



## A MODEST PROPOSAL AND OTHER WRITINGS

JONATHAN SWIFT was born in Dublin on 30 November 1667, some months after his father's death. He was sent to Kilkenny Grammar School when he was six and later attended Trinity College, Dublin, where he received his BA degree in 1686. When civil war broke out between the forces of William III and the Catholic James II in 1688, Swift fled to England, where he took up employment in the household of Sir William Temple and first met Esther Johnson, later to be immortalized as 'Stella' in the birthday poems and London journal he addressed to her. Ordained in Ireland in 1694, he spent an unhappy year as an Anglican churchman in largely Presbyterian Kilroot, near Belfast, before returning to Temple's service, where he became involved in the Ancients–Moderns controversy, for which he wrote *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battel of the Books*. Having obtained his Doctor of Divinity degree from Trinity College in 1702, he was sent to England as an emissary of the Church of Ireland in order to win remission of the First Fruits (a tax paid by the Irish clergy to Queen Anne): an aim he achieved during his extended stay in London (1710–14) while supporting the Tory ministry through his periodical *The Examiner*. During his stay he was actively involved in London's literary scene, becoming a member of the Scriblerus Club and forming close ties with writers such as Alexander Pope, John Gay and Joseph Addison. Following the ministry's fall in the summer of 1714, Swift returned to Ireland to take up his post as Dean of St Patrick's cathedral in Dublin, where (except for two extended visits to England in 1726 and 1727) he remained for the rest of his life. It was during this final period that Swift achieved his greatest successes: first as the Drapier, whose galvanizing *Letters* helped prevent the circulation of potentially worthless half-pence made in England for Irish consumption (1724), later, as the author of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), an enormously popular work in its day that has resonated with both young and old for centuries thereafter. His widespread reputation as 'Hibernian Patriot' grew out of the numerous tracts and satires he wrote against Britain's repressive colonialist policies in Ireland, and which included his ironic masterpiece, *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Swift died on 19 October 1745 and was buried in St Patrick's cathedral under an epitaph he himself composed, which acknowledged a life of 'savage indignation' and exalted his role as a strenuous champion of liberty.

CAROLE FABRICANT is Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside. She is the author of *Swift's Landscape* (originally published by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1982; reissued in paperback with a new introduction by the University of Notre Dame Press in 1995) and has published widely on a number of eighteenth-century writers, including Alexander Pope, Edmund Burke and Bishop Berkeley, as well as on topics such as landscape gardening, travel, tourism and questions of colonialism and race in the eighteenth century, especially as they relate to British–Irish relations during the period.

JONATHAN SWIFT

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A Modest Proposal  
and Other Writings

*Edited with an Introduction by*

CAROLE FABRICANT

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# Acknowledgements

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# Chronology

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- 1667** Born in Hoey's Court, Dublin, on 30 November to Abigail Swift (*née* Erick), seven months after the death of his father, Jonathan Swift.
- 1673** Sent to Kilkenny Grammar School (remains there until 1682).
- 1682** Enters Trinity College, Dublin.
- 1685** Death of Charles II (6 Feb.); accession of his Roman Catholic brother, James II.
- 1686** Swift obtains BA degree, *speciali gratia* ('by special grace'); continues at Trinity College.
- 1688** The '[Glorious Revolution](#)': accession to the throne of William of Orange (as William II) and his wife (as Mary II); James II flees to France.
- 1688–9** Swift leaves for England to escape the civil strife following James II's arrival in Ireland.
- 1689** Enters household of Sir William Temple at Moor Park in Surrey, where he first meets Esther Johnson ('Stella'), then eight years old.
- 1690** Returns to Ireland; William III defeats James II at the Battle of the Boyne (1 July).
- 1691** Swift returns to Moor Park to work as Temple's secretary; the Treaty of Limerick (3 Oct.) ends the civil strife in Ireland after the defeat of the Jacobite army.
- 1692** Swift receives MA degree from Hart Hall, Oxford University; publishes 'Ode to the Athenian Society', his first work to appear in print.
- 1694** Returns to Ireland and is ordained deacon (28 Oct.); death of Queen Mary (28 Dec.)
- 1695** Swift is ordained priest (13 Jan.) and appointed to the prebend of Kilroot, near Belfast; enactment of first of the Penal Laws in Ireland.
- 1696** Swift returns to Moor Park (June), where over the next three years he contributes to the Ancients–Moderns controversy by writing *The Battel of the Books* and (most of) *A Tale of a Tub*.
- 1699** Death of Temple (27 Jan.); Swift returns to Ireland as chaplain to the Earl of Berkeley; Lord Justice of Ireland; passage of Woollen Act restricting Irish trade.
- 1700** Swift is presented to the church livings of Laracor, Rathbeggan and Agher (Feb.); installed as [prebendary](#) of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin (22 Oct.); death of John Dryden (30 Oct.)

May).

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- 1701** Swift returns to England; publishes *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions in Athens and Rome*, defending several impeached Whig statesmen; Esther Johnson moves to Dublin accompanied by Rebecca Dingley; death of James II (16 Sept.).
- 1702** Swift receives Doctor of Divinity degree at Trinity College (16 Feb.); English Parliament declares war on France; death of William III (8 Mar.) and accession of Queen Anne.
- 1704** Publication of the volume containing *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Battel of the Books* and *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*; the [Test Act](#) is passed in Ireland.
- 1707** Swift arrives in London in November with commission from the Church of Ireland to solicit remission of the 'First Fruits' from Queen Anne, remaining for a year and a half; the Union of England and Scotland prompts *The Story of the Injured Lady* (published posthumously).
- 1708–9** Swift develops close ties with Addison, Steele and other prominent writers and wits; publishes *The Bickerstaff Papers* and several tracts related to the Church; writes *An Argument against Abolishing Christianity* (published in 1711); contributes to Steele's *Tatler* with 'A Description of the Morning'; returns to Ireland (June 1709).
- 1710** Returns to London (Sept.) and joins forces with the new Tory ministry (led by Robert Harley and Henry St John), on whose behalf he writes partisan essays for *The Examiner* (from 2 Nov. until 14 June 1711); starts the *Journal to Stella* on 2 September (runs to 6 June 1713); writes 'A Description of a City Shower' for *The Tatler*; publication of the fifth edition of *A Tale of a Tub*, with the 'Apology' added.
- 1711** Swift publishes his *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*; begins his involvement with Esther Vanhomrigh ('Vanessa'); circulates his highly effective pro-peace polemic, *The Conduct of the Allies* (Nov.); Duke of Marlborough dismissed (Dec.); Addison's and Steele's *The Spectator* appears on 1 March (runs to 6 Dec. 1712; briefly revived in 1714); Harley made Earl of Oxford.
- 1713** Swift's membership (with Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot and Parnell) in the Scriblerus Club; his attacks on Steele's Whig journalism; Treaty of Peace with France, ending the [War of the Spanish Succession](#), signed at Utrecht (11 Apr.), celebrated by Pope in *Windsor-Forest*; Swift installed as Dean of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin (13 June); returns to London (9 Sept.).
- 1714** Collapse of Tory ministry (July); death of Queen Anne (1 Aug.) and accession of the

Hanoverian George I; Swift has price placed on his head for writing *The Public Spirit of the Whigs*; leaves for Dublin (16 Aug.) to assume his new post; personal and political tensions between Swift and his 'boss' William King, Archbishop of Dublin (later eased through their mutual exertions on behalf of the 'Irish interest').

**1715** Former Tory ministers impeached; Bolingbroke flees to France to join the Pretender and Oxford is imprisoned in the Tower (released in 1717); Jacobite Rebellion in Scotland; death of Louis XIV of France (1 Sept.).

**1720** Publication of Swift's *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (May), shortly after passage of the [Declaratory Act](#), strengthening Britain's legislative power over Ireland; prosecution of the printer; [South Sea Bubble](#) (Sept.).

**1721** Robert Walpole appointed First Lord of the Treasury and begins his de-facto tenure as Prime Minister of Britain (until 1742); he will become a target of Swift's satire and wrath throughout the 1720s.

**1722** William Wood receives royal patent to coin copper halfpence for Ireland (July); opposition to the patent begins to emerge among all segments of the Irish population.

**1723** Swift embarks on a four-month tour of southern Ireland following the death of Esther Vanhomrigh at her Celbridge home near Dublin (2 June).

**1724** Writes *The Drapier's Letters* attacking Wood's patent; Carteret arrives in Dublin as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (Oct.); reward of £300 (unclaimed) offered for discovery of the Drapier; Harding jailed and prosecuted for printing *Drapier's Letter IV* (Nov.); Swift attains hero status as the 'Hibernian Patriot'; death of Earl of Oxford (21 May).

**1725** Wood's patent surrendered (Aug.); Swift works on manuscript of *Gulliver's Travels* during a five-month visit to Sheridan in Co. Cavan (late Apr. to early Oct.).

**1726** Visits England (Mar.–Aug.); stays with Pope at Twickenham; has disastrous meeting with Walpole to discuss the Irish situation; *Gulliver's Travels* published in London (28 Oct.) and becomes an instant sensation, with two Dublin editions following shortly thereafter.

**1727** Swift's final visit to England (Apr.–Sept.); returns to Dublin to a seriously ailing Esther Johnson via a trip recorded in the *Holyhead Journal*; death of George I (11 June) and accession of George II; onset of a severe famine in Ireland.

**1728** Death of Esther Johnson (28 Jan.); Swift publishes *A Short View of the State of Ireland* (Mar.) and writes other Irish tracts on the worsening conditions in the country; collaborates with Sheridan on the periodical, *The Intelligencer* (lasts for one year, beginning

11 May); opening of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in London; publication of Pope's *The Dunciad* (3-canto version).

**1729** Publication of *A Modest Proposal* (Oct.); death of Archbishop King (8 May).

**1731** Swift writes *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift* (published in 1739).

**1732** Publication of *The Lady's Dressing Room*, one of his most popular poems during his lifetime and a prime example of his so-called 'excremental' poems; death of Gay (4 Dec.).

**1735** Publication of George Faulkner's 4-volume Dublin edition of Swift's *Works*.

**1736** Publication of the poem *A Character... of the Legion Club*, Swift's scathing satire on the Irish House of Commons.

**1738** Publication of Swift's *Polite Conversation*; death of Sheridan (10 Oct.).

**1740** Swift makes his last will (3 May), directing that the bulk of his estate be used for the construction of St Patrick's Hospital; severe weather results in widespread disease and famine throughout Ireland.

**1742** Swift declared 'of unsound mind and memory' (17 Aug.) and delivered to the care of guardians; Walpole forced to resign (1 Feb.); Handel in Dublin oversees the first performance of his *Messiah* (13 Apr.); publication of Pope's *New Dunciad* (Book IV).

**1744** Death of Pope (30 May).

**1745** Death of Swift (19 Oct.); burial in St Patrick's cathedral, beneath the famous epitaph he himself composed; publication of his unfinished *Directions to Servants*; death of Walpole (1 Mar.); the final, abortive Jacobite uprising in Britain, led by the 'Young Pretender'.

# Abbreviations

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- Apperson G. L. Apperson, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993)
- Ball F. Elrington Ball (ed.), *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, 6 vols. (London: Bell, 1910–14)
- BL British Library
- Brewer/Evans *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase & Fable, Based on the original book by Ebenezer Cobham Brewer*, rev. Ivor H. Evans (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993)
- C *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift* (see Williams, below)
- CD *A New Canting Dictionary* (London, 1725)
- Davis Herbert Davis (ed.), *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, 14 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939–74)
- DS [date] Volumes in Hawkesworth's *The Works of Jonathan Swift* (see below), edited by Deane Swift
- Ehrenpreis Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, his Work, and the Age*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962–83)
- F '35 *The Works of Jonathan Swift*, 4 vols., ed. George Faulkner (Dublin, 1735); subsequent editions by Faulkner are indicated by *F* followed by the relevant year
- Ferguson Oliver W. Ferguson, *Jonathan Swift and Ireland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962)
- Forster Manuscript collection housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- GT *Gulliver's Travels*; in *Prose Works*, ed. Davis (see above)
- H [date] *The Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. John Hawkesworth, 6 vols. (London, 1755–12 vols. (London, 1765–75)
- Hob-Job Henry Yule and A. C. Burnett, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary*

- Hunter-Baillie* Manuscript collection housed in the Royal College of Surgeons of England, London
- JN [date]* *A Supplement to Dr. Swift's Works*, ed. John Nichols, 2 vols. (London, 1776–9)
- Johnson* *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Alexander Chalmers (London: Studio Editions, 1994)
- JS* Jonathan Swift, *The Journal to Stella* (see Williams, below)
- Kelly* James Kelly, *A Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs* (London, 1721)
- Landa* Louis A. Landa, *Swift and the Church of Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954)
- M'11* Swift, *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (London, 1711)
- M.: Burnet* Swift's 'Marginalia' to Gilbert Burnet, *History of His Own Times* (London, 1724–34)
- M.: Clarendon* Swift's 'Marginalia' to Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion* (London, 1707)
- M.: Macky* Swift's 'Marginalia' to John Macky, *Characters of the Court of Britain, &c.* (London, 1733)
- Molyneux* William Molyneux, *The Case of Ireland's Being Bound by Acts of Parliament in England, Stated* (Dublin, 1698)
- ODEP* *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, compiled William George Smith; intro. Janet E. Heseltine; second edition revised Sir Paul Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952)
- OED* *The Oxford English Dictionary*
- Partridge* Eric Partridge (ed.), *Swift's Polite Conversation* (London: André Deutsch, 1963)
- Pierpont Morgan* The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City
- PW* *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (see Davis, above)
- Ray* John Ray, *A Collection of English Proverbs* (London, 1670); reissued as *A*

*Hand-Book of Proverbs*, ed. Henry G. Bohn (London: H. G. Bohn, 1855; New York: AMS Press, 1968); second edition of Ray's collection published in 1678

- Rothschild* Manuscript collection housed in Trinity College Library, Cambridge
- Tilley* Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950)
- Williams* Harold Williams, ed., *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963–5); *Journal to Stella*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948); repr. as vols. 15–16 of *Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*.
- Woolley* James Woolley (ed.), Swift and Thomas Sheridan, *The Intelligencer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)

NB Swift's poetry is quoted from *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).



# Introduction

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Any mention of Swift as prose writer is likely to call to mind a small handful of canonical works that confirm his status as one of the greatest satirists in the English language. But these texts constitute only a tiny portion of Swift's total prose output, which was voluminous, generically and thematically varied and reflective of both learned and popular traditions. This edition is designed to display the full range of these writings. The deliberate omission of *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Tale of a Tub*—two pieces readily available elsewhere—has allowed for the inclusion of many of Swift's less familiar works, along with several texts that have not appeared before in popular editions. The selections in this edition are intended to reveal both the towering figure who lent his name to an age, becoming one of the most eminent authors in the Great Literary Tradition, and the gadfly who flitted along the margins of respectable literary (and political) [society](#), engaged in activities that alternated between falling under the radar screen and falling foul of established canonical institutions. Swift may be numbered among a group of great thinkers and writers—Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, Mark Twain, George Orwell—who, while quite capable of producing lengthy, even magisterial works that have become anointed as 'classics', spent much of their careers in the trenches (as it were), writing political pamphlets and journalistic essays in crisis situations that demanded quick-witted responses (often laced with satire) rather than lengthy artistic contemplation. It is therefore not coincidental that Swift was as much associated with printers of cheap ephemera (John Waters, Sarah Harding) as with publishers of artful editions designed for posterity (George Faulkner).

For Swift, prose writing was not simply an exercise in creative expression, nor was it only an activity periodically indulged in for purposes of instruction, amusement or profit. It was one of his most important ways of being and acting in the world, of positioning himself in relation to the people, events and material conditions of his life. This intimate bond between author and work was tacitly acknowledged by Swift himself in his statement in *A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately entered into Holy Orders* that reading a book is largely meaningless 'without entering into the Genius and Spirit of the Author' (p. 122) and in his promise made in the *Journal to Stella*, 'I'll come again to-night in a fine clean sheet of paper' (JS 1: 154). At

the same time, one should avoid a simplistic equation of the author and his work that ignores the mediating effects of language and the ways in which even explicitly autobiographical pieces rely on rhetorical and fictional techniques to convey their picture of 'truth'. Swift's regular use of complex irony, intricate wordplay and fictive speakers undermines any simple clear-cut interpretation of his writings and helps explain the often widely divergent meanings that readers have derived from them.

Swift's prose works exemplify all the different ways in which written texts can intersect with the world. History functions in these works, not as an inert background or external set of references, but as an integral part of both their form and content. With few exceptions, Swift's texts dramatize the social and public function of writing. Even an ostensibly private work such as the *Journal to Stella*, filled with verbal intimacies meant to be unintelligible to an outside reader, insists upon its status as an important chronicle of events. Thus Swift assures his correspondent, Esther Johnson, that a particular letter of his will be 'a good history' to show her the significant political changes occurring in England at the time ( *JS* 2: 436). Swift's often-cited advocacy of 'Proper Words in proper Places' in *Letter to a Young Gentleman* has less to do with a narrowly defined stylistic or generic decorum than with his acute sense of language's social context, and of the need to use words in a manner appropriate to the specific setting and occasion at hand. The 'Places' he refers to include all those social spaces—the marketplace, the coffee house, the church, for example—where words are publicly exchanged and communal meanings are produced. In writing separate letters to distinct groups in Irish society as the Drapier, Swift conveyed his awareness that the propriety of his own words was to be measured, not against some abstract norm of stylistic or rhetorical correctness, but according to their effectiveness in reaching real-life audiences made up of particular classes and economic interests.

As writings that tend to call attention to their status as occasional works tied to specific contemporary events, Swift's prose pieces encourage us to rethink the nature and meaning of a 'literary classic', which has traditionally been associated with ideas of aesthetic transcendence and universality. The reason his works have endured for almost three centuries and remain relevant to us today is not because they make sweepingly general statements about 'the nature of man' but because, in their very concern for showing individual men (and women) acting within concretely defined sets of circumstances, they are able to present situations that everyone living in a world of power and privation must in some way contend

with. The society of Swift's day was, after all, hardly the last or the only one to be faced with the recalcitrant fact that, in Gulliver's words, 'Poor Nations are *Hungry*, and *rich* Nations are *proud*; and Pride and Hunger will ever be at Variance' (*PW* 11: 246). It is stark realities such as these that inhabit much of Swift's (especially later) prose, presented not as eternal truths but in all the blood and guts of their particularity. Edward Said has commented that 'too many claims are made for Swift as a moralist and thinker who peddled one or another final view of human nature' and suggests instead the idea of Swift as 'a kind of local activist, a columnist, a pamphleteer, a caricaturist'.<sup>1</sup> Though wrong to deny the clear evidence of large ideological commitments and coherencies in Swift, Said offers a useful corrective to conventional views of Swift as a producer of thoughts and writings that lend themselves to general labels ('Christian humanist', 'Augustan', etc.). His view allows us to understand Swift as an organic as well as a traditional intellectual—as someone who helped formulate the new ideas of an emerging class as well as someone who defended the status quo—and to appreciate his role as a fighter against what Jean-Paul Sartre called 'the terrorist practice' of 'liquidating the particularity'.<sup>2</sup> Sartre's comment that 'At one time this intellectual terror corresponded to "the physical liquidation" of particular people' brings to mind Swift's graphic examples of such 'liquidation': the Modest Proposer in his scheme to cannibalize Irish Catholic infants, the Houyhnhnms debating 'Whether the *Yahoos* should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth', and the colonialist-butchers depicted at the end of *Gulliver's Travels*, who give 'free Licence... to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust', leaving 'the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants' (*PW* 11: 271; 294).

Swift's resistance to the 'terrorism' of abstraction resulted in writings distinctive for their concreteness and immediacy. Their contributions to Irish nationalist, anti-colonialist and anti-war ideologies are universal in scope while at all times remaining firmly tied to the specific conditions in which Swift lived and worked. In contrast to Pope, who regularly wrote, revised and published his works governed by the idea that 'We who are Writers ought to love Posterity, that Posterity may love us', Swift produced the majority of his prose works for immediate impact rather than for artistic immortality.<sup>3</sup> He was generally more concerned about their influence on the thoughts and actions of his present readers than about their place in some future pantheon of Great Literature. As he remarked in *Thoughts on Various Subjects*: 'It is pleasant to observe, how free the present Age is in laying Taxes on the next. *Future Age shall talk of this: This shall be famous to all Posterity*. Whereas, their Time and Thoughts will be

taken up about present Things, as ours are now' (*PW* 1: 243). Not that Swift was indifferent to fame, or content to let his works pass out of existence along with the occasions that produced them. The persona of *A Tale of a Tub* dramatizes the plight not only of the Grub Street Hack but of all occasional writers when he complains to Prince Posterity of the disappearance of the Moderns' productions without a trace after being mercilessly devoured by Father Time. Along with its obvious function as a satire on ephemeral scribblers, this lament surely reflects something of Swift's own anxiety and dread when faced with the threat of historical extinction. In the Drapier's wish that readers of his *First Letter* keep it 'carefully by them to refresh their Memories' in times to come (p. 164), we can see evidence of the occasional writer's paradoxical desire to preserve the ephemeral; to speak to the immediate moment while creating a more lasting memorial for future ages. Swift's reluctance to let the Drapier 'die' even after his political *raison d'être* had ceased to exist (he continued invoking the latter's presence and authority long after *The Drapier's Letters* had accomplished their goal), and his concern with creating an enduring image of himself as an Irish Patriot in works such as the *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift*, point to an interest in the perpetuation of his memory which invites comparison with Pope's desire for immortality. Where they differ is in Swift's insistence upon situating his fame in the very heart of the mundane, transient circumstances of his life rather than in an aesthetic transformation of them. Swift entertained little notion of the transcendence of his work to some otherworldly status, in the way (for example) that the apotheosis of Belinda's lock into the heavens, at the end of *The Rape of the Lock*, suggests the elevation of Pope's poetry itself to a kind of divine status—or at least to the airy realms of high culture. Swift's version of this apotheosis—his poetic depiction of the astrologer Partridge's ascent into the spheres, where he appears as a '*Triumphant Star*' ('An Elegy on Mr Partridge')—functions as pure mockery, ridiculing all claims to supposedly prophetic vision and underscoring the absurdity of attempts to soar beyond earthly bounds.

Swift's particular understanding of worldly realities, especially those growing out of the inequalities of power and wealth, was derived from his concrete situation in the world as an Anglo-Irishman whose life and career, shaped (and fissured) by the political and ethnic conflicts between England and Ireland, as well as those within Ireland itself, serve to magnify the problematic nature of colonial identity in eighteenth-century Ireland. Swift was born on 30 November 1667 in Hoey's Court in Dublin, to a father who had emigrated from England to Ireland some half-dozen years earlier and to an Irish-born mother from an old English family

from Leicestershire. He was in many ways fated by historical circumstances to a life of social dislocations and uncertainties. The Dublin in which Swift grew up was an expanding colonial city, the fortified centre of the English settlement in Ireland known as ‘the Pale’ and the site of the main institutions of Anglican power. At the same time the city functioned as a bilingual community of English- and Gaelic-speaking inhabitants which included a growing number of Catholic merchants, artisans and servants as well as a significant Dissenting element, such as the Huguenot weavers whose dire plight was later to have a galvanizing effect on Swift’s exertions on behalf of Ireland’s economic independence. Since his father died before he was born and his mother was left with few resources, Swift was exposed from an early age to the ignominies of financial dependency—an experience whose indelible mark could later be discerned in his often scathing view of the patronage system, his resentment towards those in whose service he toiled and his passionate rejection of the idea of Ireland as a ‘*depending Kingdom*’ in the *Fourth Drapier’s Letter* (p. 174). With the help of his well-to-do uncle, Godwin Swift was able to attend Kilkenny School and Trinity College, Dublin, elite institutions committed to inculcating the religious and cultural values of Ireland’s governing class. At the same time his tenure at Trinity College exposed him to modes of parody, wit and wordplay that were uniquely Irish in form and cadence.

An indifferent student, Swift scraped by in his studies to obtain his Bachelor of Arts degree at Trinity, but his academic career was dramatically interrupted by the upheavals following upon the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688, when the Catholic monarch James II was forced to flee England, making way for the joint rule of his Protestant daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange (William III). This event had a profound effect on the course of English history, but its most immediate and destructive consequences were felt in Ireland, which served as the battleground for the forces of James and William. Forty years later, Swift would say that this contention was decided ‘with such ravages and ruin executed on both sides, as to leave the kingdom a desert’ (*PW* 12: 132). Along with many others of his class Swift fled to England, where he began his lengthy tenure working for the son of a family friend, the noted Whig diplomat and man of letters Sir William Temple, at his country seat, Moor Park, in Surrey. It was here that Swift first met the then eight-year-old Esther Johnson who was to play so significant a role in his life and become immortalized in his writings as ‘Stella’. Through his contact with Temple (and with Temple’s essays on history and literature which he had frequent occasion to read, transcribe and later edit), Swift was ushered into the

world of the scholar-dilettante, at once connected with and detached from affairs of state. Moreover, Temple's involvement in what came to be known as the Ancients–Moderns controversy through his essays championing the superiority of Ancient learning fuelled Swift's great satires on the Moderns, *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battel of the Books*.

Temple, despite (or perhaps because of) his own Anglo-Irish lineage, projected the very model of an English country gentleman, Whig in outlook, epicurean in mode of living, expressing a casual contempt for the Irish that was endemic to his class. It was a model that must have held no small appeal for Swift, then eager for entrée into English society, but it proved to be as ill-fitting for him as the 'embroidered coat' worn by the man 'begging out of Newgate [Prison] in an old shoe' described in *A Proposal to the Ladies of Ireland* (PW 12: 127) and in later years he would construct a life—as a Dubliner, a fierce critic of English policies in Ireland, a Tory and an Anglican churchman—which rejected most aspects of the Temple model of existence. Moreover, Temple tended to be haughty and patronizing in his behaviour towards Swift, who a dozen years later warned that he 'would not be treated like a school-boy' by Lord Bolingbroke since he had 'felt too much of that in [his] life already (meaning from sir William Temple)' (JS 1: 230). This treatment, combined with Temple's failure to help him obtain suitable [preferment](#), resulted in Swift's departure from Moor Park and return to Ireland after taking holy orders in 1693. Swift's first church living was in remote Kilroot near Belfast, an inhospitable area dominated by the Presbyterian kirk. This experience proved bitterly disappointing to Swift, reinforcing his aversion to religious Dissent and prompting his return to Moor Park, where he resumed his former duties until Temple's death in 1699. Immediately thereafter he accompanied the Earl of Berkeley to Ireland as his chaplain, and in the following year he was named vicar of Laracor, a village in County Meath near Dublin.

The ensuing decade was crucial to Swift's development as a churchman, a political activist and a writer. As the chosen representative of the Church of Ireland in its solicitation for remission of certain taxes (known as the '[First Fruits and Twentieth Parts](#)') then being paid to the Crown, he was given the opportunity to live for lengthy periods of time in London. His indefatigable efforts on behalf of the Church were ultimately successful, but not before his disillusionment with those he initially viewed as allies—the Whig politicians who were willing to aid his cause only if he agreed to support a repeal of the Test Act, which made the taking of the sacrament according to Anglican ritual a prerequisite for holding public office—prompted his switch in allegiance to the Tory Party.



Swift's embrace of the Tory ministry at the moment of its ascendancy was no doubt motivated at least in part by political self-interest, as well as by personal factors such as vanity and resentment. Robert Harley, Lord Treasurer of the Tory ministry, showered him with attention and treated him as an important personage, while the leader of the Whig Junto, Sidney Godolphin, was barely civil to him in their one meeting about the 'First Fruits' matter. But mixed together with these personal and narrowly political motives were more general beliefs— about the necessary role of an Established Church, the destructiveness of a new economic system based on speculation and credit, and the need to subordinate the military to **civilian** authority and severely curtail the power of a standing army— which made Swift's embrace of the Tory position at this moment in history consistent with larger and long-standing ideological allegiances. Indeed, it is as well to keep in mind that Swift in later life did not explicitly identify himself as a Tory, despite the fact that he was regularly branded and ostracized as one. Instead he insisted, not without justification, that it was the Whig Party, not his own political beliefs, that had changed. As late as 1733 he could write to a friend, 'I am of the old Whig principles, without the modern articles and refinements' (C 4 100).

The years 1710–14 were among the most active and productive in Swift's life, marking his highly visible emergence into public life and into the vibrant literary world centred in London. Swift pursued a busy schedule as chief political writer for the Tory ministry, which included penning essays for the government periodical he edited, *The Examiner*, and weighing in on the side of a peace treaty with France to end the War of the Spanish Succession—most notably through his highly influential tract, *The Conduct of the Allies* (1711). He simultaneously enjoyed the life of a London wit, developing friendships with noted writers of all political persuasions, including Alexander Pope, John Gay, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Nicholas Rowe and Matthew Prior. During this period, his authorship of *The Bickerstaff Papers*, a brilliantly effective parody of astrological almanacs, along with poems such as 'A Description of the Morning', 'A Description of a City Shower' and 'The Virtues of Sid Hamet the Magician's Rod' (a political lampoon on Sidney Godolphin) readily demonstrated Swift's unique imaginative powers and his particular genius for satire—one already amply displayed in his earlier, anonymously published *A Tale of a Tub*. It was also during this period that Swift, through his participation in the Scriblerus Club, a literary group whose members included Pope, Gay, John Arbuthnot and Thomas Parnell, collaborated on

pieces satirizing perceived abuses in modern learning.

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Yet for all the heady excitement and rich promise of these years in London, the period was marked by often profound frustrations for Swift, some of which were bitterly reminiscent of earlier disappointments with patrons and modes of employment. Growing conflicts between the two leaders of the Tory ministry, Henry St John (by this time Viscount Bolingbroke) and Harley (now Earl of Oxford), and their continual delays in finding suitable preferment for him, made Swift increasingly cynical about both political and personal prospects. As he wryly observed to Esther Johnson, ‘They call me nothing but Jonathan; and I said, I believed they would leave me Jonathan as they found me’ ( *JS* 1: 193–4). Moreover, even as he expressed fondness for many aspects of London life and fantasized about obtaining a church living somewhere nearby, his *Journal to Stella* is filled with recurring nostalgic recollections of his gardens at Laracor and with eager anticipations of his return to Ireland: ‘Oh, that we were at Laracor this fine day! the willows begin to peep, and the quicks to bud’ ( *JS* 1: 220). When the Tory government began disintegrating as a result of warring factions within it, Swift realized the futility of his continued stay in England and, shortly after Queen Anne’s death in the summer of 1714, sailed for Ireland to take up the post of Dean of St Patrick’s cathedral, Dublin, which he had earlier obtained, not through his employers’ English connections, but through the Irish-born Duke of Ormonde, in whose gift the Deanship resided.

The first years of Swift’s return to Ireland were difficult ones for him, marked by jurisdictional struggles within the cathedral hierarchy (highlighted by tensions with his ‘boss’ William King, Archbishop of Dublin) and by various forms of harassment and persecution, including interception of his mail, because of his Tory associations in London and the consequent unfounded suspicions that he was a Jacobite sympathizer (that is, a supporter of the exiled Stuarts). Forced to keep a low profile, he professed indifference to all public affairs, assuring one correspondent (albeit somewhat disingenuously), ‘I am the only man in this kingdom who is not a politician, and therefore I only keep such company as will suffer me to suspend their politics’ ( *C* 2: 294). By late 1719, however, there was the more candid admission to his friend Charles Ford, ‘But as the World is now turned, no Cloyster is retired enough to keep Politicks out, and I will own they raise my Passions whenever they come in my way’ ( *C* 2: 330). And indeed, it was only a matter of months after this observation that Swift acted on his political ‘passions’ by publishing the first of his Irish political tracts, *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture*, which attacked England’s legislative



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