

JONATHAN SWIFT IN CONTEXT

Jonathan Swift remains the most important and influential satirist in the English language. The author of *Gulliver's Travels*, *A Modest Proposal*, and *A Tale of a Tub*, in addition to vast numbers of political pamphlets, satirical verses, sermons, and other kinds of text, Swift is one of the most versatile writers in the literary canon. His writings were always closely intertwined with the English and Irish worlds in which he lived. The forty-four essays collected in *Jonathan Swift in Context* advance the latest research on Swift in a way that will engage undergraduate students while also remaining useful for scholars. Reflecting the best of current and ongoing scholarship, the contextual approach advanced by this volume will help to make Swift's works even more powerful and resonant to modern audiences.

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JONATHAN SWIFT
IN CONTEXT

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Preface

Few writers can be as secure in their canonical status as Jonathan Swift. He is one of the giants of English literature. Even during his lifetime, Swift was revered as the ‘greatest master of humour that ever wrote’, surpassing Rabelais and Cervantes.¹ In the judgement of T. S. Eliot, he was ‘the colossal Swift, the greatest writer of English prose, and the greatest man who has ever written great English prose’. It was in Swift’s writings, according to Eliot, that satire ‘rose as near to the highest as it ever has risen, or ever is likely to rise’.² But if anything, Swift’s reputation as a colossus of satire underplays the spectacular versatility of his pen. He stands among the first rank of pamphleteers and political journalists, not only of his lifetime but ever since. Among his contemporaries, only Pope surpassed him in verse – a fact which, he claimed, piqued his jealousy.³ He was an extraordinarily talented preacher, parliamentary speechwriter, and political strategist. Add to this his status as a pioneer of the English novel, and it is easy to understand why Swift’s reputation stands so high. How many other writers can claim such grand achievements across such an array of genres and forms?

And yet for all the perceived timelessness of his writings, Swift was very much a man of his moment. He wrote with the purpose of changing his world. For this reason, his writings can often seem hopelessly entangled with the forbidding contexts of early eighteenth-century party politics, religious debate, and affairs of state, all of which can befuddle even the most experienced reader. Such contexts require explication. That is the aim of this book. The following essays arise from a shared sense that any legitimate reading of Swift’s writings must be grounded in a thorough knowledge of his world. If we wish to understand these complex texts, then we cannot ignore the contexts that mattered most to Swift and his contemporaries, especially when those contexts seem strange or repellent to modern eyes. Swift’s imagination was fundamentally alien to our own: it may sometimes appear authoritarian, reactionary, misogynistic, and deeply

committed to the persecution of religious minorities. Yet his writings also include some of the most excoriating attacks on tyranny, corruption, and colonialism in the English language. A complete understanding of Swift's contrariness will always be out of reach, but renewed attention to the contexts within which he wrote may help get us some of the way there.

Our hope is that this volume will be taken not as the final say on its topic, but rather as a spirited provocation in an ongoing scholarly conversation. Contributors include not only senior academics with many decades of expertise in eighteenth-century literature and history but also junior scholars working at the forefront of the next wave of criticism. Several contributors bring their experience of working as volume editors for *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift* (2008–), of which six volumes have now been published and a further eleven are projected. The new edition promises to overhaul our understanding of Swift's writings by situating individual texts within pertinent contexts and by reconstructing the biographical and bibliographical circumstances under which they were written. *Jonathan Swift in Context* is designed to bring some of those findings to the attention of students and other interested readers, without their having to slog through the footnotes and textual apparatus of a modern multivolume scholarly edition.

To this end, the volume is divided into six sections covering Swift's personal life, his publishing history and critical reception, the literary background for his works, the many genres in which he wrote, the external worlds of England and Ireland, and the social and intellectual topics with which he engaged. The balance of the volume is tipped towards the contexts that Swift himself would have recognised as having shaped his works: there are numerous chapters on the religious and political battles that defined his public life as a writer, as well as the generic backgrounds for his best-known works. But there are also numerous chapters on topics and issues that exerted a subtler but no less profound influence on his mental world: for instance, race, gender, material culture, and food. If any of these chapters provoke further work in these areas, then the volume will have achieved its purpose.

Notes

- 1 Williams, *CH*, p. 110.
- 2 Claude Rawson, 'T. S. Eliot and Swift', *Essays in Criticism*, 67 (2017), 355–66 (p. 356).
- 3 'In POPE, I cannot read a Line, / But with a Sigh, I wish it mine' (*Poems*, II, p. 555).

Acknowledgements

This volume draws together forty-four essays by forty-two Swift scholars. The intellectual debts within this community are too many to be properly acknowledged here, though both editors would like to recognise the importance of Claude Rawson to our own readings of Swift. Bethany Thomas and George Laver at Cambridge University Press gamely cheered the book to the finish line, for which we are very grateful. Joseph Hone would like to thank colleagues and family for their patience during the volume's long gestation. And Pat Rogers wishes to thank Adrienne Condon for her continued support and encouragement.

Chronology

1664 June	Marriage of JS's father, Jonathan Swift (1640–67), and Abigail Erick (1640–1710), both of English origin but settled in Dublin.
1666 May	Jane Swift, sister of JS, baptised. She married Joseph Fenton in 1699 and died in Guildford in 1736, having moved to England to work for Sir William Temple's sister.
1667 March or April	Death of Jonathan Swift senior.
30 November	Birth of JS in Dublin.
1668	About this time, the infant JS kidnapped by his nurse, according to his own account, and taken to Whitehaven in Cumberland for three years. Soon after, Abigail moves to Leicester, leaving her son behind, chiefly in the care of his uncle Godwin.
1673–82	JS attends Kilkenny School, nearly 80 miles south-west of Dublin.
1682 14 April	JS enters Trinity College Dublin.
1686 February	JS graduates as Bachelor of Arts, granted 'by special grace' and continues in residence.
1689 January	JS leaves Trinity around this date owing to the collapse and effective closure of the college as a result of conflicts with King James II (reopened after William III's successful campaigns in England and Ireland). Travels to England
spring/summer	JS spends some months with his mother and then joins the household of the retired diplomat and author Sir William Temple, first at Sheen and then at Moor Park in Surrey, a relationship

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- that will survive until Temple's death. He meets the daughter of Temple's housekeeper, Esther, whom he christened 'Stella', then eight years old.
- 1690 JS experiences earliest symptoms of Ménière's disease, caused by fluid building up in the inner ear. This gave rise to problems throughout his life, among them hearing loss, vertigo, and tinnitus. Returns to Ireland for more than a year.
- 1 July Battle of the Boyne confirms William's hold on the throne, and James flees to France.
- 1692 First surviving poem by JS, an ode, published in a magazine around 1 April, followed by five similar items in the next few years. JS now contemplating ordination. Spends a further period in Leicester during the summer.
- 14 June Incorporated at Hart Hall, Oxford, on the basis of his Dublin degree. Proceeds to Master of Arts on 5 July. Temple promises advancement in the Church of England through patronage by the crown, never to come to pass.
- 1694 28 October Ordained deacon in the Church of Ireland at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.
- 1695 13 January Ordained priest at the same location.
- 28 January JS presented to his first ecclesiastical living, the prebend of Kilroot, covering three parishes near Belfast, with a stipend of £100 per annum. Installed in his post on 15 March. Spends only a year there, disliking the poverty of the surroundings and the hostility of the Presbyterian community who dominated the locality.
- 1695–96 While in Northern Ireland, JS meets a young lady from Belfast whom he addressed as 'Varina', actually Jane Waring (1674–1720), and begins a stilted affair with her, mostly at a distance, up to about 1700. She seems to have been unwilling to commit to marriage, and JS did not make much effort to overcome her

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- resistance, other than setting out requirements in a wife headed by cleanliness. Neither party ever married.
- 1696 JS back at Moor Park by the end of June. He will shortly embark on the first version of *A Tale of a Tub*, and probably writing some undatable poems, including one on the burning of Whitehall Palace in January 1698.
- 1699 27 January Death of Temple.
 August JS, now in need of employment, returns to Dublin as domestic chaplain to the recently appointed Lord Justice, the Earl of Berkeley, who was sworn in on 23 August. Berkeley survived only a year in the post before being replaced.
- 1700 First volume of Temple's works, including *Letters, Miscellanea, and Memoirs*, edited by JS and published up to 1709.
- 20 February JS appointed to the more congenial living of Laracor, near Trim in County Meath, 30 miles from Dublin.
- 22 October Installed as a prebendary of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.
- 1701 Outbreak of War of Spanish Succession.
 9 April After Lord Berkeley's dismissal, JS accompanies him back to London.
- August Esther Johnson and her companion Rebecca Dingley emigrate from Sheen to Dublin. JS follows with the new Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Rochester, reaching Dublin on 18 September.
- October First considerable work by JS, *Contests and Dissensions*, published in London.
- 1702 16 February JS awarded degree of Doctor of Divinity by Trinity College Dublin.
- 8 March Death of William III, succeeded by Queen Anne.
- 1703 JS returns to England.
 1704 10 May Publication of *A Tale of a Tub*, with *Battel of the Books* and *Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*.

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- 18 August Victory at Blenheim of allies under Duke of Marlborough.
- 1706 JS begins a series of intermittent visits to England of varying length, lobbying the government of Lord Godolphin on behalf of the Church of England, with partial success. Makes contact with Addison and Steele.
- 1708 By early this year JS has met Esther Van Homrigh (his 'Vanessa'), who has moved with her mother from Dublin to London, aged about nineteen.
- February Publication of first of the *Bickerstaff Papers*, followed by two more over the course of 1708–09.
- 1709 26 March Edmund Curll's illicit printing of *Baucis and Philemon*, the first of his numerous piracies over JS's lifetime.
- 12 April First issue of the *Tatler*, edited by Steele and Addison; JS makes occasional contributions over the next two years.
- 1710 March Trial of Dr Henry Sacheverell foreshadows the downfall of the Whig ministry; Godolphin dismissed on 8 August.
- 10 April Copyright Act comes into force.
- 24 April Death of Abigail Swift, mother of JS.
- 7 September JS arrives in London to lend support to the new Tory ministry, led by his personal allies Robert Harley (later Lord Oxford) and Henry St John (later Lord Bolingbroke). He embarks on his *Journal to Stella*, maintained with sixty-five letters until he set out for Dublin on 1 June 1713.
- 17 October 'Description of a City Shower' published in *Tatler*.
- 2 November JS writes first of thirty-three weekly numbers of the pro-government organ *The Examiner*, running to 14 June 1711.
- c. December Publication of *Short Character of Wharton*. Late in the year, the fifth edition of *A Tale of a Tub*, with important new materials.

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1711 27 February	First authorised collection of works by JS, <i>Miscellanies in Verse and Prose</i> , which contains some important items, including <i>An Argument against Abolishing Christianity</i> .
21 June	JS joins the recently formed Brothers Club, a Tory dining society and informal pressure group.
1 August	Stamp Act regulating pamphlets and newspapers comes into effect, with broad support of JS.
September	Charter granted to the new South Sea Company, established by Lord Oxford. JS would invest in £500 worth of stock in January 1712, funded partly by borrowing.
27 November	The most influential of the pamphlets JS wrote for the ministry, <i>The Conduct of the Allies</i> , which goes into numerous editions and translations, besides provoking many Whig replies.
1712 2 March	Publication of the first of Arbuthnot's five <i>History of John Bull</i> pamphlets, issued up to 31 July; admired by JS.
17 May	JS issues his <i>Proposal</i> for an English academy to preserve the purity of the language, on the French model: almost unique in that the author's name is attached.
Summer	JS begins work in the summer on <i>History of Four Last Years of the Queen</i> , completed in May 1713, but unpublished until 1765.
1713 31 March (OS)	Signing of the Treaty of Utrecht between the major parties, effectively ending the long running war. Popular with JS and other Tories, but criticised on various grounds by Whigs.
13 June	On a return visit to Dublin, JS is installed as Dean of St Patrick's. In the course of the year JS probably meets Pope for the first time, and cements his friendship with Dr John Arbuthnot. First plans laid for the satirical group known as the Scriblerus group, who begin to meet early in

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- 1714, with JS, Pope, and Arbuthnot joined by John Gay and Thomas Parnell.
- 2 November Publication of *The Importance of the Guardian Considered*, attacking Steele.
Likely date of composition of *Cadenus and Vanessa*, revised before publication in 1726.
- 1714 23 February Publication of *The Publick Spirit of the Whigs*, the last of the major pamphlets by JS in support of the government. His relations with Addison and especially Steele now irretrievably broken.
- 3 June JS arrives at Letcombe in the Berkshire Downs, a deliberately remote spot from which to consider the potential collapse of the Oxford ministry and his own future. He remains there until mid-August, corresponding with his friends about the tumultuous events taking place in London. Esther Van Homrigh makes him a surprise and indiscreet visit.
- 27 July Oxford dismissed as Lord Treasurer and government falls.
- 1 August Death of Queen Anne.
- 24 August JS arrives back in Ireland and divides his time between Trim and Dublin.
- 18 September George I, the new king, arrives in England from Hanover. Friends and allies of JS now removed from their posts.
- 5 November Esther Van Homrigh has arrived in Dublin, planning to take up residence at her childhood home of Celbridge, County Louth, 15 miles west of Dublin.
- 1715 March Bolingbroke flees to join the Old Pretender in France.
- June Oxford and Bolingbroke impeached. Oxford committed to Tower of London, Bolingbroke under an attainder: both regarded as martyrs to the cause by JS, who writes verses eulogising Oxford's grace under pressure.
JS begins drafts of *Enquiry into the Queen's Last Ministry* (published 1765).