Introduction

> To steal a Hint was never known,
> But what he writ was all his own.
>
> *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift, D.S.P.D.*

Part way through his most famous self-elegy, Jonathan Swift delivers one of the greatest one-line gags in poetry: 'what he writ was all his own'. The ostensibly proprietorial phrase was brazenly lifted from John Denham's *On Mr Abraham Cowley*:

> To him no Author was unknown,
> Yet what he wrote was all his own.[1]

Denham praises Cowley for writing original verse under the appropriate influence of prominent models old and new. In Swift's poem, more than half a century later, the venerable art of imitation (*imitatio veterum*) had been displaced by the dubious threat of theft (*stealing hints*). What does it mean to steal a hint? 'To steal another's idea is wrong', as James McLaverty says; but 'to take it and adapt it (as Swift does with the La Rochefoucauld maxim that stimulates the *Verses* or with Denham's couplet in these lines) is a vital aspect of invention'.[2] A hint can be gifted and regifted among likeminded writers. Swift gave John Gay the idea for *The Beggar's Opera*, though the latter preferred 'to have my own Scheme and to treat it in my own way'.[3] Sometimes 'a friend', Swift retorted, 'may give you a lucky [hint] just suited to your own imagination'.[4] But hints can be hijacked by hacks, as Pope affirms in the first book of the 1728 *Dunciad*: 'How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie; / How new-born nonsense first is taught to cry'.[5]

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[1] Denham, *On Mr Abraham Cowley*, 2. Unless stated otherwise, all references to Swift's poems come from *Poems*, ed. Williams.
[2] McLaverty, 'Swift and the Art of Political Publication', 119.
[3] The Duchess of Queensberry and John Gay to Swift, 18 July 1731, *Correspondence*, 3.478.
[4] Swift to Gay and the Duchess of Queensberry, 28 August 1731, *Correspondence*, 3.495.
[5] *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. Rumbold, 24.

Swift's joke gains extra heft because he does not make the claim directly. He quotes from a made-up conversation among friends and rivals who have gathered for a hypothetical wake ('Suppose me dead', he asks us, somewhat brusquely). Swift puts the borrowed line into the mouth of an unlikely commentator ('One quite indiff'rent in the Cause, / My Character impartial draws'): 'As for his Works in Verse and Prose', he concedes, 'I own my self no Judge of those'. It is the ignorant critic who plagiarises Denham, merely in words if not in ideation, but he is unnamed (and fictional) and therefore not liable. A short while before publishing *Verses*, Swift made a similar if more earnest observation about his refusal to steal hints. In the 'Advertisement' to the first official edition of his *Works*, in 1735, speaking in the third person, he declares 'the author never was known either in verse or prose to borrow any thought, simile, epithet, or particular manner of style'.[6] Such a claim is ironised by the editorial glosses in which the sources of just some of Swift's hints are cited. Borrowing, not stealing, is his preferred description. What is the difference, materially speaking? *The author never was known* – is that a baiting confession?

Poets are also makers, etymologically speaking (ποιητής, or poiētḗs: *creator, maker, author, poet*; from ποιέω, or poiéō: *I make, compose*). Over a long career in verse, from the early 1690s to the late 1730s, Swift habitually foregrounded a tension between poetry-making (squeezing out lines, to use a crude image from a late poem, 'A Panegyrick on the Dean, in the Person of a Lady in the North') and filching familiar material from the poetic archive. At the start of his career he mimicked Cowley's Pindaric odes. Garth's *The Dispensary* and Butler's *Hudibras* were early favourites. Later on, he arbitrarily pastiched *Paradise Lost*. Dryden's translations were frequently alluded to, often for bathetic effect. Pope's *Dunciad*, a text Swift claimed to have read at least a dozen times, exerted a strong influence over his Market Hill period in the late 1720s. Over many decades, Swift often turned to Virgil, Ovid and Horace for stories, characters and even metaphors. Really, another of Denham's lines for Cowley is more appropriate: 'To him no Author was unknown'.[7] Adept with the colloquial styles of Skelton and Butler, the panegyrical methods of Cowley and Marvell, the epic scope of Milton and the comic subversions of Prior and Pope, among other things, Swift was an adaptive and adaptative poet.

Unlike Dryden, Swift did not produce a complete translation of a classical poem. Rather, he snatched parts of Horace's odes and epistles and reworked

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[6] Quoted in Swift, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Rogers, 577–78.
[7] See *Library and Reading*, passim, and Brean Hammond, 'Swift's Reading', 73–86.

bits of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He freely spliced genres and forms, including everything from panegyric to pastoral, epistle to fable. Even his most conventional looking imitations, his early Pindaric odes after Cowley, strategically depart from the nominal sources. Elsewhere he makes a point of signposting his intertextuality, often in an attempt to defeat an opponent with their own words, as in his paper wars with Richard Steele and Jonathan Smedley. Pat Rogers puts it well: Swift's parody 'requires a parity of host and invader'; his parapoetry, he continues, 'lives alongside its sources'.[8] To invert Paul Hammond's remarks about Dryden, Swift writes poetry in which other poets are not ghosts but reluctant guests, fictive figures with whom he creatively quarrels.[9] In the homes of friends Swift appointed himself as a sort of sham live-in poet, with the Temples in the 1690s through to the Achesons in the late 1720s and early 1730s. In these coterie poems he impersonates his hosts and other inhabitants with a series of seemingly unflattering portrayals. In a manoeuvre at once self-mocking and self-aggrandising he also presents himself (typically, after 1714, in character as the Dean) as increasingly inept, poetically and socially (a droll ruse, of course).

Just as the nabbing of Denham's lines for Cowley established a paradox about stealing unsubstantiated material, so Swift's invasive impersonation creates another authorial anomaly. Beyond mere mimicry, to impersonate means to assume the character of somebody else, a familiar enough definition since at least 1715 (before then, the more common term would have been *personate*, to invest with personality).[10] Imbuing real people with manufactured personalities and dumping them into imagined situations, in his poetry, Swift created them anew. Well into the eighteenth century, *imitation*, for most poets and commentators, would have meant copying identifiable literary models. Bysshe, Constable, Fenton, Gildon, Steele, Pope and others used the term in this restricted sense. But improvisatory *impersonation* is a far more appropriate term for much of Swift's practice. Formal or extensive imitation, like taking substantiated hints, is anathema to Swift's methodology. Rather, Swift the poet is at once a taker and a maker: 'To steal a Hint was never known, / But what he writ was all his own'.

II

Over the past fifty years alone, since the 300th anniversary of the author's birth, in 1967, a vast amount of scholarship on Swift's poetry has

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[8] Rogers, 'Swift the Poet', 189.   [9] Hammond, *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, 21.
[10] See Terry, 'Swift's Use of "Personate" to Indicate Parody'.

appeared.[11] For our purposes that scholarship can be glibly divided into two distinct camps. One group celebrates Swift's bibliophilic imagination: Swift's creativity feeds *off* and extends the works of others, as well as his own (one of the secondary claims of this book is that Swift's poems ought to be read alongside his prose writings). The other group argues that Swift's works, especially his satires, are pervaded by grammaphobia, a portrayal of writing as an act of corruption, the feeding *on* and consumption of printed or circulated texts.[12] Another way to frame this debate, one more narrowly tied to the study of the poetry, would be to revisit the entrenched notion of Swift's 'anti-poetry' (as recently as 2001, in the introduction to a new selection of Swift's verse, Derek Mahon called him 'a sort of anti-poet').[13] To be sure, his poetic canon is full of riotous lampoons, mock-panegyrics, prickly political and religious libels, sordid love poems and more besides. His lines often look crude: the wrenched couplets test the patience of readers accustomed to Restoration elegance or Augustan correctness. Equally, his trimeters trip along at an exhilarating pace. (Swift the poet 'beats us all hollow', Byron conceded; 'his rhymes are wonderful'.[14]) Calling Swift an anti-poet, in short, assumes that poetry is a fixed commons; 'something in the poems', James Ward recently observed, 'repeatedly confronts and affronts cherished ideas of what poetry is for'.[15]

My book instead suggests that facets of each metaphor (feeding off or feeding on the works of others) inform Swift's highly expansive approach to poetry-making. Swift unravelled genres, or made up new ones such as his urban pastorals 'A Description of a City Shower' and 'A Description of the Morning'. He repurposed clichés for entirely new effects. His poems include extra half-lines. Some are drawn short. Swift scribbled on windows, on table-books, on his own books. Through a mock-academic intermediary he killed a rival writer, John Partridge, with a premature elegy. He adopted the mystical voices of Merlin and St Patrick, and the gods Apollo and Jove. But he also failed to listen, by his own admission. In 'Dr Swift to Mr Pope, While he was writing the *Dunciad*', the Dean is 'too deaf to hear'; so Pope composes his masterpiece in silence. Another close ally, Esther Johnson, was the subject of a miniseries of non-love poems in which Swift wonders, 'Am I a Poet fit for you? / Or at the Age of

[11] See Cook, 'Reading Swift's Poetry, 1967–2017'.
[12] On grammaphobia in Swift's prose satires see Castle, 'Why the Houyhnhnms Don't Write'.
[13] 'Introduction', *Jonathan Swift: Poems Selected by Derek Mahon*, vii.
[14] *Byron: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Page, 26. See Erskine-Hill, 'Swift's Knack at Rhyme'.
[15] Ward, 'Jonathan Swift', 21.

Forty three, / Are you a Subject fit for me?' ('Stella's Birth-Day [1725]').
He also mulled over the ineptitude of others, such as the poet-architect
John Vanbrugh, whose house, like his art, collapsed. Poetry-making entails
breaking, too.

Swift mocked his own pretensions to posterity with his late self-ode,
'A Panegyrick on the Dean, in the Person of a Lady in the North'. Rather
than create a colossal monument in his name, he raises two outhouses, in
which his pages will be put to better use than for mere verse. Even one of
his greatest political successes, as the patriotic M. B. Drapier, is reduced to
mere rags ('Drapier's Hill': 'His famous LETTERS made waste Paper').
Among his copious outputs there are short pieces that comment on their
own immediate failures, such as 'On Burning a Dull Poem'. The speaker
follows the famous opening lament of Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*
('. . . beating my selfe for spite'): 'Methought, when I this Poem read, / No
Vessel but an Ass's Head, / Such frigid Fustian could contain'. But whereas
Sidney breaks his writer's block ('"Foole", said my Muse to me, "looke in
thy heart and write"'), at the end of his poem Swift claims the destruction
of the text gives it a weird energy: 'How could I more enhaunce it's Fame? /
Though born in Snow, it dy'd in Flame'.[16] Some of Swift's narrators end
poems abruptly, as in 'The Progress of Poetry', where he leaves the
syphilitic Celia to rot. 'Send us new Nymphs', he demands with casual
cruelty.

We are left with some apparently finished poems that have significant
patches of asterisked ellipses, dashed-out names, blank spaces within lines
and other material markers of fragmentation, in small pieces like 'On the
Irish-Club', as well as the much longer productions, most notably *On
Poetry: A Rapsody* and *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift, D.S.P.D.* Even his
memorialising works will be subject to destruction, or so he envisions in
his late, great self-elegy, where he gives us a conversation between the
publisher Bernard Lintot and some country squire who inquires 'for SWIFT
in Verse and Prose' a short time after the Dean's death. Lintot – Pope's
bookseller in real life, but not Swift's – cannot find any remaining copies.
'To fancy they cou'd live a Year!', he jokes. Outwardly, Swift envies the
English Homer ('In POPE, I cannot read a Line, / But with a Sigh, I wish it
mine'). But equally he rejected the heroic style asked of him ('I the lofty
Stile decline', he writes in a mid-career metapoem, 'An Epistle to a Lady,
Who desired the Author to make Verses on Her, in the Heroick Stile').

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[16] *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Ringler, 165.

He prefers to infiltrate the styles of his enemies ('Souse them in their own Ex-crements', he jeers in his final major piece, 'The Legion Club').

III

Chiefly focusing on Swift's Cowleyan odes and epistles of the 1690s, Chapter 1 of *Reading Swift's Poetry* demonstrates the author's early rejection of conventional imitation in favour of a spontaneous form of appropriative writing. Railing against the accumulated habits of his seventeenth-century forebears, Swift repeatedly reveals in the early poems his own thwarted attempts to reinvent poetry for an unheroic age. Temporarily discarding the panegyric mode at the end of the decade, Swift found a new metafictional style that challenged the very medium of poetry. How can we adequately describe whispering or smells? If a table-book could talk would it have anything valuable to say? What would the petition of a barely literate waiting woman sound like? What happens if an over-confident member of your circle finishes one of your unfinishable ballads?

Current affairs increasingly occupied Swift's pen, as we shall discuss at length in Chapter 2. By the time we reach the first half of the 1710s, he had even become, briefly, a key propagandist for the government. Taking gentle Horace as his guide, Swift freely adopted a disparate range of prose and verse, including that of his rival, Richard Steele. In this period Swift deftly experimented with a number of classical sources, often in startling ways. 'A Description of a City Shower' and 'A Description of the Morning' revisit Virgil by way of Dryden and Donne, among other improbable bedfellows. Like many poets before him, Swift explicitly turned to Ovid (and his chief English imitator, Dryden) when writing 'Baucis and Philemon', a raucously mundane British variation on the story made famous in *Metamorphoses*. Description poetry, irreverent odes and epistles, fantastical fables, repurposed songs, fake prophecies and even a premature elegy: in his mid-career verse Swift covered a wide array of mixed-up genres, many of which had (to his mind) become corrupted by modern poets and commentators, as well as writers in all sorts of other lines of work, from shamming astrologers to political pamphleteers.

In the late 1710s and early 1720s, the main focus of Chapter 3, Swift produced three fairly neglected but potent short poems that break open the typical depiction of romance in verse. 'Phillis, or, The Progress of Love' follows the life of an artful prude who elopes with an unpromising hero. Their relationship soon sours and Swift's haughty narrator cuts their tale short. Spurning the cosmetic radiance of Dryden's Cleopatra or Waller's

Sacharissa, 'The Progress of Beauty' presents Celia as a syphilitic nymph rotting to pieces before the narrator can even bother to finish her story. 'The Progress of Marriage' delights in the misfortunes of a foolish cleric and his wife. If anyone could lay claim to the dubious honour of being Swift's own muse it was Esther Johnson ('Stella'). Swift wrote her an annual poem for nearly a decade until she died. Presented mainly as knockabout birthday poems, they take in a variety of unorthodox metonyms for physical and intellectual beauty, from dilapidated pub signage to fattened cows. What sort of love poetry could Swift write? Pretty panegyrics for a younger woman he admired? Profound verse essays on life and love and ageing? Metapoems for a trainee poet? Some important friendships made for difficult poetry. The most noteworthy case in point is doubtless Esther Vanhomrigh, another former tutee, whom Swift immortalised in his longest ever poem. *Cadenus and Vanessa*, like the pieces in the Stella series, is a remarkable non-love poem that conveys a deeper attachment to the subject than a straightforward parody would permit.

After his return to Ireland, Swift mixed with new writers, including brash younger clerics such as Thomas Sheridan and Patrick Delany, as we shall see in Chapter 4. Daniel Jackson's large nose proved to be the unlikely source of ekphrastic pieces written by the group. Jovial bagatelles aside, Swift retained serious doubts about poetry-making in such company. 'To Mr Delany' displays a mid-career poet getting back to basics – 'simple Topicks told in Rime'. Amid a wry account of modern literature in 'The Progress of Poetry', at the start of the 1720s, urban hacks and farmer's geese alike have grown fat and shrill. 'Advice to the Grub-Street Verse-Writers', half a decade later, ironically advises how modern hacks might trick a real poet – Pope – into writing original works into the margins of their books. Wearied by politics, Swift still had more tales to tell, if his body would let him. He continued to rework British and Irish georgic and pastoral poetry with extraordinary inventiveness in this period, whether in drolly dreary hospitality poems or pseudo-prophecy verses in the voice of St Patrick himself. His Unwilling Muse (his phrase) was a misnomer – he found new ways to insult his friends, including his host Anne Acheson ('The Journal of a Modern Lady', 'Death and Daphne') and Matthew Pilkington ('Directions for a Birth-day Song'), as well as emerging poets for whom he had little taste ('On Stephen Duck, the Thresher, and Favourite Poet'). Such insults were couched within the unlikely genres with which he engaged, from the Ovidian courtship tale to the royal ode.

Chapter 5 surveys some of the Market Hill poems, which Swift wrote during bouts of intense creativity while in semi-retirement in the north of

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Ireland in the late 1720s. A subseries of poems written to, and in the guise of,
the author's hosts explicitly turn away from such famous works as Jonson's
'To Penshurst' or Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' by moving inward:
whereas the ideal poem in this mode celebrates a grand home as the material
manifestation of the owner's impeccable qualities, Swift instead voices the
hostess as a trainee vexer, the host as a cruel dullard, the staff as aggravated
upstarts, and even himself, in the character of an unwelcome if celebrated
houseguest. The gentrified British pastoral gives away to Irish realism. The
satirical panegyrical ode has become a vehicle of self-critique rather than out
and out political propaganda. In markedly different ways, whether risibly or
aggressively, the Market Hill poems deal with the Dean's uncertain legacy as
the Hibernian Patriot, a hard-won but easily dashed image. This chapter
ends with an examination of a short-lived but excessive verse war conducted
with a rival cleric poet from Dublin who sought to tarnish Swift's reputation.

He was not done. In the 1730s, Swift produced his most controversial
poems ('The Lady's Dressing Room', 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going
to Bed', 'Strephon and Chloe' and 'Cassinus and Peter'), as discussed in
Chapter 6. Often read as discomfiting scatological poems, these works
have been grouped together as 'the unprintables', proof (some critics
argue) of an increasingly depraved mind. My new interpretation treats
the works in the context of Swift's career-long fascination with the mate-
riality of poetry. In the unprintables Swift messily mingles the conventions
of ancient and Restoration love poetry as an exposé of what he perceives to
be the limitations of form itself. Far from marking a new turn in his verse,
the late poems extend the deliberate bookishness of Swift's imitations of
standard and faddish models of modern writing. This chapter also places
Swift's most famous poem, *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift, D.S.P.D.*,
alongside his other self-portraits written between 1731 and 1733, includ-
ing political satires and parapoems alike, from verse libels on Delany to *On
Poetry: A Rapsody*. Even in his late period, I suggest, Swift riffs on structural
tensions between poetry-making and poetry-taking. 'The Legion Club', at
the end of his career, and 'On the Day of Judgement' (found among his
papers after his death, according to legend), have been taken as evidence of
a weakening mind. Both in fact skilfully use borrowed voices to shatter
their satiric targets: the pompous Dublin Stroller, who attacks from within
the madhouse of politics, and Jove, who petulantly spites the whole human
race in barely a few lines. Odes, epistles, fables, ballads, verse libels,
descriptive and narrative verses, imitations, auto-eulogies, elegies, rhapso-
dies, anti-erotica, Peeping Tom poems and more: to the end, Swift kept
reinventing himself and the poetry and poets around him.

CHAPTER I

Early Poems

> Poetry has lost the art to praise,
> Alas, the occasions are so few.
>
> 'Ode to Dr William Sancroft'

Writing and burning and writing: that is how Swift describes his early intellectual pursuits.[1] He worked slowly: 'I seldom write above 2 Stanzas in a week I mean such as are to any Pindarick Ode, and yet I have known my self in so good a humor as to make 2 in a day, but it may be no more in a week after'.[2] Frequently dissatisfied, he reveals, 'I alter them a hundred times, and yet I do not believe my self to be a laborious dry writer, because if the fitt comes not immediatly [*sic*] I never heed it but think of something else'. Maddened by the results of his labour, Swift casually killed his muse in 1693. The aspiring writer had already grown tired of the exalted poetry she inspired in him: 'since thy essence on my breath depends, / Thus with a puff the whole delusion ends' ('Occasioned by Sir William Temple's Late Illness and Recovery').

Commentators have long considered the murder an act of mercy. Deane Swift, a junior cousin, set the tone in 1778. Forty-odd years ago, Mrs Whiteway the housekeeper, he says, showed him a poem written in the 'Pindarique way' that addled his brain so fiercely he could not drudge through more than fifty or sixty lines, less than half of the extant text.[3] Chiefly of interest as a contrast to the author's later successes as a writer, the early productions are, for Peter J. Schakel, '[s]tilted, banal, and even self-contradictory'.[4] Reading Swift's first efforts, writes Nora Crow Jaffe, exposes 'disappointing discrepancies between them and his mature

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[1] Swift to John Kendall, 11 February 1691/2, *Correspondence*, 1.3–4.
[2] Swift to Thomas Swift, 3 May 1692, *Correspondence*, 1.8.
[3] Quoted in Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 5.382.
[4] Schakel, *The Poetry of Jonathan Swift*, 7. See also Fischer, *On Swift's Poetry*, 7–54, and England, *Energy and Order*, 19–43.

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works'.[5] To Robert W. Uphaus's mind there is a 'pervasive disunity' among the odes; Swift, he adds, 'simply cannot accommodate Pindaric inventiveness and praise with his own essentially satiric awareness'.[6] David Sheehan, in response, says Swift knowingly extended 'the satiric pindaric' that emerged in the seventeenth century.[7]

Did Swift have a plan? Was he trying to be a sincere panegyrist in his twenties, as Herbert Davis assumes?[8] Or was he by inclination always a subversive flatterer, as A. C. Elias Jr argues?[9] In a mock-dedication to Prince Posterity belatedly published in *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift concedes that the ode has become obsolete: 'the Materials of Panegyrick being very few in Number, have been long since exhausted . . . Now, the utmost a poor Poet can do, is to get by heart a List of the Cardinal Virtues, and deal them with his utmost Liberality to his Hero or his Patron'.[10] Looking back at the end of the decade, Swift might have been mocking his own pretensions as an aspiring panegyrist in the early 1690s. But, in any case, the early odes already display the same kind of cynicism about the mode's habitual listing of virtues, as we see most blatantly in 'Occasioned', where Swift dismisses as madness that 'no fancy ever seiz'd' a list of dulling rules laid out by the muse for those striving to be 'poetically great', such as 'Stoop not to int'rest, flattery, or deceit; / Nor with hir'd thoughts be thy devotion paid'. Duplicitousness, it turns out, is a poet's livelihood. The poetry of praise is a sham – a useful one, if handled properly.

To pose a pertinent question: what was his intended readership, if any? Would he have relied on readers' familiarity with Cowley and some other sources? Elias treats the early odes as private works intended to entertain a coterie audience at Moor Park, where Swift was an employee of the retired diplomat Sir William Temple.[11] Clive Probyn gathers the pieces together as 'a record of Swift interrogating his own ambition and its relationship with others' writing'.[12] 'Their dominant purpose is not to announce a coherent artistic apologia', he continues, 'but to exorcize some querulous internal demons, chief of which is an anxiety about mentors, exemplars, and literary influence'. At least two of the poems were publicly targeted at specific groups, however. Published in a new periodical,

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[5] Jaffe, *The Poet Swift*, 61. See also Harris, 'Occasions so Few', 22; Johnson, *The Sin of Wit*, 9; Nokes, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed*, 21; McMinn, *Jonathan Swift*, 4; and Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 82.

[6] Uphaus, 'From Panegyric to Satire', 55, 60.   [7] Sheehan, 'Swift on High Pindaric Stilts', 26.

[8] Davis, *Jonathan Swift*, 172.   [9] Elias, *Swift at Moor Park*, passim.

[10] Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Walsh, 30–31.

[11] Elias, *Swift at Moor Park*, passim.   [12] Probyn, 'Swift's Early Odes', 276.