



*Essays in  
Eighteenth-Century  
English Literature*

*Louis A. Landa*

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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

Louis A. Landa

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

1980.1021  
A. J. J.

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Published by Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Guildford, Surrey

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data will be  
found on the last printed page of this book

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Printed in the United States of America by Princeton  
University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

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TO  
HAZEL AND EVELYN  
AND  
THE MEMORY OF MAYNARD

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following is a list of the places and dates of the original publication of the essays in this volume. I am grateful to the various editors and presses for permission to reprint.

"Swift's Economic Views and Mercantilism," *ELH, A Journal of English Literary History*, X (1943), 310-35. Reprinted by permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

"A Modest Proposal and Populousness," *Modern Philology*, XL (1942), 161-70. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

"Jonathan Swift and Charity," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XLIV (1945), 337-50. Reprinted by permission of the University of Illinois Press.

"Jonathan Swift: 'Not the Gravest of Divines'," in *Jonathan Swift, 1667-1967: A Dublin Tercentenary Tribute*, eds. Roger McHugh and Philip Edwards (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1967), pp. 38-60.

"Swift, the Mysteries, and Deism," in *Studies in English, Department of English, The University of Texas 1944* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1945), pp. 239-56. Reprinted by permission of the University of Texas Press.

"Swift's Deanery Income," in *Pope and His Contemporaries: Essays presented to George Sherburn*, eds. James L. Clifford and Louis A. Landa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), pp. 159-70. Reprinted by permission of Clarendon Press.

"Jonathan Swift," in *English Institute Essays 1946: The Critical Significance of Biographical Evidence; The Methods of Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), pp. 20-40. Reprinted by permission of Columbia University Press.

"The Shandean Homunculus: The Background of Sterne's 'Little Gentleman'," in *Restoration & Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop*, ed. Carroll Camden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 49-68. Reprinted by permission of the Trustees of William Marsh Rice University.

"Johnson's Feathered Man: 'A Dissertation on the Art of Flying' Considered," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde*, ed. W. H. Bond (New York: Grolier Club, 1970), pp. 161-78. Reprinted by permission of the Grolier Club.

"Pope's Belinda, the General Emporie of the World, and the Wondrous Worm," *South Atlantic Quarterly: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Literature in Honor of Benjamin Boyce*, LXX (1971), 215-35. Reprinted by permission of Duke University Press.

"Of Silkworms and Farthingales and the Will of God," in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century II: Papers presented at the Second David Nichol Smith Seminar*, ed. R. F. Brissenden (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), pp. 259-77. Reprinted by permission of the Australian National University Press.

"London Observed: The Progress of a Simile," *Philological Quarterly: From Chaucer to Gibbon, Essays in Memory of Curt A. Zimansky*, LIV (1975), 275-88. Reprinted by permission of the University of Iowa Press.

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## INTRODUCTION

The essays in this volume were originally published in various scholarly journals and collections over a period of roughly three decades ranging in time from 1942 to 1975. Of the authors who are the main focus of the discussions Jonathan Swift has received by far the most extensive treatment. Seven of the essays are concerned with him; Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Laurence Sterne are central figures in single essays. Of the two remaining essays one is devoted to the great metropolis, London, as Englishmen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries viewed it; the other is a study of a pervasive and influential idea or concept in the mercantilist economic thought of the times, a rationalistic concept that awed men of all persuasions and found its way reverentially into the works of theologians, scientists, and ethical writers as well as literary men. I wish to suggest that it will be misleading to consider an essay in this volume which bears the name of an author in the title as the sole domain of that particular author. The approach I have used permits—in fact, it demands—that a host of writers be used to build up the background or climate of opinion which intellectually nourished the writer under discussion. Such a climate of opinion, drawn from both major and minor authors past and present and from various fields, represents a body of ideas, pre-suppositions, and assumptions the writer shared with others of his day and to which they would respond. Logically this approach ought to prepare a twentieth-century reader to read the eighteenth-century authors, to an extent at least, as contemporaries sharing a common heritage. In most of the essays reprinted here works of the several authors have been placed in this cultural matrix and examined not from the vantage point of literary merit but as the authors assimilated and adapted for their own purposes certain concepts and ideas from both traditional and contemporary culture, specifically as these concepts and ideas had been formulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by many thinkers in the fields of economics, religion, and science.

I have, it will soon be apparent, given more attention to the climate of economic opinion, appropriately in view of the Englishman's article of faith that his country had become the greatest of all trading nations. The English merchant (i.e., the man engaged in foreign trade) was justly celebrated as a national benefactor. Yet there was dissent: though one segment of the nation proclaimed that commerce was the

true basis of a nation's flourishing, an equally convinced group maintained that a flourishing agriculture was more valuable. This latter view derives from the biblical and classical tradition of the importance of an agrarian culture. It was eloquently supported, about the time Swift published *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), by Richard Bradley, Professor of Botany in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of the Royal Society, who maintained that one learns from the Holy Scriptures themselves that the science of husbandry was "appointed by God himself."

In the clash of opinion between the trading and the landed interests Swift was a vocal supporter of the landed class. He was particularly indignant that England should rule Ireland by the harsh colonial principles prescribed by the mercantilist economic philosophy, and it is in his various Irish tracts that one finds instances of his reaction to these principles both explicitly and implicitly as England unjustly and arbitrarily applied them to a hapless Ireland. This is the crux: some of the mercantile principles he thought valid, but an England bent on oppression did not permit them to operate normally in Ireland. It is striking how frequently Swift's writings can be interpreted in economic terms, in many of his miscellaneous tracts, in *The Drapier's Letters* (1724), in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in his correspondence, and even in one of his sermons, "Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland" (1715 or later). Like his contemporaries Swift was the inheritor of an amorphous body of economic ideas formulated by miscellaneous thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ideas generally accepted as embodying the true nature of an economic society and the principles that should guide a nation's foreign trade.

In the essay entitled "Swift's Economic Views and Mercantilism," I have cited instances which reveal his strategy in using commonly accepted mercantilist principles as a basis for his indictment of England. His logic is that in natural resources Ireland had the potentialities of becoming a flourishing nation by means of commerce had England left if free to operate according to those mercantilist principles which had assured England's maritime greatness. Any balanced assessment of Swift's economic views would recognize that despite his preference for the landed interest he understood well the importance of trade, of what he called the moneyed interest.

In 1729 Swift published the most brilliant of his tracts, the ironic comment on the economic conditions of Ireland, then enduring a famine of three years' duration. "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them Beneficial to the Publick" is political in its intention but economic in its substance. For his purpose

Swift uses one of the most cherished economic principles among the mercantilist writers, the "undisputed maxim" that people are the wealth of a nation. In 1698 Sir Josiah Child, a widely respected proponent of mercantilist doctrine, had written: "Most Nations in the Civilized Parts of the World are more or less Rich or Poor proportionably to the Paucity or Plenty of their People, and not to the Sterility or Fruitfulness of their Lands." A like-minded mercantilist, Sir Francis Brewster, four years later maintained that "Nothing makes Kingdoms and Commonwealths, Mighty, Opulent and Rich, but Multitudes of People; 'tis Crowds bring in Industry." Daniel Defoe, the laureate of trade, agreed: ". . . the glory, the strength, the riches, the trade, and all that is valuable in a nation as to its figure in the world, depends upon the number of its people, be they never so mean and poor. . . ." As Swift observed the people of Ireland, the increase in beggary, thievery, undernourishment, and unemployment—and utterly despaired that any future generation of Irishmen could possibly fare better—he realized the cruel irony inherent in the unqualified doctrine as applied to Ireland, that people are "in truth the chiefest, most fundamental, and precious commodity." In the guise of a public-spirited citizen seeking a solution, Swift noted the "prodigious Number of Children" in Ireland doomed to grow up to a life of misery and uselessness. But they too were people, and in mercantile theory counted as potential units of the wealth of the nation. Though a grievance to the nation at that moment, they could become actual units of wealth: the modest proposal is to turn them into delectable and tender meat, some to be used as a new dish for the Irish palate, others to be exported for the Englishman's table, to the improvement of Ireland's foreign trade. Thus by the simple expedient of cannibalism Ireland too might operate under the universally valid mercantile principle that people are the wealth of a nation, a principle that English restrictions on Irish trade negated.

The essay "Swift and Charity," although it has some affinity with the more purely economic essays, is primarily biographical. The problems created by poverty were overwhelming in Ireland, and Swift as a clergyman and Dean of a great cathedral was inevitably involved. The essay details his various charitable activities, relates him to the flourishing charity-school movement of the times, and examines the traditional Christian theory of charity as he and his contemporaries, both clergymen and laymen, understood it. The man of wealth must consider himself not the *owner* of his wealth but its steward. He held his wealth in trust, and the distribution of it as charity was an obligation not to be scanted. As a parallel to his examination of the meaning of riches in the Christian scheme of things, Swift examines as well the

significance of poverty. He accepts the prevailing view that the division of men into rich and poor is providential. The disparity in the condition of men is agreeable to the will of God, and thus the poor should accept their state without repining. Nevertheless, though they have no legal demand upon the rich, they do have a right or claim under God antecedent and superior to any merely mundane or human rules for the dispensing of charity. However sensitive Swift was to the sufferings of the poor and the injustices in the social order, he was conservative, not inclined to argue in his sermons for radical changes in the structure of society. In those sermons where he examines the meaning of riches and poverty in the Christian scheme of things, we find him accepting the commonplaces and rationalizations which had come down to his day and were pervasive in homiletic literature.

Even Swift's enemies, those who attacked him on both political and religious grounds, granted that he was a dedicated churchman and an effective Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. In the essay titled "Jonathan Swift: 'Not the Gravest of Divines'" I have sketched his troubled career from its beginnings, his rise from an obscure parish priest to the dignity of a Dean, his relationship with the canons in his cathedral chapter, and his workaday world as the Dean of the most important cathedral in the Irish Anglican establishment. As a bemused observer of himself as a clergyman Swift described himself as "not the gravest of Divines." Elsewhere he had asserted that

Humour, and Mirth, had Place in all he Writ:  
He reconcil'd Divinity and Wit

Such casual remarks should not obscure his long and dedicated service to the Church of Ireland as an institution. Indeed, Swift was not a theologian. He rarely entered into the heated controversies that agitated the contemporary clergymen: the respective claims of reason and faith in religion, the validity of the Christian miracles, doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. It is possible that in some of his lost sermons he "reconcil'd Divinity and Wit," but in the eleven extant sermons he is little concerned with divinity or doctrinal matters. There is one interesting exception, "On the Trinity," in which his views are lucidly set forth. The sermon is one of scores in the Trinitarian Controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is directed against the extreme rationalists then attacking the orthodox view of the Trinity—the deists and the Socinians. The deists particularly were the most feared of those asserting heterodox views of the Trinity and the other mysteries and miracles of Christianity. It was the deists who insisted on the primacy of reason over faith, who maintained that the Trinity could not be accepted as a valid article of

faith unless it was intelligible to human reason. To Swift they exemplified the old heresy, the prying intellect with its subtleties and quibbles which were the source of contention in the Christian world, and he ridiculed their excessive claim that weak human reason could penetrate the grand mysteries of revealed religion. Human reason might indeed arrive at the conclusion that such a mystery as the doctrine of the Trinity was a true revelation of the deity, but once it reached this conclusion it then must resign itself to faith and accept the doctrine even though it might be in many aspects beyond human comprehension. In the essay "Swift, the Mysteries, and Deism," I have examined Swift's sermon on the Trinity, a remarkably complex document, in the context of the relevant religious thought of the times, both orthodox and heterodox.

The essay "Swift's Deanery Income" is restricted in scope, but it bears interestingly on the temporal as contrasted to the spiritual aspect of Swift's life. It prints for the first time a recently discovered manuscript which sets forth in detail the sources—rents, tithes, fees—from which Swift's annual income was derived. The Anglican clergymen of eighteenth-century Ireland were firmly convinced that only flourishing church temporalities could keep the Anglican faith vibrant and strong in its struggles to keep pace with a vigorous Presbyterianism. Swift and the clergy generally were in controversy with laymen about the divine tenth—the tithe due the priesthood from the produce of the land. Resistance to the payment of tithes by dissenters, Anglican landlords, and others was much resented by the clergy, who argued that tithes were due them by divine right, by immemorial custom, and as a legally defensible property right. Over the years Swift had much to say on the subject, including his amusing remark to Alexander Pope in a letter, February 26, 1729/30: ". . . although tithes be of divine institution, they are of diabolical execution." Since tithes were roughly half of his income, Swift frequently grumbled over being deprived of his due, and increasingly in his later years his sense of doom was intensified as he wrote about both his personal fortune and the impoverished state of the Church of Ireland. The newly discovered document, which is a list of his possessions and income about 1742, was in all probability drawn up for the Commission of Lunacy preparatory to the verdict which found him to be of unsound mind and memory. As a result Swift's property and person were placed in the hands of trustees. The document is highly personal; it reveals that his income was ample for his personal expenses and his extensive charities. The essay entitled "Jonathan Swift" was first delivered as an address in 1946 in a session at the English Institute devoted to the critical significance of biographical evidence. Swift is an appropriate subject for this

theme since his biographers, both past and present, have relied so heavily on biographical fact—and fiction—to interpret his writings. The biographical approach to literary interpretation is of course a valid one, but Swift has suffered more than most authors from commentators who have made their interpretations of the works by unwarranted emphasis on selected facts of his life, finding it convenient to ignore the facts which would give a different or more balanced interpretation. It should be mentioned that the twentieth-century critics of Swift have done much to correct the distortions and misapprehensions of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Two of the essays exemplify the impact of contemporary science on authors of widely different temperaments and intentions, Sterne and Johnson. In “The Shandean Homunculus: The Background of Sterne’s ‘Little Gentleman’ ” I have examined the opening passages of *Tristram Shandy* in the light of the prevailing embryological theories which resulted from the microscopic investigation of such respected biologists of the late seventeenth century as Harvey, Leeuwenhoek, de Graaf, and others. The microscope revealed, it was maintained, that the sperm is in fact a fully formed, or preformed, animalculum, a homunculus, or manikin, so exceedingly small that, according to John Keill, a scientist lecturing at Oxford in 1700, it exemplifies the dream of some philosophers concerning angels: “many thousands of them may dance on the Point of a small Needle.” Inevitably a controversy divided the scientists: the animalculist contended that the male sperm, already a preformed human being, needed the ovum or the womb—a resting-place—to develop, but that the woman is not the true agency in the process of conception and generation. Hers is the passive agency. The ovists or ovarians derived their view from the famous dictum of Harvey, *ex ovo omnium*, enunciated in 1651. The two schools of thought agreed that the very moment of conception had great importance, a topic which had been discussed from ancient times. Sterne, alive to the risible aspects of the preformation theory and certain of its implications, introduces in the opening chapters of the novel the homunculus who is to burgeon into Tristram, the little gentleman, so young a traveler, arriving in a “sad disordered state of nerves”—the result of Mrs. Shandy’s untimely question to her husband at the critical moment of conception. Tristram’s “misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world.” Unconventional in his ideas of time and structure in the novel, Sterne introduces his hero not at birth or later, as was customary, but as a little man already at the moment of conception “a Being guarded and circumscribed with rights . . . a Being of as much activity . . . and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor.” The witty context of the Shandean