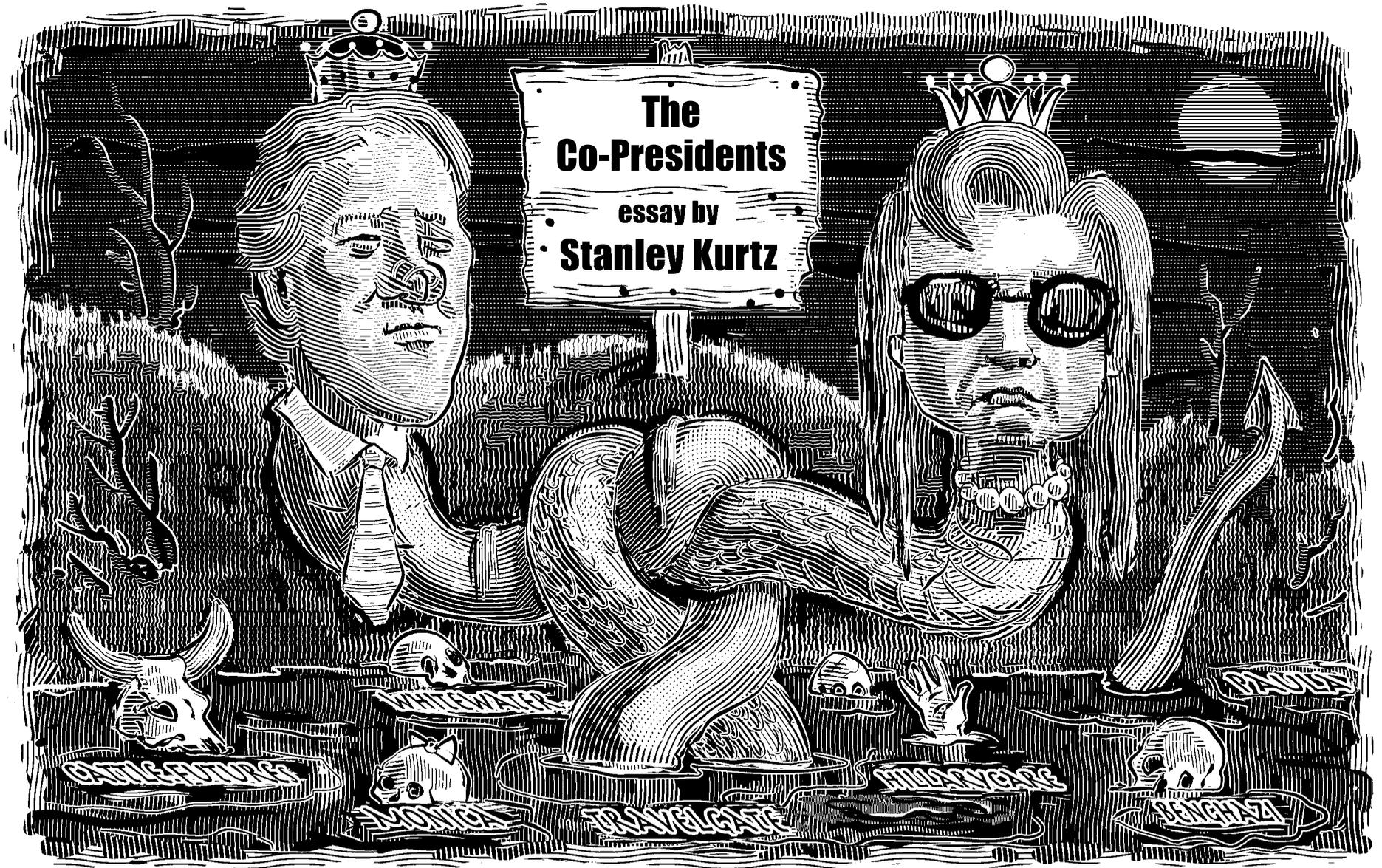


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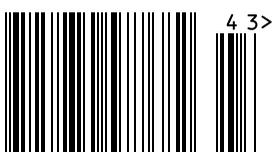
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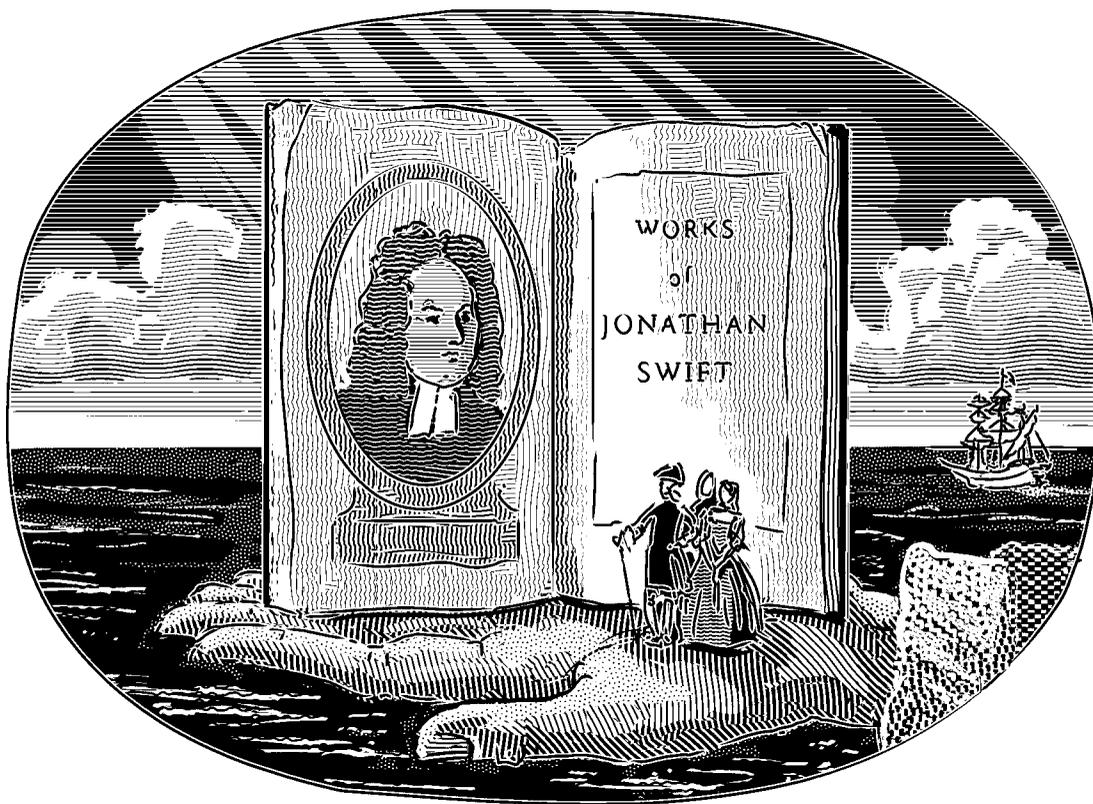
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Book Review by Paul A. Cantor

## A RIDDLE WRAPPED IN AN ENIGMA

*Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World*, by Leo Damrosch.  
Yale University Press, 592 pages, \$35



**J**ONATHAN SWIFT WAS ONE OF THE MOST secretive men who ever lived, the Howard Hughes of 18th-century Britain. Given how well-known his name is today, it comes as a surprise to learn that most of his writings were initially published anonymously. Deeply involved in the vicious pamphlet wars of British politics, he had to protect himself against prosecution for libel and sedition. Aware that government spies were reading his mail, Swift denied even in letters to his closest friends that he wrote his most controversial works.

For a public figure, he also managed to keep his private life remarkably secret. The details of his birth and childhood are shrouded in mystery, complete with a puzzling tale—straight out of an operetta—of his having been kidnapped as an infant by a wet nurse. Evidently the great love of Swift's life was a woman he referred to as Stella (real name: Hester or Esther Johnson), but we do not know whether they were ever married or not; we do not even know whether they had sexual

relations or not (contemporary witnesses gave contradictory evidence).

Swift was a distinguished Protestant cleric and rose to being dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. One would expect a prominent churchman to be orthodox in his religious beliefs. But Swift was closely associated with the most notorious freethinker of his day, Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, and some of his contemporaries publicly questioned Swift's religious orthodoxy.

**A**LL OF THIS SECRECY AND MYSTERY obviously complicates the task of a Swift biographer. Leo Damrosch, who teaches literature at Harvard University, has risen to the challenge in a carefully researched book that re-opens the questions surrounding Swift's life in light of recent scholarly developments. For example, Damrosch takes seriously Irish literary critic Denis Johnston's argument that the mysteries in Swift's childhood can be explained as an attempted cover-up prompted by the fact

that he was the illegitimate son of Sir John Temple. The plot thickens—indeed we seem to be plunged into a bad 18th-century novel—when Damrosch also entertains Johnston's conjecture that Stella was the illegitimate daughter of Temple's son, William. If Swift learned that he was Stella's uncle, it might explain why he never married her.

Damrosch admits that we may never learn the full truth about such matters, but he knows a good story when he sees one and his biography is enlivened by the way he considers these newly proposed alternatives to the standard accounts of Swift's life. Damrosch also deftly places Swift's life story in the context of the important political, religious, social, and economic developments of his age. Today Swift is known almost exclusively as a literary figure, chiefly as the author of the classic *Gulliver's Travels*. But during his lifetime, he was better known as a political writer. He was deeply involved in English and Irish politics, and interacted with many of the most distinguished figures of his day. He was allied



with the great Tory leaders Bolingbroke and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, and opposed to prominent Whigs, such as Robert Walpole and John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (Winston's ancestor).

Accordingly, Damrosch has to explain the difference between Tories and Whigs, as well as that between High Church and Low Church, and a host of other controversies that divided Britain in Swift's day. Given the importance of Ireland in Swift's life, Damrosch also has to unravel the complexities of English-Irish relations in the 18th century. He easily could have gotten bogged down in a morass of historical details, but instead he turns the historical density of his book into one of its strengths. Even someone initially unfamiliar with the subject will come away from Damrosch's book with a solid grasp of 18th-century British history. It is a tribute to Swift's historical importance that to tell the story of his life is to tell the story of the epochal moment when Britain emerged as a worldwide imperial power.

**F**OR ALL SWIFT'S IMPORTANCE IN ENGLISH and Irish politics, he never enjoyed the rewards his service to the Tory ministry deserved. Still, as a great comic writer,

he has had the last laugh on his contemporaries. Today, his grand political associates find their names languishing in history books, whereas—thanks to the endless recycling of *Gulliver's Travels* in popular culture—Swift's name is familiar to the general public, and he remains a national hero in Ireland for his brave efforts against England's economic policies. Lord Carteret, lord lieutenant of Ireland for the British government, wrote to Swift in 1735: "As for futurity, I know your name will be remembered when the names of kings, lords lieutenant, archbishops, and parliament politicians will be forgotten."

As Damrosch's subtitle indicates, his subject is Swift's "life and his world." He is not writing an intellectual biography of Swift, or even a literary biography in the strict sense of the term. He does not offer sustained or original interpretations of individual works, nor does he analyze, except occasionally in passing, Swift's writings in relation to their sources or to broad literary traditions, such as the development of satire from classical antiquity to the modern world. Nevertheless, Damrosch does succeed in giving a broad overview of Swift's literary career, and readers who mistakenly think of Swift as a one-trick pony will be exposed to the wide range of his achieve-

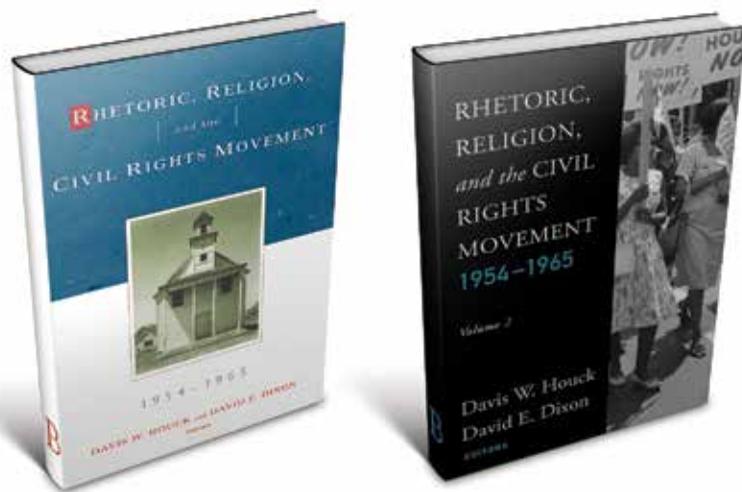
ment in both prose and poetry. In particular, Damrosch quotes liberally from Swift's poetry, reminding (or informing) his readers of how clever and funny the great prose writer could be in verse. He devotes a whole chapter to what are normally called Swift's "scatological poems," but which he renames the "disgusting poems." Here Damrosch has a field day quoting Swift, in such memorable couplets as: "Repeating in his amorous fits, / Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!"

**F**OR ME, THE ONE DISAPPOINTING ASPECT of this otherwise outstanding book is the failure to take seriously the possibility that someone as pathologically secretive as Swift might have practiced the art of esoteric, or secret, writing. Damrosch quotes an early biographer, John Boyle, earl of Orrery, referring to Swift as "my hieroglyphic friend." Swift would have known from his comic predecessor Rabelais that "hieroglyphics" was a code word in early modern Europe for esoteric writing. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais states: "But the wise men of Egypt, in the old days, proceeded completely differently, when they wrote the magical letters that we call hieroglyphics—which no one understood who had no understanding, and which everyone understood who had any understanding of the powers, the nature and the special qualities of that writing." Rabelais points to the phenomenon political philosopher Leo Strauss analyzed in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952)—the ability of sophisticated authors to write with two audiences in mind: those not in on the secret, who accept the surface, orthodox meaning of a work at face value; and those in on the secret, who can read between the lines and ferret out covert, unorthodox meanings.

To his credit, Damrosch is aware of this possibility. Throughout his biography, he conducts an ongoing argument with a distinguished precursor text, Irvin Ehrenpreis's three-volume *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age* (1962-83). Damrosch criticizes Ehrenpreis for taking Swift's orthodox statements at face value: "Strangely, though a man of subtle irony himself, he insisted that literature always means exactly what it says, and that Swift's thinking and life were massively conventional—his views on religion, politics, and love were all tepidly middle of the road." By contrast, Damrosch argues that Swift's complex authorial strategies were linked to his expression of unorthodox ideas:

It is no accident, too, that much of Swift's writing was issued under assumed names: Isaac Bickerstaff; M.B.,

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—Keith D. Miller, Professor of English, Arizona State University

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Drapier; Lemuel Gulliver.... And much more than playfulness was involved. Impersonating a different voice liberated the subversive side of Swift's imagination, and that could be very subversive indeed.

Unfortunately, Damrosch does not work out this insight in detail. The closest he comes is in his chapter on Swift's brilliant and vertiginous satire on religious sects, *A Tale of a Tub*, in which Damrosch considers whether Swift was "defending religion or subverting it." Damrosch correctly points out that this book's "left-handed ironies allow [Swift] to suggest things that he would never dare to say straight out." Contemporary readers "felt that it wasn't just abuses in religion that were under attack, but religion itself. And when the author's identity became known, it was scandalous that such a subversive satire had been written by a clergyman."

Damrosch notes that "[t]hroughout Swift's life he was hounded by accusations that he was too irreverent for a clergyman, and maybe not even a believer at all." And yet on the next page, he pulls back from this radical possibility and turns in the direction of Ehrenpreis: "there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Swift's faith." But the evidence Damrosch then cites on behalf of Swift's piety is, by his own admission, taken from the latter part of his life when he was suffering from dementia. He then undermines his own argument by granting: "However earnestly Swift performed his devotions, in private as well as in public, he may still have harbored doubts. And if he did, it's inconceivable that he would have allowed anyone to know it."

DAMROSCH'S REFLECTIONS ON *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS* would have been more interesting if he had pursued the line he does with *A Tale of a Tub* and explored the possibility that Swift's most famous book is an example of esoteric writing. Strauss's student Allan Bloom made this connection in his essay "An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*," available in the collection of his writings, *Giants and Dwarfs* (1991). For example, Bloom notes that Swift has Gulliver swear to the veracity of the book with Sinon's oath in Latin from Virgil's *Aeneid*—the oath of one of the most famous liars in history (Sinon was lying about the Trojan Horse, which leads Bloom to claim that *Gulliver's Travels* conceals a secret cargo of Greeks).

Bloom argues that *Gulliver's Travels* is Swift's contribution to the famous Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns (which already comes up in his earlier *Battle*

*of the Books*). Bloom works out Swift's philosophical allegory according to this plan:

Book I, modern political practice, especially the politics of Britain and France; Book II, ancient political practice on something of a Roman or Spartan model; Book III, modern philosophy in its effect on political practice; Book IV, ancient utopian politics used as a standard for judging man understood as the moderns wished to understand him.

Reading *Gulliver's Travels* esoterically, Bloom presents Swift as a partisan of the ancients in moral and political philosophy, concluding audaciously: "Swift, the Tory and the High Churchman, was a republican and a non-believer." Now there is a genuine alternative to Ehrenpreis's orthodox view of Swift! But Damrosch does not explore these philosophic depths.

STILL, ONE SHOULD NOT CRITICIZE A book for not being what it never claims to be. Leo Damrosch did not set out to offer sustained interpretations of *A Tale of a Tub* or *Gulliver's Travels*. In fact, he deserves credit for saying as much as he does about these two works in a book already (and justifiably) crowded with details about Swift's life. His book does what a good biography of Jonathan Swift ought to do. It gives general readers a comprehensive introduction to his life and literary career and prepares them for exploring the subject further, above all, for reading Swift's prose and poetry in depth. For the historically minded, Damrosch grapples with the thorniest issues in understanding Swift's life, sorts out the arguments on different sides of the issues, and offers sane and balanced answers to the questions that have haunted all attempts to get at the truth. And if all this is not enough, the book is lavishly illustrated and Damrosch tells his tale with a novelist's skill, displaying a good eye for the big picture as well as for the little details that bring a narrative to life. He always maintains a sense of forward momentum and even suspense. A wise biographer, he does not pretend to have solved all the mysteries concerning his uniquely mysterious subject, and we are left with the sense that as the ultimate in esotericism, Jonathan Swift succeeded in taking his best kept secrets with him to the grave.

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