

Jonathan Swift

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Jonathan Swift

(November 30, 1667 – October 19, 1745) was an Irish cleric, satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer (first for Whigs then for Tories), and poet, famous for works like



Jonathan Swift

Gulliver's Travels, *A Modest Proposal*, *A Journal to Stella*, *The Drapier's Letters*, *The Battle of the Books*, and *A Tale of a Tub*. Swift is probably the foremost prose satirist in the English language, although he is less well known for his poetry. Swift published all of his works under pseudonyms — such as Lemuel Gulliver, Isaac Bickerstaff, M.B.

Drapier — or anonymously. He is also known for being a master of two styles of satire; the Horatian and Juvenalian styles.

Contents

- 1 Biography
 - 1.1 Youth
 - 1.2 The writer
 - 1.3 Maturity
 - 1.4 Epitaph
- 2 Works
 - 2.1 Major prose works
 - 2.2 Essays, tracts, pamphlets, periodicals
 - 2.3 Poems
 - 2.4 Correspondence, personal writings
 - 2.5 Sermons, prayers
 - 2.6 Miscellany
- 3 Biographical sources
- 4 See also
- 5 External links

Biography

Youth

Jonathan Swift was born at No. 8, Hoey's Court, Dublin, and was the second child and only son of Jonathan and Abigail Erick (or Herrick) Swift. His father was Irish born and his mother was born in England. Jonathan arrived seven months after his father's untimely death. Most of the facts of Swift's early life are obscure, confused and sometimes contradictory. It is widely believed that his mother returned to England when Jonathan was still very young, leaving him to be raised by his father's family. His uncle Godwin took primary responsibility for the young Jonathan, sending him with one of his cousins to Kilkenny grammar school (also attended by the philosopher George Berkeley).

In

1682 he attended Dublin University (Trinity College, Dublin), receiving his B.A. in 1686. Swift was studying for his Masters when



Jonathan Swift at Trinity

political troubles in Ireland surrounding the Glorious Revolution forced him to leave for England in 1688, where his mother helped

him get a position as secretary and personal assistant of Sir William Temple at Moor Park. Temple was an English diplomat who, having arranged the Triple Alliance of 1668, retired from public service to his country estate to tend his gardens and write his memoirs. Growing into confidence with his employer, Swift "was often trusted with matters of great importance." Within three years of their acquaintance, Temple had introduced his secretary to William III, and sent him to London to urge the King to consent to a bill for triennial Parliaments.

When Swift took up his residence at Moor Park, he met Esther Johnson, then 8 years old, the fatherless daughter of one of the household servants. Swift acted as her tutor and mentor, giving her the nickname "Stella" and the two maintained a close, but ambiguous relationship for the rest of Esther's life.

Swift left Temple in 1690 for Ireland because of his health, but returned to Moor Park the following year. The illness, fits of vertigo or

giddiness — now known to be Ménière's disease — would continue to plague Swift throughout his life. During this second stay with Temple, Swift received his M.A. from Hertford College, Oxford University in 1692. Then, apparently despairing of gaining a better position through Temple's patronage, Swift left Moor Park to become an ordained priest in the Established Church of Ireland and in 1694 he was appointed to the prebend of Kilroot in the Diocese of Connor, with his parish located at Kilroot, near Carrickfergus in County Antrim.

Swift appears to have been miserable in his new position, being isolated in a small, remote community far from the centres of power and influence. While at Kilroot, however, Swift may well have become romantically involved with Jane Waring. A letter from him survives, offering to remain if she would marry him and promising to leave and never return to Ireland if she refused. She presumably refused, because Swift left his post and returned to England and Temple's service at Moor Park in

1696, and he remained there until Temple's death. There he was employed in helping to prepare Temple's memoirs and correspondence for publication. During this time Swift wrote *The Battle of the Books*, a satire responding to critics of Temple's *Essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690). *Battle* was however not published until 1704.

In the summer of 1699 Temple died. Swift stayed on briefly in England to complete the editing of Temple's memoirs, and perhaps in the hope that recognition of his work might earn him a suitable position in England. However, Swift's work made enemies of some of Temple's family and friends who objected to indiscretions included in the memoirs. His next move was to approach King William directly, based on his imagined connection through Temple and a belief that he had been promised a position. This failed so miserably that he accepted the lesser post of secretary and chaplain to the Earl of Berkeley, one of the Lords Justices of Ireland. However, when he reached Ireland he found that the

secretaryship had already been given to another. But he soon obtained the living of Laracor, Agher, and Rathbeggan, and the prebend of Dunlavin in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

At Laracor, a mile or two from Trim, County Meath, and twenty miles from Dublin, Swift ministered to a congregation of about fifteen persons, and had abundant leisure for cultivating his garden, making a canal (after the Dutch fashion of Moor Park), planting willows, and rebuilding the vicarage. As chaplain to Lord Berkeley, he spent much of his time in Dublin and traveled to London frequently over the next ten years. In 1701, Swift published, anonymously, a political pamphlet, *A Discourse on the Contests and Dissentions in Athens and Rome*.

The writer

In February 1702, Swift received his Doctor of Divinity degree from Trinity College, Dublin. That spring he traveled to England

and returned to Ireland in October, accompanied by Esther Johnson — now twenty years old — and her friend Rebecca Dingley, another member of Wm. Temple's household. There is a great mystery and controversy over Swift's relationship with Esther Johnson nicknamed "Stella". Many hold that they were secretly married in 1716. Although there has never been definite proof of this, there is no doubt that she was dearer to him than anyone else and that his feelings for her did not change throughout his life.

During his visits to England in these years Swift published *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books* (1704) and began to gain a reputation as a writer. This led to close, lifelong friendships with Alexander Pope, John Gay, and John Arbuthnot, forming the core of the Martinus Scriblerus Club, (founded in 1713).

Swift became increasingly active politically in these years. From 1707 to 1709 and again in 1710, Swift was in London, unsuccessfully

urging upon the Whig administration of Lord Godolphin the claims of the Irish clergy to the First-Fruits and Twentieths ("Queen Anne's Bounty"), which brought in about £2500 a year, already granted to their brethren in England. He found the opposition Tory leadership more sympathetic to his cause and Swift was recruited to support their cause as editor of the *Examiner* when they came to power in 1710. In 1711, Swift published the political pamphlet "The Conduct of the Allies," attacking the Whig government for its inability to end the prolonged war with France. The incoming Tory government conducted secret (and illegal) negotiations with France, resulting in the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) ending the War of the Spanish Succession.

Swift was part of the inner circle of the Tory government, and often acted as mediator between Henry St. John (Viscount Bolingbroke) the secretary of state for foreign affairs (1710–15) and Robert Harley (Earl of Oxford) lord treasurer and prime minister

(1711–4). Swift recorded his experiences and thoughts during this difficult time in a long series of letters to Esther Johnson, later collected and published as *The Journal to Stella*. The animosity between the two Tory leaders eventually lead to the dismissal of Harley in 1714. With the death of Queen Anne and ascension of George I that year, the Whigs returned to power and the Tory leaders were tried for treason for conducting secret negotiations with France.

Also during these years in London, Swift became acquainted with the Vanhomrigh family and became involved with one of the daughters, Esther, yet another fatherless young woman and an ambiguous relationship to confuse Swift's biographers. Swift furnished Esther with the nickname "Vanessa" and she features as one of the main characters in his poem *Cadenus and Vanessa*. The poem and their correspondence suggests that Esther was infatuated with Swift, that he may have



The title page to Swift's 1735 *Works*, depicting the author in the Dean's chair, receiving the thanks of Ireland. The

motto reads, "I have made a monument greater than brass." The 'brass' is a double entendre, for Wood's half-pence (alloyed with brass) is scattered at his feet. Cherubim award Swift a poet's laurel.

reciprocated her affections, only to regret it and then try to break it off. Esther followed Swift to Ireland in 1714, where there appears to have been a confrontation, possibly involving Esther Johnson. Esther Vanhomrigh died in 1723 at the age of 35. Another lady with whom he had a close but less intense relationship, was Anne Long, a toast of the Kit-Cat Club.

Maturity

Before the fall of the Tory government, Swift hoped that his services would be rewarded with a church appointment in England. However, Queen Anne appeared to have taken a dislike to Swift and thwarted these efforts. The best position his friends could secure for

him was the Deanery of St. Patrick's, Dublin. With the return of the Whigs, Swift's best move was to leave England and he returned to Ireland in disappointment, a virtual exile, to live "like a rat in a hole".

Once in Ireland, however, Swift began to turn his pamphleteering skills in support of Irish causes, producing some of his most memorable works; *Proposal for Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (1720), *The Drapier's Letters* (1724), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729); earning him the status of an Irish patriot.

Also during these years, he began writing his masterpiece, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts, by Lemuel Gulliver, first a surgeon, and then a captain of several ships*, better known as *Gulliver's Travels*. Much of the material reflects his political experiences of the preceding decade. For instance, the episode when the giant Gulliver puts out the Lilliputian palace fire by urinating on it can be

seen as a metaphor for the Tories' illegal peace treaty; having done a good thing in an unfortunate manner. In 1726 he paid a long-deferred visit to London, taking with him the manuscript of *Gulliver's Travels*. During his visit he stayed with his old friends, Alexander Pope, John Arbuthnot, and John Gay, who helped him arrange for the anonymous publication of his book. First published in November 1726, it was an immediate hit, with a total of three printings that year and another in early 1727. French, German, and Dutch translations appeared in 1727 and pirated copies were printed in Ireland.

Swift returned to England one more time in 1727 and stayed with Alexander Pope once again. The visit was cut short when he received word that Esther Johnson was dying and Swift rushed back home to be with her. On January 28, 1728, Esther Johnson died, though he prayed at her bedside, even composing prayers for her comfort, Swift could not bear to be present at the end, but on the night of her death he began to write his

The Death of Mrs. Johnson. He was too ill to attend the funeral at St. Patrick's. Many years later, a lock of hair, assumed to be Esther Johnson's, was found in his desk, wrapped in a paper bearing the words, "Only a woman's hair."

Death became a frequent feature in Swift's life from this point. In 1731 he wrote *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift*, his own obituary published in 1739. In 1732, his good friend and collaborator John Gay died. In 1735, John Arbuthnot, another friend from his days in London, died. In 1738 Swift began to show signs of illness and in 1742 he appears to have suffered a stroke, losing the ability to speak and realizing his worst fears of becoming mentally disabled. ("I shall be like that tree," he once said, "I shall die at the top.") In order to protect him from unscrupulous hangers on, who had begun to prey on the great man, his closest companions had him declared of "unsound mind and memory." In 1744, Alexander Pope died. Then, on October 19, 1745, Swift died. After being laid out in

public view for the people of Dublin to pay their last respects, he was buried by Esther Johnson's side, in accordance with his wishes. The bulk of his fortune was left to found a hospital for the mentally ill, originally known as St. Patrick's Hospital for Imbeciles, which opened in 1757, and which still exists as a psychiatric hospital.

Epitaph

Text

extracted from the introduction to The Journal to Stella by George A. Aitken and from other sources)

Jonathan Swift wrote his own epitaph:

Hic depositum est corpus
JONATHAN SWIFT S.T.D.
Huius Ecclesiae Cathedralis
Decani
Ubi saeva indignatio
Ulterius

Cor



Jonathan Swift, illustration
from a 1905 collection of his
works

lacerare nequit
Abi Viator
Et imitare, si poteris
Strenuum pro virili
Libertatis Vindicatorem

Obiit 19 Die Mensis Octobris

A.D. 1745 Anno Ætatis 78

which William Butler Yeats translated from the Latin as:

Swift has sailed into his rest.
Savage indignation there
cannot lacerate his breast.
Imitate him if you dare,
world-besotted traveller.
He served human liberty.

Works

Jonathan was a prolific writer, famous for his satires. The most recent collection of his prose works (Herbert Davis, ed. Basil Blackwell, 1965-) comprises fourteen volumes. A recent edition of his complete poetry (Pat Rodges, ed. Penguin, 1983) is 953 pages long. One edition of his correspondence (David Woolley, ed. P. Lang, 1999) fills three volumes.

Major prose works

Swift's first major prose play, *A Tale of a Tub*, demonstrates many of the themes and stylistic techniques he would employ in his later work. It is at once wildly playful and funny while being pointed and harshly critical of its targets. In its main thread, the *Tale* recounts the exploits of three sons, representing the main threads of Christianity, who receive a bequest from their father of a coat each, with the added instructions to make no alterations whatsoever. However, the sons soon find that their coats have fallen out of current fashion and begin to look for loopholes in their father's will which will allow them to make the needed alterations. As each finds his own means of getting around their father's admonition, they struggle with each other for power and dominance. Inserted into this story, in alternating chapters, Swift includes a series of whimsical "discourses" on various subjects.

In 1690, Sir William Temple, Swift's patron, published *An Essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning* a defense of classical writing (see

Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns) holding up the *Epistles of Phalaris* as an example. William Wotton responded to Temple with *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) showing that the *Epistles* were a later forgery. A response by the supporters of the Ancients was then made by Charles Boyle (later the 4th Earl of Orrery and father of Swift's first biographer). A further retort on the Modern side came from Richard Bentley, one of the pre-eminent scholars of the day, in his essay *Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris* (1699). However, the final words on the topic belong to Swift in his *Battle of the Books* (1697, published 1704) in which he makes a humorous defense on behalf of Temple and the cause of the Ancients.

In 1708, a cobbler named John Partridge published a popular almanac of astrological predictions. Because Partridge falsely determined the deaths of several church officials, Swift attacked Partridge in *Predictions For The Ensuing Year* by Isaac

Bickerstaff, a parody predicting that Partridge would die on March 29th. Swift followed up with a pamphlet issued on March 30th claiming that Partridge had in fact died, which was widely believed despite Partridge's statements to the contrary.

Drapier's Letters (1724) was a series of pamphlets against the monopoly granted by the English government to William Wood to provide the Irish with copper coinage. In "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" (1739) Swift recalled this as one of his best achievements.

Gulliver's Travels was published in 1726. Though it has often been mistakenly thought of as a children's book, it is a great satire of the times. *Gulliver's Travels* is a misanthropic anatomy of human nature; a sardonic looking-glass. It asks its readers to refute it, to deny that it has not adequately characterized human nature and society. Each of the 4 books has a different theme, but all are attempts to deflate human pride. Critics hail the work as a satiric

reflection on the failings of Enlightenment modernism.

In 1729, he published *A Modest Proposal*, a satire in which the narrator, with intentionally grotesque logic, recommends feeding the rich using impoverished infants: "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food..." Following the satirical form, he introduces the reforms he is actually suggesting by deriding them:

Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients...taxing our absentees...using [nothing] except what is of our own growth and manufacture...rejecting...foreign luxury...introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence and temperance...learning to love our country...quitting our animosities and factions...teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants....Therefore I repeat, let no man

talk to me of these and the like
expedients, 'till he hath at least some
glympse of hope, that there will ever be
some hearty and sincere attempt to put
them into practice.

- According to other sources, Richard Steele uses the personae of Isaac Bickerstaff and was the one who wrote about the "death" of John Partridge and published it in *The Spectator*, Not John Swift.*

Essays, tracts, pamphlets, periodicals

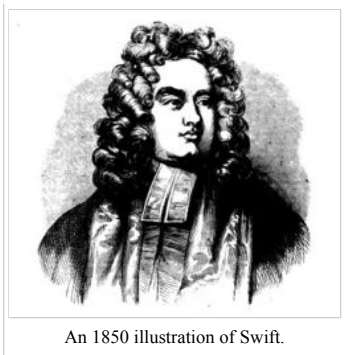
- "A Meditation upon a Broomstick" (1703–1710): Full text: Blackmask
- "A Critical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind" (1707–1711)
- The Bickerstaff-Partridge Papers (1708–1709): Full text: U of Adelaide
- "An Argument against Abolishing

Christianity" (1708–1711): Full text: U of Adelaide

- *The Intelligencer* (with Thomas Sheridan) (1710-????): Text: Project Gutenberg
- *The Examiner* (1710): Texts: Ourcivilisation.com, Project Gutenberg
- "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue" (1712): Full texts: Jack Lynch, U of Virginia
- "On the Conduct of the Allies" (1713)
- "Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation" (1713): Full text: Bartleby.com
- "A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Entered into Holy Orders" (1720)
- "A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet" (1721): Full text: Bartleby.com

- *The Drapier's Letters* (1724, 1725): Full text: Project Gutenberg
- "Bon Mots de Stella" (1726): a curiously irrelevant appendix to "Gulliver's Travels"
- A Modest Proposal, perhaps the most famous satire in English, suggesting that the Irish should engage in cannibalism.
- "An Essay on the Fates of Clergymen": Full text: JaffeBros
- "A Treatise on Good Manners and Good Breeding": Full text: Bartleby.com
- "On the Death of Esther Johnson": Full text: Bartleby.com
- "An Essay On Modern Education": Full text: JaffeBros

Poems



An 1850 illustration of Swift.

"Ode to the Athenian Society" 1692
(first published work)

- Poems of Jonathan Swift, D.D. Texts at Project Gutenberg: Volume One, Volume Two
- "Baucis and Philemon" (1706–1709): Full text: Blackmask

- "A Description of the Morning" (1709):
Full annotated text: U of Toronto;
Another text: U of Virginia
- "A Description of a City
Shower" (1710): Full text: U of Virginia
- "Cadenus and Vanessa" (1713): Full
text: Blackmask
- "Phillis, or, the Progress of
Love" (1719): Full text:
theotherpages.org
- Stella's birthday poems:
 - 1719. Full annotated text: U of
Toronto
 - 1720. Full text: U of Virginia
 - 1727. Full text: U of Toronto
- "The Progress of Beauty" (1719–1720):
Full text: OurCivilisation.com
- "The Progress of Poetry" (1720): Full
text: theotherpages.org

- "A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General" (1722): Full text: U of Toronto
- "To Quilca, a Country House not in Good Repair" (1725): Full text: U of Toronto
- "Advice to the Grub Street Verse-writers" (1726): Full text: U of Toronto
- "The Furniture of a Woman's Mind" (1727)
- "On a Very Old Glass" (1728): Full text: Gosford.co.uk
- "A Pastoral Dialogue" (1729): Full text: Gosford.co.uk
- "The Grand Question debated Whether Hamilton's Bawn should be turned into a Barrack or a Malt House" (1729): Full text: Gosford.co.uk
- "On Stephen Duck, the Thresher and

Favourite Poet" (1730): Full text: U of Toronto

- "Death and Daphne" (1730): Full text: OurCivilisation.com
- "The Place of the Damn'd" (1731): Full text
- "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" (1731): Full annotated text: Jack Lynch; Another text: U of Virginia
- "Strephon and Chloe" (1731): Full annotated text: Jack Lynch; Another text: U of Virginia
- "Helter Skelter" (1731): Full text: OurCivilisation.com
- "Cassinus and Peter: A Tragical Elegy" (1731): Full annotated text: Jack Lynch
- "The Day of Judgment" (1731): Full text

- "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D." (1731–1732): Full annotated texts: Jack Lynch, U of Toronto; Non-annotated text:: U of Virginia
- "An Epistle To A Lady" (1732): Full text: OurCivilisation.com
- "The Beasts' Confession to the Priest" (1732): Full annotated text: U of Toronto
- "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1732): Full annotated text: Jack Lynch
- "On Poetry: A Rhapsody" (1733)
- "The Puppet Show" Full text: Worldwideschool.org
- "The Logicians Refuted" Full text: Worldwideschool.org

Correspondence, personal writings

- "When I Come to Be Old" — Swift's

resolutions. (1699): Full text: JaffeBros

- *The Journal to Stella* (1710–1713): Full text: U of Adelaide; Extracts: OurCivilisation.com
- Letters:
 - Selected Letters: JaffeBros
 - To Oxford and Pope: OurCivilisation.com

Sermons, prayers

- Three Sermons and Three Prayers. Full text: U of Adelaide, Project Gutenberg
- Three Sermons: I. on mutual subjection. II. on conscience. III. on the trinity. Text: Project Gutenberg
- Writings on Religion and the Church. Text at Project Gutenberg: Volume One, Volume Two
- "The First He Wrote Oct. 17, 1727." Full text: Worldwideschool.org

- "The Second Prayer Was Written Nov. 6, 1727." Full text: Worldwideschool.org

Miscellany

- *Directions to Servants* (1731):: Extracts: OurCivilisation.com
- *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation* (1731)
- "Thoughts on Various Subjects." Full text: U of Adelaide
- Historical Writings: Project Gutenberg
- Swift Quotations: JaffeBros — many choice, well-documented Swift quotations here
- Swift quotes at Bartleby: Bartleby.com — 59 quotations, with notes

Biographical sources

- Samuel Johnson's Life of Swift: JaffeBros. From his *Lives of the Poets*.
- William Makepeace Thackeray's influential vitriolic biography:

JaffeBros. From his *English Humourists of The Eighteenth Century*.

- Bullitt, John M. Jonathan Swift and the Anatomy of Satire: A Study of Satiric Technique. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1953.
- Jae Num Lee "Swift and Scatological Satire" UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS 1971 ISBN 0826301967 jstor review
- Lee, Jae Num. "Scatology in Continental Satirical Writings from Aristophanes to Rabelais" and "English Scatological Writings from Skelton to Pope." Swift and Scatological Satire. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1971. 7–22; 23–53.
- Susan Gubar "The Female Monster in Augustan Satire" Signs, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1977), pp. 380–394
- Many other sources are listed here.

See also

- List of people on stamps of Ireland

External links

- The Gulliver Code - Gulliver's Secret Deciphered, by Alastair Sweeny
- e-texts of Swift's works
 - at The Online Books Page
 - Works by Jonathan Swift at Project Gutenberg
 - at Gulliver's Travels
- Swift and Gulliver
- Free audiobook of *A Modest Proposal* from LibriVox
- Jonathan Swift Resource
- Modern satire in the style of Jonathan Swift

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| Christian writers

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