



Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World

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Jonathan Swift is best remembered today as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, the satiric fantasy that quickly became a classic and has remained in print for nearly three centuries. Yet Swift also wrote many other influential works, was a major political and religious figure in his time, and became a national hero, beloved for his fierce protest against English exploitation of his native Ireland. What is really known today about the enigmatic man behind these accomplishments? Can the facts of his life be separated from the fictions?

In this deeply researched biography, Leo Damrosch draws on discoveries made over the past 30 years to tell the story of Swift's life anew. Probing holes in the existing evidence, he takes seriously some daring speculations about Swift's parentage, love life, and various personal relationships and shows how Swift's public version of his life - the one accepted until recently - was deliberately misleading. Swift concealed aspects of himself and his relationships, and other people in his life helped to keep his secrets. Assembling suggestive clues, Damrosch re-narrates the events of Swift's life while making vivid the sights, sounds, and smells of his English and Irish surroundings.

Through his own words and those of a wide circle of friends, a complex Swift emerges: a restless, combative, empathetic figure, a man of biting wit and powerful mind, and a major figure in the history of world letters.

Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World Details

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From Reader Review Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World for online ebook

Richard says

This is an almost-great biography of a great and surpassingly strange man. Well-written, alive to its subject's sheer oddness, copiously illustrated, and filled with interesting detail. "Life and World" is right: the context is often (despite the caveat below) as interesting as the subject it illuminates.

I say "almost-great" for two reasons, perhaps only one of which can fairly be laid at Damrosch's door.

So, first, my all-purpose complaint about modern scholarly biographies. This one, although short relative to at least one of the monsters that preceded it, is 500 closely-printed pages - even though it tells the story of a man whose life is, in some crucial respects, a total enigma. (We are allowed to give full rein to prurient interest about Swift's involvement with Stella and Vanessa - Hester Johnson and Esther Vanhomrigh - only to be shown once again, alas, that essentially nothing can be known about his relationship to either of them.) The need for academics to write something that will be judged "definitive" seems to trump any consideration for the ordinary reader, who is unlikely even to attempt a tome on this scale and who would come away with just as much real understanding of Swift from a carefully-edited 300-page (or even 200-page) version. What does one want - status, or actual readers?

That's a question with which you can so readily imagine Swift himself having fun, perhaps in a new addendum to the Academy of Lagado section in *Gulliver*. The other point, which is more directly Damrosch's fault, even more so: the author cannot resist endlessly and cattily stabbing at the always-inferior scholars who preceded him. Most notably, biographer Irvin Ehrenpreis, who is damned with faint praise (or just damned) again and again, usually over minor errors or excesses. Why can't a writer and scholar of Damrosch's stature see how petty this sounds, and how utterly uninteresting and irrelevant it is to 99.7% of his potential readers? Why can't he hear Swift's shade, chuckling darkly at his expense while sharpening a quill?

Well, enough: ignore these minor faults, be prepared to skim a bit, and it's a highly recommended insight into perhaps the greatest (if most ambivalently-Irish) writer Ireland has ever produced.

Rj says

Damrosch's biography of Swift is well researched referring often to the work of previous biographers and interspersed with knowledge of Swift's work. It is intensive and well written.

"Perhaps Swift would have agreed with Kafka that "the selfishness of parents-the authentic parental emotion-knows no bounds." 15

"A social historian remarks, "Walk me through your childhood home," we say, "for opening the creaky front door unlocks the library of memory." 16

"...Thomas Szasz, "If you talk to God, you are praying: if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia." 149

"He knew the town," Macaulay said, "and paid dear for his knowledge. He was a rake among scholars and a scholar among rakes." 181

"I never wonder to see men wicked, but I often wonder to see them not ashamed." 183

George Orwell once drew up a recipe for good prose:

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
 - (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
 - (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
 - (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
 - (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
 - (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous." 409-410
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Patricia says

Today is St. Patrick's Day, the perfect occasion to honor an esteemed son of Ireland and thank Goodreads Giveaways and Yale University Press for sending me this impressive volume. It was a pure pleasure to read. Engaging. Vivid. Fascinating. Soundly researched and written with a perceptible passion for history. Supplemented with a well-chosen collection of portraits and illustrations. Unraveling the enigmatic Swift could have been no small task, as the subject had deliberately shielded aspects of his life in layers of mystery and misdirection. An understandable defense given the atmosphere of gossip and persecution at the time. Swift had a magnetic and charming personality as well as a crafty intelligence. With wit and satire his writings reveal a keen reflection on human nature and strong views on social, political and economic issues that are as relevant today as they were three centuries ago. It is a beautiful book that I will cherish and reference for years to come.

Mandy says

This latest biography of Jonathan Swift is both an academic study and immensely readable book. With painstaking and meticulous research, acclaimed academic and biographer Leo Damrosch has left no stone unturned in his effort to make this most intriguing of characters come alive. And in this he succeeds, so that the reader is left with a vivid portrait of a complex and fascinating man of politics, religion and literature. Best known today for his book *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift was active not only in the world of letters, but also in the church and in politics. He had a vast network of friends and acquaintances, and Damrosch examines all these aspects of his life and puts them into their historical context. It's a long book, and sometimes feels a bit overwhelming with so many facts and figures to take in, but the style remains accessible throughout, and accompanied as it is with a wealth of illustrations, this is a perceptive and enjoyable biography, and will be of interest to both scholars and the general reader.

mimo says

Damrosch achieves his goal of evoking a more complex, nuanced Swift than the Swift described by some of his earlier biographers. When I read the last chapter for the first time for a class, I cried for Swift. Now, having read the whole book, it's a deeper, rounder grief for him, which is how I know I've been made to feel like I knew Swift.

Brian Willis says

I absolutely loved this book and the subject. So eminently readable.

Julie says

Very readable and entertaining.

Unwisely says

A review I read made me interested in this book, even though approximately everything I knew about Johnathan Swift before I read this book was "Gulliver's Travels", and really only two bits of that (Lilliput and Brobdingnagian).

With that said, it started promisingly enough. I was actually drawn in at first. Then there was a long slog in the middle (and this is a huge book - I took it with me on a vacation with plenty of plane time and didn't finish it).

So, pros: I learned a lot, and it mostly gave me enough background to follow (I wasn't expected to be familiar with the ins and outs of politics in the 1600s). Cons: OMG so long. I'm sure I'm a better person for reading it, but I'm not sure I would make myself read it again, given the choice.

Ilinca says

if you are contemplating reading this book, a word of warning: don't get the audio version. The reader does voices. And does them in such a horribly annoying manner than I almost gave up on the book.

Another warning: the introduction is weirdly critical of previous work on Swift. Almost rudely so.

Now for the other things.

What I knew of Swift had already made him an interesting character. Although Damrosch appears to be strangely unsympathetic toward him, Swift does come across as indeed interesting and complex, precisely for those reasons that at times seem to make him somewhat discreditable to Damrosch: he was inconsistent in his political options; ambiguous in his romantic connections; a bit of a sycophant at times; religiously, um, interesting; lacking connections to the great minds of the age.

But if you do know that Gulliver's Travels is not a children's book and loved it nonetheless, you can't not be interested in this insight into the times and man behind it.

Willy Marz Thiessam says

A good biography.

Jean says

(Audible; David Stifel narrator) Suggests plausible solutions to the identification of Swift's father (John Temple?) and Hester Johnson's (Swift's Stella) father (William Temple, his son). Could this be the reason Swift and Stella were best friends (or lovers?) until her death? Much interesting information about Swift's contemporaries, e.g., Dr. Arbuthnot; Alexander Pope; Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough; the book collector Robert Harley, the Duke of Oxford. A good discussion of Swift's struggles with Meuniere's Disease, responsible for his vertigo, tinnitus, and deafness. Altogether too much time spent on Swift's scatological side. Re: slave trade--The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, ending the Spanish War of Succession, transferred the right to trade slaves from the French to the English, who in the next century sent 1 1/2 million slaves to the Caribbean and the New World. Robert Harley, Duke of Oxford, that collector of magnificent manuscripts, supported and benefited from the slave trade. Lord Bolinbroke appears to have tried to make a deal with James Stuart, the Pretender, to take the throne from George I. A better narrator would have been welcome. This just awful narrator does his best to make this book as boring as possible. An American, he switches to a dreadful English accent when quoting from works of Swift and his contemporaries. Still, for once, the subject matter supersedes the audio performance.

Vicky Hunt says

A Hawk in His Fist

Traveling by book near Ireland, I was looking for a good classic biography to satisfy a genre challenge lacking only that and instantly thought of Swift. This is not a classic. I chose to read it anyways for absolutely no reason but that it appears to be a perfectly written bio of Swift. Since I was off my route, I read it bit by bit, in between my other books. This gave me a chance to read a few of 'Swift Johnny's' best known classic books, like [Tale of a Tub](#).

Ironically, though there is so much we don't know about Swift's life, because much was unknown even by him, and much he chose to obscure in secrecy; we learn much about him from his writing. This is how Damrosch laid out the story. He very adeptly wove in Swift's books throughout his life story, giving some of the many arguments for the many theories about the 'secrets.' Normally, guesswork does not make good reading. But, here Damrosch reveals the large amount of previous research that has been done on Swift's life. So, it makes for an interesting life, even though we are removed from the subject by some 3 centuries. His wit and humor are almost cast in stone, through the beauty of his writing. Both Swift's birth and his last days of life were as intriguing as his writing.

I need to read [The Drapier's Letters](#) next. And, I don't think its possible to tire of [Gulliver's Travels](#). I highly recommend that anyone interested in Swift's writing take a look at Damrosch's biography. I read it in the Audible narrated perfectly by David Stifel.

John says

Second Reading: Same response to this biography on second reading.

First Reading:

Even though this biography may well be the "best" that we have - whatever that may mean - I was

disappointed. Damrosch devotes more pages to speculation regarding Swift's paternity, the possibility that he was Esther/Hester Johnson's (Stella's) uncle, his dining out and dining in, etc., all of which has its place in his biography, I suppose, than to the inner life of his subject. We have more information on the presence of human excrement in the streets of Dublin during the 1730s. All very frustrating - especially because he tantalizes.

Damrosch gives us hints and glimpses of the content, organization and workings of Swift's private, inviolable domain, which he explores not at all. Here's an excerpt from my list of lost opportunities:

"...Swift's anarchic hidden self, defying the proprieties he normally had to preach and observe." (p. 403)

"With his probing, corrosive intelligence, Swift surely experienced a temptation to skepticism." (p. 148)

"in another early poem the aggressiveness is even more startling: 'Each line shall stab, shall blast, like daggers and like fire.'" (p. 86)

"... he always had an impulsive, risk-taking streak." (p. 256)

"Swift chose this moment to self-destruct ..." (p. 255)

"'Swift seems,' Scott said admiringly, '... to have possessed the faculty of transfusing his own soul into the body of anyone he selected - of seeing with his eyes, employing every organ of his sense, and even becoming master of the powers of his judgment.'" (p. 106)

"In the years to come Swift would return often to this mode of impersonation, which evidently satisfied a psychological need. It was a way of standing outside himself, inhabiting someone else's mind and then subverting it from within." (p. 152)

"... he had a disillusioned view of human nature, and no sympathy with attempts to patch it." (p. 141)

"Irony was a way of life for Swift ..." (p. 359)

"Swift was rightly proud of his skill as an ironist, and what makes his irony distinctive is the passionate emotion that drives it. ... 'A Modest Proposal' is a cry of despair." (p. 420)

What riches!

I want to know how the mind and corrosive, subversive intelligence of that hidden, anarchic self operated. I want to know how, when, under what conditions his ironic stance and perspective morphed into despair. And on and on.

But even suggestions of answers do not appear in Damrosch's narrative. Perhaps Damrosch gives us the reason. His target is Ehrenpreis's biography of Swift in three volumes - clearly dated as a relic of "the days when psychoanalytic writers liked to deduce formative traumas without any evidence." (p. 453.) I stopped counting after noting fifty passages in which Damrosch contradicts Ehrenpreis's characterizations and interpretations of Swift's behavior. But even if one rejects Freudian psychobiography - as I do - why must one also avoid explorations of an inner life almost entirely? Surely Damrosch could delineated the workings of a "probing, subversive intelligence" in 'A Tale of a Tub' without reference to Freud or any page of the DSM - at all.

I don't understand.

Liam Guilar says

This is the most readable of the three Biographies of Swift that I have read. It's not a painstaking scholarly work, but it is readable and provides a sound introduction to Swift and his world. It feels light on the writing, which is why there's only four stars.

As a subject Swift poses particular problems. He wrote one of the most famous books in the English Language, coining terms that have passed into general usage, but what kind of person he was remains a matter for conjecture: demented, obscene, bitter, misogynist? He lived in that murky period between the Restoration and the Romantics which always seems to possess an irredeemable alterity. It is a foreign country shut off from us by the 19th century. Because of this, subsequent generations of scholars, critics and readers have rewritten and reread and imposed their own fussy morality on his life, letters and reputation.

Little evidence survives for the first forty years of his life, and most of that consists of anecdotes that were handed down at third or fourth hand. It's not even clear who his father was or where or when he was baptised.

His poetry, which I like, belongs to a dead tradition and with a few (often notorious) exceptions, remains generally unread. Many of his famous literary friends are fading out of general knowledge. To the non-specialist, the politics of the period is baffling: it is the hinge between the old politics of King and aristocracy and the birth of the two party system in Britain; a time when patronage was still the only game in town, and no matter who you were, if you offended the wrong person, as Swift found out, the sound of doors shutting could be audible to everyone. Swift knew some of the major political players but how well or in what capacity other than for a brief period as party hack is open to debate.

His most famous relationships were with two women, but exactly what those relationships were is unknowable. Did he or did he not marry "Stella", and if he didn't, why not? There's lots of speculation. The letters to "Vanessa" make frequent references to coffee but whether that means coffee or sex or both or neither is unknowable. Dashes were an agreed way of writing something that Swift thought shouldn't be written, but what that something was is irredeemably lost.

The Journal to Stella, which reads like the most private of correspondences, is anything but. It has been tidied up and edited for publication and some of the originals are lost. The private language it was written in, which proved to one editor Swift's incipient insanity and which reminds Damrosch of Finnegans Wake in places, remains private. Knowing he had enemies, and knowing his letters were being opened, Swift knew there was a great deal he couldn't say or admit to. But as Damrosch points out, he also avoided telling 'Stella' about 'Vanessa' until it was unavoidable. So we have a man who was driven to secrecy and anonymity, who may rarely have spoken openly and certainly took great care in print to find ways of saying nothing that could be used against him.

Using the writing as evidence for his beliefs is unusually dangerous. It's obvious that the infamous suggestion that farming and eating children would solve the problem of famine should not be taken literally, but then what to do with the group of poems Damrosch calls the "Disgusting poems".

Add to this inevitable secrecy a mess of apparent contradictions. He was a national hero to a people he may have despised; the champion of a country he didn't want to live in: a man who seems to have delighted in the company of strong willed intelligent women but whose poems and writing have been taken as examples of an almost hysterical misogyny.

Damrosch negotiates the problems to produce a readable, enjoyable narrative. Inevitably it's part discussion, part refutation, part guarded approval of previous attempts. But he refuses to get bogged in what is unknowable. Instead he gives what is known, says which options he prefers, and moves on. Since so much of the early life depends on anecdotes, he has made a virtue of necessity, and given the source and the anecdote, but left it to stand as anecdote.

He is good at steering the reader through the politics, making enough sense of it so the reader can follow Swift. His use of Johnson's dictionary to define Swift's word usage is an effective way of side stepping the problem of a diction that appears familiar and often isn't.

Apart from the revision, and some criticism of previous readings of 'Vanessa' and her letters, there are some new ideas or at least some new usage of material. The major suggestion is the claim that Swift did not marry 'Stella' because they were too closely related.

If the strength of the biography is in its style, the potential flaw in the biography is also in the style. While a biographer like Hadfield, with even less to go on for his life of Spenser, tracks carefully through the contending versions, Damrosch summarises. This makes for easy reading but at times the judgement on offer has to be taken on trust. If I were trying to use this for any kind of scholarly purpose I'd have to spend a lot of time trolling the bibliography to get behind the biography.

Although Damrosch gives a whole chapter to the "Disgusting poems" and the discussion is a good overview of what's been said, I'm not sure it gets close to an offered conclusion.

Swift remains a shadowy character, lost in a lack of evidence, adrift in his multiple masks and contradictions. But in this biography Damrosch has succeeded in showing how context helps to read the man, not just his work. And for the seemingly effortless way in which Damrosch can recreate that context, the book is worth the price of admission.

Justin Evans says

A model biography: Damrosch keeps it succinct, without skimping on details; he combines information about Swift with information about his age; he doesn't take much for granted, but also isn't condescending. Also, it's perfectly readable. You could say "it reads like a novel," except that most novels don't read so well.

Swift is the perfect subject for a biography, so that helps as well. We have a bunch of letters, but not a library's worth; there's a solid biographical tradition that isn't completely overwhelming; and, most importantly, his life is fascinating no matter how you present it. His birth is shrouded in mythology, as is his early family life. He worked for one of the foremost literary stylists of the previous generation, and became the foremost prose stylist of his own time. He worked for two of the most powerful men in British politics, knew royalty, and somehow managed to keep his head about the whole thing. He may or may not have been secretly married to one woman, who may or may not have been related to him, and may or may not have cheated on her with another woman--and, in general, he seems to have been a ladies man.

More important than all of this, however, is his own writing. I think there's a real distinction between people who get Swift, and people who do not. Oddly, many of those who do not write academic articles about him.

If you can't make a biography out of all that, you shouldn't be writing biographies. On the other hand, there's a large set of verbs and adverbs that mean something completely different in biographies than they do in ordinary English, and Leo isn't immune to their lure: must have, possibly, perhaps, maybe, certainly, assuredly, definitely etc etc... Biographers of a previous generation used them to cover up the biases of their own age. Damrosch points out when previous biographers have done this for Swift, which gets a little annoying (put it in footnotes, not the main text) Then he does exactly the same thing. Swift 'must have' had doubts about his religion, because he was so smart.* Swift 'must have' been sleeping with Vanessa, because he was funny and smart and funny, smart people sleep around. Well well, what are we here for, but to provide the next generation of biographers something to complain about.

My only real complaint is that Damrosch fails to put readers of the 'Disgusting Poems' in their place. The poems are a hilarious send-up of romantic love, but literary critics being professors, they must find some

kind of perversion or disturbance behind them. After all, if a man uses the word 'shit' in a poem, he must be utterly immoral/anally fixated/repressing his sexuality/subversive/a space alien. He couldn't possibly, you know, find it funny to end a poem with the word 'shit'. Most poems still end with some guff about My Mistress's Eyes are Black as Dried Figs or whatever, and Swift's coruscating poems should be celebrated far more than they are simply for being funny and acidic.

Anyway, of all the anecdotes about Swift, my favorite is the Bickerstaff case. But one snippet I learned from this book is almost as good. A 'science writer' read Gulliver's Travels in 1969. He assumed it was recently released, and tried to contact Swift at St. Patrick's. The current Dean responded, "Dr. Swift departed here on 19th October, 1745. He left no forwarding address. Since that date, as far as I know, he has not communicated with friend or foe. Where he is at present, God only knows."

* This silliness reaches Olympian heights when Damrosch suggests that Swift saying (not a direct quote, but more or less) "If heaven is the reward for virtue, then my mother will certainly be there" means *he didn't believe that the virtuous go to heaven.* At another point, he suggests that the entirely conventional use of 'Jove' to refer to God indicates doubts about Christianity.
