Breaker of lives

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Leo Damrosch

JONATHAN SWIFT
His life and his world
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With more than eighty biographies of Jonathan Swift available, one has to wonder at why another should enter the fray. The answer may be that he has remained popular as a writer and somewhat elusive as a man.

The business of writing about Swift's life began in the decades immediately after his death in 1745, establishing a corpus of anecdotage (recently reprinted in Daniel Cook's useful *Lives of Swift*) which has rolled on down the centuries unchallenged until the way was blocked by "Ehrenpreis's Dilemma": that is, the question asked by Irvin Ehrenpreis, the author of *Swift: The man, his works and the age* (1962), as to whether such "Swiftiana" should be repeated and proved false, or remain unproven and unmentioned. Altogether unimpressed by Ehrenpreis's approach, Leo Damrosch embraces Swiftiana closely in *Jonathan Swift: His life and his world*, catching up all the speculative material that might be had, at some cost to close interpretation of the facts.

Swift has been the subject of political biographies, ecclesiastical, nationalistic and literary biographies, but not, until now, has he received the full romantic treatment with which the nineteenth century ought to have furnished us. Here he becomes Swift the breaker of hearts and lives, as previously discussed by Anne Cline Kelly, rather than Swift the poet, politician and satirist. From this new biography's florid opening – a breathless exchange of sentences between an unnamed man and woman, which turn out to be fragments of the passionate exchanges between Swift and Esther Vanhomrigh ("Vanessa") – one knows one is in unsafe hands with Damrosch. This generously illustrated volume is, in part, intended as a biography for the common reader, a role already satisfactorily filled by Victoria Glendinning's *Jonathan Swift* (1998).

Since Ehrenpreis, biographers of Swift have turned away from sweeping narratives. In keeping with this trend, *Jonathan Swift* is less a conventional Life than a series of extended sketches and close readings. The passages of literary criticism are abundant and often astute, especially in the case of *Cadenus and Vanessa* and the scatological poetry, although the lack of dates makes frequent reference to the appended chronology necessary. (Damrosch also has the odd tendency of quoting from Scott and Macaulay as though they were contemporaries of Swift, when contemporary accounts could furnish the same evidence, or the evidence simply does not exist.) The story here really begins with Swift and the *Examiner* (1710–11), the Tory periodical sponsored by Robert Harley, described by Damrosch as "the intoxicating years in London". Damrosch is unusual – but not alone – in that he sees the satirical activity of the "Scriblerus" Club, which Swift formed with Pope, John Gay, John Arbuthnot and Thomas Parnell – with Harley in occasional attendance – as a mere passing phase and not informative and formative of Swift's life and career, which it undoubtedly was: it gave the world *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance.

An illustration from *A Tale of a Tub*, engraved by John Sturt, 1704

Yet Swift's is an intrinsically interesting life, and Damrosch's account of it is engaging in many ways. There is a large cast of characters, often tellingly described. Women featured prominently in Swift's life, and each of them – except Stella – is given extensive and justified treatment. Damrosch persuasively sees much more in Swift's relationship with Vanessa than Ehrenpreis allowed. Ehrenpreis saw Swift as essentially asexual; Damrosch supplies us with hints of a more sexually engaged individual, more like the man David Nokes presented in *Jonathan Swift: A hypocrite reversed* (1987).

There are also some new discoveries, but these are swamped by an all too familiar narrative and often throw up as many – unanswered – questions as answers, partly because Damrosch has the scholar's tenacity but lacks the conviction to come to conclusions. His indecisive account of Swift's supposed marriage to his "Stella", Esther Johnson, in 1716 is a case in point. Evidence that Swift was a closet Jacobite, meanwhile, is tantalizingly offered but no more, without reference to the crucial recent work of Ian Higgons on this question. At the other extreme, a book that gives us the comparative heights of the eminent men of Europe is surely wearing its learning a little heavily.

Damrosch is on surer ground back in Ireland, and offers quite a full account of the Dean's modus vivendi and those with whom he mixed – their activities and pastimes – although recent work on Swift's sermonizing seems to have been overlooked. Swift himself wrote "for words pass, but letters remain" and what remains is teasingly explored. It is not, however, exhaustively examined and it may be that the abundance of sources leaves Leo Damrosch with an embarrassment of riches from which to choose. He is certainly right about one thing: "Swift still matters, three and a half centuries after his birth, because he was a great writer and a great man". What Swift was remains a mystery, and his idiosyncrasies and private relations remain beyond the scope of any definitive biography. But we will continue to return to him because of the irreducible richness of what he left behind – from broadsides a single page long to satirical verses on himself, his friends and everybody else, to *A Tale of a Tub* and, of course, *Gulliver*.

Property wrongs

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Don Herzog

HOUSEHOLD POLITICS
Conflict in early modern England
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"Give no Person any Liquor till he has called for it thrice at least", a former footman advises a butler in Jonathan Swift's mock-conduct book *Directions to Servants* (1745). Two centuries earlier, the moralist Leonard Wright had offered this advice in *A Display of Dutie, Dect with Sage Sayings, Pythie Sentences, and Proper Similies* (1589): "it is required in a good servant, to have the back of an Asse, to beare all things patiently: the tongue of a shéepe, to kéepe silence gently: and the snout of a swine, to féede on all thinges heartily". Yet there is, perhaps, some irony here too, since Wright goes on to castigate churchgoers who would not "looke vp to heaven when they pray, for wrinkling theyr ruffes". It is no surprise to see Swift in *Household Politics: Conflict in early modern England*, in which Don Herzog scrutinizes ideas about domestic governance, marriage, misogyny, patriarchy and gender roles from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, but he also makes brilliant use of more obscure sources, such as *A Display of Dutie*, alongside canonical works.

Conduct manuals, and other texts such as poems, plays, anthologies of songs and jokes, are not reliable evidence of what actually happened in early modern households. Herzog suggests, however, that they did comment on, mock or echo domestic dynamics with which their readers or audiences would have been familiar – and, as he asks, "doesn't the mere fact that some people doggedly insisted patriarchal authority is justified suggest that others doubted or disputed it?" In Charles Johnson's comedy *The Generous Husband: Or, the coffee house politician* (1711), for example, a jealous husband attempts to exercise some "time-honoured patriarchal authority" over his wife, and fails. He calls his fifteen-year-old wife "my property", "a jewel that I have purchas'd at a costly Price . . . and being so have I not the Right to lock it up in my Casket, or wear it abroad on Holidays, as I think fit?" After he shuts her away in a room with no windows, she threatens to run away with another man. The husband blames himself for thinking he could tame her: "Fool that I was, to have consider'd how inconsistent the 15 Years of this Girl were with the threescore of mine . . . like the Silk-worm, I have wrought my own Tomb, and I lie down in it in peace". The play ends with another character saying, "Why should you pretend to lock up a Treasure to which all Mankind have a key? No, rather . . . Let all her Ways be unconfin'd: / And clap your padlock on her Mind".

Yet Daniel Defoe's "Academy for Women" (1697) shows that not everybody agreed that padlocking the female mind was a good idea:

> I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous Customs in the world, considering us as a Civiliz'd and a Christian Countrey, that we deny the advantages of Learning to Women. We reproach the Sex every day with Folly and Impertinence, while I am confident, had they the advantages of Education equal to us, they wou'd be guilty of less than our selves.

Defoe famously went even further in *Roxana* (1724): "a Woman was as fit to govern and enjoy her own Estate, without a Man, as a Man was, without a Woman; and that, if she had a-mind to gratifie herself as to Sexes, she might entertain a Man, as a Man does a Mistress". As Herzog notes, the supposedly monolithically patriarchal society of the time turned the novel into a bestseller.

The crux of Herzog's argument is that politics is a conflict over legitimate authority, no matter where or on what scale that conflict occurs. He parallels domestic politics and state politics with examples such as Martin Luther's *A Commentarie upon the Fiftene Psalms* (1577), which tells us that "household government" is the "headspring" of cities, dukedoms, shires and kingdoms: "when the house is wel governed, then shal it go well with the common wealth. If father, mother, husband & wife be lacking which should bring forth children, nourish them and bring them up, there can be no common wealth". Out of that need for authority spring debate, struggle, dissent, even mere disgruntled backchat. When servants or wives taunt or defy hapless employers or husbands, we are not witnessing social decay; "it's a stable social formation", Herzog argues.

The hollow chumminess of some sentences ("It behoves us to muck around in the evidence"; "you betcha") and scenarios (Don Herzog drums on about whether buying Skippy peanut butter in a supermarket is a private or public act) are weak moments in the book. But then we find out that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had a commode made from the works of her male literary rivals Swift, Alexander Pope and Henry Bolingbroke; and that when interviewing for new servants, Swift would not hire those that flinched at hearing they were expected to clean other servants' shoes. The value of this book lies in such instructive details.