

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 4

Article 9

1998

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Recommended Citation

Thorson, James L. (1998) "SWIFT The New Tradition," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 4, Article 9, 199-204.

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol4/iss1/9>

Special Feature


SWIFT
The New Tradition

JAMES THORSON
SPECIAL FEATURE EDITOR

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 few words about the genesis of this special selection of essays on Jonathan Swift are perhaps in order. For more years than I care to remember, I have been chairing sessions at various scholarly meetings on the works of Jonathan Swift. A few years ago, more than a little amazed at the number and quality of the papers presented at those sessions, I decided that a selection of the best of those papers might make a good book of new essays on Swift. I discussed the idea with Professor Kevin Cope, who not only agreed that the idea was a good one, but offered to join me in going forward with the project. Professor Cope subsequently founded and edited *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, and suggested that instead of putting together a whole book of essays, we publish the best six or seven in this annual publication. This procedure would insure the very highest quality of essays from those presented and help add lustre to *1650-1850*. Though the process has taken longer than originally planned, the extra time has allowed me to select from a broader choice of essays, and to insure that the authors

included have kept abreast of the rapidly changing field of Swift studies.

The first essay, Robert Mahony's "Swift's Modest Proposal and the Rhetoric of Irish Colonial Consumption" places Swift's great short satire right in the mainstream of the Irish Studies movement. I am sure that the Dean, could he be consulted in the manner of the third book of Gulliver's Travels, would find some wonderful ironies in this interesting development in American higher education. A number of American universities, most of them affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, have instituted Irish Studies programs, and Swift, as one of the greatest of Irish writers, commands the attention of many scholars and students in those programs. One can only cite with wonder the recent publication of *Walking Naboth's Vineyard: New Studies of Swift* (1995) by the University of Notre Dame Press as an example of that irony. The "Introduction: Swift and Irish Studies" to that volume by Brenda Tooley and Christopher Fox spells out how complex the relationship of Swift to his historical Irish context was and is. Mahony's contribution to that volume, "Swift and Catholic Ireland," should also be consulted, as should his recent monograph, *Jonathan Swift: The Irish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), but the essay published here breaks new ground. Mahony examines the rhetoric of consumption which has cannibalism as its governing trope and dates much of it back to the catholic rebellion which began in Ireland in 1641 and was commemorated each October 23 from 1662 on. Thus Mahony shows that Swift's pushing of the idea into literal cannibalism in *A Modest Proposal* was a natural but nevertheless brilliant extension of an existing idea.

William Foreman's contribution to the present collection, "Swift's Twists: A Case for Ironic Metaphor in the Satire of Jonathan Swift," also casts new light on the Dean's great short satire, but comes at it from a different angle. Also a rhetorical study, Foreman uses the work of modern theorists of metaphor George Lakoff and Mark Johnson with his own valuable

theoretical additions, to study several relatively obscure verse satires, "The Elephant," "A Description of a Salamander," "A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General," "The Dog and the Thief," and "The Fable of the Bitches," before turning to *A Modest Proposal*. His conclusions throw new light on the greatest short satire in the English language, but opens up new insights into the general question of the use of metaphor in satire. By using Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphoric entailment as well as the criticism of such varied writers as Aristotle, John Dryden, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, I. A. Richards, Leon Guilhamet, and Wayne Booth, Foreman derives his own concept of ironic metaphoric entailment in satire. This development will indeed establish a "New Tradition" for the study of satire in general as well as Swift's work in particular.

The Dean's work has attracted the attention of many of the most notable of eighteenth-century scholars and critics, including many of the feminist persuasion. Professor Margaret Doody's work on Swift in particular has tried to reassess Swift's attitude toward women in a rehabilitative way, but Louise K. Barnett's essay, "Betty's Freckled Neck: Swift, Women, and Women Readers" pointedly takes issue with Doody's effort to rehabilitate his reputation vis-a-vis women. Barnett's lively essay ranges from sociolinguistic theory to the letters of several of Swift's female companions, to biographical anecdotes to the famous (or infamous) poems such as "The Lady's Dressing Room." The critic also looks at Swift's relations with Letitia Pilkington, Esther Van Homrigh (Vanessa), and Mary Barber, whose collection of poems was given a "Preface" by Swift. Barnett's close analysis of this preface, however, cogently reveals the condescension which Swift deploys there. The title of Barnett's essay comes from another seldom-studied poem, "Betty the Grizette." Barnett objects to the gratuitous and troubling quality of Swift's attention to "Betty's freckled neck," which is, after all, not something that the hapless Betty can do anything about. It is highly likely that feminist critics will

return to the life and work of Jonathan Swift in the future, and Barnett's essay will have to be considered when they do. It also establishes a new tradition in its wide-ranging and thoughtful conclusions.

Frank Boyle contributes "Old Poetry and New Science: Swift, Cowley, and Modernity" to the present collection. Fortunately, Boyle also looks at one element of the feminist approach to Swift, though he could not be called a feminist critic. He does look at Swift's choice of gender for the ideal muse in his "Ode to the Athenian Society," the future Dean's first published poem. Boyle convincingly argues that Swift's poem is a direct response to Abraham Cowley's Ode "To the Royal Society." Cowley's poem explicitly makes philosophy (which term would be called "science" by a twentieth-century writer) male with almost stereotypical male characteristics of warrior-like aggression. Swift responds to this conception by using a female muse who "offers herself as a kind of mirror in which a man may 'dress and polish his uncourtly mind.'" While not putting Swift into a modern feminist position, Boyle asserts that the "poem may nevertheless fairly be read as attacking the dehumanizing implications of the New Philosophy's violently aggressive male imagery." Boyle also notes the wonderful irony of Cowley's use of poetry to attack poetry, one which the earlier poet blandly overlooks. The larger context into which Boyle's argument is placed is, appropriately, the history of ideas, and he energetically shows how Swift's first published poem establishes the anti-modern stance which was to appear consistently in his later satiric work. It also establishes his satiric voice at the beginning of his public literary career.

Julia Goldberg also looks at some philosophical ideas in her "Houyhnhnm Subtext: Moral Conclusions and Linguistical Manipulation in *Gulliver's Travels*." Dealing with the largest of philosophical questions, "What is Man?," Goldberg quickly narrows down to the question of Gulliver's sanity, or lack of same, in the Fourth Book of the Travels. By giving a very

close reading to the question of language in the land of the Houyhnhnms, she finds that the most basic difficulty is that though the Houyhnhnms' language does not have names for some institutions, such as slavery or genocide, the concepts nevertheless exist in that supposedly perfectly rational society. It is the discrepancy between fact and linguistic invisibility that finally drives Gulliver off the deep end. Taking issue with Kathleen Swaim, Marilyn Francus, and Anne Kline Kelly, among other critics who have dealt with the language of Swift, Goldberg builds a convincingly detailed argument against the Houyhnhnms and their worshiper, Gulliver, and for Jonathan Swift. These introductory comments oversimplify her subtle arguments, so I ask you to read her words, not mine.

The final essay in this group is by Todd C. Parker, and is called "Swift's 'A Description of a City Shower': The Epistemological Force of Filth." Theoretically sophisticated, the essay proceeds to a very close reading of the text of one of Swift's most-studied poems, and thus illustrates Parker's underlying contention that theory can only be useful when it begins or ends (or both) in a close reading of a text. Arguing against A. B. England's contention that the poem is unified only by the rain, and that that element is superficial and "emphasizes the essential miscellaneousness of the crowd," Parker examines the hard question of "how perception and evaluative knowledge are produced." Ranging from Virgil's *Georgic I* to Addison's essay on the *Georgics* to a number of modern essays on the poem, he produces a powerful argument on the hierarchical relation between genres which has been used by modern critics to assign Swift's poem its value. He also shows how important categories of meaning arise within the poem. By employing filth as the epistemological background that makes meaning emerge, Parker further argues that Swift's poem emphasizes the contingent nature of apparently necessary interpretive conventions. This essay may require more than one reading to comprehend its full subtlety, but it will well repay the effort.

I am delighted to have worked with all of the authors of these essays and with the general editor of *1650-1850* in producing this section of the publication. I believe that the essays contained herein will truly establish "A New Tradition" for the study of the works of Jonathan Swift.