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BETTY'S FRECKLED NECK

Swift, Women, and Women Readers

Louise K. Barnett

Recent years have seen a feminist reassessment of Jonathan Swift's attitude toward women that could be termed rehabilitative.¹ The most significant contribution to this endeavor, Margaret Anne Doody's "Swift among the Women," an article originally published in 1988, makes a persuasive case for Swift as a man and writer who, in spite of certain notorious poems, received a great deal of favorable attention from his female contemporaries.² Doody remarks as unwittingly contradictory Lord Orrery's description of Swift as a man who saw women as only partial rather than whole beings, but whose house was "a constant seraglio of very virtuous women, who attended him from morning till night, with an obedience, an awe, and an assiduity, that are seldom paid to the richest, or the most powerful lovers."³

¹ Nora F. Crow provides a thorough review of this scholarship in her essay "Swift and the Woman Scholar," forthcoming in *Swift, Pope, and Women*, ed. Donald Mell (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1996).

² Margaret Anne Doody, "Swift Among the Women," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 18 (1988): 68-82; cited here in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Frank Palmeri (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), 13-37.

³ John Boyle, Earl of Orrery, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan*

There does seem to be a contradiction somewhere, for at times Swift's poetry is highly critical of women, yet, as a matter of record, he did have many staunch women friends and admirers, and—as Doody documents—a number of eighteenth-century women writers were influenced by his work.

The situation is not as strange as it might first appear; on the contrary, in terms of traditional gender relations it is all too familiar. As modern studies of speech suggest, "discourse in contexts where there exists an asymmetric power relation will orient to and reflect the assumptions and world view of the more powerful participant."⁴ Testimonials to Swift from admiring women need to be read sociolinguistically according to this model, that of the asymmetrical relationship between a powerful male speaker, whose approbation was highly desirable, and a relatively powerless woman, who had many reasons to want to please the illustrious Dean.

The Swift who had many women admirers was a well known writer and a patriot of such renown that the prime minister of England was told that it would take an army to arrest him. Such a man had, in Pierre Bourdieu's useful term, a large "capital of authority" with women who themselves wrote or who appreciated literary merits.⁵ Moreover, Swift was considerably older than the women who constituted his "virtuous seraglio," and this could only have increased his authority. He was also a man of the cloth, another enhancement of status, and a natural pedagogue who took particular delight in instructing young women. It hardly seems accidental that he was drawn to the company of women much younger than himself, who his formidable intellect and wit—not to mention his eminence—would most certainly impress.⁶ That he

Swift (London: A. Millar, 1752), 119, 128.

⁴ David Graddol and Joan Swann, *Gender Voices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 171.

⁵ Bourdieu, "The Economics of Linguistic Exchange," tr. Richard Nice, *Social Science Information* 16 (1977): 646.

⁶ As a man of thirty-two Swift wrote a series of resolutions entitled "When I come

could relax in their company, as various anecdotes attest, is not mysterious. Such women were an adoring and noncritical audience for Swift's own work and a group he could criticize with impunity.⁷

Surely it was easy enough for Swift to be expansive in the company of those gentlewomen who gave him the attention and admiration he missed so conspicuously in other venues, an audience that constantly clamored for his latest work and no doubt always received it with extravagant praise. As Laetitia Pilkington describes her own feeling in listening to Swift hold forth, "Nothing could be more delightful to me, as Pleasure and Instruction flowed from his Lips."⁸

Swift obviously enjoyed the company of women who were not boring and empty-headed, yet who had no desire for the greater sphere of masculine experience that he so rigorously forbade them. Commendably, Swift wanted gentlewomen to participate in after-dinner conversation rather than be exiled to the drawing room; he also wanted them to hold the interest of their husbands through good sense rather than physical charms (a program that required the cooperation of husbands as well as wives).⁹

Beyond this rather limited program lies speculation. Doody remarks that Swift's circle of women writers "might perhaps be seen as a group of Vanessas," suggesting that Swift wanted to see more women as intelligent and spirited as the heroine of "Cadenus and Vanessa."¹⁰ This movement from the poetic

to be Old" that reveal his own knowledge of his predilection for young women. The very first resolution is "not to marry a young woman." Another is "not to keep young company unless they really desire it." And still another is a partial recasting of the first: "Not to hearken to flatteries, nor conceive I can be beloved by a young woman."—*The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis, 14 vols. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1939–68), 1:xxxvii.

⁷ Laetitia Pilkington, *Memoirs of Mrs. Laetitia Pilkington*, 3 vols. (Dublin: 1748–54), 1 & 3 passim, has left the fullest account of the elderly Dean playing this role.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:72.

⁹ Swift, *Prose Works* 9:90, 89–90.

¹⁰ Doody, "Swift Among the Women," 22.

context which Swift controlled to a more complicated historical situation seems fraught. The fictive Vanessa could be contained in poetry, abandoned in the text with a coy nonconclusion; unlike the real Vanessa, she did not combine her intelligence and spirit with any troubling usurpations. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu may have been closer to the mark when she wrote to her daughter that "Swift was so intoxicated with the Love of Flattery, he sought it amongst the lowest of people and the silliest of Women, and was never so well pleas'd with any Companions as those that worship him while he insulted them."¹¹

Contemporary evidence suggests some truth to this harsh opinion. As the future Mrs. Delany described Swift in a letter to her sister (1733), "He talks a great deal and does not require many answers."¹² Pilkington, with all of her reverence for the Dean, must confess that "he was a very rough sort of a Tutor for one of my years and Sex." and further, "he really was sometimes very rude."¹³

Far from wanting more Vanessas, Swift came to regard the one Vanessa in his life as an intractable problem. "Cadenus and Vanessa" is, after all, an elaborate compliment probably designed to reconcile the too-assertive Vanessa to her mentor's refusal to draw closer. It is sadly contradictory, torn between opposed exigencies of valorizing Vanessa's unusual abilities and returning her to an existence that could make little use of them, a situation Swift seemed unable to appreciate. One of the saddest aspects of his relationship with Esther Van Homrigh is the isolation his instruction brought about in her life. Attempting to follow his advice to seek out company, but irrevocably moulded by Swift to regard it with contempt, she wrote to him of her experience:

¹¹ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 3:56.

¹² Swift, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D. D.*, ed. F. Elrington Ball, 4 vols. (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), 4:436n.

¹³ Pilkington, *Memoirs*, 1:107, 73.

One day this week I was to visit a great lady...where I found a very great assembly of ladies and beaux, dressed (as I suppose) to a nicety. I hope you'll pardon me now, if I tell you that I heartily wished you a spectator; for I very much question if in your life you ever saw the like scene, or one more extraordinary. The lady's behaviour was blended with so many different characters, I cannot possibly describe it without tiring your patience. But the audience seemed to me a creation of her own, they were so very obsequious. Their forms and gestures were very like those of baboons and monkeys...one of these animals snatched my fan and was so pleased with me, that it seized me with such a panic, that I apprehended nothing less than being carried up to the top of the house, and served as a friend of yours was; but in this one of their own species came in, upon which they all began to make their grimaces; which opportunity I took, and made my escape.¹⁴

In her attempt to, as she imagines, see things through Swift's eyes, Vanessa consciously identifies with a Swiftian fiction, the misanthropic Gulliver. And far from being pacified by Swift's flattering portrait of her in poetry, in life she remained bitter and demanding: the relationship of real life Cadenus and Vanessa ended in acrimonious rupture.¹⁵

Such complexities did not enter into the relationships that Swift formed with younger women after first Vanessa and then Stella passed from the scene, but these later admirers might well

¹⁴ Cited in A. Martin Freeman, *Vanessa and her Correspondence with Jonathan Swift* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1921), 136-37.

¹⁵ Or so most biographers have believed on the evidence of Vanessa's will and her instructions to her executors to publish both the poem and her correspondence with Swift. See Ball, *Correspondence*, 3:462, and David Nokes, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 263-64. Irvin Ehrenpreis disagrees.—*Dean Swift*, vol. 3 of *Swift the Man, His Works, and the Age*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962-83), 3:388-89.

have been made uncomfortable by some of Swift's poems about their sex. While they would not have seen themselves mirrored in the horrors of the decaying prostitutes in "The Progress of Love" and "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," they might have paused over poems that indict gentlewomen as frivolous, empty-headed, and extravagant. They might also have wondered about Swift's intention in "Betty the Grizette," where a woman's freckled neck is the object of the poet's minute and unfavorable scrutiny:

Queen of wit and beauty, Betty,
 Never may the muse forget ye;
 How thy face charms every shepherd,
 Spotted over like a leopard!
 And, thy freckled neck displayed,
 Envy breeds in every maid.
 Like a fly blown Cake of Tallow,
 Or, on Parchment, Ink turn'd yellow:
 Or, a tawny speckled Pippin,
 Shrivel'd with a Winter's keeping. (7-10)¹⁶

The gratuitous quality of Swift's attention to Betty's neck is comic, but it is also troubling: it calls to mind the similarly gratuitous character of Gulliver's experience with the "monstrous" Brobdingnagian breast. When Gulliver is nauseated by the sight of the "spots, pimples and freckles" of this breast, he reflects upon the fair skins of "our English ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass."¹⁷

¹⁶ Jonathan Swift, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). Further citations to Swift's poetry will be to this edition. Rogers, 826, believes that the spots are "pock-marks or perhaps an excess of patches (beauty-spots)." I think they are apt to be freckles: the same kind of complexion that produces a freckled neck is likely to produce a freckled face. The analogy with the leopard's spots would thus be more telling.

¹⁷ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa

The question to ponder is whether the magnifying glass of Swift's satiric attention is properly directed at such innocuous objects as freckles.

The poems centering on excretion are obviously more problematic for women readers, and not just modern women readers. As Pilkington reported, "With all the Reverence I have for the Dean, I really think he sometimes chose Subjects unworthy of his Muse, and which could serve for no other End except that of turning the Reader's Stomach, as it did my Mother's, who, upon reading the *Lady's Dressing-room*, instantly threw up her Dinner."¹⁸ However much we may distribute some blame to the sensibility of romanticizing male voyeurs, whose experience is privileged in the poems, the vivid linkage of filth and femaleness is inescapable—and not just in the mind of a foolish male character. Celia in "The Lady's Dressing Room" not only shits; she leaves her towels "Begumm'd, bematter'd, and beslim'd / With Dirt, and Sweat, and Ear-Wax grim'd" (45–6). If not quite as innocent as freckles, dirt, sweat, and ear-wax are fairly modest substances in the realm of sin and vice, although in the poetic description they seem both sinister and culpable.

The ambiguous nature of the poem's conclusion has been discussed for centuries, since neither Strephon nor the narrator telling his story (sometimes assumed to be the poet speaking) espouses comforting views. Strephon, after his traumatic progress through the dressing room, comes away with a "foul Imagination" that brands all women with the same disgusting brush. We are accustomed to reading this as Strephon's folly—the folly of an idealizing male imagination—yet he has not hallucinated his experience and may well be justified in imagining that other women arrayed like Celia in "Lace, Brocades and Tissues" also leave filthy dressing rooms behind. The narrator agrees with this blanket condemnation, but

(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 74.

¹⁸ Pilkington, *Memoirs*, 3:161.

recommends overlooking it, possibly for reasons of sexual satisfaction: "Should I the Queen of Love refuse, / Because she rose from stinking Ooze?" (131-2). This is not a very palatable conclusion either. While Strephon and the narrator have diametrically opposed responses to the situation, both agree that it is what it is: namely, "gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung" (144).

And we as readers, whether we have taken the dressing room tour affirming Strephon's disgust or bestowing a patronizing smile upon his violent reactions, must also agree that the poem presents a body of factual data that is meant to repulse. But to what end? Hester Piozzi remarked of such poems as "The Lady's Dressing Room" that Swift was trying to shock women "into cleanliness."¹⁹ This distances a given woman reader from the poetic situation—that is, a woman whose dressing room is clean and tidy—but it does not engage the full weight of the text. Granted, there is much unnecessary sloppiness and filth in Celia's boudoir and it would be possible to reform a great deal in her toilette. But not everything: what is the poem saying when it dilates upon the tweezers that not only shape Celia's eyebrows but pluck "Hairs that sink the Forehead low, / Or on her Chin like Bristles grow"? (57-58) Cleanliness has nothing to do with the repulsive bristles that appear on her chin, not as the result of vicious living but merely according to a natural process. Neutral natural process, I wish to emphasize, although these "bristles" are described as disgusting in and of themselves. Like Betty's freckled neck, they are not phenomena that fall under the rubric of morality—or cleanliness, for that matter. Such physical manifestations cannot be obliterated by good hygiene or virtuous conduct.

The treatment of excretion presents similar difficulties, difficulties which I would place under the rubric of "assignment of blame." Although some aspects of excretion can be relegated to the domain of cleanliness, in the two other poems that foreground it as an issue, "Cassinus and Peter" and "Strephon

¹⁹ Hester Thrale Piozzi, *Retrospection*, 2 vols. (London: 1801), 2:352.

and Chloe," there is no evidence that the woman involved has been unclean in performing these functions. In "The Lady's Dressing Room" the elaborate presentation of the excremental chest may obscure the simple fact that when it is used, it will stink regardless of the excretor's fastidiousness—this is the nature of excrement. As the narrator comments:

So Things, which must not be exprest,
When plumpt into the reeking Chest;
Send up an excremental Smell (109–111)

That the *things* referred to must indeed be expressed, literally if not verbally, is an unpleasant fact of physical life for the poet, and one that is problematized only in terms of women.²⁰

Doody argues that "to a woman reader the fact that 'Celia shits' is probably less upsetting or annoying" than Pope's horrific portrait of maternal power in the *Dunciad*.²¹ But while Swift may not be blaming women for the wrongs of the world, he does seem to be blaming them for having disgusting bodies, and this is a fairly large matter to overlook. Men may be foolish in imagining that women are physically clean and wholesome, but who can doubt that their error is less culpable than the foulness attributed in such vivid detail to women.

One may also read the negative ascription of maternal power in Pope somewhat differently than Doody does: distorted and rendered monstrous, it is at least an acknowledgment of the maternal role and its importance, something that is markedly absent from Swift's consideration of women.²² His *Letter to a*

²⁰ Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 181, remarks that "ultimately the world inhabited by this female figure seems to receive corruption from her rather than bestow it upon her"—a crucial distinction.

²¹ Doody, "Swift Among the Women," 20.

²² Katharine M. Rogers notes that "hostile descriptions of motherhood ... run through Swift's work" and that his "references to nurses are also invariably unpleasant."—*The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 170, 170n.

Young Lady, on her Marriage, for example, is notable in making no reference to motherhood while instructing the young lady at length on the company she ought to keep. Then, there is Swift's violent reaction in the *Journal to Stella* to a woman "just up after lying-in." Swift wrote of her as "the ugliest sight I have seen, pale, dead, old and yellow, for want of her paint. She has turned my stomach."²³ Significantly, the offspring Swift attributed to matrimony in "Thoughts on Various Subjects" were "Repentance, Discord, Poverty, Jealousy, Sickness, Spleen, Loathing, etc."²⁴

That many eighteenth-century women writers learned from Swift's poetry and imitated his verse does not speak to issues of his treatment of women either in life or in his writing. Women of the era looking to connect to the literary tradition would naturally model themselves on writers already situated within it and these writers, perforce, would be men. Swift was a prominent literary figure whose verse furnished a particularly useful model for women in its tetrameter form and its vernacular voice, one more suited to a woman's world than the high style.²⁵

Pilkington, who was both an acquaintance of Swift's and a writer, avowed that she wrote her poem "The Statues" as a rebuttal to Swift's "eternally satirizing and ridiculing the *Female Sex*."²⁶ Doody accordingly lauds Swift's role in encouraging a woman to write, yet were we to give Swift credit here, we might also credit the man who batters a woman with inspiring her to take a course in self-defense.

This is only part of the story, however, for Pilkington goes on to attribute any merit she may have as a writer to the

²³ Cited in Herbert Davis, *Stella: A Gentlewoman of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 26. Elsewhere, of course, Swift criticizes the artifice of "paint."

²⁴ Swift, *Prose Works*, 4:252.

²⁵ Doody, "Swift Among the Women," 23-4.

²⁶ Pilkington, *Memoirs*, 1:75.

"Pains" Swift took to instruct her.²⁷ As numerous anecdotes in her *Memoirs* illustrate, their relationship was that of the paternalistic teacher and great man to a woman regarded indulgently as a little girl. On one occasion Swift asked her help in pasting letters into a book. "I intended to do it myself, but that I thought it might be a pretty Amusement for a Child, so I sent for you," she reported him saying. And her reply: "I told him I was extremely proud to be honoured with his Commands."²⁸

Swift lent his prestige to another woman poet, Mary Barber, in the form of a preface to her collection of poems, where he wrote the following: "She seemeth to have a true poetical Genius, better cultivated than could well be expected, either from her Sex, or the Scene she hath acted in, as the Wife of a Citizen. Yet I am assured, that no Woman was ever more useful to her Husband in the Way of his Business. Poetry hath only been her favourite Amusement; for which she hath one Qualification, that I wish all good Poets possess'd a Share of, I mean, that she is ready to take Advice, and submit to have her Verses corrected, by those who are generally allow'd to be the best Judges."²⁹

Certainly Swift's comment, intended to be complimentary to Barber, is not as forceful as Dr. Johnson's memorable remark comparing a woman preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs: "It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."³⁰ Still, there is some similarity. Both Barber's gender and her station in life as an ordinary housewife presuppose that she will not have cultivated her natural endowment, just as the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:60.

²⁹ Swift, Preface to *Poems on Several Occasions* (1734) in *The Poetry of Mary Barber*, ed. Bernard Tucker (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 40.

³⁰ James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. ed. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 1:463. In "Thoughts on Various Subjects" Swift wrote in a similar vein, although evidently not for publication, that "a very little Wit is valued in a Woman; as we are pleased with a few Words spoken plain by a Parrot."—*Prose Works*, 4:247.

conditions of Dr. Johnson's world presupposed that women would not preach. Barber's talent was, in Swift's estimation, "better cultivated than could well be expected"—but given that very little could be expected, this does not mean that it was well cultivated.

According to Swift, Barber "never writes on a Subject with general unconnected Topicks, but always with a Scheme and Method driving to some particular End."³¹ This much might be expected of any conscientious writer: as evidence of "poetical Genius" it is less than compelling. In other respects the picture is all too predictable: she did not neglect her real role, that of a housewife, in order to write—poetry was only "her favourite Amusement." After all, this was a time in which, according to Piozzi, "versifying wives were by most husbands deemed *fantastical*."³²

Docile female pupil that she was, Mary Barber was ready to take advice on correcting her poems from her (undoubtedly male) betters, most notably, of course, Swift himself. In her own preface Barber, too, acknowledges "the Goodness of some Men of Genius, who with great Condescension undertook to correct what I had written."³³ As Pilkington remarked of Swift and women in her *Memoirs*, "When he found them docile, he took great Pleasure to instruct them."³⁴

Barber's own self-presentation begins with the following apologia: "I am sensible that a Woman steps out of her Province whenever she presumes to write for the Press, and therefore think it necessary to inform my Readers, that my Verses were written with a very different View from any of those which other Attempters in Poetry have proposed to themselves: My Aim being chiefly to form the Minds of my Children."³⁵ As her most recent editor remarks, Barber's work

³¹ Swift, "Preface to *Poems*," 42.

³² Piozzi, *Retrospection*, 2:352.

³³ Barber, *Poetry*, 48.

³⁴ *Memoirs*, 1:87.

³⁵ Barber, *Poetry*, 45.

constantly bears witness to "the position of women in [her] society and her obligation to placate a succession of patrons and wealthy friends."³⁶ In Barber's time this may not have been perceived to be a degrading experience, but it was certainly a deforming one.

What then can we conclude about Swift and the women of his day? Mary Barber, grateful and self-effacing, is a textbook example of what has been true down through the centuries: women have habitually denied, defended, or ignored negative male attitudes toward their sex, and for the best of reasons—their own need to survive within a male-dominated hierarchy.

As Arnold Krupat writes about another marginalized group: "Native Americans have had to make a variety of accommodations to the dominant culture's forms, capitulating to them, assimilating them, sometimes dramatically transforming them, but never able to proceed independent of them."³⁷ The same could be said for those eighteenth-century women poets who, like Barber, tried to insert themselves into a male literary establishment. They used what they could and discarded the rest. In the case of Swift, women readers and writers continue to have a good deal that they must cast aside.

³⁶ Bernard Tucker, *The Poetry of Mary Barber*, 30.

³⁷ Krupat, "The Dialogic of Silko's 'Storyteller,'" *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 56–67.