

Ireland's Enigmatic Dean :

A Review of *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript* by Stephen Karian

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Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) is the foremost satirist in the English language.¹⁾ While his best book, the brilliant and profoundly subversive *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), is not as well known as it deserves to be, many will be familiar with works such as *A Modest Proposal* (1729) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).²⁾ Although a renowned author, he was by profession a clergyman — he was Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin from 1713, and is still known as the Dean.

Swift's life and work is often divided into a late Stuart or English period and, after the death of Queen Anne, an early Georgian or Irish period. He was born in Ireland, a member of the Protestant elite, that is, of the Anglican Anglo-Irish establishment. Since his father died before he was born, he lived on the charity of his relatives in straitened circumstances. Nevertheless, his education was, by the standards of the times, excellent. He attended Kilkenny School and then Trinity College, Dublin, graduating from the latter in 1686 and continuing his graduate studies there until the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the civil war in Ireland that broke out as a result. Many Irish Protestants moved to England (or Scotland), among them Swift, who was employed by Sir William Temple, a position which he held for a decade until 1699, when Temple died. Swift completed his education at Temple's estate, Moor Park, in Surrey, where he worked as Temple's amanuensis, had access to his private library, and was exposed to a sophisticated world of letters and political influence. Temple was — must have been — a significant influence. He had been a successful Whig statesman, a diplomat known in Europe, and in retirement was a man of letters. The new king, William III, consulted with him, and the two were seen as friends.

Although Swift received a first-class education thanks to a wealthy uncle, he seems not to have had the loving emotional support he must have craved as a young boy. Temple might have been a second father-figure, but his protégé again seems to have thirsted for an emotional attachment, and resented the subordinate position in which he found himself. In 1711, Swift was to say that he “would not be treated like a school-boy” again, having put up with such treatment from Temple.³⁾

After Temple's death, Swift returned to Ireland with the Earl of Berkeley, for whom he worked as chaplain and secretary. Although he had aspired to a position in England, he settled for the living of Laracor in 1700. The new Vicar of Laracor frequented London and, from 1707 to 1709, lived in London as the representative of the Church of Ireland. Here, he published several early works, such as the Bickerstaff pieces in 1708 and 1709 and also the

wonderful poems “A Description of the Morning” (1709) and “A Description of a City Shower” (1710), both of which appeared in Richard Steele’s *The Tattler*⁴⁾. He developed a close friendship with the Whig *literati*, and in particular Joseph Addison. However, in 1710, when the Tory ministry led by Robert Harley and Henry St. John was formed, he emerged as an influential political player, editing the Tory journal *The Examiner* and writing for the Tory administration. When Queen Anne died in 1714, the Tory ministry collapsed. The accession of George I shut the Tories out of power for a generation, and Swift went into what he saw as “exile” in Ireland. Apart from two short trips to England, he spent the rest of his life in the country of his birth. The loss of political influence was a tremendous shock — he published nothing for several years — but when he again took up his pen, it was to write on Irish issues, and against the authorities in Dublin and London. He also further developed a new type of verse that in style and perhaps especially in content was quite distinctly his own. If he is little regarded as a poet today, it is only because his prose satires cast his other achievements deep into shadow.

Much of his writing consists of scabrous diatribe against the vices and follies of mankind. In his “Life of Swift”, Samuel Johnson wrote, “perhaps no writer can easily be found that has borrowed so little, or that in all his excellencies and all his defects has so well maintained his claim to be considered as original⁵⁾”. It is Swift’s originality that makes him enigmatic. For instance, critical analyses of his “excremental vision”, to use John Middleton Murry’s phrase, differ sharply in their interpretation.⁶⁾ One group of critics (including Murry) argues that it signifies misogyny, misanthropy, and madness. Another group however views this vision as a crucial literary device. Scholars are still debating a wide range of issues, from broad questions, such as the nature of his politics, to narrower ones, such as whether Swift meant to depict the land of the Houyhnhnms as a utopia or a dystopia.

It is this exuberant, carnal, indecorous, and very funny author who is discussed by Stephen Karian. His *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript* begins as follows. “This book explores the uses of print and manuscript throughout Jonathan Swift’s career. Its central premise is that our understanding of Swift as an author is incomplete without attending to both print and manuscript circulation as well as to their complex intersection⁷⁾”. Karian attempts to demonstrate what new light can be shed on Swift through an analysis of manuscript circulation and the interaction between print and manuscript texts. This results in a rare occurrence in Swift studies — the unveiling of a new direction, a new way of approaching him. Of course, the Dean is an author about whom our understanding will always be incomplete, if only because much of his writing, and in particular his satire, is so complex and ambiguous. Nevertheless, Karian’s examination does provide fresh insights. His book is structured very much like the PhD dissertation I assume it once was. It begins with a brief theoretical framework, moves on to an examination of historical context, and finally deals with his case studies, three individual poems (“On Poetry: A Rapsody” (1733), “The Legion Club” (1736), and “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” (1731)), each of which is discussed in an independent chapter. The argument developed within this straightforward structure is intriguing. Karian believes that the relationship between manuscript and

print is significant. Through a close attention to the fluid interaction and interrelationships between print and manuscript texts, and to the dissemination and reception of Swift's writings, Karian clarifies the complex process of composition, transmission, (private manuscript) reception, revision, and (public print) reception. He is working on a large electronic archive, the *Swift Poems Project*, which perhaps explains why he pays so much more attention to Swift's poems than to his prose (none of his three case studies were ever printed by Swift in complete form in an authorised version, which may also explain why these were chosen).

In a letter to his friend Alexander Pope, Swift wrote in September 1725 that he was working on *Gulliver's Travels* and that the four parts were "intended for the press when the world shall deserve them, or rather when a Printer shall be found brave enough to venture his Eares⁸⁾". In matters of both religion and state, a sharp line delineated legitimate, orthodox opinion and illegitimate heterodoxy. Official orthodoxies limited what could be published, and so promoted both circumspection in printing, and the circulation of heterodox and forbidden texts, the hand-written manuscripts and anonymous publications that were the *samizdat* of the day.

Swift's writings have always been controversial. Indeed, at two times in his life, the authorities offered a price of £300 for information leading to his arrest. In 1713, a reward of £300 was offered to whomsoever revealed the identity of the author of the political pamphlet, *The Publick Spirit of the Whigs*. Swift was not identified as the author, and so was saved. In 1724, the fourth of the Drapier's letters was also judged to be seditious. A reward of £300 was once again offered, this time for information leading to the discovery of the Drapier's identity. Again, no one was willing to betray Swift. As he was later to boast in his magnificent "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift", "Two Kingdoms, just as Faction led, / Had set a Price upon his Head; / But, not a Traytor cou'd be found, / To sell him for Six Hundred Pound⁹⁾".

Over a long life, Swift published in a number of genres both in print and in manuscript, and published a variety of texts, from those that were politically acceptable to those that were libelous and even seditious. After 1714, as a suspected Jacobite, he was the target of government surveillance. His mail was intercepted, and he had to safeguard himself against government searches of his home. He had to ask himself how to deal with government threats to his ability to express himself and what he was willing to risk — a great deal, it must be said: he was certainly a very courageous writer. Karian walks us through the various strategies that Swift used.

First, he could publish. Various devices were used to avoid public censure and the threat of government prosecution and censorship. A combative polemicist, he sought to create buffers between himself and the long arm of the state when writing and then publishing heterodox texts. Many of his works were published under various pseudonyms — in his *Dunciad*, Alexander Pope addresses Swift as "Dean, Drapier, Bickerstaff, or Gulliver!¹⁰⁾". An examination of Swift's relationship with loyal booksellers and printers helps explain how he maintained his anonymity. He was protected by those he worked with, and it was the

booksellers and printers who faced the wrath of the authorities. Moreover, in addition to the genuine publisher, “trade publishers”, individuals who allowed their names to be printed at the bottom of a work, also existed. Swift at times resorted to using intermediaries to hand material to his publishers, creating yet another buffer.

Secondly, Swift could decide not to publish, but instead circulate a work as a hand-written manuscript. It is here that Karian’s approach comes into its own.

Needless to say, the manuscript suited a polite and aristocratic mode of conversation in which hand-written texts were circulated among a courtly and elegant audience. In Swift’s day, if and when a pirated edition was threatened or imagined, a genteel man of letters could also publish — note however that it was traditional for a gentleman of wit to publish anonymously — for a broader reading public in order, it was usually claimed, to secure textual integrity. In addition, the manuscript also suited the polemicist, the libelous and seditious author. Here, it would be much less easy to move from manuscript to print.

Swift exploited both styles of writing. His social verse, for instance, was often circulated in manuscript to a small group of friends, within the subculture of a quasi-aristocratic coterie (although working within a genteel culture, it must be said, he did write pieces that were at times far from genteel in content). The feedback, including commentary and even poems written in response, sheds light on the social interaction and exchange that shaped the writing process. In discussing the coterie, Karian argues that this kind of writing was a collaborative process. He certainly makes it very difficult to ignore the social and participatory nature of these poems, and the crucial importance of Swift’s audience. When it comes to his political polemics, however, since it would have been dangerous for Swift to acknowledge authorship, or for anyone to respond to him in writing, the social and collaborative nature of his writing is far harder to demonstrate.

Manuscript circulation was sometimes limited. A single manuscript could be kept under lock and key and neither loaned out nor allowed to be copied. The seditious “A Wicked Treasonable Libel” (c.1718) is a case in point. A copy of this poem exists in the Dean’s own hand-writing. On the reverse side, he has written “A traiterous libel, writ several years ago ... Copied September 9th, 1735. I wish I knew the author, that I might hang him”, to which he has added a postscript. “I copied out this wicked paper many years ago, in hopes to discover the traitor of an author, that I might inform against him¹¹⁾”. Swift, one must assume, is writing this for the benefit of any who might search his house and find the manuscript. The poem refers to the scandalous behavior of George I and his wife, Sophia Dorothea, both of whom had lovers, and especially to the rumor that George meant to divorce Sophia and marry the Duchess of Kendal. It begins “While the King and his ministers keep such a pother, / And all about changing one whore for another, / Think I to myself what need all this strife, / His majesty first had a whore of a wife, / And surely the difference mounts to no more / Than, now he has gotten a wife of a whore”. Here, discretion regarding authorship was obviously an absolute necessity.

On the other hand, the decision to set a poem to the tune of a popular song that could be memorised and then transmitted orally demonstrates at the very least a desire to circulate

a particular work as widely as possible, although actual circulation may very well be difficult if not impossible for the historian to reconstruct because popular songs recited in taverns and on the streets often leave no traces in the historical record. Swift's "An Excellent Song on a Seditious Pamphlet. To The Tune of Packington's Pound" (1720) is an example.

Swift lost control of some of his own works, and this meant that unforeseen transmission could happen. There are cases in which a manuscript was handed to others, who were then able to decide whether and how to circulate it. There is a documented case in which a reader, on being loaned a manuscript by Swift, and refused permission to write it down, memorised it instead. The well-known case of unwelcome transmission is when the bookseller Edmund Curll obtained some manuscripts of works by Swift and published them. Thus, depending on the work, he at times acted to restrict circulation, while at other times actively promoted circulation; sometimes was in control of a manuscript, sometimes lost control.

Karian persuades us that Swift's poems should be read as manuscripts. One example he gives is "The Humble Petition of Frances Harris" (1701), a poem in which long verse lines are used to mimic what Karian calls "the rambling and scatter-brained voice of Harris"¹²⁾. He includes photographic reproductions of the poem in print and in manuscript, and, sure enough, the first lines, "That I went to warm my self in Lady *Betty's* Chamber, because I was cold, / And I had a Purse, seven Pound, four Shillings and six Pence, besides Farthings in Money and Gold" becomes five lines in the former but is only two in the latter. Reproductions are also used to illustrate how manuscript aped print, and print manuscript. For instance, one manuscript has been written in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish it from a printed text. In other cases, a limited number of copies are printed and privately distributed. As Karian says, "This private distribution of print combines the typographic element of print with the coterie climate associated with manuscript"¹³⁾.

Controversial works were sometimes not published at all — "A Wicked Treasonable Libel" is an example. Sometimes they were circulated in manuscript form — as in the case of "The Legion Club". And sometimes they were published with offensive material excised, or replaced with asterisks or blanks as in "O, what Indignity and Shame / To prostitute the Muse's name, / By flatt'ring — whom Heaven design'd / The Plagues and Scourges of Mankind. / Bred up in Ignorance and Sloth, / And ev'ry Vice that nurses both"¹⁴⁾. Here, the blank indicates that "Kings" has been removed. Censorship meant that only an incomplete version of "On Poetry" was published, and the deleted material was then circulated in manuscript form among a small group of readers. In other words, manuscript was used to complement and complete print publication. In his "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift", Swift seems to have used censorship and piracy to his advantage. Karian provides a detailed account of its publishing history, and demonstrates that Swift first stimulated interest in his work by keeping the single manuscript copy under strict control, allowing some to read, but not to copy, it. He then created further interest by circulating a burlesqued version, a hoax piracy, "The Life and Genuine Character of Dr. Swift" (1733). And finally print publication met the public demand he himself had fostered. The first print publication was is-

sued in London, but in a distorted form. Swift then had a version published in Dublin, but even this was not completed, leaving blank spaces for missing words to force the reader to engage actively with the poem.

Manuscripts could be used to fill in the blanks. Karian provides a number of examples of eighteenth-century prints in which hand-written additions were made. The consistency (especially in the notes) demonstrates that manuscripts with the missing text were circulating. Karian argues that Swift *intended* the text to appear with gaps the reader would then have to fill in. For instance, in discussing the use of lacunae in his criticisms of the Queen, Karian says, “By exploiting the possibilities of textual absence, Swift circumvents the printed page and, in effect, further involves his readers with the work so they might participate in the indictment of the Queen¹⁵⁾”.

Swift believed that reason could and should be “improved by a general Conversation with Books”. To read a great work “with just Application”, he claimed, was to be influenced for the better. “Books give the same Turn to our Thoughts and Way of Reasoning, that good and ill Company do to our Behaviour and Conversation¹⁶⁾”. To read Swift is to participate in conversation in wonderful company — stubborn, pig-headed, savagely biased, but nevertheless humorous, thoughtful, humane. We can all benefit from acquaintance with this profoundly original intelligence.

Notes

- 1) Swift studies is an area of academic research replete with biographies. The best is the three volume *Swift : The Man, his Works, and the Age* by Irvin Ehrenpreis: see vol.1, *Mr. Swift and his Contemporaries*, London: Methuen, 1962/1983, vol.2, *Dr. Swift*, London: Methuen, 1967/1983, and vol.3, *Dean Swift*, London: Methuen, 1983. Also see David Nokes, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed : A Critical Biography*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, and Victoria Glendinning, *Jonathan Swift*, London: Hutchinson, 1998. For political biographies, see J. A. Downie, *Jonathan Swift, Political Writer*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, and David Oakleaf, *A Political Biography of Jonathan Swift*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008. Two books by F.P.Lock should also be mentioned: *The Politics of Gulliver's Travels*, Oxford: Clarendon Press and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, and *Swift's Tory Politics*, London: Duckworth and Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983. For my own ideas of Swift, see David Askew, “Not Pulling Punches”, *The Dublin Review of Books*, no.14, Summer 2010 (http://www.drbi.ie/more_details/10-05-10/Not_Pulling_Punches.aspx).
- 2) For Swift's works, see Herbert Davis ed., *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, vols. 1-14, Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1964-1969. A new edition of Swift's works has started to appear: see Claude Rawson *et al.* eds., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008-.
- 3) This conversation is recorded in Jonathan Swift, edited by Harold Williams, *Journal to Stella*, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948, p. 230.
- 4) For Swift's poetry, see, for instance, Jonathan Swift, edited by Herbert Davis, *Swift, Poetical Works*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, and/or Jonathan Swift, edited by Pat Rogers, *The Complete Poems*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983.
- 5) Samuel Johnson, “Swift”, in Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol.

- 22, edited by John H. Middelndorf, *The Lives of the Poets*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 969–1023, at p. 1023.
- 6) John Middleton Murry, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Biography*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1954.
 - 7) Stephen Karian, *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 1.
 - 8) Jonathan Swift to Alexander Pope, 29 September 1725, reprinted in Jonathan Swift, edited by David Woolley, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D. D.*, vol. 2, *Letters 1714–1726, nos. 301–700*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001, p. 606.
 - 9) Jonathan Swift, “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift”, in Swift, *Swift, Poetical Works*, pp. 496–513, at p. 508.
 - 10) Alexander Pope, John Butt ed., *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. 5, edited by James Sutherland, *The Dunciad*, London and New York: Routledge, 1943/1993, pp. 62 (*The Dunciad, Variorum* of 1729), 270 (*The Dunciad, in Four Books* of 1743).
 - 11) James Woolley, “Writing Libels on the Germans: Swift’s ‘Wicked Treasonable Libel’”, in Rudolf Freiburg, Arno Löffler, and Wolfgang Zach eds., with the assistance of Jan Schnitker, *Swift, The Enigmatic Dean: Festschrift for Hermann Josef Real*, Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1998, pp. 303–316, at p. 304, also cited in Karian, *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, p. 74.
 - 12) Karian, *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, p. 52.
 - 13) Karian, *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, p. 67.
 - 14) Orrery’s annotated copy of *On Poetry: A Rapsody* (1733), cited in Karian, *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, p. 112. Also see Jonathan Swift, *On Poetry: A Rapsody*, in Swift, *Swift, Poetical Works*, pp. 569–584, at p. 580 (“King’s” has been inserted in this edition)
 - 15) Karian, *Jonathan Swift in Print and Manuscript*, p. 198.
 - 16) Jonathan Swift, “A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately entered into Holy Orders”, 9 January 1719–20, in Swift, edited by Davis, *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, vol. 9, *Irish Tracts 1720–1723 and Sermons*, edited by Herbert Davis and Louis Landa, 1968, pp. 63–81, at p. 76.