

Jonathan Swift's *Message for Moderns*

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Jonathan Swift and the Millennium of Madness: The Information Age in Swift's "A Tale of a Tub," by Kenneth Craven, *Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992. xii + 238 pp. \$71.50.*

When modern conservatives associate their political views with compatible precursors in the eighteenth century they ordinarily think of Edmund Burke in England and Alexander Hamilton in America. They strangely neglect the works of the prose satirist Jonathan Swift, who vindicated social and political stability with vigor equal to that exhibited by these champions of individual liberty. No more powerful wielder of the weapons of classical satire over the modern devices of populist rhetoric can be found in the history of English literature than the author of *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Tale of a Tub*. Swift was a staunch defender of church and state, an advocate of absolute moral values over consensus, an opponent of the idea of progress along with utopian schemes and systems, and a supporter of traditional values in the Ancients-Moderns controversy over the directions and ideals of scholarship. Kenneth Craven has focused on *A Tale of a Tub* to trace the origin of these concepts in ancient philosophy and seventeenth-century polemics over alchemy, medi-

cine and science; in so doing he has revealed the relevance of Swift's learned satire to the moral dilemmas of our modern information age.

The conjunction of the notions "madness" and "information age" in Craven's title inevitably brings to mind the theory explosion that has overturned literary criticism in the last two decades. Eighteenth-century scholarship has been relatively free of theoretical extremes, even though feminists have had some success in promoting gender over genre and others besides Marxists have been able to elevate ideology over ideas. It must be admitted that Jacques Derrida, the most prominent representative of what Swift would undoubtedly call modern critical madness, made some use of the linguistic theories of Rousseau, but he otherwise left the latter's Enlightenment-oriented contributions largely untouched. Even the "froth and ferment" whipped up at academic conferences by literary theorists has had only negligible effect on college syllabi, and interpretations in printed scholarship continue to be "concentrated on the most canonical of writers."¹ Voltaire still reigns supreme in the French canon and Jonathan Edwards retains his privileged position in American studies, even though neither one offers much in support of current attitudes to-

ward political correctness.

The mainstream of eighteenth-century studies, which is by and large grounded in positivism and formalism, has been less influenced by advocates of radical methods of research such as structuralism and deconstruction than by social and politically-minded critics, who argue that the peripheries of literary research should be broadened or expanded. The latter view is not antithetical to the "New Historicism," which differs from traditional historicism primarily in advocating a widened perspective, so wide indeed that Craven defines it as "allowing all opinions free rein." Multiculturalism, another aspect of the expanded view, has not entered eighteenth-century studies in the United States except marginally in regard to Latin-America.

American scholarship has a respectable record of dealing with the theme of exoticism and the reports of travelers venturing beyond the confines of Europe and the Americas. This is a salutary aspect of multiculturalism that diverges completely from the politically correct aspect that seeks to provide material advantages for single ethnic groups or to elevate one ethnic group over another. Salutary multiculturalism shares the function of comparative literature in providing information about cultures previously unknown or considered as merely exotic. Irving Babbitt, for example, seriously recommended oriental philosophies as potential models for the West. A self-proclaimed positivist, Babbitt could in contemporary terms be considered a multiculturalist as well.

Among the new methods of investigation, both radical ones such as deconstruction and relatively conventional ones such as reader response produce descriptions and evaluations, but they engender no new knowledge. As Craven observes of the trendy critics of the Augustan age, if their data can be

classified as information, it has no basis in historical reality. It cannot be denied that the essence of positivism, to which Babbitt subscribed and which is now much out of vogue, consists in creating a factual base without which there could be no theory at all. If there is room for a new historicism, contemporary literary criticism has an even greater need for a new positivism, that is, a method of objective description allowing for esthetic and moral evaluations and welcoming multiculturalism as represented by Babbitt at the beginning of this century and Etiemble at its end.

Such a neo-positivism could embrace both linguistically-oriented studies and those tending toward history. Even at present, most critics dealing with eighteenth-century literature include *rappports de fait*, the basic element of positivism, somewhere in their discriminations and judgments. But those carried away by theory, like the alchemists and mad scientists satirized by Swift, consider "information delivery" more important than "information substance." In the *Tale*, "ancient pygmies with large male pudenda are the type for antitypes in modern learning who produce little compendiums with large indexes."

Craven's study could be considered as a blend of literary, historical, and psychological inquiry, but it pledges no allegiance to any theoretical system. Although the author is a practicing psychotherapist, he makes no attempt to analyze Swift's inner life, but limits himself to intellectual currents and, to a lesser degree, political and social relationships. A previous reviewer has specifically contrasted Craven's straightforward style and mental clarity with the woolly aims of a trendy collection of critical theory entitled *New Eighteenth Century* in which the only real novelty consists in "obfuscating, ivy-barricades, jargon, mystifying zeal being the last refuge of stale ideas."² Craven's entire book is devoted

to analysis without deconstruction of *A Tale of a Tub*, a project which before the age of theory would have been hailed as a contribution to the history of ideas. Even today, the publisher's collection to which Craven's distinguished analysis belongs clings to the rubric "Studies in Intellectual History."

To the casual reader, *A Tale of a Tub* is a satire on the three main branches of Christianity, the Ancients-Moderns controversy, the Royal Society, and utopian political speculation. Craven does not dispute this perspective, but goes beyond the surface to reveal the interrelationships between these apparently discrete strands. The "millennium" in his title refers to utopian political-religious programs and "information age" to the gathering of scientific and pseudo-scientific data. Craven himself is a computer expert, having, according to the book jacket, authored a "landmark study for the National Science Foundation and the Modern Language Association that defined the information cycle and prescribed the first doctoral programs in information and computer science." He, nevertheless, perceives that much of the information gathered and stored during both the Augustan Age and the late twentieth century is completely without use or value. A similar parallel between the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns in the seventeenth century and the current contentions between traditional literary historians and advocates of radical literary theories has been noted by a former president of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association. Ironically this Chinese scholar was not aware that one of the seventeenth-century polemicists on the side of the Ancients, Sir William Temple, had argued that Western knowledge in both the ancient and modern worlds had suffered by leaving out of consideration the Eastern ancients. Going beyond the Chinese professor, Craven reveals how the reductive Ancients-

Moderns division can be "perpetuated down the centuries and used again for choosing sides" in political propaganda under the simplistic labels of "reactionary-radical."

A Tale of a Tub exploited explicitly and in detail the historical targets which became more famous in the narrative guise of *Gulliver's Travels* 30 years later. In form as well as in intellectual content, *A Tale* parodies the excesses of the publishing industry of Swift's day; it contains imitations of pamphlet paraphernalia, ludicrous titles of other treatises by its purported author, an analytical table, a preface, a defense of running into print, and an introduction. The ostensible core of the *Tale* is an apologue concerning the three principal Christian sects, but the discourse is interlarded with digressions associated with the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and a dissertation on madness. All this is followed by an allegorical Battle of the Books separating major authors according to their presumed allegiance to either Ancients or Moderns together with a discourse "Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit" or religious and political fanaticism. Craven gives relatively little attention to the obvious religious and literary allegories in the text, which have been thoroughly exploited by previous scholars, but concentrates on making the various strands of Swift's satire blend into a relatively coherent critique of modern society. In his treatment, the notion of "modern" weaves back and forth between Swift's British Augustan Age and the period in which we are now living. "Information Age" and "Millennium of Madness" in his title also refer to both periods, the latter comprising social and political systems with utopian aims impossible and perhaps undesirable to obtain and to the irrational behavior of their advocates.

Craven confronts the difficult task of reconciling the biting anti-clericalism of

A Tale with Swift's personal vocation as an Anglican priest and the orthodoxy of his sermons and some of his other published works. He does so by demonstrating that much of the satire was directed, not against Christianity, but against one of the pioneer deists of the time, John Toland, whose *Christianity not Mysteriorous*, 1696, fulminates against many of the same characteristics of revealed religion satirized by Swift. Although the two agreed "on the abomination of priestcraft and the essential simplicity of the New Testament," they remained at odds over reason and faith. Swift parted company from the deists who accept reason and sense experience as the sole sources of knowledge by adopting, to the contrary, a skeptical view of the limitations of reason. He subjected the deists' supreme faith in reason to the same skeptical scrutiny that the deists, the natural philosophers, and the classical republicans had brought to bear against orthodoxy, learned authority, and absolutes. As some of our contemporaries "charge that reason brings ultra conservatives to obscurantism, overbearing authority, and absolutist positions," Swift argued that "reason is the instrument that causes freethinkers, latitudinarians, and other moderns to create a priesthood of their own devising."

Instead of defending the mysteries of orthodox Christianity, Swift attacked those literary figures he associated with modern rationalism, taking Toland as his major target and foil. As Craven puts it, he matched absolute tyranny against demagogic tyranny. Both the persona of the *Tale* and Swift's primary satiric victim, mad Jack, the dissenter, undermine modern secular reason. Mad Jack is either John Calvin or John Knox and for some at the present time Jacques Derrida. The persona, mad Jack, and Toland possess three flaws in common, "private, egoistic invention, relentless hostility to Rome, and a converting zeal." From the

political perspective, Swift perceives two other evils in Toland's rationalism, "blind rage against tyranny and a zeal for change, both leading to madness." Since Toland and the republicans stand for the tyranny of the mob and the vulgar, Swift prefers the tyranny of the aristocracy and the refined. In order to tear down Toland's deistical rationalism, Swift parodies the latter's history of the Church as fanatical exaggeration and tarnishes him as the purveyor of the modern mysteries of topology and apocalypse associated with Milton and the Puritans. For Craven, Toland's use of history is an example of how "information systems skew the assembled evidence to satisfy private needs, ends, prejudices, and fantasies."

The mock scholarly apparatus and other trappings of the publication mania symbolize "the dubious information explosion." Craven traces this aspect of modern society to Milton's defense in *Areopagitica* of the liberty of the press as a necessary concomitant of the liberty of conscience, thereby revealing how the *Tale* can logically satirize such apparently contradictory elements as religious fanaticism, deism, republicanism, and the entire publishing industry. Craven buttresses his chapter on Toland with extensive quotations of direct or oblique references to Toland's works. In a following chapter on Milton, he relies on generalities rather than quotations, associating Milton with literary notions of "heroic Virtue," to Hercules as a type and Christ as antitype, and to the seeking of wealth and power instead of wisdom and virtue. Much of his general argument depends on the definition of virtue in ethical thought rather than on poetical conventions in which virtue is associated with heroic figures. This section on the notion of virtue is one of the few areas in the book which fails to convince this reviewer.

Craven confidently traces from "Milton to Temple to Shaftesbury to

Rousseau to Jefferson to Paine to Lenin” the credo that “Virtue is something that humans come by naturally—a logical outgrowth of liberty of conscience and reason. Private good leads to public good. When suitably cultivated by a small learned vanguard, a band of professional revolutionaries with a virtuous cause are entitled to ascendant political power over outmoded and vicious absolutism.” This genealogy, with its striking but insubstantial commentary, takes in too much territory. Not all of the above figures have the same, if any, attitudes toward virtue, and abstract ethical notions do not necessarily conform to political theories and actions. Some of the men named above tend to the proposition that public good leads to private good, the reverse of Craven’s formulation. He takes no account, moreover, of a third option incorporated in the famous slogan of Shaftesbury’s opponent Mandeville, private vices, public benefits.

In addition to including Shaftesbury in an ill-matched historical genealogy, Craven expresses the startling opinion that Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry concerning virtue and merit* is “the centerpiece of *A Tale of a Tub*’s climactic Digression on Madness—essentially a point-by-point refutation” of the *Inquiry*. This is more serious. Craven bases his interpretation on Shaftesbury’s principle that mental pleasures are superior to physical ones and that those accompanying the awareness of virtue are the greatest, a principle that many moralists besides Shaftesbury have expressed. Craven assumes that Swift is attacking both this principle and Shaftesbury in one of the most-quoted passages of the *Tale* in which it is asserted that the most prized pleasures in life are those that “Dupe and play the Wag with the Senses” and that happiness “is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived.” In a prior identification of Toland as target of many passages in the *Tale* Craven supports his contentions

with close parallels and verbal echoes, but the above passage has absolutely no verbal link with Shaftesbury.

I see no connection, moreover, between the *Inquiry* and another famous passage from the *Tale*, which Craven boldly affirms delivers Shaftesbury the *coup de grâce*:

And he, whose Fortunes and Dispositions have placed him in a convenient Station to enjoy the Fruits of this noble Art; He that can with *Epicurus* content his Ideas with the *Films* and *Images* that fly off upon his Senses from the *Superficies* of Things; such a Man truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving the Sour and the Dregs, for Philosophy and Reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined Prince of Felicity, called the *Possession of being well deceived*; the Serene Peaceful State of being a Fool among Knaves.

Not only is a visible verbal connection with Shaftesbury lacking in this passage, but also the reference to Epicurus puts Shaftesbury, a committed Stoic, completely out of the picture. He had maintained in the *Inquiry* that virtue and vice have independent authority, not dependent on any external source, not even the Supreme Will itself. This goes contrary to the view of Epicurus and others that good and evil are not entities but depend upon the arbitrary will of God. Shaftesbury was a zealous foe of all forms of materialism, including the suggestion of sense impressions from “the Superficies of Things.” As other Swiftians have indicated, and Craven recognizes elsewhere in his book, the most plausible identification of the disciple of Epicurus in Swift’s portrait is his own employer Temple, the author of a work entitled *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus*. Shaftesbury in his *Inquiry*, moreover, ranks piety as an essential element of virtue, and Temple, as Craven admits, was an atheist.

Craven also rejects the accepted view of Swift as Temple’s spokesman, limiting

their area of agreement largely to issues concerned with the Ancients-Moderns controversy. In nearly every other area Craven finds Swift taking either an opposing or an independent direction from Temple so that he could satirize the rationalists on one side and the mystics and enthusiasts on the other. Swift opposed the efforts of both sides to gain public support under the guise of what Craven calls "the modern advocacy of freedom of information." For Swift, the publishing mania was not evidence of wholesome pluralism, but rather an example of the tyranny of the many being equally as subversive as the tyranny of the one. Swift's satire, according to Craven, points to "a profound qualitative information loss as a result of the information explosion." Applying this information glut to our times, Craven affirms that

...modern capitalist and socialist societies stemming from the same European watershed may engage in violent public polemic and even military conflict against one another, blocking out all other information, other values, and other information-delivery systems in their overarching competitive effort to secure one and the same European franchise—monopoly—of secular materialism.

Craven allows himself to diverge from Swift's text in treating the separation recognized in recent historiography between the ancient models of civic humanism emphasizing virtue and Roman jurisprudence emphasizing rights. He argues that Swift's satire embraces both models and that, if extended toward modern utopian ideals or mysteries, it would include amongst its targets "the unproved assumptions of basic goodness in man, the unflagging heroism of virtuous great men, the idea of progress, and the happy return to a material paradise."

Embracing medicine and science, Swift's satire characterizes the extremes in each discipline as examples of modern

madness. Medicine, according to Craven, stands at the heart of Swift's indictment of modern man. He takes on the empiricists as represented by the ancient Hippocrates and the modern Paracelsus together with the rationalists symbolized by the ancient Aristotle and the modern Galen. His satire of science is more than a facile ridicule of all attempts to understand and interpret the physical universe; he recognizes the contrary directions of mechanists, like Descartes and Newton, and innovators in the chemical or life sciences such as Paracelsus, Van Helmont, and the Rosicrucians. To the casual reader, the latter group is the more vulnerable, but Craven reveals that Swift's technique encompasses and demolishes the extremes on both sides.

The millennium of madness, however, has more relevance to man and society than to the elements of the physical universe. Swift's *Tale* is a "moral discourse," raising the question of the relative validity of two philosophical extremes, that in which man appears as "a microcosm in a divine system" or that portraying "man and the universe as chance atoms." Craven gives no direct answer to this fundamental question, but neither does Swift. Both are highly skeptical of the notion of progress. The moderns in Swift's day and ours have been concerned primarily with physical science and utopian reforms. Craven's portrayal of the conflux of issues in literature, science, and political thought of the Augustan Age brilliantly exposes a condition that is likely to be continuously investigated during the remainder of the present century, that "modern information systems remain skewed by a deconstructing millenarian myth."

1. Richard Rodino, "Canon and Hermeneutics in Eighteenth-Century Literary Studies," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 16 (1992), 214-229. 2. Melvyn New, *The Scriblerian*, 24 (1993), 208.