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CHRISTOPHER FOX

Introduction

"When a true Genius appears in the World," Swift wrote, "you may know him by this infallible Sign; that the Dunces are all in Confederacy against him"(*PW* I: 242). He may well have been speaking about himself. After his death, his ghost was said to haunt the aisles of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, complaining that "The Pamphlets wrote against me, would have form'd a Library."[1] Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) lived a contentious life in a contentious age. The day Swift, an ordained Anglican priest, became Dean of St. Patrick's in 1713, these lines of welcome were said to be posted on the Cathedral gate:

> Look down St. *Patrick*, look we pray,
> On thine own *Church* and Steeple,
> Convert thy Dean, on *this great* Day,
> Or else *God help* the People.[2]

Swift of course invited and sometimes even welcomed this response. He did so because he was first and foremost a political writer, and one who was not afraid to speak truth to power. As a political writer, Swift was a brilliant controversialist with an uncanny ability to become what he attacked and then burrow from within. During his lifetime, political writers were at a premium. Swift lived to see the emergence of the new two-party system in the wake of the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the explosion of print media after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. These contributed to what Jürgen Habermas has called the "growth of the public sphere."[3] In a new world of opinion-making, writers of Swift's caliber were highly sought after by politicians such as Robert Harley (later Earl of Oxford) who understood the power of the press to shape public perception.[4] As David Oakleaf points out in this volume, in writing for Harley and the Tory administration in the last four years of Queen Anne (1710–14), Swift "attacked what he called faction with a partisan vehemence unsurpassed even in a vehement and partisan age"

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(p. 45 below). In the partisan world of party politics, the counter-attacks on Swift were fierce. "Wild Beasts are reckon'd sporting Creatures, and must be kill'd fairly," writes one opponent of Swift in 1714, "but others that are Ravenous and Cruel, are knock'd down . . . as we can find them. I have an Adversary that claims a Place in the last Class."[5]

Swift's move in the same years to the Tory party, after his early allegiance to the Whigs, was neither forgiven nor forgotten. Francis Jeffrey was still complaining about it a century later. "In public life, we do not know where we could have found any body," he said in 1816, who so "openly deserted and libelled his party." Whatever may be Swift's merits as a writer, "we do not hesitate to say, that he was despicable as a politician, and hateful as a man."[6] Calling this attack on Swift "a sharp, slashing, libelous assault, as if he were in the dock, and somebody had hired a rhetorician to get him hanged," one nineteenth-century commentator would remark: "It is not to be wondered at that Swift has had various treatment. You know he acted in public life with the Tory party; so of course the Whigs assail him."[7] The critic, William Hazlitt, would agree that Jeffrey "does not seem to have forgotten the party politics of Swift" and add that "I do not carry my political resentments so far back: I can at this time of day forgive Swift for having been a Tory."[8] Few showed such tolerance. And the winners – the Whigs, as Herbert Butterfield reminds us – wrote the history.[9] Years after Hazlitt, in the same *Edinburgh Review* in which Jeffrey had written, Macaulay would continue to refer to Swift as "the apostate politician" with "a heart burning with hatred against the whole human race . . ."[10]

In looking at Swift, it is important to recall this highly politicized early history and the ways in which he was written into it and out of it. Macaulay's comment points to another factor, besides partisan politics, that has shaped and sometimes slanted representations of Swift and his work. This is the author's reputed misanthropy, usually connected with his critique of the then-emerging belief in human benevolence. In Swift's view, human nature was radically flawed from the start.[11] As a moralist, he inherited a tradition that saw human nature itself as inherently self-serving and corrupt, and the original sin, pride, as a "main cause of psychological distortion," of "prejudice, misperception, misunderstanding, and worse, delusion, in one's thinking about oneself and everything else."[12] In a letter to Alexander Pope on September 29, 1725, Swift tied this view to his best-known work, *Gulliver's Travels*: "I have got Materials Towards a Treatis proving the falsity of that Definition *animal rationale*; and to show it should be only *rationis capax*. Upon this great foundation of Misanthropy (though not in Timons manner) The Whole building of my Travels is erected" (*C* III: 103). Timon of Athens,

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the subject of works by Lucian and Shakespeare, was the archetypal hater of humankind. In his letter, Swift differentiates his own position from Timon's by arguing that he does not hate specific people; he just does not expect very much from them. Man is not a rational animal (*animal rationale*) but an animal capable of reason (*rationis capax*). Swift would later tell Pope and his friends that "after all I do not hate Mankind, it is vous autres [you others] who hate them because you would have them reasonable Animals, and are angry for being disappointed. I have always rejected that Definition and made another of my own" (*C* III: 118).

Swift's ideas here were not always shared by others, especially those beginning to entertain newer views of human nature. In his time, thinkers such as the third Earl of Shaftesbury were arguing that, far from being selfish and fallen, human nature is basically benevolent. Perhaps the only fall we have experienced is the belief that we are fallen. These ideas would later be developed by writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who would argue that not people but the institutions that surround them are corrupt. By the middle of Swift's century, the belief in human benevolence began to carry the day, as did a new stress on the importance on the individual. This brought with it a corresponding redefinition of pride. During the eighteenth century, this first medieval sin became the main modern virtue and the cornerstone of the new individualism.

This helps explain one reason why Swift was soon maligned as a misanthrope. In the first full-length critical consideration of the author – *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Jonathan Swift* (1751) – the Earl of Orrery took the newer path and found Swift's satire on human pride and pretense in *Gulliver's Travels* to be "a real insult upon mankind." In the story of the humanoid and grotesque Yahoos in Book IV especially, Orrery says, Swift "has indulged a misanthropy that is intolerable. The representation which he has given us of human nature, must terrify, and even debase the mind of the reader who views it." Though consistent with centuries of Christian belief in original sin, Swift's satire was linked by Orrery instead to a pathological "disposition" that caused the author "to ridicule human nature itself."[13]

Friends of Swift rushed to correct this view, among them Patrick Delany, who argued that far from being a misanthrope, the author of *Gulliver's Travels* managed "to do more charities, in a greater variety of ways . . . than perhaps any other man of his fortune in the world."[14] Along with giving away much of what he earned to the Dublin poor, Swift left his entire fortune to found the first mental hospital in Ireland, St. Patrick's Hospital (which is still there). As he had said himself:

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> He gave what little wealth he had,
> To build a house for fools and mad:
> And showed by one satiric touch,
> No nation wanted it so much.
> (*Poems* 498)

Challenging the charge of misanthropy, others would point to Swift's wide circle of friends, both male and female. (As Margaret Doody suggests in this volume, Swift's friendship with women was something Lord Orrery simply could not understand.) Still others would note the love fellow Irish Protestants showed Swift after he had vigorously defended them against English authorities in *The Drapier's Letters* of 1724–25, where he had argued that "in *Reason*, all *Government* without the Consent of the *Governed*, is the *very Definition of Slavery*" (*PW* x: 63). After traveling to London in 1726 to drop off the manuscript of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift returned home (if the report can be believed) in triumph:

> In his return to Dublin, upon notice that the ship in which he sailed was in the bay, several heads of different corporations, and principal citizens of Dublin went out to meet him in a great number of wherries engaged for that purpose, in order to welcome him back. He had the pleasure to find his friend Dr. Sheridan, in company with a number of his intimates, at the side of the ship, ready to receive him into their boat, with the agreeable tidings that [his friend Stella, who had been ill] was past all danger. The boats, adorned with streamers, and colours . . . made a fine appearance; and thus was the Drapier brought to his landing-place in a kind of triumph, where he was received on shore by a multitude of his grateful countrymen, by whom he was conducted to his house amid repeated acclamations, of *Long live the Drapier*. The bells were set a ringing, and bonfires kindled in every street.[15]

Somehow, this does not accord with Lord Orrery's misanthrope. But Orrery's view prevailed.

The hostile response to Swift that began to set in from several fronts was reinforced by stories surrounding the tragic circumstances of his last years. In 1742, at age seventy-five, in an action taken by his friends to protect him, Swift was legally declared *non compos mentis* or of "unsound mind and memory." After three more years of deafness and ghastly suffering, Swift died (in Johnson's words) "a driveller and a show."[16] Soon after his death and the publication of Orrery's *Remarks*, Swift came to be pictured as one of his own dark creations, a decrepit and deranged old Strudlbrugg or a dirty and disgusting Yahoo. As Allen Reddick points out, Swift's protracted final illness and death "became a cautionary tale told over and over again" as a moral exemplum and a just punishment for his misanthropy. Focusing on

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Swift's own bodily and intellectual decay "provided something of a relief, particularly from the burdens and direction of his satire and his peculiar use of wit." The "insistence and consistency with which moralizing on Swift's protracted illness and death was substituted for discussion of his works is," Reddick notes, "remarkable."[17]

In his chapter in this volume, Seamus Deane would add that focusing on Swift's illness or madness or eccentricity or (more recently) energy has allowed readers to avoid the material and political dimension of Swift's writing, by doing something not unlike what Orrery did, reducing it to the pathological. Even the critic who begins to locate Swift in his "historical circumstances," says Deane, can then imply "that there is in his writings something fierce and repellent the explanation for which must be sought beyond history. This alternative source is Swift's psyche, to which many commentators have claimed special access" (p. 243).

This is particularly true of assessments of Swift as a distinctly *Irish* writer. His writings on Irish matters have tended to be seen as simply "occasions for Swift's satire, rather than objects of it."[18] *A Modest Proposal* (1729) for instance has often been read in complete isolation from its Irish context and reduced to a model exercise in irony or an amusing example of Swift's perversity (or both, ending with the latter). In his chapter in this volume, however, Patrick Kelly shows that this same pamphlet was published in Dublin during the second worst famine in the century, brought about by "the series of bad harvests and severe climatic conditions which had started in 1725 (and would continue to the summer of 1729)" (p. 138 below). Conditions were so dire that Dublin streets were said to be "crowded with living spectres" in search of food: "If they happen to hear of the death of a horse, they run to it as to a feast" (*E* III: 627).

Here and elsewhere in his writing on Irish political economy, Swift does not simply blame the weather for the situation. "As to this country," he wrote Pope from Ireland on August 11, 1729, "there have been three terrible years dearth of corn, and every place strowed with beggars, but dearths are common in better climates, and our evils here lie much deeper. Imagine a nation the two-thirds of whose revenues are spent out of it, and who are not permitted to trade with the other third" (*C* III: 341). As Swift saw it, English colonial restrictions on trade and Ireland's failure to protect herself had compounded a situation so terrible that the only option left the Irish was to sell their own babies – to the butcher. "I have been assured by a very knowing *American* of my Acquaintance in *London*," the narrator of the *Modest Proposal* asserts, "that a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether *Stewed, Roasted, Baked*, or *Boiled*; and, I make no doubt, that it will

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equally serve in a *Fricasie*, or *Ragoust*." He offers to "*publick Consideration*" that

> of the Hundred and Twenty Thousand Children, already computed, Twenty Thousand may be reserved for Breed; whereof only one Fourth Part to be Males . . . [for] *one Male* will be sufficient to serve *four Females*. That the remaining Hundred thousand, may, at a Year old, be offered in Sale to the *Persons of Quality* and *Fortune*, through the Kingdom; always advising the Mother to let them suck plentifully in the last Month, as to render them plump, and fat for a good Table. A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind Quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Pepper or Salt, will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in *Winter*. (*PW* XII: 111–12)

Other end products could result. The skin for instance could be used to make "admirable *Gloves for Ladies*" or kid gloves (*PW* XII: 112). The modest proposer's scheme of improvement would allow Ireland to be self-sufficient down to the very bone. After promoting his plan and enumerating its many benefits, the proposer concludes with a solemn oath "in the Sincerity of my Heart" that his project is solely intended for "the *publick Good*" and not personal benefit: "I have no Children, by which I can propose to get a single Penny; the youngest being nine Years old, and my Wife past Child-bearing" (*PW* XII: 118).

A reader might ask whose children would *not* be eaten, which calls into question the proposer's own stated disinterestedness. As a satirist, Swift delighted in puncturing inflated claims to purely altruistic acts.[19] The "reasonable Dish" of course seems less reasonable than he suggests; but it is in line with the respectable economic theory that people are the wealth of the nation. The work takes this literally. It also takes a cannibalism charge – directed historically at the native Irish – and turns it back on the English colonial rulers and absentee landlords. These are the real eaters, Swift implies, who are already consuming Ireland and her people, and doing so out of mean self-interest disguised as rational economic policy.

Samuel Johnson observed that the ancients guess, the moderns count.[20] The almost obsessive use of numbers in the above passage and throughout the tract identifies the modest proposer as a modern counter, an economic "projector" in the mode of Sir William Petty, author of such works as *Political Arithmetick* (1690) and *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* (1691). In *A History of The Modern Fact*, Mary Poovey finds Petty's basic "theoretical proposition" to be "that the 'value' of human beings themselves should be figured in monetary, not religious or ethical terms." She also points to

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Petty's hope that Ireland itself could become "a kind of laboratory, where . . . economic 'experiments' could be made to yield usable results."[21]

The modest proposer would agree, on both counts. His plan to turn human beings into saleable commodities demonstrates a concern for what he calls "The Number of Souls in *Ireland*" not the souls in Ireland (*PW* XII: 110–11). In Swift's satire, of course, this experiment will yield no results (or results anyone can live with). The modest proposer's numbers do not add up to reason but to madness; as elsewhere in Swift, benevolence masks a form of brutality. Along with a theory that produces a graveyard, Swift shows Ireland to be the graveyard of theory, the place where projects (including many of his own schemes for improvement) die.[22] Most disconcerting is the deadpan prose, the seemingly neutral, impartial, and quantitative language of the proposal itself, starkly demonstrating what Emer Nolan describes as Swift's ability "to apply polite styles to intractable realities."[23] This contributes to the work's lasting power. At a reopening of Dublin's Gaiety Theatre in 1984, without announcing what he was doing, actor Peter O'Toole read from the *Modest Proposal* and "prompted a mass walk-out of dignitaries." In a newspaper report on the incident, "O'Toole Defends 'Disgusting' Reading," the actor claimed that he wanted to capture Swift's savage indignation by reciting a piece that had "a little something to offend everybody."[24] If this episode suggests anything, it is Swift's ability to literally move an audience hundreds of years after his death.

More could be said about the *Modest Proposal*. But enough has been said to highlight the importance of Irish contexts to Swift's work. A native Dubliner, Swift spent most of his long life there, much of it politically engaged. For that reason, chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift* by Carole Fabricant, Patrick Kelly, and Seamus Deane explore, in different ways, the centrality of this experience to the author and his work. Though often unnoticed, Swift's connection with Ireland is also apparent in works written during his residence in England, as Carole Fabricant suggests. She and other contributors also address the vexed issue of Swift's Anglo-Irish identity. Historically, Swift has been variously pictured, on one hand, as an Englishman stranded in Ireland and, on the other, as the first Irish nationalist (or sometimes something in between, a so-called colonial nationalist). In recent postcolonial studies, he has been represented as a voice of liberty and an originator of the so-called "Patriot" cause in Ireland at the same time he has been portrayed as an arch defender of the English Pale and Protestant Ascendancy interests.

We can thus add the Irish patriot and the English colonialist to the often contradictory but consistently contested images we have seen – the apostate politician pilloried by the Whigs, the pathological misanthrope pictured by

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Lord Orrery, the mad Yahoo punished for his critique of human pride. Many more "Swifts" would be constructed, some into our own time, often to suit a specific cultural or political purpose. During Cold War days and the 1960s, for example, Swift served the conservative cause as an arch critic of totalitarianism *and* the liberal cause as an arch critic of war and the moneychangers who make a killing on it.

In the opening chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, Joseph McMinn says that Swift "realized that his life would become as contentious as his work, and that he would be recreated and reinvented by friends and enemies alike" (p. 14). In the ways he pictured himself and his work, Swift also tried (successfully at times, unsuccessfully at others) to control future representations. How else for instance can we account for Swift's long poem, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, describing his relationship with one of the two young women who followed him to Dublin to live out their lives? In what sense was Swift here, as Margaret Doody asks (p. 99), "less of a Priest and more of a Beast"? Swift's relations with and representations of women have generated their own contested set of after-images, among these, the misogynist author of excremental poetry – "Nor, wonder how I lost my wits; / Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits"(*Poems* 466) – or the polygamous lover and putative hero of such scandalous tales as the *Memoirs Of the Amours and Intrigues of A Certain Irish Dean* (1728).[25] In recent discussions, feminists have found him both friend and foe. In her exploration of Swift's complex relationships with women – relatives, friends, lovers, and authors – Doody adds significantly to this ongoing debate. Her examination of the manuscript of Swift's own autobiographical statement, "The Family of Swift," opens up new ways of looking at his work.

So does Brean Hammond's chapter on Swift's reading, a subject that has been recently advanced by the collective efforts of an international group of scholars associated with the Ehrenpreis Center for Swift Studies in Germany. Looking at what Swift read does not always help with the more difficult question of what he *did* with what he read, as Hammond notes. But it does help us understand how Swift negotiated his own relation to tradition and to classical, continental, and contemporary writers. Much of Swift's reading was not in what we have come to call "literature" but in history, itself intricately connected, as David Oakleaf adds, to Swift's view of politics. Oakleaf also stresses a point sometimes missed: that Swift's political writing is *always* connected with religion. From his early and brilliant *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* to his later anti-Presbyterian tracts of the 1730s, Swift defended the established church – particularly the Church of Ireland – with all the resources at his disposal. As Marcus Walsh suggests

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here, when Swift took his first Church of Ireland post in 1695, "he joined an embattled institution, under severe economic strain, politically dominated by England and the English church hierarchy, struggling to maintain its devotional and pastoral position as a minority group of believers amongst indigenous Roman Catholics and immigrant Presbyterians" (p. 162). Though not always acknowledged or sufficiently understood, Swift's switch to the Tories had much or almost everything to do with the Whigs' endorsement of toleration for religious dissenters in Ireland. This would, Swift believed, destroy the established church in Ireland by tilting the balance of power to the Scots Presbyterians, who had large numbers in the north.[26] Walsh and Oakleaf also note the strong connection Swift saw between church and state, a point that undergirds his conservative views on such issues as toleration and censorship.

Swift's career as a cleric is also connected to his career as a satirist, as Michael Suarez argues. In this context, satire's end is not simply condemnation. Rather, satire makes us think critically, instills or restores an awareness of choices. Suarez also notes the connection between language, religion, and politics which, for Swift, are "not strictly divisible, but all intricately linked as integral parts of human endeavor" (p. 112). This link is also evident in Swift's extensive discussion of language in such works as *A Proposal for Correcting . . . the English Tongue* (1712) or *A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Enter'd into Holy Orders* (1721). In the latter, Swift tells the young clergyman that "Proper Words in proper Places, makes the true Definition of a Stile" (*PW* IX: 65). The master of the so-called plain style himself, Swift's own prose is often deceptively simple, as Ian Higgins argues, particularly in a highly politicized age. Although Swift "preferred a plain style, he hardly practiced plain statement. Beneath the seeming simplicity of his concise plain style is a challenging complexity." His conservative theory of language "coexists" with a "love of verbal play" that often got him into trouble (p. 149). This was particularly true, as Judith Mueller argues, in his brilliant early satire on abuses in religion and learning, *A Tale of A Tub* (1704). A defense of the established church, the ironic play of wit here led Swift's work to be criticized by a contemporary as "one of the Prophanest Banters upon the Religion of *Jesus Christ*" ever written and its author to be caricatured as an atheist priest.[27] Swift's lifelong fascination with puns and codes and the play of language is culturally and politically inflected, as several contributors suggest. Carole Fabricant points to the number of Irish rhymes in Swift's verse. Ian Higgins sees in Swift's coded language a thread of high Tory Jacobitism. After his association with Harley's Tory ministry, Swift was certainly accused of being a Jacobite, that is, of supporting the ousted Stuarts over the reigning

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Hanoverians. Whether Swift was a Jacobite remains a debated issue, as is the precise nature of his allegiance to the Whigs or the Tories.[28]

Historically, Swift the prose stylist has often eclipsed Swift the poet. As several chapters suggest, however, Swift's poetry has been widely read and more influential than often noticed. Margaret Doody for example shows how Swift's octosyllabic form and subjects opened up spaces for later women writers. Carole Fabricant finds a fascinating Irish aesthetic in Swift's poetry, one that differs significantly from Pope's. Brean Hammond discusses Swift's "Beast's Confession to a Priest" as a veritable handbook of Swiftian satire, and his mock use of Ovidian metamorphoses in "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" (a poem in which a woman literally takes herself apart). Michael Suarez explores the rich wildness of Swift's *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, an account of his own death and the reaction to it published when he was very much alive. In a wide-ranging chapter, the editor of Swift's poems, Pat Rogers, considers some neglected verse of Swift and looks at it in new ways. As Rogers and other contributors point out, the poetry itself richly repays reading.

Much of Swift's poetry was written late in life, in his sixties, and well after the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726. This seems to counter Orrery's myth of the deranged old man in the last two decades of his life. As J. Paul Hunter points out here, Swift was highly prolific for many of these years, before age and ailments (particularly his lifelong battle with a condition now called Ménière's Syndrome) got the best of him. Published when he was fifty-nine, *Gulliver's Travels* was a sensation. John Mullan elsewhere notes that over 100 separate editions of *Gulliver's Travels* were published by 1815 and 330 versions after it, making it easily the best-selling work of prose fiction produced in the eighteenth century.[29] Along with its popularity, it also created controversy in an age when – as Hunter comments – "any published text of any significance was immediately identified with some party or ideology and quickly both praised and denounced for whatever its loyalties and implications were perceived to be" (pp. 218–19). Since its publication, Swift's book has continued to generate debate. In our own time, *Gulliver's Travels* has sparked lively discussion among feminists, historians of politics, historians of science, and literary and cultural theorists. Like other writings of Swift, it finds a place in recent critical, cultural, and political debates over Anglo-Irish relations, the role of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, and the nature of political economy, as well as in theoretical discussions of colonialism, modernity, and enlightenment.

If the past is any indication, Swift in the future will remain a controversial and contested figure. It is part of his jagged legacy. His work will no doubt be at the center of emerging debates on such issues as the relations between

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