

An essay on scatology and Swift

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The abundance of scatological themes and motifs in Swift's works has frustrated critics since their publication. Writers who indulge in toilet-humour at length or in detail are usually dismissed as either immature, thus lacking the intelligence to rise above it, or mentally unstable and thus lacking the capacity to understand the social compulsion for discretion on the uncomfortable realities of the human body. Obviously it is impossible to accuse a man of Swift's immediately apparent intelligence of the former, so over the years much criticism has used the latter answer to attempt to rationalise and explain away the misanthropic glee with which Swift sifts through all subjects scatological.¹ Such criticism tends to highlight Swift's declining mental state in later life, looking back at cherry-picked samples of his writings and subjecting them to Freudian psycho-analysis to present them as warning signs of an inevitable decline to be disregarded as stains on his literary legacy. Principal amongst these is the so-called 'Scatological Cycle' of *The Lady's Dressing-Room*, *A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed*, *Strephon and Chloe* and *Cassinus and Peter*, which Derek Mahon dismisses out of hand. 'Not too much need be made, at this stage of the scatological poems, few in number, written in the period of disorientation following Stella's death... Celia and Corinna are the unfortunate whipping-girls of Swift's bereavement', a hypocritical criticism in light of his praise of Swift's awareness with '[his] nose especially to the physical facts of the world he knew' having addressed the subject of waste in early poems such as *A Description of A City Shower*.² Nevertheless scatology, misanthropy and mental imbalance are taken to be inherently linked, with this cycle representing, aptly, a toilet into which Swift's interests in these subjects can be collectively lumped together and flushed away. The term 'Scatological Cycle', then, represents a sanitised euphemism such as the ones that appear in abundance in these poems themselves - 'Pandora's box', 'chamber' and 'House of Ease'.

However the greatest flaw of this construction is not its genteel terminology but its inaccuracy. Even a cursory glance over the entire corpus of Swift's writings reveals the constant recurrence of scatological themes and the grotesque potential of the human anatomy combining to produce a vivid sense of body-horror, similar not only in their subject matter but the techniques of application. Rawson, for example, notes the possible influence that the invention of the microscope may have had in the changing perspectives of size in *Gulliver's Travels*, with the giant inhabitants of Brobdingnag representing an opportunity to examine the human body in microscopic detail.³ Gulliver's reaction to this change of perspective is one of disgust and embarrassment - upon seeing 'the dug so verified with spots, pimples and freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous' he remembers 'the fair skins of our English ladies... and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass'.⁴ In *The Lady's Dressing-Room* Cælia's magnifying-glass similarly provides Strephon with 'the

¹ 'criticism designed to domesticate and housebreak this tiger of English literature' N. Brown, 'The Excremental Vision' in *Discussions of Jonathan Swift* ed. J. Traugott, (D.C. Heath & Co., 1962) p.92.

² D. Mahon, 'On Swift's Poems' in *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift* ed. C. Rawson and I. Higgins, (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), p.799; p.797

³ *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift* p.xvi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.371.

visage of a gyant', another optical tool changing the perspective of human vision allows him to see 'The smallest worm on Cælia's nose' evoking the image of her squeezing it from her skin.⁵ From both within and without the 'Scatological Cycle' the same human revulsion is addressed in the same way and rather than dismissing these themes as a discreet event many critics have attempted to do we should instead investigate why Swift continually returns to these themes.

The simple answer is that Swift achieves a twofold effect by addressing our disgust at our own bodies and their functions to provide a means of catharsis, whilst paradoxically being aware of and exploiting the reactions that this disgust provokes to advance his own literary message. One might consider the repeated references to the human body in culinary terms as butchered cuts of meat in *A Modest Proposal*, again echoing the in-cycle references to mutton cutlets in *The Lady's Dressing Room* and their unpleasant associative undertones of coprophagia in this context, which serve as a blunt reminder that we are composed only of meat and bone. Yet this demystification is then taken from one extreme to the other, having highlighted our material nature and humanised the human anatomy Swift facetiously proceeds to quantify in calories the value of the dehumanised people of Ireland in a time of famine. The disgust at the suggestion of cannibalism is a reaction that is intentionally exploited for the purposes of the proposal and the moral suggested is that we must come to terms with the realities of our own bodies whilst remembering that along with this understanding must come balance and responsibility. The body-horror provided is tempered by suggestions of balanced attitudes to our bodies; having plumbed the depths with the suggestion to battery-farmed humans Swift implies a healthy alternative to both the artificial elevation of human flesh above 'meer mortal flesh' and this other extreme, callous disregard for the value of human life.⁶

In the same way Swift's most scatological poems represent an exploration of the extremities of our disgust regarding our own waste, in detail vivid enough to inspire sickness in some readers. In *Strephon and Chloe* the development of tension and repression up to the couple's wedding night suggests Chloe's own overfilled bladder, desperate to be released but each lover is ridiculously unwilling to admit that they engage in natural processes for fear that they will reveal themselves to be mortal after all. The result of this repression is the eventual need to present scatological material in these terms, as an exploding cornucopia of 'vapours' and 'streams'. When Strephon and Chloe finally reveal themselves to each other it is almost celebratory, 'Inspir'd with courage from his bride' Strephon lovingly 'Let fly a rouzer in her face'.⁷ The disquieting sexual circumstances of this exposure cannot be ignored - by denying that lovers engage in processes just as natural as sex; a society so disgusted by these processes elevates them almost to the level of sexual fetish. Swift is only too happy to reflect on the implications of this in his poetry. Conversely Cassinius suffers a melancholy madness 'swallow'd up by spleen', an explanation based on the humoural conception medicine and thus inherently concerned with various bodily secretions and excretions, for the very thought that Celia shits.⁸ The admission that not only Celia but *everybody* shits would surely heal him, but a socially-conditioned madness regarding defecation is causing him considerable mental distress. Lawrence identifies Swift's own moral concerning this 'mass insanity', even if he does not realise it, when he asks simply 'how much worse would it be if Celia didn't shit?'⁹ It is ironic that Freudian analysis of Swift has accused him of being

⁵ Ibid., p.604.

⁶ Ibid., p.611.

⁷ Ibid., p.614.

⁸ Ibid., p.618.

⁹ D.H. Lawrence, 'On Swift's Celia' in *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, p.742.

anally-retentive, when what Swift encourages is a collective unclenching of the tight arses of the human race in general.¹⁰

This idea is repeated regarding the subject of madness in *A Tale of a Tub*. Again Swift presents two polar extremes, the madmen described in the digression on madness representing people unable to vent their various bodily vapours and humours correctly and accordingly becoming insane. The other extreme is represented by the various characters that seem to go too far and have become too lax in the exercise of their vapours, most notably the cult of the Æolists. The latter case presents an image especially rich in absurdity and scatological criticism. Having accepted the very air as the essence of the divine they belch breath from their bodies as a religious devotion to be inhaled by their brethren, seemingly as blind to the reality that they are creating a closed system of ever more tainted and recycled air out of their less-than-divine bodies as they are to the notion that they have become windbags, literally full of hot air. In this image Swift emphasises a satire on collective hysteria by reflecting on the queasy practical considerations of what a system of belching would actually look and smell like. This examination of breath and bodily vapours is reminiscent of the cautionary couplet concerning being too scatologically-obsessed from *Strephon and Chloe*, where one of those who ‘call[s] it witty, to reflect, On ev’ry natural defect’ creates such a stink that ‘You’d think she utter’d from behind, Or at her mouth were breaking wind’.¹¹ This again reinforces the association between madness and unhealthy attitudes to scatology, physical and mental health. This might seem ironic considering the fact that Swift’s fate as a target for criticism based on his perceived scatological excesses, however Swift’s use of scatological imagery is always justified as a stimulus to rational discussion, a cure to the social hysteria, the symptoms of which he highlights in his writing. If we take Swift at his word that madness and genius are separated primarily by how much an individual has ‘good fortune to light among those of the same pitch’ it is not surprising that his interest in these subjects has left him open to accusations of madness.¹² However his intention in ‘vexing’ the world with his work actually shows that Swift is neither an unhealthy scatophile nor an unhealthy scatophobe but rather attempting to both revolt and educate those who are.¹³

Again tying together the genius versus insanity dichotomy in scatological terms, Swift sickeningly envisions the celebration of the madmen in Bedlam in their own waste and sarcastically suggests that they might be able to hold positions of military and political power. Swift is aware of the potential implications of this logic in constructing personal attacks on those who he deems to be of unsound mind, working the logic of this proposition backwards. So, if an unhealthy obsession with waste indicates madness then a perceived madness in an individual must indicate a secret obsession with waste, indulged in secret behind closed doors. In *The Legion Club* Swift turns the Bedlam episode from *A Tale of a Tub* on its head, suggesting that not only is it possible to *imagine* turning lunatics loose on positions of authority but that this has already happened in the Irish parliament of ‘lunaticks and fools’.¹⁴ To emphasise the madness of a parliament of that would even consider abolishing the system of tithes for clergymen Swift speculates that the ‘Dear Companions, hug and kiss, [And] Toast Old Glorious in your piss’, celebrating and worshipping their own magnificence in urine.¹⁵ Initially this flexible image carries undertones of a scatological Eucharist, with the secular authority of the Parliament established in a direct conflict with the church. This elevation of the human to the divine through the medium of their own bodily

¹⁰ Karpman in quoted in Brown (1962), ‘Swift showed marked anal characteristics... [which] indicate clearly that early control of excretory function was achieved under great stress and perhaps too early’ p.95.

¹¹ *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, p.616.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.662.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.664.

secretions is an echo of the Æolists, already established as caricatures of mass hysteria - to Swift the mad celebrate their humanity by celebrating to disgusting excess the waste products of the human body. The juxtaposition of the noxious secular toast of urine compared to the wholesome diet of reason and knowledge is more directly applied with the chairman 'learned Morgan', who having betrayed his religious education is shown to have thrown in his lot with piss-drinking fools, thus turning from 'nourishment to poison'.¹⁶ Finally the punishment awaiting this parliament is that the devil will 'Sauce them in their own excrements' in Hell, aptly reflecting their lives and once again spicing their scatological lunacy with a culinary suggestion of coprophagia.¹⁷

The problem for critics unsure of how to deal with Swift's misanthropic, scatological themes is that they analyse Swift as a historical figure, looking back on him from a modern perspective and with an air of patronisation. Now that psychopathology has superseded humoureal medicine as an explanation for mental illness, now that history shows us that Swift's life ended in mental decline, there is perhaps a temptation to look back at Swift as the product of a more primitive time to be pitied, with mental capacities on a downward trajectory throughout his life. Modern psychology criticises archaic literature. Defences against this approach such as Brown's often follow suit, taking on modern criticisms in their own terms simply retorting 'certainly no genius will escape if this kind of psychoanalysis is turned loose on literary texts'.¹⁸ The irony in this is that Swift appears to have thought in precisely the opposite way: from his own viewpoint at the peak of his mental faculties he anticipates the modern age and judges it according to the standards he established with his literary works. One might consider how Huxley was still in 1929, nearly two centuries after Swift's death, incapable of printing the word 'shit' due to the 'modesties' of contemporary society. What Swift would have made of his awkward attempts to discreetly lead the reader to the word by rhyming it with 'wit' and 'fit',¹⁹ all the while judging Swift on his abnormal attitude concerning excrement, is perhaps best not to speculate on. Lawrence's criticism assumes the omission of the word itself in published editions of Swift, more likely an editorial choice than an authorial one, to indicate that Swift bore a personal, pathological distaste towards the subject, begging the question why Swift addressed it in the first place.²⁰ The people of the supposedly enlightened ages following Swift's own are often hypocritically guilty of the same unhealthy attitudes concerning bodily functions that they accuse him of, still vulnerable to the same criticisms that Swift raises when he all-too-happily delves into these subjects.

To see Swift's viewpoint in application it is best to examine his role as 'the true initiator'²¹ of black humour by observing his influence on modern approaches to humour, scatology and socially-accepted madness. For example stand-up comedian Bill Hicks' 'Rush Limbaugh is a scat-muncher' routine is a thematic clone of the scathing personal attacks found in *The Legion Club*, insinuating that Limbaugh's political views are the product of lunacy linked to gruesome hunger for faeces. The application is also markedly Swiftian, with Hicks envisioning in grotesque detail a feast enjoyed by his political enemies and interspersing purely scatological jibes ('Piss in my mouth, Ronnie [Ronald Regan]', '[Barbara Bush] squeezes out a link into his mouth'²²) with specific political criticisms such as the suggestion that a maggot emerging from a bubble of Limbaugh's semen will 'rush off to a pro-life meeting somewhere'. Much like Swift, Hicks considered himself a social and

¹⁶ *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, p.665.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brown, p.95.

¹⁹ Brown, p.92.

²⁰ *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, p.724.

²¹ A. Breton, 'Swift and Black Humour' in *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, p.758.

²² B. Hicks, *Love all the People* (Constable, 2004), p.290.

political commentator and his work to be a means of addressing Lawrence's 'taboo-insanity' appearing in society.²³ Hicks goes so far as to consider the role of 'all artists in Western cultures... [to be that of] a shaman' a spiritual healer who must 'heal perception by using stories... [providing] the voice of reason'.²⁴

Quite aside from highlighting obvious parallels with Swift's rational intentions in demystifying scatology, the application of this theory again draws upon the interconnection of scatological and medical or psychotherapeutic themes. As black humorists Swift and his successors diagnose mental defects that are not treated by conventional psychology and so must be addressed in creative exercises such as literature. These particular treatments gain power when illustrated in terms of bodies as well as minds being out of balance, with scatological illustrations providing a simple and vividly effective means of showing how a body and mind can be imbalanced. We must consider Swift not as a madman of a bygone age wallowing in scatology for its own sake but rather a forward-thinking literary doctor identifying scatological imbalance and attempting to cure its symptoms through creative means.

²³ Lawrence, p.724.

²⁴ Hicks, p.245.

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