novel owes its style of narration, at least in part, to its predecessor, the genre of secret history, which was known for its use of active narrators who served as bearers of insider information and complex narrative layers that protected authors from being held liable for the information their secret histories contained. These two components of secret history are part of its contribution to the modern novel.

Carnell uses the term “slipping” to describe the transition from secret history to novel, and when one considers the evolution of writing, the term fits well. First, in the seventeenth century, readers were said to have read in what Kate Loveman calls a “skeptical manner, looking for real persons and events;” and appear to have done so regardless of whether or not the word ‘secret’ or ‘history’ appeared in the title, as they were prone to seek “hidden meanings in texts, supplying morals and motives where the author’s methods seemed deficient” (5). Then, according to Carnell, “as the eighteenth century progressed, and as ‘the novel’ evolved into a form understood as a work of

‘invention’ despite its frequent claims to truth, writers demonstrated increasing awareness of the difference between secret histories, based on real events and persons, and novels as works of fiction, even as they also clearly saw an advantage to marketing the works as ‘true’ or ‘secret’ histories” (3). As the late eighteenth century arrived, readers did not tend to recognize secret history as its own unique genre of writing, though, and thus grouped secret histories into the broader categories of “romance” and/or “novel.” Despite the fact that the genre of political secret histories began to decline between 1714 and 1740, many such texts were still written. However, because “these subsequent secret histories [did] not necessarily demonstrate further narratological innovation” and because “novels would continue to develop increasingly complex and subtle uses of narrative perspective” the genre slowly began to move “under ground,” around 1811 (D’Israeli qtd. in Carnell 23). Finally, by the twentieth century, Eve Tavor Bannet observed that secret history had been pushed to “lay on the wrong side of opposition between truth and scandal, fact and fiction,” and thus was not provided “serious consideration by literary scholars” (367). This was made all the more complicated by the fact that “twentieth-century literary historians, notably Ian Watt, misread secret histories as ‘unrealistic’ novels with characters whose names ‘carried foreign, archaic, or literary connotations which excluded any suggestion of real and contemporary life’” (Carnell 4). What those who study secret histories in depth know that Watt appeared not to in making these comments, however, was that most of these names were intentionally chosen as a way to protect authors from being sued for libel, because as the characters to whom these foreign names belonged were representations of figures who were well-known and easily recognizable to the public.

While Carnell notes that “important correctives to studies such as Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* provided alternative categories for a range of early novelistic texts, including amatory fiction, print entertainment, courtesan’s narratives, Oriental tales, or simply prose fiction,” she points out the fact that “this recent research has not generally focused on the secret history as a separate genre or considered its formal relationship to the developing novel” (5). Even so, novels which are both political and apolitical are still written today, and modern readers still tend to look for the real persons behind characters they read about, so such texts benefit “from the techniques of narrative perspective once deployed by secret historians avoiding libel” (23). As the twentieth century has gone on, Bannet’s observation about secret history has held true in contemporary America, as political secret histories are still often viewed as falling on the wrong side of the boundaries between literature and conspiracy theory. Thus, the genre of secret history not only become buried under the novel’s rise to popularity, but any such genre that was considered to be political came to be viewed as sub-literary. In fact, simply saying a novel was political ruined its reputation before its pages were even opened.

While there are many examples of this trend, perhaps the most applicable for our purposes are the two accounts written by insiders about Bill Clinton’s presidency. One was titled *Primary Colors, A Novel of Politics*, published in 1996, and the other *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton: The Unreported Stories*, published in 1997. While *Primary Colors, A Novel of Politics* was given favorable reviews by respected newspapers and even compared to other political novels such as Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton: The Unreported Stories*, on the other hand, was not taken seriously by reviewers and its author was “dismissed as one of the ‘Clinton crazies

... of conservative and sometimes conspiratorial bent” (Carnell 24). This anecdote proves Carnell’s argument that “the line to definitely separate the two genres that was drawn when fiction slipped away from secret history in the mid-eighteenth century has not yet been entirely effaced” and this line serves to show the contrast between the “fluidity of terminology in the late seventeenth century,” and the rigid terminology used in contemporary America (24). However, Carnell and I agree with Srinivas Aravamudan, who suggests that “it might be worth revaluating secret history as a genre” (5), because “the secret historians dismissed by mid-twentieth-century scholars as marginalized writers of romance were in fact central to the eighteenth-century novel’s narratological development” (6); and when we view certain modern texts as novels rather than as secret histories, their political overtones can become lost.

By overlooking the genre of secret history in modern literary criticism, we are overlooking the emergence and application of narrative techniques that not only shape a text, but also its passing on of crucial information from author to reader. Given the aforementioned role that secret history played in the rise of the modern novel, the fact that this genre has been cast aside to the margins of literary analysis and labeled as sub-literary means that the origins of its structural tactics such as narrative layers, character pseudonyms, and active narrators have also been cast aside. Without the category of secret history, the reception and existing criticism surrounding texts such as *All the Kings Men* and *Primary Colors* lacks an important angle of political commentary about those in power, their shortcomings, the decisions they make, and how these decisions affect those over whom they hold power.

When it comes to analyzing texts, secret history is a path less traveled so to speak, but in the case of some works, given their qualities and styles, we can determine that they might be better read as a secret history than as a novel or a memoir like their title page proclaims. In fact, as Bannet states, reading modern works as secret histories “may reveal more about our present structures of knowledge and political unconsciousness than it does about the past” (367). There are two texts which merit study as secret histories. One such text is Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, which, according to Warren, was “never intended to be a book about politics” (vi), but which also contains numerous facets of secret histories within its pages. The other is Joe Klein’s *Primary Colors*, which purports itself as “a novel of politics,” but which contains many of the elements of secret histories published in the period between 1670 and 1740. As a result, we can better understand both *All the King’s Men* and *Primary Colors* if we view them as secret histories, especially in terms of their narration, how their characters function, and their structure.

## CHAPTER II

### SECRET HISTORIES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

A study of texts already labeled as secret histories will allow us to first discuss what I feel are the trends that exist across this genre, and then to understand their function in secret histories, and finally how they function in texts like *All the King's Men* and *Primary Colors*. After doing so, we can break down what we can add to our understanding of *All the King's Men* and *Primary Colors* by reading them as secret history.

For our purposes, we will consider three texts which exemplify the characteristics that secret histories possess: Procopius' *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian*, Brémond's *Hattige or the Amours of the King of Tamaran*, and Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister*. Close readings of these texts will not only provide examples of the qualities that I believe secret histories possess such as active narrators, narrative layers and unusual character names, but also demonstrate how these qualities function in a secret history. Notably, these three qualities which I have identified

are not a menu of sorts that authors pick from to create a secret history; indeed, it is not *just* the active narrator or narrative layers or unusual character names which make a text secret history, it is the combination of all three, used in a very deliberate manner.

Of these characteristics of secret histories, the most notable is the active narrator. Rebecca Bullard touches upon this aspect of secret histories when she notes that “secret histories differ from most other contemporary accounts of conspiracy and political intrigue because of the highly self-conscious approach that they adopt towards the discourse of disclosure” (5). This self-conscious approach towards disclosure is revealed most fully in *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, as there are an abundance of “I” moments in which the narrator surfaces in this text, inserting his own words. Upon close analysis of these moments, we can organize them into the following categories: those in which the narrator explains his means for writing, those relating to travel/distance, those in which the narrator offers opinions of others, those in which the narrator presents himself as an observer of life or giver of facts, and finally, those which serve organizational purposes or as a means to revisit previously cited information and claims in a text.

The most widely used category of “I” moments in the text are those in which the narrator explains his means for writing and the manner in which he/she is doing it. These moments are usually prefaced by phrases such as “This is what I proposed to communicate in this book...” (92) and “I will give the dream as well as I am able...” (103), making them easy to identify. Phrases like these function as a means to alert readers of the narrator’s primary purpose in the text. For example, in *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, the narrator notes that he has set out to

communicate how John of Cappadocia, the praetorian prefect to the Byzantine emperor Justinian, tried to warn Justinian about the “great crimes” of his wife, Theodora (92). In doing so, the narrator exposes not only the public actions of Justinian and his wife Theodora as well as his commander Belisarius and his wife Antonina, but also the “crimes” that peppered their private lives, which were shameful and embarrassing.

Other instances of “I” moments in *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian* include narrative insertions relating to travel and distance, such as mentions of “Constantinople and Streets nearby” (12) and phrases like “There are two Streights not far from Constantinople, one in Helespont betwixt Sestos and Abydos, the other at the mouth of the Enxine Sea not far from the famous Church of our Lady” (129). These insertions function in the text as a means for the narrator to establish credibility, given that readers are usually hesitant to take everything a first person narrator says as fact because this style of narration leaves room for altering of the truth. By adding in such phrases, the narrator is able to set his story in non-fictional locations like the aforementioned Constantinople, and to provide for readers facts that can be verified, thus helping him to appear more credible as our storyteller, or in the case of this secret history, scandal revealer.

There also exist “I” moments in which the narrator of *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian* offers opinions of others. For example, in regard to Justinian’s car, the narrator notes: “his car was always open to Informers and Traytors...he never understood any cause he judged” (45). These additions are usually prefaced by phrases such as “I am of the opinion...” (26) and therefore function as a way

for the narrator to provide us with his own ideas, positive or negative, about people without losing credibility.

In addition to the narrator offering opinions of others, there are also moments when the narrator presents himself as an observer of life or giver of facts. These insertions into the text are another device used by the narrator to assert his credibility and importance as they usually come in the form of phrases such as “I know a thousand crimes of this nature...” (150) or “I myself have many times seen an incredible quantity of such trades...” (94). It is a well-known fact that first person narrators are not always reliable. As a result of this, we may conclude that narrators of secret histories go out of their way to establish their credibility with readers because they want them to trust their stories and due to what Bullard calls their “self-consciousness” (5). Both this example and the aforementioned example relating to travel and distance serve as evidence of these attempts to establish credibility which help the text to both appear and function as fact rather than fiction. Perhaps the most overlooked instances of “I” moments in the text are those that serve organizational purposes or as a means to revisit previously cited information and claims. These moments occur quite often throughout the text and allow the narrator to seamlessly transition between ideas and refer back to previously mentioned statements, as is often necessary when telling stories like those which secret histories tell, namely ones which involve many anecdotes and events that feed into larger events and thus must be understood for one to understand the story as a whole. Statements like “I shall return now to...” (31) and “As I have said elsewhere...” (26) serve this purpose of transitioning between anecdotes. While these statements can be

easily overlooked, their function in linking parts of the text so as to create a more coherent whole cannot.

The effect of all of these “I” moments on the text is the narrator’s constant, active presence in the story. These moments allow secret histories to function as their name suggests: as secrets being revealed to the reader by the narrator. Thus, such insertions make readers feel like we are living the stories along with the narrator, rather than simply having them “told” to us. These revelations from the narrator to the reader are important because they bring new information to light, one of the characteristics of secret history according to Bullard (39); and not just any new information, but rather, as Casey notes, information that can be woven into known history and which changes the way one thinks of this history (54). This is best evidenced by a close examination of Brémond’s *Hattige*.

In *Hattige*, the narrator describes, via the use of narrative layers and changed names, the infidelities of Charles II and Barbara Palmer, Duchess of Cleveland, information which few readers knew about prior to reading the text. This information was not only new to readers, but it also provided a depiction of Charles II that was vastly different from the descriptions they were likely used to reading, unless they were reading other secret histories. Instead of portraying Charles II in a glorified manner, *Hattige* casts him as quite submissive with Palmer having all the power in the pair’s affairs. This is evidenced by many scenes, but one in particular stands out: when “the King of Tamaran [read: Charles II] took his Crown from his head and put it on Hattige’s [read: Palmer]” (Brémond 22). As a result of this new information weaved into the history of Charles II’s reign via the use of imagined characters, readers might have changed their opinions about him, just as they might have changed opinions about Justinian after reading the

aforementioned text *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*. At the very least, the example above proves that *Hattige* could be said to be successful in creating what Casey calls “reverberations” as opposed to “reflections” (54) of Charles II’s glory (or lack thereof).

Given the allure of secret histories as “reverberations” of history that readers might not otherwise know this active narration approach functions in a meaningful way. It feels like the narrator is motioning to us from the shadows, winking, and promising good information if we just sneak outside in the middle of the night and meet with him. What is perhaps most fascinating about this narrative strategy is that while the narrator reveals an abundance of information about those around him, we find out little about the narrator himself.

This fact that narrators of secret histories tend to reveal little about themselves makes sense if we consider that authors of such texts had to remove any moral implications which could be tied to themselves. One way in which authors were able to do this was the addition of narrative framing, thus making this another common characteristic of secret histories. The seventeenth century text that best illustrates the use of framing via narrative layers is *Hattige*, as we see it begin with one narrator introducing readers to the knight of Malta then eventually switch to another narrator, Razié, who tells the story of *Hattige*, expanding upon the first narrator’s story. Layers such as these function as a way to ensure that no narrator reveals anything that would allow him to be easily identified as someone outside the text.

A similar structure is used in Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters from a Nobleman to His Sister*, as this text transitions from the use of a first person narrator speaking as though

writing in a diary in volume I: “I am a stranger to all but your eyes and soul...” (4) to the use of a mix of the same first person narrator and a new third person narrator in volume II, to a third person narrator who provides several letters which disclose information in volume III. Again, Behn, like Brémond makes it nearly impossible to connect any narrator to anyone outside the story.

Switching narrators and having a new narrator add to a previous narrator’s story in a text allows the text to meander its way to the stories it tells rather than taking a direct path to them. Each narrative layer weaves in a new angle of a scandal rather than having one layer do all the work, and, consequently, no single layer reveals everything, nor does a single narrator. Given this, one can comprehend why secret histories like *Hattige* and *Love Letters from a Nobleman to His Sister* usually disclose their darkest secrets and scandals in the latter half of the text after layers of narration have been established. As Carnell notes, “secret historians used layers of narrators and abrupt shifts between third- and first-person narration to diminish their political liability” (4). The result is a complex story told from multiple points of view and with multiple storytellers; one that is impossible to attribute to any single layer. In using such a complex cast of narrators, Brémond, Behn, and other authors of secret histories make it hard for readers to see a one-to-one relationship between characters in the text and real people. This muddying of the waters via the use of narrative layers can thus be said to function as a way to reduce the likelihood of the author being sued for libel.

In addition to an active narrator and narrative layers, we can also identify one other characteristic of secret histories through close readings of *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, *Hattige*, and *Love Letters from a Nobleman to His Sister*:

the use of unusual character names. According to Watt, “the novelist typically indicates his intention of presenting a character as a particular individual by naming him in exactly the same way as particular individuals are named in real life” (18). Secret histories do not do this. For example, in *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, we meet Eugenius, and Cosroes. Then, in *Hattige*, we meet Gourdan and Razié, and in *Love Letters from a Nobleman to His Sister*, we meet Cesario, Myrtilla, and Philander. While all of these characters can be tied to a non-fictional person, the names bear very little similarity to this person’s, with the exception of some of the characters in *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian* whose names were unchanged. This use of changed names functions as another way to protect authors from being sued for libel.

Now that we have studied closely three texts made popular in the period between 1670 and 1740, we can see how applying these characteristics to the modern texts *All the King’s Men* and *Primary Colors* helps us to read them as secret histories rather than novels, but more importantly, to gain a more detailed understanding of the texts as a whole, especially in terms of their narration, how their characters function, and their structure. By removing secret history from the margins of literary criticism and reinstating it into the conversation surrounding texts such as *All the Kings Men* and *Primary Colors*, we are able to note the emergence and application of the aforementioned narrative techniques that not only shape such texts, but also their passing on of crucial information from author to reader. It is from this information that we can then uncover an important angle of political commentary that these texts possess about those in power, their shortcomings, the decisions they make, and how these decisions affect those over whom they hold power. Given this, it is easy to see the payoff at stake when we consider

modern texts like *All the Kings Men* and *Primary Colors* and their qualities via the lens of secret history.

### CHAPTER III

#### EXISTING CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF *ALL THE KING'S MEN*

We will begin our study with *All the King's Men*, which was originally published in 1946, exactly fifty years prior to *Primary Colors*. This text has much to gain from the genre of secret history, so much that when it is read as a secret history, this path leads to an abundance of new knowledge when it comes to the text. When the text was first released in 1946, its reception was anything but political, though. A New York Times review of this work, published on August 19, 1946, raved about it as an “exciting new novel” and referred to it as a

magnificently vital reading, a book so charged with dramatic tension it almost crackles with blue sparks, a book so drenched with fierce emotion, narrative pace and poetic imagery that its stature as a “readin’ book,” as some of its characters would call it, dwarfs that of most current publications (Prescott).

While this review notes that this text “dwarfs” other current publications in terms of its ability to spark reader interest, it fails to mention the text’s political undertones. At one point, the review notes that *All the King’s Men* “is really a double story, that of Willie, the hick from the red-neck country who rose to power through eloquence, leadership and ruthless mastery of dirty politics, and that of three aristocrats drawn into Willie’s orbit” (Prescott) but it does not detail the *other* double story we explore here, that of Huey Long, the non-fictional political figure whose resemblance to Willie Stark’s character in the text seems more than just coincidental. Warren might not have been privy to the genre of secret history, however, he certainly was privy to Long’s story, and, he certainly was aware of the manner in which the literary world handled depiction of promiscuity in history as well as the discourses of political tarnishing that existed within this political-literary sphere. He was also aware that when *All the King’s Men* was published, there existed a certain stigma around novels labeled as “political.” Warren admitted in his introduction to the Modern Library Edition of the text that “the reception of a novel may depend on its journalistic relevance” (vi) and in this same introduction, thus denied that the book should be read in a political way, specifically noting that it was not to be taken as praise for Huey Long or as praise for his assassination. In fact, Warren claims that *All the King’s Men* was “never intended to be a book about politics” (vi), which is a statement seemingly meant to make this work seem less political and more literary in an era when high literature was seen as “above” any type of literature with political undertones or illusions. What Warren did not deny, however, was that Long served as an inspiration for Stark. He also notes that politics did provide “the framework story in which the deeper concerns [the text expresses], whatever their final significance, might

work themselves out” (vi). By acknowledging here that *All the King’s Men* has political moments, Warren is allowing for the genre of secret history to enter the conversation when it comes to this text, as every political moment makes use of this genre in some manner, whether those writing these political moments are aware of it or not.

Interestingly, *All the King’s Men* possesses what I identify as the major defining characteristics of secret history—namely an active narrator, narrative layers, and unusual character names for its imagined characters— and none of the major defining characteristics of a novel— namely “an air of complete authenticity” and an established “realism” in the way the text is presented— and because of this, we as modern readers should view it as a secret history rather than a novel. In doing so, we gain a more in-depth understanding of the text as a whole and how its features offer a critique of politics, especially in terms of its narration, how its characters function, and its structure. Before crafting a case for a new way to view this text, though, we can benefit from a study of the current critical readings of the text.

Critics have explored many aspects of this text, but as we will later find with *Primary Colors*, none have studied its qualities via the lens of secret history, though some have noted that the text possesses an active narrator and interestingly named characters, which are among the qualities studied in this paper. The scholar whose work is most relevant to this study is the aforementioned John M. Murphy, who, in his article “The *Primary Colors* of American Politics,” discusses *All the King’s Men* as an “obvious ancestor” to *Primary Colors* due to its telling of a very similar tale: “both tell the tale of an ambitious, populist politician through the eyes of the ‘body man,’ the aide closest to the governor” (493). He also notes that both texts have a similar cast of characters: “it is

possible to match the characters of *Primary Colors* to those of *All the King's Men* (excepting Susan Stanton, aka Hillary Rodham Clinton) nearly as neatly as one can tie them to the politicians of the nineties" (493). The similarities end here, though, according to Murphy.

Of the additional scholars who have studied *All the King's Men*, the work of three should be recognized as pathways which lead into the exploration of the text as secret history, especially in terms of its narration. The first scholar who merits study is Joseph H. Lane, Jr. His article titled "The Stark Regime and American Democracy: A Political Interpretation of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*," is necessary to be discussed due to its assertions that "a careful reading of the novel that is informed by the classical approach to the analysis of regimes reveals the close connection between the politics Willie Stark and the politics of modern American democracy" (811). This article paves the way for the study of *All the King's Men* as more than just a novel, and its study via a lens looking deeper into the insights the text offers, just as secret histories did.

In the case of *All the King's Men*, according to Lane, "we can gain insight into both why modern democracies encourage the formation of a debilitating nihilism among their citizens and the prospects for countering these effects" (811). In making this argument, Lane takes to task literary scholars whom he feels "tend to discount the political character of *All the King's Men* as being either too simple or too insidious to yield significant political insight" (811), noting that "when we examine *All the King's Men* from the broad perspective of the classical approach to the study of the character of the regime, all the disparate parts of Warren's novel can be explained as part of a consistent whole" and that while the novel has not been looked to for political insight, it

should be (811). As to how this novel was read instead, Carnell offers insight when she notes that political secret histories are often “viewed as falling on the wrong side of the boundaries between literature and conspiracy theory” (24). Indeed, as was previously noted, there was a time in the history of literary criticism when any text that was considered to be political came to be viewed as sub-literary and in such times, simply saying a novel was political ruined its reputation before its pages were even opened. *All the Kings Men* was published in such a time.

However, to Lane, “the purpose of the novel is twofold: to illustrate a set of political dangers inherent in certain commonly held views about the character of American democracy and to show how these dangers are manifested both in the practice of our politics and in the character of our citizens” (813). Lane argues that Warren does this in the text via his use of what we have come to term narrative layers, one notable quality of secret histories, as he presents an “unnamed southern state as a particular democratic regime,” one in which, with some careful analysis, can be said to be “related to our own political situation” (814) via both its narration and its narrator.

Gwen Le Cor discusses what she terms “the critical voice” and the “narrative voice” of Robert Penn Warren, noting that Warren’s work is striking because “it resists categorizing” and Warren himself is striking because he “had a rare capacity to experiment with all genres” (119). Le Cor goes on to note the “interrelatedness of criticism and fiction writing” noting the parallels between Warren’s essay on Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and *All the King’s Men*. In building this case, Le Cor also points out the unique, layered structure of *All the King’s Men*, which she argues is “dominated” by the Mariner figure “in an almost systematic way...through a series of

thematic echoes, verbal resonances, and direct references” (121). By doing so, Le Cor notes the narrative layers which the text possesses.

Finally, Simone Vauthier delves further into the ideas of narrative layers and who he terms as the ‘narratee’ of *All the King’s Men*, noting that this narratee’s trail “is not always easy to follow” due to the fact that “the tracks which he leaves in the text are now very broad, now rather faint” (43). According to Vauthier, this waxing and waning trail happens for a few reasons, the first of which are changing pronouns: “certainly for long stretches, pronouns may clearly reveal his presence, either the recurrent ‘you’ that proclaims the allocator...or the occasional ‘we’ that includes the narrator and the receiver” (43-44). Another contributing factor to the narrative layers Vauthier discusses is a change in tenses, which sometimes “signals that the orientation of the utterance has changed” as in from “narrative to commentary [which] marks the rise of the narratee who is confided in, enlightened, advised, and finally urged to act, with an imperative that introduces him directly in the text” (44). An even less obvious contributor is also “the network of rhetorical questions that riddles the narration” (44). Or, “the narrator may also be challenging his audience...or taunting his self-pitying narratee” (44). What is clear, however, is that “the narrator knows what is on the table” (44) and reveals this information in numerous ways: “a reiteration of some words or phrases,” “negations that are in fact assertions,” and phrases such as “all right,” “no doubt,” and “as I say,” which “answer an implicit remark, objection, or question of the addressee” (45). According to Vauthier, such “clues to the narratee’s presence are abundantly scattered throughout the novel...but this presence remains elusive” (45). Such mystery mirrors the narrators of many secret histories.

While much has been written about the qualities of the narrative style, narrator, and narratee of *All the King's Men*, no critic has connected these qualities or, by extension, the text as a whole to the genre of secret history. Given that the genre of secret history was known for its use of narrative tactics like these, this connection can allow us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the narratological structure in *All the King's Men* as well as the political commentary that the text offers about those in power, their shortcomings, the decisions they make, and how these decisions affect those over whom they hold power.

## CHAPTER IV

### RE-READING *ALL THE KING'S MEN* AS SECRET HISTORY

In a similar fashion to *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, a study of *All the King's Men* via the lens of secret history should begin with a careful analysis of how the story is told. It is no secret that *All the King's Men* possesses an active narrator who plays a vital role in the text. While Vauthier focuses his study on the meandering trail of the narratee in *All the King's Men*, the narrator also merits examination. Lane himself admits that the text's choice of a narrator is intriguing when he states that "we must consider why the grand and terrifying political take that occupies the foreground of the text presented through the eyes of Burden" (816). Indeed, Jack Burden is an intriguing narrator, as he describes himself as someone who has "been a piece of furniture for a long time," and appears to have very little self-worth. Normally, such a narrator might be off-putting, but in the case of *All the King's Men* it has the opposite effect: we come to see Burden as an observer of life and giver of facts who spends time organizing, or repeating, or both, his previously cited information to solidify

it in readers' minds. This makes him come off as a narrator who not only has much information to disclose, but who is interested in disclosing it in a certain manner. In these respects, Burden's narration is strikingly similar to that of the unnamed, self-conscious narrator of *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*.

The narrative has a curious introduction in which readers are taken on a journey to Mason City, which is described in an unexpected manner by Burden, though he is not immediately identified. While the path to this destination is initially described by Burden via the highways one would take to arrive there: "to get there you follow Highway 58, going northeast out of the city" (1), his description quickly drifts off of the road and to the state of the city. Mason City has changed drastically, and for the worse, according to Burden who notes that "the flat country and the bog cotton fields are gone now...there were pine forests here a long time ago but they are gone" (3). This assertion could be said to relate back to the text's seemingly strange epigraph, which is taken from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and which reads: "Mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde." This phrase can be translated to "As long as hope maintains a thread of green." If hope needs 'green' to be maintained, this landscape seems quite hopeless, as its pine forests are long gone. Perhaps our narrator's hope is not, though. While this style of narration might seem strange at first glance, when considered via the lens of secret history, it can be said that Burden is working to present himself as an observer of life, perhaps even a hopeful observer of life, here; that is, someone who has a keen eye for details and who can thus pass these details on to readers, some seemingly insignificant, others much less so. While Burden does not use the same avenues to communicate this information as the narrator of *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, who goes out of his way to

note that he is serving as an observer for readers when he prefaces statements with phrases like “I will give the dream as well as I am able...” (103), or Burton from *Primary Colors*, whose use of “I” moments to establish his place in and importance to the events he describes will be later analyzed, he still solidifies himself as a reliable person who has a first-hand account of events and who merits our attention as readers via his use of anecdotes.

One such anecdote connects to the text’s opening location of Mason City and involves Burden recounting the last time he saw Mason City which was “nearly three years ago, back in the summer of 1936.” This anecdote not only orients readers in the story’s physical and historical setting, but also introduces its main cast of characters. Yet, unlike a novel, the text does not spend much time on careful characterization. Rather, it uses Burden’s anecdotes to tell us what we need to know in a matter-of-fact manner:

I was in the first car, the Cadillac, with the Boss and Mr. Duffy and the Boss’s wife and son and Sugar-Boy. In the second car, which lacked our quiet elegance...there were some reporters and a photographer, and Sadie Burke, the Boss’s secretary, to see that they got there sober enough to do what they were supposed to do. Sugar-Boy was driving the Cadillac...[and] when he whipped around a hay wagon in the face of an oncoming gasoline truck...the Boss loved it. He always sat up front with Sugar-Boy and looked at the speedometer and down the road and grinned at Sugar-Boy (4-5).

From this anecdote in the text’s opening, Burden shows us how close he was to Stark and the kind of person Stark was, as well as the kinds of people with whom he surrounded

himself. While very few of the anecdotes Burden presents in the text portray Stark in a flattering light, this one is especially negative as it introduces readers to the irresponsible tendencies and behaviors of Stark that we assume will continue and even multiply as the text goes on. Because readers are made aware of Stark's deficiencies so early in the text, it is hard to see him in a positive light as the text progresses. While this anecdote has this effect on readers, it is interesting to note that Burden relays this information very bluntly and in fact never uses any words of his own which have a negative denotation.

For example, when he goes on to detail the fact that Stark enjoyed having his son sit up front in the car with him as Sugar-Boy drove, Burden notes, "The Boss was sitting in the front seat with Sugar-Boy and watching the speedometer, with his kid Tom up there with him. Tom was then about eighteen or nineteen—I forgot which—but you would have thought he was older" (6). In the case of this addition to the anecdote, Burden actually could have painted Stark in an even more negative light had he omitted Tom's age. Without knowing Tom's age, we likely would have assumed he was younger and that Stark was a *really* irresponsible parent; however, hearing that Tom is an older teenager makes this behavior somewhat less startling, yet we still see Stark's parenting skills as poor. Burden is thus set up as a narrator who has an abundance of information about Stark and who will relay it to us bluntly with no inherent judgment, although he seems to have made such judgments of his Boss which he is not sharing. This is evidenced when he notes that he keeps "little black books" which he fills with the work of his days, six years' worth in the case of Stark, and which he puts in "a safety-deposit box... because they aren't something to leave around and because they would be worth their weight in gold to some parties... Not that they ever got their hands on them, I never

needed money that bad” (30). With anecdotes like this, Burden shows he is not only a knowledgeable narrator, but also a reliable one who will present just the facts and withhold his interpretation and judgments of them. With these anecdotes and his delivery of them, Burden quickly becomes the authority on “The Boss,” Willie Stark; he knows him so well, he could tell when he was about to deliver a speech, despite Stark’s own insistence that he was not: “*It’s coming*, I thought. You saw the bulge suddenly like that, as though something had happened inside him, and there was that glitter...it was always that way” (13).

In fact, Burden is so focused on telling Stark’s story, that we don’t even learn his identity as narrator until page nineteen, and even then, we are only told that he “was a newspaperman” who worked for the *Chronicle* and who, in this flashback, “had the hope of transacting a little business.” While more is learned about Burden as the text progresses, Burden remains a “student of history,” who is dedicated to preserving and exploring the past, and the truth (657). In doing so, Burden can again be seen as a narrator who puts the truth first, which makes him an ideal giver of facts in this text. When Burden does insert himself and his experiences into the text, it is in a subtle manner that does not overshadow the stories he has set out to tell. This is perhaps best seen in the text’s final pages, in which Burden notes “This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too” (656). Even when Burden mentions his own story, it is secondary to the stories of others. Burden acknowledges the sometimes surprising nature of these stories in a very Procopian manner, disclosing that his story is “the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way” (656). In saying this, Burden paints this

story as a secret history, and perhaps offers an ideal definition of how secret histories function: as texts which reveal little known information and another, different way of viewing certain people and events to the reading public.

The result of Burden providing an abundance of information about others via his anecdotes and very little about himself is that we as readers want to believe him. He does not let his personal story or opinions interfere with the information he has set out to provide, nor does he seem to be telling this story or relying this information for personal gain, though we are told he could have sold his previously mentioned “little black books” for a sum. It is true that Willie Stark’s story is Jack Burden’s story, too, but Burden’s story is never in the foreground of the text. In fact, he seems wholly focused on relaying every detail he possibly can about Stark to readers, even those which are seemingly insignificant, such as the way Stark is said to drink a bottle of pop with two straws and without picking it up from the table (27). He is truly the active narrator we have come to expect from a secret history. This makes us as readers become fully ingrained in Stark’s story, with Burden as our “fearless leader/narrator.” Even though Robert Penn Warren “had a rare capacity to experiment with all genres” according to Le Cor (119), he might not have known of the genre of secret history. Nevertheless, he seemed concerned that his work be viewed as timeless high literature rather than partisan political propaganda, though, and as such is aware of the depiction of promiscuity in history as well as the discourses of political tarnishing that exist within the political sphere. In this sense, his work makes use of the genre.

As with *Primary Colors* and the other secret histories we have previously encountered in these pages, Burden’s service as an active narrator sets in motion the

critique of politics that *All the King's Men* offers. As Lane notes, this critique sends a message of how “a set of political dangers inherent in certain commonly held views about the character of American democracy are manifested both in the practice of our politics and in the character of our citizens” (813). As with any secret history, this critique is not found on the surface of the text, but rather under some narrative layers. The first layer is our first-person narrator Burden who relays the story to us. The second layer is the layer that removes any potential for Warren to face consequences or punishments for this work, the same layer Procopius, Brémond, and Behn include in their works. Warren makes use of this layer when he denies that the text is political in any way in the prologue to the text. Nonetheless, Warren cannot deny the fact that he presents a fictional situation that with careful analysis can be seen to mirror a non-fictional situation, namely the political situation surrounding Huey P. Long. When we think back to Maud Casey’s definition of secret history as a genre which involves the use of imagined characters which “intersect with historical moments we recognize to create reverberations of truth” (54), and consider the manner in which the life of the imagined character of Willie Stark in *All the King's Men* aligns with the life Huey P. Long, the governor and State Senator of Louisiana in the 1930’s, we can see how *All the King's Men* fits into the genre of secret history and better understand why it is structured as it is.

Even so, because the text simply “intersects” with historical moments (and historical figures) and in doing so creates a fictional parallel to a non-fictional person and what Lane terms “a unnamed southern state as a particular democratic regime” (814), Warren is able to deny that the book should be read as either praise for or criticism of Huey Long in his introduction to the Modern Library edition of the text. Warren does not

deny that there is a commentary to be found in the text, though, as he notes that although the book was “never intended to be about politics” politics did “provide the framework story in which deeper concerns, whatever their final significance, might work themselves out” (vi). While analyzing these deeper concerns and their significances is outside of the realm of this paper, we can discuss the appearances of parallels between Long and Stark in the text and the additional means by which the text distances itself from reality while also paralleling it, via its characters’ names, their functions and how they create the text’s structure, which, when analyzed via the lens of secret history can be better understood.

While there are many parallels between Long and Stark, perhaps the most notable is their rhetorical ability. Of Long, Ernest G. Bormann writes: “even by modern standards, the success of Huey Long's rhetoric in the 1920s and 1930s is remarkable” (88). Within the pages of *All the King's Men* we see Stark’s rhetorical ability as well. We first see his ability to captivate an audience and leave them silently waiting on his next word: “The Boss stood up there quiet, with the bulge and glitter in the eyes, and there wasn’t a sound in the crowd...there wasn’t anything but the waiting” (14). We also see his rise to become a powerful orator, as it is noted that he did not begin as one, which is set into motion with the speech he drunkenly delivers at the Upton picnic. This speech eventually leads to MacMurfee’s election and Stark’s realization that his rhetoric could convince people to vote a certain way and that he could use this to his advantage. It is this event that serves as the catalyst for Stark’s transformation from an under-educated farm boy, to a political powerhouse who worked to help the state’s farmers. This transformation by Stark was Long’s transformation, too and these parallels are well known: like Long, Stark, despite being quite uneducated managed to pass the state bar

exam so he could practice law; and like Long, Stark rose to political power via his institution liberal reform designed to help the state's poorest farmers. One final parallel that is hard to ignore is the fact that after this rise to power, like Long, Stark was assassinated by a doctor when he was at the peak of his power. Even the title of the text could be said to be derived from one of Long's famous speeches titled "Every Man a King" which he delivered on February 23, 1934 and whose title he previously used in his 1933 autobiography (*The Senate, 1789-1989: Classic Speeches, 1830-1993*).

Despite these parallels, Warren is able to protect himself from any accusations of libel via the manner in which *All the King's Men* is presented. The text has many features embedded in its pages which serve to distance it from reality, despite its obvious parallels to it. These features are those we have explored as common amongst secret histories. First, an active narrator separate from the author: of course, it is not Warren detailing the story; it is Burden. This distances Warren from the claims made in the text, since he is not the narrator and it is not his story. Second, the narrative's structure mirrors that of a secret history: the fact that Burden does not detail the story in a linear fashion, but rather uses a series of anecdotes that alternate between flashing back to Stark in the times before he rose to power and flashing forward to detail his rise to power makes the text feel like more of a narrative and not a biography, again distancing Warren and even Burden from the reality the text parallels.

Next, unusual character names which have no relation to their non-fictional doppelgangers: Huey Long's counterpart is Willie Stark, whose name has no relation to his whatsoever. Dr. Carl A. Weiss' counterpart is Dr. Adam Stanton, whose only similarity is his title of Doctor. Further, certain figures who surround Stark and who can

likely be linked to Long, too, are not referred to by their real names at all, preventing us from delineating any definitive parallels: for example, “Sugar-Boy” is Stark’s driver and bodyguard, “Old Leather-Face” is Stark’s friend whose son was incarcerated for whom Stark wanted Burden to find a lawyer, and even Stark himself is largely referred to as “The Boss” and not by his name. These characters thus function as the place holders for the non-fictional people about whom Warren was likely writing, though it is impossible to say for certain that any one fictional character represents any one non-fictional person. This is another quality of secret histories of which Warren makes use. If no character in the text can be exactly and certainly tied to a nonfictional person from outside the text, there is no way Warren as the author can face judgment or blame for these character’s words or actions.

All of these aspects together create the structure of *All the King’s Men* which at first sight is a novel about the political dangers of democracy, specifically in terms of the practice of politics, politicians, and citizens, but which can be better understood when studied as more than just a political novel. When viewing the text from the lens of secret history, many of its curious qualities are better explained. From its active narrator, this narrator’s use of anecdotes and flashbacks and flash forwards to tell us his story and the story of others, too, and the unusual names of the people whom this narrator interacts with, the text does not just parallel the story of Huey Long; it also parallels the structure of a secret history. Even if Robert Penn Warren was not privy to the genre of secret history, in writing this text which offers much political commentary and which draws from stories Warren *was* privy to the stories surrounding Long, Warren nonetheless depicts promiscuity in history and how its stories are told and to whom they are told.

Warren might not have known or planned it, but *All the King's Men* truly possesses the major defining characteristics of secret history—namely an active narrator, narrative layers that comprise the text's structure, and unusual character names for its imagined characters— and none of the major defining characteristics of a novel— namely “an air of complete authenticity” and an established “realism” in the way the text is presented. Because of this, we as modern readers should view it as a secret history rather than a novel. Doing so allows us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the text as a whole and how its features offer a critique of politics, especially in terms of its narration, how its characters function, and its structure.

## CHAPTER V

### EXISTING CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF *PRIMARY COLORS*

In a similar fashion to *All the King's Men*, we can uncover much about the qualities of *Primary Colors* via the lens of secret history. Studying this text, which bears the subtitle “a novel of politics,” from this lens of secret history not only magnifies its storylines, but it can also reveal much about the significance of the events its characters encounter. This text was originally published anonymously on January 16, 1996, just days before Bill Clinton’s last State of the Union Address of his first term as President. In the months following the text’s release, many in political circles debated who the real author of *Primary Colors* might be. The debate then turned into an investigation spearheaded by The Washington Post, when Maureen Casey Owens, who is described as “a top document examiner and a past president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences” was recruited to study notes made on an early manuscript of the book and compare them with samples of the handwriting of then Newsweek columnist and CBS commentator, Joe Klein. She concluded that the two samples of handwriting were

“absolutely consistent throughout” and The Washington Post published these findings in an article titled “‘Anonymous’ Undone by His Own Hand?” on July 17, 1996. Later this day, in a news conference, Klein admitted to writing the text. When asked why he kept his identity anonymous, he claimed that he did so because he was not sure how his fiction would be received. One day later, on July 18, 1996, an article published in The New York Times reported on this “hastily called news conference” and Klein’s confession that came along with it, titling the article “Columnist’s Mea Culpa: I’m Anonymous.”

Since the text’s publication, more research appears to have gone into determining who its author was than any other aspect of the text. While there has not been an abundance of scholarly work written specifically about *Primary Colors*, the writings of three critics in particular stand out. John M. Murphy focuses on the realities the text creates, noting that writings such as this one are “acts of persuasion [which] choose elements, interpretations, and ideas to contribute to their purpose” (492) so that we as readers come to “understand the world as the text does” (493). Loren Daniel Glass covers the scandals the text chronicles, citing Bill Clinton’s claim that “even presidents have private lives” and the subsequent public debates over the division of a person’s public and private lives (198). Finally, Pat Rogers, likely thinking of the fact that *Primary Colors* was originally published anonymously, writes about the uses of anonymity as an author and makes the argument that “it is hard for a writer to make a point by withholding her or his name: the gesture is too large, and the effect too large, and uncontrollable” (243).

What none of these critics have noticed is that while *Primary Colors* does create a certain reality and chronicle particular scandals, it does not contain the defining

characteristics of the novel despite referring to itself as a novel. One such quality is realism. According to Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, "realism...[is] the defining characteristic which differentiates the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction" (10). Simply stating that "realism" is the defining characteristic of a novel needs further clarification, though. Watt provides this clarification when he states that "the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it" (11). Watt also notes that novels contain "the adaptation of prose style to give an air of complete authenticity" (27). *Primary Colors* does not contain either of these characteristics which Watt claims are essential to the novel. Though *Primary Colors* calls itself "a novel of politics," its author's note asserts that "this is a work of fiction and the usual rules apply. None of the...characters are real. None of these events ever happened" (1). When Klein states that "the usual rules apply" in this note, it is hard to know exactly what "rules" he is referring to. What is made clear, however, is that the characters and events in the text are not real. In stating this, Klein does not provide what Watt calls "an air of complete authenticity" for the text, nor does he use "realism," as readers are told that the text is not to be taken as fact or as an authentic story. So, when Klein writes that "the usual rules apply," we can infer that he is not referring to the rules of the novel which Watt set forth and which readers have come to expect from texts labeled as such. In this sense, Klein sets his text up to be interpreted as something other than a novel. No critic has addressed this aspect of the text, nor the fact that the text contains the curious author's note which is also uncharacteristic of novels. Enter the genre of secret history, which is known for the inclusion of such author's notes. Having made this initial

connection, we can explore additional understandings which can be added to the text if it was read as something more than a novel: a secret history.

According to Rebecca Bullard, “the defining characteristic of secret history...is that it brings new information to light” (39); to Maud Casey, secret history involves the use of imagined characters which “intersect with historical moments we recognize to create reverberations (as opposed to reflections) of truth, which might otherwise remain hidden in the shadows” (54). Thus, even though Joe Klein and Robert Penn Warren were probably not privy to the eighteenth-century genre of secret history, in writing their own texts of opposition/political propaganda, they create texts which a reader in the 1670’s would have seen as a secret history given the characteristics of the genre, and which feel very similar to Brémond’s critique of the court of Charles II in a text already labeled as a secret history: *Hattige or the Amours of the King of Tamaran*.

By extension, because *Primary Colors* possesses the major defining characteristics of secret history—namely an active narrator, narrative layers, and unusual character names for its imagined characters— and none of the major defining characteristics of a novel— namely “an air of complete authenticity” and an established “realism” in the way the text is presented— we as modern readers should view it as a secret history rather than a novel. Doing so allows us to gain insight into its storylines, and can reveal much about the significance of the events its characters encounter. From this insight, two aspects of the text are illuminated: the text’s ability to offer a critique of politics and its inner-workings, namely its narration, how its characters function, and its structure.

## CHAPTER VI

### RE-READING *PRIMARY COLORS* AS SECRET HISTORY

We can begin to gain a more in-depth understanding of *Primary Colors* by simply analyzing how the story is told. In a similar fashion to *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, *Primary Colors* possesses an active narrator who inserts himself into the story through the use of “I” moments. These “I” moments are harder to categorize in *Primary Colors* than those in Procopius’ text, however. Even so, we can still note some parallels in the narrative structure of both texts that can aid in our understanding of *Primary Colors*. First, we can identify the narrator’s establishing credibility by presenting himself as an observer of life or giver of facts.

The narrator of *Primary Colors*, Henry Burton, is introduced as a retired political advisor who “fled Washington after six years with Congressman William Larkin” (4) and who is presently being recruited by Governor Jack Stanton [read: Clinton] who “might or might not be running for president” (4). The text opens with Burton describing his first meeting with Stanton in great detail. Burton notes that he does not remember much about

it then, but now that he has seen Stanton “do it two million times” (3) he can tell “a whole lot” about it: if Stanton put his left hand “on your elbow, or up by your biceps...he is interested in you” (3). Burton goes on to break down the other moves made by Stanton in his handshakes, everything from “draping his left arm over your back” to “sharing a laugh or a secret...a light secret, not a real one—flattering you with the illusion of conspiracy” (3). Burton goes on to disclose everything from Stanton’s handshakes to his “aerobic listening” (4) for the next several paragraphs and, as a result, just as with the narrators of the secret histories that surfaced in the seventeenth century, we learn significantly more about Stanton than Burton.

Thinking back to the characteristics of secret history can help us to understand why Burton might be telling us this information about Stanton in such a blunt fashion: Burton is likely using these initial paragraphs to paint himself as a close observer of the life of Stanton in order to establish his credibility as a narrator by, as David Wyatt eloquently puts it, creating “the context within which he is to be understood” (1). In this case, it appears that Burton wants us to understand his narratives as observations he made by spending an abundance of time with Stanton and which he now wants to share. So, while we do not learn much about Burton other than a brief snapshot of his past in politics in these introductory paragraphs, we do learn about what he brings to the table as our narrator, namely, an abundance of knowledge about Stanton which he will gradually present to readers through the use of “I” moments like this one in which he plays the role of an observer of life/giver of facts.

Having established his credibility, Burton launches into the first of many stories about Stanton’s campaign. In this anecdote, which feels much like the anecdotes given in

*Hattige* about Charles II, Stanton visits a Harlem library's continuing education program. Here, he listens to the participant's stories about how they got lost in the education system and never learned to read, sheds tears and ensures that the attendees see these tears: "Stanton launched into motion, rubbing his cheeks off with the back of his hands—everyone knew now that he had lost it" (8). He then shares stories about his own uncle who also never learned to read and puts in a plug for why he will continue to fund programs like this one: "When people ask me, 'Jack Stanton, why are you always spending so much money and so much time and so much effort on adult literacy programs?' I tell them: Because it gives me a chance to see real courage" (9). Finally, he heads back to his hotel with the librarian running the program, who can be later seen emerging from his room "arranging herself" as Stanton "was buttoning a shirt over a hairless, pink chest" (13). In scenes such as this one, we can see first-hand one of the qualities of secret history that Bullard identifies: the offering to readers "tales of sexual as well as political intrigue gathered from the closets and bedchambers of those who occupy positions of power" (7).

As the text progresses, Burton remains our ever active narrator, presenting anecdote after anecdote like the one previously mentioned. In addition to using these anecdotes and the "I" moments he inserts within them as ways to establish himself as an observer of life or giver of facts, we can also see instances when Burton offers his opinions of others. Unlike those in Procopius' text which were often prefaced by a signal phrase such as "I am of the opinion," the opinions Burton offers are more masked, but if we can uncover them, we can come away with a better understanding of how characters like Susan Stanton function in the text.

The function of Susan Stanton in the text is also noteworthy, as she is shown to be her husband's silent accomplice and undying support system, no matter what. While Burton never directly states that he thinks Susan [read: Hillary Clinton] is all bark with little bite, he implies this in his descriptions of her and as the text winds through the events leading up to the primary election, we can easily note changes in her demeanor, as she appears to become more submissive to her husband. For example, in the duo's meeting at the beginning of the text Susan is waiting alone in the dark on the tarmac for her husband's plane to land and when it does she begins to berate Jack calling him "faithless, thoughtless, and disorganized" (17) for missing an important meeting with a group of party leaders. This does not last long, however, as all it takes is for Jack to start whistling and then singing to her, letting her know that, as Burton put it, "I know your game" (18) before she gives up her argument and falls in line with his plan. This is just the beginning of the text's unflattering portrayal of Susan. Later, we see her look the other way when Jack is accused of fathering another woman's child (193) and in the end when his victory in the primary election seems solidified, especially when another candidate drops out late in the race, Susan barely even speaks her mind anymore, but rather her actions speak louder than her words as she simply stands stoic as an ally to her husband, "an arm across his shoulders, her cheek resting atop his head" (362).

Analysis of these moments, as revealed by the narrator, can help us to understand how the character of Susan functions in the text: not as her husband's "wounded bird" as female characters were so long portrayed (Wyatt 194), but rather as his caged bird. At first glance, it appears as though Susan is the one with the real power in the Stanton household. However, it does not take long for readers to realize that she knows that the

more power her husband gains, the more power she gets in return. As such, she functions as the silent accomplice to all of her husband's actions in the text. Viewing her character in this light can help us to understand why she acts the way she does, giving up her fights and opinions easily, and why, as is previously noted, she becomes more and more submissive as the text progresses.

The other category of "I" moments which stand out when analyzed using the lens of secret history are those in which Burton uses political lingo and his prior experiences in politics to add not only more detail to the story but also more credibility and authenticity. These are the moments when Burton could be said to be working to prove what we can term his "value" as a narrator. In *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, the narrator asserts his value when he prefaces certain facts or observation he gives with statements like "I know a thousand crimes of this nature..." (150), which let readers know he is making observations based on much experience. In the case of Burton, while he does not preface his credentials as clearly, he still makes them known via the infusion of political lingo like "lulus" (22) and "scorps" (189), terms that a reader must look up to find their meanings: namely, categorizations for the different demographics a presidential candidate must seduce (literally in addition to figuratively in the case of Clinton) in order to win an election.

In addition to his use of political lingo, Burton also inserts epithets about the life of a politician, what Burton calls "the rhythms of a campaign (11): "Politicians work—they do their public work, that is—when civilians don't: mealtimes, evenings, weekends. The rest of the time, down time, is spent indoors, in hotel suites, worrying the phones, dialing for dollars, fighting over the next moves, living outside time; there are no

weekdays or weekends; there is sleep but not much rest” (11-12). Presenting the reader with political lingo and epithets not only allows Burton to establish more credibility with readers as an observer of life and giver of facts, but also to assert that the observations he is making are not ones that could be made by any onlooker. Rather, because of his many experiences in the realm of politics, he can serve as a more credible narrator than someone who has no political background and is simply a fly on the wall in the hotel room of Jack and Susan Stanton.

In addition to providing a foundation for the analysis of the narration and character functions in *Primary Colors*, reading it as a secret history can also provide some answers about why its characters were named as they were. Like *Hattige*, this text does not use the real names of the people whose lives it chronicles, and for good reason. According to Bannet, “the work of Annabel Patterson, Lois Potter, and Paul Hammond has demonstrated that political censorship and legal prosecution were largely responsible for the ubiquitous presence of political allusion, functional ambiguity, and secret writing in a variety of seventeenth-century print and manuscript genres” (368).

We can infer that a similar fear of legal prosecution or other negative repercussions led to the use of allusions to non-fictional political figures rather than the direct naming of these figures in *Primary Colors*. While it is easy to see the parallels between Jack and Susan Stanton and Bill and Hillary Clinton; Orlando Ozio and Mario Cuomo; and Cashmere McLeod and Gennifer Flowers, even the previously mentioned author’s note that prefaces the text states: “Several well-known people—journalists, mostly—make cameo appearances in these pages, but this is a work of fiction and the

usual rules apply. None of the other characters are real. None of these events ever happened” (1).

To explain why Klein might have included this author’s note and what it has to do with his naming of characters, we can look to Michael McKeon. In his text, *The Secret History of Domesticity*, McKeon notes the difference between using figures to “represent characters, and not any particular persons” and the “application of that figure to any particular person” (317). Though it seems like Klein has used figures like Jack and Susan Stanton to represent particular people, his inclusion of the author’s note makes us unable to directly claim that the Stantons represent the Clintons, as he explicitly states that no characters in the text are real, save a few journalists; and because he uses no names of real people, we can only read characters in the text as being allusions to real people, not any particular persons. In this sense, Klein uses the aforementioned ambiguity and allusion described by McKeon to protect himself from consequences just as we can guess that Brémond and other seventeenth-century writers did.

As Burton continues to reveal anecdote after anecdote, he, like the narrators in *Hattige*, details the scandals surrounding the Stantons, most of which were public knowledge when this text was released. However, the manner in which the text ends catches readers off guard. Stanton manages to keep on his feet as despite all of his missteps in the text, yet the final paragraph has him practically on his knees, begging Burton to stay with him: “I can’t *do* it without you. Don’t leave me now... You’re still with me, aren’t you? Say you are. Say you are. *Say* it” (366). Just as *Hattige* casts Charles II in a negative light, this text ends with Stanton being presented in a similar regard.

But, while *Hattige* seemed to change readers' opinions of Charles II, casting him in a negative light for the first time, *Primary Colors* does not seem to set out to do the same with Clinton. The reason for this could be the fact that Clinton's scandals were quite well-known in the public sphere before this text was released. So, while some of the anecdotes in the text reveal new information, this information is not really different from what we are used to reading about Clinton. What Klein could not have predicted was that Clinton's public image would decline even further in the coming years, as this text was published in 1996, two years prior to the emergence of information about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Interestingly, Klein's characterization of Stanton in the text's final pages when he finally begins to show signs of weakness, nearly mirrors the position in which Clinton would be found in the coming years. When it comes to Stanton, readers are left to wonder how many more scandals he will be able to weather and in doing so, while their opinions of him might not have changed, their faith in his resilience likely has. When it comes to Clinton, we were not left to wonder; instead we saw first-hand the effect his scandals had on the second term of his presidency and his public image.

The final aspect of *Primary Colors* that merits examination via the lens of secret history is the text's structure. While the storyline of *Primary Colors* does not contain narrative layers as *Hattige* did, and instead uses a single narrator who flashes back and forward to tell his story, the resulting structure of the text mirrors that of *Hattige*. In *Hattige*, the text begins with one narrator who introduces readers to the knight of Malta then eventually switches to another narrator, Razié, who tells the story of Hattige, expanding upon the first narrator's story. While Burton is the only narrator of *Primary Colors*, he begins his story with a flashback to the first time he met Jack Stanton: "As I

recall it, he gave me a left-hand-just-above-the-elbow [handshake] (3); then takes us further behind the scenes in the life and scandals of Stanton as he alternates between anecdotes from the present time, that is, during the 1992 presidential campaign, and from his past with Stanton. This switching between stories regarding Stanton's current behaviors and those from his past have a certain effect on the text: each anecdote functions as a tiny crack in the foundation of Stanton's image and all of the cracks together result in what seems to be his inevitable crumbling, which we can begin to predict in the text's previously referenced final pages and which history proved to be true after the text's publication.

What is noteworthy about the anecdotes which seem to stand out the most in *Primary Colors* is the fact that they closely parallel those which stood out in *Hattige*. For example, we previously visited the moment when "the King of Tamaran took his Crown from his head and put it on Hattige's" (Brémond 22), which could be read as a sign the king's submission to Villiers. In *Primary Colors*, we can visit a similar moment when Jack Stanton submits to Susan after an accusation has been made that he had an affair with Susan's hairdresser and she stands up for him: "Suddenly, Susan jumped in: 'You are making an assumption...untrustworthiness? It's the exact opposite: this man does not give up. He will work through the rough times...'" (123-24). Given that Susan speaks better on Jack's behalf than he manages to do on his own, Burton rightfully notes at the end of this anecdote that "she had made the sharpest response of the show. She had the sound bite. She came off looking fine. He, on the other hand, was a runner-up for best supporting actor. When the lights went off, she dropped his hand as if it were a dead rat" (124). Just as was the case with Charles II and Barbara Palmer, Duchess of Cleveland, in

this anecdote, Susan seems to have power over Jack. We can infer that if Jack had a crown, he certainly would have put it on Susan's head in this moment.

This moment in particular is interesting to note because it differs from the way in which Susan is portrayed in the text as a whole, given that she usually comes across as Jack's "caged bird" who always submits to him. This makes the anecdote stand out even more as a moment of weakness and submission on Jack's part and serves as an example of how the depiction of promiscuity has changed from the time of Charles II to the time of Bill Clinton. While promiscuity was equated with power for both Charles II and Palmer in *Hattige*, this was not the case in *Primary Colors*. According to Hesketh Pearson's *Charles II: His Life and Likeness*, "during the English Restoration period, the term 'rake' was used glamorously: the Restoration rake is a carefree, witty, sexually irresistible aristocrat typified by Charles II...who combined riotous living with intellectual pursuits and patronage of the arts" (56). However, according to Pearson, "after the reign of Charles II, and especially after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the rake was perceived negatively and became the butt of moralistic tales" (56). Indeed, when the accusation that Jack had an affair with Susan's hairdresser surfaces, Jack seems to lose respect, and even power, becoming "runner-up for best supporting actor" (Klein 124). And, while Jack loses power, Susan gains it. In *Hattige*, Palmer was depicted as powerful and promiscuous from the text's first page to its last. In *Primary Colors*, Susan's power is not shown initially, but rather her capitulation. However, as the text progresses, it appears as though Susan's power is gradually built up until this moment when it is released. She does not need to be promiscuous to be powerful. In fact, it is her clean reputation next to her husband's now tarnished one, that allows her to "[come] off

looking fine” (124) while her husband is left unable to save face. Even Susan seems to acknowledge this fact, as she is said to “[drop] his hand as if it were a dead rat” (124) after the interview is finished and the cameras have moved away from them.

Beyond the flashback and flash forward anecdotes that become the building blocks of the structure of *Primary Colors*, there is a final aspect of the text’s structure that merits recognition. Even though *Primary Colors* does not possess narrative layers like those in *Hattige*, the text still uses specific narrative tactics which function as another way to protect Klein from consequences. These narrative tactics serve as a layer of smoke that hangs between what the text discloses and what Klein could be accused of disclosing.

The most notable of these tactics can be seen by analysis of who reveals what in the text. A close reading of the biggest scandals unveiled in the novel will show that Burton is never the first to break the news. For example, when it is revealed that the aforementioned hairdresser who accused Jack of infidelity claims to have tapes with evidence of his infidelity which she intends to show at a press conference, it is not Burton who initially informs readers of it, but rather his assistant Libby (121). This further protects Klein from accusations.

While who reveals the scandals chronicled in *Primary Colors* is important to study, what is even more important is what the text reveals as a whole, namely an unflattering portrait of the controversies surrounding Jack Stanton and his rise to the presidency. Beyond this, it is also worthwhile to consider the text through the lens of secret history and take note of what this lens can help us to better understand in the text.

In the case of *Primary Colors*, reading it as a secret history can lead us to a more detailed understanding of its narration, how its characters function, and its structure.

Without this lens, *Primary Colors* appears simply as Murphy sees it: “an act of persuasion” which chooses “elements, interpretations, and ideas” that contribute to its purpose (492) so that we as readers come to “understand the world as the text does” (493). *Primary Colors* is an act of persuasion, but it is also much more than that. As Wyatt explains, any text worth reading hides some kind of secret history in plain sight (11). In the case of *Primary Colors*, it does not hide a *kind* of secret history within its pages, but rather the *qualities* of secret histories. Identifying these qualities in *Primary Colors* and then reading the text through the lens of secret history allows us to magnify certain aspects of it. In fact, the text appears even more aligned with the genre of secret history and thus would be better labeled as such than as “a novel of politics.” In this sense, secret history can serve as a set of binoculars which make lucid the text’s use of political propaganda and allusions.

This magnification of certain aspects of the text can first be seen in the anecdotes provided by narrator Henry Burton whose active presence offers modern readers “tales of sexual as well as political intrigue gathered from the closets and bedchambers of those who occupy positions of power” (Bullard 7), just as the narrator of *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian* offered readers in the eighteenth century the same tales. Beyond providing us with a more in-depth understanding of the narration of *Primary Colors*, reading it as a secret history can also provide information about how its characters function, namely, how Jack and Susan Stanton, in a similar fashion to the King of

Tamaran and Hattige, are allusions to non-fictional figures and how their portrayals provide “reverberations” as opposed to “reflections” (Casey 54) of the truth about them.

Given these new understandings about *Primary Colors* when it is read as a secret history, we can conclude that although secret history is a genre that lies “in the margins of literary history” (Carnell 6), in the case of works like Klein’s *Primary Colors*, these margins merit examination, as the information they hold has much power to increase our understanding of and ability to fully interpret texts and the characteristics of secret histories which they possess: their events, their narration, and their characters.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

For many readers and even critics, the works *All the Kings Men* and *Primary Colors* stood out as different in their style and structure from other works; they rose above the novelistic fictions surrounding them. The “double lives” they chronicled served to magnify the effect that power can have on people: both in terms of how they use it and how they abuse it, a precise quality of the secret histories that proceeded them. This chronicling of power and those who have it is what the genre of secret history offers to us as readers: to Bullard, “it brings new information to light” (39), to Casey, it “creates reverberations as opposed to reflections of truth” (54), and for modern texts like *All the King’s Men* and *Primary Colors*, it brings into our consciousness information that might otherwise remain outside our realm of awareness. Although Robert Penn Warren and Joe Klein might not have set out to write secret histories and in fact, might not have even known this genre existed, both penned texts which would have likely been read as secret histories had they been written two hundred years earlier, as they contain the structural

characteristics of secret histories which I have identified: active narrators, narrative layers, and unusual character names. Studying the characteristics of secret histories as they are seen in *All the King's Men* and *Primary Colors* helps us to see the manner in which texts can offer us the all-important alternate points of view on which our society thrives. By acknowledging this genre and its place in these contemporary works, scholars of twentieth century literature can present a more well-rounded analysis and categorization of these texts and answer the lingering questions that exist about their double storylines, disparate parts, narration, and character names. Indeed all of these characteristics which have troubled modern critics would not have troubled readers of seventeenth century secret histories. This shows the value in removing secret history from the margins of literary criticism and reinstating it into the conversation surrounding contemporary texts.

In noting the emergence of the aforementioned narrative techniques which characterize secret histories in modern texts, we can learn much about how such texts function in terms of their passing on of crucial information from author to reader. It is from this information that we can then uncover an important angle of political commentary that these texts possess. In doing so, we also see firsthand the manner in which every political moment makes use of the genre of secret history in some way, and that, despite the term's disparagement, secret history has not slipped from existence, and in fact, its basic components and characteristics are growing increasingly popular in contemporary America. As long as there exist secrets, scandals, and those who chronicle them, there will exist secret history.

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