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SANTA CRUZ

**“TO BE EQUALLY DIVERTED AND INFORMED BY EVERY LINE”
THE AMBIVALENT ACT OF STORY-FASHIONING IN *A TALE OF A TUB***

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LITERATURE

by

Elizabeth Bejarano

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Abstract

Elizabeth Bejarano

“To be equally diverted and informed by every line”: The Ambivalent Act of Story-Fashioning in *A Tale of a Tub*

In this paper I examine narrative technique in Jonathan Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* (1704) to offer a methodology for his satire. I foreground my reading of the *Tale* with two events that informed the work: the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, and the Repeal of the Licensing Act of 1662, a measure that substantially deregulated the British Press. Both these events call knowledge production into question, specifically, what kind of knowledge is valuable and how it should be disseminated to the literate public. The *Tale* does not answer these questions, but enacts the tension sparked by their debate, and reflects a major shift in print culture at the turn of the eighteenth century. Hasty, plagiarized, and digressive, the *Tale* is meant to echo a *misinformed* society. I argue that Swift mimics information overload by use of constant ambivalence, which then exposes the limitations of expression in print.

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I would like to thank my advisor and chair, Sean Keilen, for helping me locate my field over the course of several years and many divergent interests. This paper is the result of an intensive discovery process, and it is Sean who fortified me with the *joy* of discovery, when so often the pursuit feels like madness. The paper is not “finished” but reflects a long, literary journey to the eighteenth century, and crowns my happy introduction to the field. Sean guided me through countless readings across periods and genres to kindle a small, focused passion for Swift’s absurdity that will lead to a PhD. Our discussions empowered me to mold boundless curiosity into scholastic achievement, and I’m so grateful for Sean’s patience, honesty, friendship, and rigorously high standards for my work.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Kim Lau, John Jordan, and Jody Greene, whose courses directly informed this paper. Without their time, encouragement, and willingness to challenge my ideas, the thesis would lack strength of conviction. Any sophistication sensed in my Swiftian criticism must be credited to the acuity and expertise of these three formidable scholars.

Finally, I’d like to thank my parents for their endless support during my Masters program. Whenever I bemoaned the woes of graduate study, they gave me a healthy dose of perspective to remind me of my good fortune as a student in my chosen field. With their tremendous love and unwavering confidence, my parents enabled me to grow my capabilities. They taught me to trade fear for experimentalism in the approach to any problem, and this is the principle that founds my work.

I. Introduction

A Tale of a Tub, first published under a pseudonym in 1704, is a pre-novelistic prose satire in which Swift attacks the institutions of Christianity, government, and learning. The “tub” is a nod to Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Swift likens his *Tale* to the seafaring practice where sailors toss an empty tub to an approaching whale so its attention is diverted from the ship. The ship, meant to stand for the Commonwealth, remains protected as long as the whale tinkers with a hollow tub. The *Tale* is offered to the reading public as the proverbial tub: a confectionary distraction to deflect from the corruptions of government. Of course, Swift’s work performs exactly the opposite function and fires directly *at* the Commonwealth.

In this work, Swift captures the spirit of the booming book trade. For him, the tide of new authorship brings insufferably longwinded prose and a careless governance of intellectual property. Approximately one third of the *Tale* comprises a parade of prefatory material – sycophantic dedications, notes from the bookseller, a lengthy preface, introductory notes – all meant to parody the superfluous preambles that padded many books in Swift’s time. The narrator is a fledgling author who worships all things Modern and despises all things Ancient, though he incessantly (and perhaps unknowingly) quotes Ancient literature without citation. He has soaring hopes for the future of Modern authorship, and considers England to be rich with green genius. He offers the *Tale* as a “divine treatise” (78) for the “general good of mankind” (77), a “panegyrick upon the world” and “a faithful abstract drawn from the

universal body of all arts and sciences” (16). These ambitious characterizations rightly indicate the narrator’s habit of grandiloquence and self-praise.

Though the narrator undertakes a straightforward tale, he is prone to vivid, winding digressions. These are formal digressions, entitled: “A Digression Concerning Criticks”, “A Digression in the Modern Kind”, “A Digression in Praise of Digressions” and “A Digression Concerning the Original, the Use, and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth.” The digressions travel on a huge topical spectrum. Often, they funnel from pedantic disquisitions on the whole of humanity to pointed commentary on Swift’s contemporaries. These departures from the tale proper muddle the narrative whereabouts. Orientation, continuity, or the allegiance to a primary subject is discouraged by every possible method. Ultimately, the tale is engulfed by the digressions totally, washed away and never concluded.

The tale proper, which the narrator dubs the “chief thread” (47), is relatively simple and centers on three brothers: Peter, Martin, and Jack. The brothers inherit a coat apiece from their father upon his death. The will of the father plainly states that the coats are not to be altered. Frivolous and materialistic, the brothers fabricate loopholes in the will so that they may alter the coats in keeping with present fashions. However, there is no consensus amongst the brothers on *how* the will should be executed to simultaneously retain their father’s legacy and violate his request. Tensions bubble, and eventually the brothers are driven apart by disagreement over the will’s fundamental instruction. The story is allegorical: Peter stands in for Catholicism, Martin for Protestantism, and Jack, a fiery evangelist, for emergent

mendicant sects. All three brothers radically depart from their father's intention, and, like the Church, their union dissolves into factions. The narrator writes to the point where the brothers disband, but abandons the "chief thread" in the thick of their dispute. It should be noted that both the allegory and the digressions form an overarching commentary on the problems of textual analysis. The father's will, grossly misconstrued by the three brothers, correlates to the Bible and its divergent readings. The digressions derail and dispose of a systematized story to liken the critical pursuit of authorial intent to the interpretation of God's word.

My interest in the *Tale* can be located with Swift's irregular narrative technique. The *Tale* is what Brian Richardson calls an "anti-mimetic" text. Richardson posits narration as a tool used to sort the data of events and rationalize experience. Dominant narrative forms, then, offer a means for causality, and subsequently authority. Richardson argues that conventional, or "mimetic" fiction (mimetic because it supposedly emulates events as we schematize them) maintains a set of influential narrative criteria. These criteria include a legible chronology (usually a beginning, middle, and end), a discernible narrator, the deliberate shrouding of their own construction, and, well, a point. Richardson contends that these elements form an arbitrary framework for narrative that in no way resembles the ongoing, inconclusive human experience. Mimetic texts enforce a dominant mode of storytelling, which includes the selection of "important" events and the ordering of these events. Perceived truth-value is then influenced by narrative structure.

Anti-mimetic texts transgress mimetic boundaries in a variety of ways,

including but not limited to: multi-person narration or second-person narration where the protagonist is referred to as *you*, fraudulent narrators, the absence of a describable setting, dissolvable characters, and inscrutable chronologies. Richardson cites Laurence Sterne and Samuel Beckett as anti-mimetic pioneers, and does not include the *Tale* in his analysis, though it easily fits the category and arguably influences both of these authors.

Swift's narrator narrates the process of narrating. He frequently shifts narrative time and voice, he makes incessant addresses to the reader, and he abandons the tale he sets out to tell in favor of a foray into the absurd. Here is one example of the narrator's self-consciousness where he directs the reader to the writing process as it unfolds: "I am now trying an experiment very frequent among modern authors; which is, to *write upon nothing*: when the subject is utterly exhausted, to let the pen still move on; by some called, the ghost of wit, delighting to walk after the death of its body." (142) This passage is embedded in a rant that deviates from the narrator's primary story. It is anti-mimetic because it does not conceal the fiction writing process to produce a distinctly fictional idea; rather, it *reveals* the writing process, which leaves the parameters of "fiction" open and in question. Where mimetic works are often held to be the result of crafting and revision, the *Tale* stands as a hypothesis, a story in which the storytelling methodology is tested, scrapped, and altered along the way.

Richardson asserts that anti-mimetic narratives are neglected in narrative theory, noting "an absence of comprehensive theoretical formulations capable of

encompassing these works.” (21) He cites a narrative bias towards mimetic fiction that stems from the influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. I will not attempt to analyze the *Tale* using narrative theory, but Richardson’s correlation of narrative structure to credibility will aid me to determine how, if at all, the *Tale* filters meaning through an unintelligible narrative constitution. The only way to do this is to either attribute the *Tale*’s significance *entirely* to its atypical narrative structure, or to evaluate the *Tale* for every element *besides* narrative structure, which is to evaluate a series of isolated fragments. Both of these approaches have been tested in many hues since the publication of the work, and my small intervention will be to read Swift’s storytelling mode as an act of ambivalence.

I will connect the elements of character and voice to demonstrate that Swift disarms the institutions he abhors by conflation and imitation. I read this text as a palette of outrageous attitudes combined and granted speech. Swift does not write a strict parody, but parodies often, and I will pay special attention to this aspect of the text. Swift’s narrator is no more than a series of imitative voices assigned to a single figure. The effect is one person comprised of multiple personas, each a different target of Swift’s disdain. I refer to this approach as *polyphonic*. Swift’s use of one narrator in many roles allows for the incomplete representation of countless ideas, aspects of his culture, and different registers of time. By resisting a cohesive identity, the narrator is able to hold contradictory ideas at once. This ambivalence underscores the structure of the work as well; by resisting a legible structure, the work resists categorization, or becomes eligible for *many* categories.

Though the text is anti-mimetic in Richardson's sense, it is actually entirely an act of imitation. The *Tale*, for all its fragmentation, is meant to mirror the society that produced it. Though a far cry from historical record, Swift does play historian in this work. The *Tale* is proffered as a representation of England's cultural climate at the turn of the eighteenth century, where technological advancement was rampant but, in Swift's view, foundations of morality eroded just as quickly. Because Swift observes a broken culture, he writes a broken text. Directly and indirectly, he details historical events of his period. He does not list the shortcomings of his society, but *imitates* them for more profound effect. Swift argues by demonstration and criticizes by enactment. Even though the *Tale* is a fable gone haywire, its alternative form might offer overlooked representational value. I pose the possibility that the anti-mimetic elements of this piece might actually reconstitute a more accurate sense of Swift's moment than a chronological account. The *Tale* operates well outside the bounds of genre, and so its *purpose*, as history, fiction, satire, what have you, is open and indeterminable.

Swift voices a myriad of perceived cultural failings from one narrator, so we have a showcase of caricatures. These caricatures include the navel-gazing critic, the patronizing pedant, the novice author, and the wise fool. There are *many* tales that could emerge from the rotating stock of personae Swift invokes, but he forbids them fruition and maintains their infancy. This way, they are often indistinguishable. The *Tale* is a kind of many-headed monster where a whole host of institutional corruptions erupt from a single body.

II. A Note on Bakhtin

I will not be the first person to link Swift to Bakhtin. Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* is extremely helpful to think through this text. Though not a novel, the *Tale* takes on novelistic elements as described by Bakhtin, particularly his concept of heteroglossia. Bakhtin's heteroglossia allows for the coexistence of many types of speech in one text; he views the novel as a compilation of genres that form a singular genre. He writes, "The novel parodies other genres... it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them." (5) Swift lawlessly pools the familiar language of classical rhetoric, biblical oratory, scholarship, etc., to reveal contradiction, ludicrousness, and corruption in these forms. By creating his pastiche from many forms, Swift generates the linguistic parameters for his own text. This creates the illusion of an *original* form. However, he can only expose a form as insufficient by maximizing its potential. From this perspective, the *Tale* is a collage.

Another useful Bakhtinian concept is that of "ambivalent" laughter. For Bakhtin, popular laughter brings a cultural problem to close proximity. To eradicate distance is to eradicate fear, and the problem becomes available for healthy scrutiny. The laughter is ambivalent because it both ridicules and corrects; it has socially transformative power. Swift's work provokes ambivalent laughter and also resists patent meaning. This grants the text transformative power not only for Swift's society, but also for any reader of the *Tale*. Even if the reader is entirely ignorant to

the historical circumstances that produced the *Tale* (as I was) the absurdity of its construction and the strength of its parodic voice still offer an appealing puzzle. If we think of the text as an exercise in Bakhtinian laughter, we can evaluate it for its ability to ridicule and its ability to correct. The most important aspect of this text might be its resistance to classification. Still, I maintain that Swift's satire enacts historical criticism in an anti-mimetic mode of parodic imitation. In order to assess its corrective potential, I will discuss two events that are of particular significance to this text: the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and the Lapse of the Licensing Act of 1622.

III. The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns

Swift published *A Tale of a Tub* in a volume that included *The Battle of the Books*, or, *An Account of a Battel Between the Ancient and Modern Books in St. James Library*. I will be working with the *Tale* exclusively, but the pieces are bound with purpose worth noting because the *Battle* situates the intellectual tensions that generate the *Tale*. The *Battle* satirizes the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, a literary debate borne of the Académie française in the late 1680s. The Ancients argued for the supremacy of classical works, and the Moderns argued that classical works were rendered obsolete by the technological developments of their age¹.

In the early part of the sixteenth century, prominent humanists, including

¹ For further reading on the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and its subsequent influence on British literature, see Joan DeJean's *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin De Siècle* (Chicago, 1997) and Joseph Levine's *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Cornell, 1991)

Rabelais and Francis Bacon, hailed Modern inventions to distinguish themselves from Ancient scholarship, and to enforce the notion of linear, exponential human progress. They maintained that the printing press, firearms, and the nautical compass enabled unprecedented power and increased knowledge. Because these creations were never envisioned by the Ancients, the Moderns were rendered superior. This conceit would fuel the official Quarrel in late sixteenth century France, when Nicolas Boileau published his *L'art poetique* (1674) to uphold the virtue of Ancient genius. Boileau and his supporters contended that no Modern author could transcend the genius of the Ancients, and that Modern art was limited to mimicry. The Moderns offered the fruits of contemporary authors to prove that Modern *knowledge* surpassed the Ancients, and thereby the present age was enlightened. In 1688, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle released the *Digression sure les anciens et les modernes* to officially champion the Modern position. The Quarrel spurred analogous debates in the scientific arena, and is sometimes reduced to a problem of balancing progress and authority in the process of inquiry.

William Temple brought the quarrel to England in 1690, when he wrote ardently in favor of the Ancients in his essay *On Ancient and Modern Learning*. Specifically, he reiterated Bernard of Chartres' position that any insights of Modern authors can be attributed to the fact that they are dwarves standing on the shoulder of giants. Critic William Wotton and classicist Richard Bentley (among a slew of other public intellectuals) responded in opposition, and it is Wotton's treatise *Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) that Swift attacks on grounds of pedantry

in *A Tale of a Tub*. Swift was working as William Temple's secretary at the time, and the crux of the Quarrel seems to have inspired both the *Tale* and the *Battle*, that is: can authors do no more than imitate classical beauty or are authors enlightened by technological progress? Both the *Tale* and the *Battle* complicate this binary by ridiculing its construction, but Swift (like Temple) narrowly favors the Ancients, or at least delights in portraying the Moderns as a pontificating herd of senseless bombasts.

While Swift professes no overt reverence for Ancient works in either the *Tale* or the *Battle*, the *Tale* acts as caustic admonition against erasure of the past. Swift writes from the perspective of a Modern to demonstrate the literary consequences of shirking intellectual debt. Entirely driven by the desire to be current, the Modern narrator drives presentism from naiveté to absurdity. For Swift, the Moderns write disposable texts in their quest for perfect relevance. They choose forgetfulness and forgo foundation, rendering their works unstable. The narrator is a kind of futurist who routinely dismisses any element of the past, and this tendency marks him as a *true* Modern.

It is important to note that the debate was considered over in England by 1696, and Swift revived it nearly a decade later with the *Tale* and the *Battle*. Why did Swift choose the Quarrel as the subject of his breakout satire? It certainly worked to reignite tensions in his immediate intellectual circle. Wotton deemed the *Tale* "one of the profanest banter upon the religion of Jesus Christ, as such, that ever yet

appeared” and reissued his response to Temple along with an answer to the *Tub*². Swift incorporates a response to Wotton’s answer in the fifth edition of the *Tale* (1710) and includes amendments and an apology. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will be working with the original 1704 edition, and only taking into account the contents of the *Tale*, not the responses. Still, the fact that several versions of this work were published in a relatively short period of time brings me to the next significant cultural phenomenon that influences this text: the repeal of the Licensing Act of 1662.

IV. The Repeal of the Licensing Act

At the turn of the eighteenth century in England, print culture underwent rapid and significant change, to which the *Tale* directly responds. Most notably, we see the lapse of the Licensing of the Press Act of 1662. The Act mandated that no printing presses were to be established without approval from the Stationer’s Company, the publishing guild that monopolized the British press from 1557, when it was granted a Royal Charter³. The Stationer’s Company exerted full control over all publications and their distribution. The Act, then, was a major censorship effort meant to curb production of “seditious” and “treasonable” texts. When up for renewal in 1694, however, it was met with strong opposition by John Locke, who claimed that the Act inhibited the free exchange of ideas, infringed on authorial rights of ownership, and

² Montag, Warren. *The Unthinkable Swift: The Spontaneous Philosophy of a Church of England Man*. London: Verso, 1994. Print.

³ For a comprehensive introduction to the lapse of the Licensing Act and its effects on copyright development see *On the Origin of the Right to Copy* (Hart, 2004) by Ronan Deazely and his subsequent works on the same subject.

wrongfully kept the works of dead authors in copyright. Locke's campaign, along with his close friendship to a member of the House of Commons and chair of the decision committee, led to a repeal of the Licensing Act in 1695.

The end of the Stationers' monopoly prompted a chaotic new environment of rapidly proliferating information that would inspire the setting of the *Tale*. New publishing establishments emerged, and England saw a huge surge in the circulation of printed material. Swift playfully muses on this phenomenon in the Preface to the *Tale*, contrasting the weightiness of so many books to the airiness of their contents. Texts that would have been prohibited by the Stationer's Company now found easy means for distribution. Zealous readerships formed around once uncommon media, such as political pamphlets and short fictions. Swift, along with authors like Pope and Defoe, bemoaned the lapse of the Licensing Act⁴ for two primary reasons, the first being that pirated editions of painstakingly written works could now be published and sold at a fraction of the cost of the legitimate version. The second, that works with no "artistic" value, or worse, *truth* value, were widely disseminated to audiences considered indiscriminate by Swift.

Perhaps Swift realized his worst fear in the famed Grub Street district, known for low-rent publishing houses where "hack" writers produced printed material to excess with little to no quality control. *A Tale of a Tub* directly addresses the literary culture of Grub Street. In fact, Swift locates his text and his narrator squarely within that milieu. The narrator is a Grub Street hack who repeatedly voices the concerns of

⁴ See Randy Robertson's "Swift's Leviathan and the End of Licensing" (Penn State, 2005) for a useful dissertation on the influence of the lapse of licensing on the *Tale*.

an author working under the pressures of an over saturated market:

[B]ooks must be fruited to their several seasons, like dress, and dyet, and diversions... I am living fast, to see the time, when a book that misses its tide, shall be neglected, as the moon by day, or like mackerel a week after the season. (140-141)

Here we see a record of perceived change. The narrator implies that books, once timeless works of artistic achievement, are now expendable, regarded only for their timeliness. With the lapse of the Licensing Act, a book is prized for its trendiness rather than its literary scope. If a book “misses its tide” in the quick-paced market, it is doomed to invisibility.

In order to demonstrate the problem of deregulation, Swift fashions the *Tale* in the style of a Grub Street treatise. He smears the freer press as manufacturer of slovenly, falsified books. The *Tale*, then, has no structural grace and is bloated with superfluity. The primary story is hardly discernable amidst the incessant, wavering digressions. The *Tale* functions, in itself, as an argument for the necessity of licensing. The apparent sloppiness of this text indicates a greater sloppiness in print culture and a perceived degradation of literature. To regulate the production of information is to grant time for well-developed thought, trustworthy news, and outstanding literary works. The *Tale* accelerates, or realizes, in its fragmented form, the outcome that Swift fears for books in his information age. The narrator, then, encompasses all of the traits Swift deems unfit for legitimate authorship.

V. Swift's Narrator

Swift establishes his narrator as an aspiring author on Grub Street who wholeheartedly embraces the Modern philosophy. This is a major point of interest, and an unlikely true-to-life combination considering that the Moderns are generally regarded as a group of elite intellectuals, and Grub Street hacks as literary hopefuls with dubious educational backgrounds. As I wrote previously, the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns was quieted in England by 1696, and the British press was substantially deregulated in 1695. Although these cultural phenomena overlapped, they were largely unrelated. The repeal of the Licensing Act effected major social and economic change, while the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns was limited to a comparatively small arena.

The commonality between these events is, of course, knowledge production. Swift takes a doubly conservative stance: knowledge should be produced with consideration to its origins and published under heavy regulation. To fortify this argument, he reduces, caricatures, and conflates the personas of Modern and Hack to fashion an astoundingly foolish narrator who easily devastates the credibility of both institutional byproducts. Swift plays with a string of unbearable writing styles to produce his flexible, many-hued narrator, and one who sufficiently embodies the futurist philosophy of the Moderns *and* the slipshod works of the Grub Street hacks.

VI. Criticism

Since the book's release in 1704, this unconventional narrative technique has prompted countless veins of criticism and speculation. Almost immediately following

publication, a series of “keys” cropped up, one notably written by Edmund Curll, a kind of notorious mogul of unsavory printing houses⁵, and a figure ripe for Swift’s condemnation. Curll revealed Swift as the author of the *Tale* and released a grossly inaccurate explanatory accompaniment. Keys such as Curll’s aimed to demystify the work by unveiling the public personalities parodied by Swift, and clarify obscure references. As previously mentioned, William Wotton, primary target in the *Tale*, wrote an “Answer” meant to scandalize Swift and jeopardize his ambitions in the Church. Wotton unpacks the allegory of the three brothers to expose it for radical, heretical content. Swift, in response, used Wotton’s observations, verbatim, as notes written by the narrator in the fifth edition of the text.

There is a rich and fascinating breadth of historical criticism dedicated to these print wars⁶ and their position in the Scriblerian heritage. I want to emphasize that discussion of the text in Swift’s time is generated by effective use of the vehicles Swift derides and delights in: scholarship and publication. Swift’s tenuous relationship with liberal discourse fortifies the ironic value of the *Tale*. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will limit my use of criticism to analysis of Swift’s unconventional narrative technique and its functional possibilities. Jay Arnold Levine writes in 1966: “The religious allegory is the Critic’s own home-made Bible, and the

⁵ For more on Curll and his tenuous relationship with the Scriblerians, see *Edmund Curll: Bookseller* (2007) by Paul Baines and Pat Rogers.

⁶ The second Oxford edition of *A Tale of a Tub* with introduction and notes by A.C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith provides a useful introduction to the publication history and extensive bibliography for further reading.

digressions are the running commentary upon it.”⁷ He continues: “The allegory peters out... because the Critic’s attention is diverted from an objective, impersonal narrative—from his own Bible—to an assertion of Self.” Here, Levine demonstrates the oft-voiced idea that the *Tale* can be separated into the two factions of “tale” and “digressions” and that the narrator (who he terms capital ‘C’ “Critic”) achieves his “true” Modern identity when he abandons the chief thread for a permanent position on the platform from which he pontificates. Swift’s narrator is often the focal point of criticism, with common characterizations including: “a figure of an author who has lost control of his text and yet is wholly comfortable with this” (Fanning, 662), and a madman, or “a diseased brain” (Coterill, 299). Anne Coterill, author of *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature*, builds on Levine’s argument in 2004:

Swift’s parody formally severs the digression from the parent line of narrative, and the disinherited figure becomes the ‘modern’ story. Once turned loose by Swift to make extended journeys around ever-larger chasms of discontinuity, the digression becomes available to embody voices like that of the distracted son and wounded body... (280)

It is important to note that, here, Coterill treats “digression” and “story” as a “figure.” This alignment is common, where the narrator’s identity is tied to his function as a storyteller. When the narrator’s identity is the focal point of criticism, he is

⁷ See pages 208-210 of "The Design of A Tale of a Tub (With a Digression on a Mad Modern Critic)".

inexorably linked to the style in which he relays information. This means that critics who parse the *Tale* according to “tale” and “digressions” reveal a split-story told by either a split-narrator, a narrator who cannot control his story, or a narrator who cannot speak in his own voice, but only parrot voices he has heard before. All of these possibilities for the narrator are meant to account for an apparent collapse of structure in the *Tale*.

Frederik N. Smith, author of *Language and Reality in Swift's Tale of a Tub* (1979) painstakingly combs the text to glean insights into the origins of Swift's syntax. Smith locates Swift's formal inspiration within the cadences of classical and biblical oratory. He notes a general critical shift from the analysis of Swift's rhetorical devices to a recuperation of Swift's own presence in the narrative voice (a trend that continues in contemporary criticism). Smith characterizes the narrator as a *style* rather than a speaker, writing: “...[I]t is impossible to split the function of the author between a persona who is a modern hack and a wholly detached manipulator of that persona” (4), and: “Swift forces us to recognize two conflicting styles and two conflicting approaches to life, that of the aloof, intellectualized, abstracting persona as against the earthy, sensate, experience-oriented approach that he recommends.” (6). Where Levine writes of one voice that grows increasingly certain, Smith distinguishes *two* primary voices in the text: that of sure, satirical Swift and that of the increasingly *uncertain* Modern. Smith argues, “Swift makes his persona slip continually from balance and periodicity into a loose, absurdly cumulative rhythm that we ought to understand as his way of registering doubt concerning the Modern's proud

categorizations.” (72) Smith credits Swift’s use of this technique to a “fascination with sound as an echo of sense” (83) where the shift in voice “effectively jars our expectations” and “sets up an ironic tension” (87). Smith reads the duality in this text as a means for Swift to express the difficulty of satirical demonstration. While Levine represents the camp of scholars who focus on the identity of the narrator, particularly the degradation of a *stable* identity, Smith focuses on the registers of persuasion effected by a text that mimics instability, especially attuned to the *ear* of the reader.

In the same year that Smith writes, Deborah Linderman suggests that the polyphonic aspect of this text is not the most significant, and shifts the critical lens to ambiguity:

Once the premise has been granted that the reader regularly oscillates between diegetic levels, registers of irony, and tonalities of voice, the idea that a single principle can be used across the board to establish a level of coherence for the text becomes manifestly useless. Perhaps indeed the only level of coherence is the one of ironic oscillation itself.

(“Self-Transforming Ironies in Swift’s *Tale of a Tub*”, 72)

Linderman discourages the pursuit of meaning with so slippery a textual object, opting instead to adapt to its movement. She alleges the *Tale* to be a self-evolving text: Swift bypasses moral prescriptions in his satire because his writing does not always conform to the conventions of that genre, but to its own linguistic developments... (69). Because Swift explodes ironic modes, the most productive

analysis comes with the discovery of Swiftian conventions, which Linderman tracks to their fullest expression. Linderman examines the work, then, for the instances in which it borrows from satirical invention and then subverts it. Her approach deviates from the identification of a *persona* or personas in the text that link it to historical authority. Rather, she connects the *structure* of the text to linguistic authority, so the works becomes an expression of the limitations of language. Carole Fabricant, Swift scholar at UC Riverside, nicely echoes Linderman's sentiment in 1991:

In *A Tale of a Tub* we see what happens when the vagaries of language take over and when links with worldly phenomena are weakened: *weakened*, not destroyed, because even the Tale-teller must use—and abuse—words within external contexts that determine their shape and impact; within the institutions... and the systems of authority that they generate. (“The Battle of the Ancients and (Post) Moderns”, 260)

Both Linderman and Fabricant convey the idea that in order for Swift to satirize effectively, he must work within intelligible bubbles, even if only to burst them. Both scholars advocate a reading of the text that embraces oppositional truths, and considers ambiguous language for its singularity, its multifaceted power, and its immunity to the confinement of meaning-seekers. Michael Seidel, a critic in the same vein, brings up an interesting point in his essay “Crisis, Rhetoric, and Satiric Power” (1988) that neither Linderman or Fabricant completely explore. He writes: ...[S]wift wants to be in a position to reject the ethical and moral bases of modern expression

while reveling in the perversions that accompany it. (180) While Linderman and Fabricant sense frustration in the ironic tension borne of the boundaries of Swift's mode, Seidel perceives joy, a sensibility that I share.

So far I have cited two general camps of scholarship on this text: criticism that identifies and characterizes a narrative *persona*, where sometimes Swift the author is present, and criticism that favors a close examination of Swift's ironic devices, and shies from humanizing the polyphonic narrator(s). As I noted previously, I have excluded historical criticism of this text that points to its possible sources and its many targets. The final thread of criticism that I will detail is that concerning the *Tale's* attention to materiality. Citing the development of print culture in Swift's time, some scholars attribute the self-referential aspect of his text to a greater shift in attitudes of authorship. Sudden accessibility to printing resources changes the face of authorial identity with an onslaught of new, unlikely authors. At the same time, however, the accessibility of printing technology changes the face of the *page* and begets a new type of expression. If the *Tale* poses as a panegyric on the wonders of Modern invention, it is wholeheartedly assisted by its use of devices exclusive to typography. Christopher Fanning writes on this idea⁸:

Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Laurence Sterne were writers who witnessed an unprecedented expansion of print culture, and who took up the philosophical implications of this expansion by engaging

⁸Fanning, Christopher. "Small Particles of Eloquence: Sterne and the Scriblerian Text Author(s)." *Modern Philology* 100.3 (2003): 360-92. *JSTOR*. Web.

with textuality as such... These authors share a materially embodied style that manifests itself in its very medium and includes ongoing commentary on its own form as it proceeds. This double phenomenon of performance and reflection constitutes what I... call “textual presence.” (361)

Fanning’s concept of textual presence directly informs my reading of the *Tale*. Typography contributes to the polyphonic aspect of this text. As Fanning points out, the typographical elements of the work provide a second layer of commentary by manipulating the language, an effect that can be used to bolster or betray the ideas. One of the most fascinating ways that Swift invokes different voices is by the experimental use of typographical devices. Capitals, italics, symbols, spacing, and liberal punctuation all stamp this text with a trademarked visual style that links to *sound*. The typography dictates how the text is to be read aloud. It commands verbal accompaniment to the printed word and begs to be spoken, or often shouted. The careful employment of typographical tools enacts a code between author and reader that requires the text to be *read* as opposed to *heard* for authentic experience. This marks the *Tale* as anachronistic, wholly indicative of the possibilities that emerge for language in an increasingly print oriented culture. Swift adds a visual emphasis to his parody that successfully mimics *performance* and layers its heteroglossia even more thickly.

With this gloss on approaches to the *Tale*, I hope to convey not only its complexity, but also the critical instinct to grasp one element of this text and expose

its irony or explode its multiplicity. To challenge my own inferences, I have rigorously maintained these criticisms while reading. The *Tale*, at the level of its design, its human figure(s), or its very materiality, is indefatigably equivocal, and will nearly *always* read as at least two things at one time. Perhaps Swift elucidates his own methodology when his narrator writes bitterly, "...[N]o thanks to philosophy; whose peculiar talent lies in fixing tropes and allegories to the *letter*, and refining what is literal into figure and mystery." (128) Here is a shining example where the narrator condemns his own tactic. The allegory of the three brothers, reportedly pieced together from true accounts by the narrator, is the most *literal* element of the text, while his digressions, offered as candid commentary on his contemporaries, are fictive and utterly absurd. So while Swift states plainly what he does, that is, literalizes metaphors and encodes the everyday in abstraction, he couches his method in a statement by the narrator who avows *never* to employ such a tactic.

VII. Structure and Parody

So much criticism of the *Tale* works to account for its incoherence, and the *Tale*'s flexibility allows many plausible hypotheses. In his book *Menippean Satire Reconsidered: From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, Howard D. Weinbrot discusses the polyphonic effect used by Swift as hallmark of satire, a well-established tactic used to disrupt the illusion of central authority. The invocation of multiple periods, genres, or voices confuses an orthodox, progressive worldview and thereby resists it. He writes on the *Tale*:

We sense our attitudes toward the Modern threat changing as we hear less of confident controlling Swift and more of angry controlled Swift replaced by the Moderns. Toward the end of *A Tale* the two worlds of abused religion and abused learning blend. Modern ambition, schism, historical disconnection, abuse of the past, and danger to the secular and spiritual states speak with one increasingly powerful voice. (119)

Weinbrot describes the experience of reading the *Tale* in terms of *listening* rather than reading, *speaking* rather than writing. He senses *Swift's* voice rather than the author or narrator. This point is contentious because Swift voices, presumably, everything that is *not* said, and this is the most difficult aspect of working in satire: the reader analyzes the text on the premise that the words are untrue. Satire requires a secondary analytical step in which meaning must be *composed* by the reader rather than consumed. In the case of the *Tale*, Swift poses as representative of several injured institutions, and while I agree with Weinbrot that these representations grow increasingly erratic and eventually fuse, I cannot agree that a distinctive, powerful voice overwhelms the text by the end.

I am drawn instead to the idea of many voices speaking in turn, eventually speaking out of turn – a cast of chattering characters that come to the crescendo of argument and then freeze in a disturbing tableaux. I mentioned that this text is sometimes depicted as a descent into madness, but madness becomes something different if the reader is willing to release a narrator from the contract of singular identity. The inner monologue of a writer who crumbles under cultural pressure

becomes a one-man show and a riveting performance. Or, the narrator is not a narrator at all, but a *methodology* with no human constitution.

Weinbrot offers a valuable insight into the satirical tradition that Swift draws from:

Swift and the Ancients regarded institutions as closely related. An attack upon one, like the established church, was implicitly an attack upon the other, like the state that the church supported. In its extreme form, no bishop, no king... He paralleled the received ceremonies of Anglican worship and the received wisdom regarding classical texts. He who rejected the one was likely to reject the other. In its extreme form, no bishop, no king, no Homer. (120)

Swift's allegory of the three brothers is an obvious attack on the established church, but with the digressions, Swift clearly attacks the institutions of government and learning as well. Why does Swift use different forms to criticize different institutions? For Swift, satirizing the Church takes the form of legend, but he is content to lampoon learning and government with rambling commentary. For Weinbrot's argument to persuade, we might have the tale of the three brothers on its own, without the digressions. It is a clear satire of the church and its factions that sees no resolution and implicitly blames a corrupt societal framework for the corruption of religion. The digressions, however, provide the crucial disturbances that detach Swift's text from the category of satire. The reader is repeatedly plucked from ancient legend to the harried present of Grub Street, and we have no reliable guide between modes. This

anti-mimetic technique serves to reflect the instability that Swift perceives in his country.

Swift uses elements of satire *and* parody to bring his country into close focus. Bakhtin suggests that in order for the absurdity of an object to register, there must be a standard version of the object to draw from. He writes that parody reframes the familiar by exaggeration:

Each separate element in... parodic dialogue, scenes from everyday life, bucolic humor, etc.—is presented as if it were a fragment of some kind of unified whole. I imagine this whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch... the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal. (59-60)

It is almost as if Bakhtin comments on the *Tale*, with the glaring exception that Swift uses hackneyed language in unconventional ways to prove the dominant discourse as a *medium* for renewal. Swift laboriously illustrates that the available tools are sufficient and the *users* of the tools are inadequate. Bakhtin's idea that each element of the parody acts *independently* to bring some aspect of culture under the microscope nicely informs Swift's work. The *Tale* does not offer coherency, but rather a dish of

societal samples carefully selected for augmentation and scrutiny at a discomfiting nearness.

This parodic method makes visible the conventions of language that seem “natural.” A traditional narrative arc, if “aging, dying,” and “ripe for change” will beget a traditional interaction with the text, an instructional pattern drawn by the author and followed by the reader. The *Tale* uses a powerful stop-and-start technique to disallow cooperation between author and reader. The result is the sense of lost control. When the narrator loses his place (or abandons it) repeatedly, the chief thread is dropped, and the act of story fashioning becomes visible. By continually gesturing towards the creative and consumption process of writing and reading, Swift unveils it, and asks us to evaluate the ugly infrastructure, to scrutinize the bare mechanics.

The narrator of the text has precisely the opposite intention. He frequently muses on the beauty of artifice, and condemns the debunking act in his digression on madness:

How fade and insipid do all objects accost us, that are not conveyed in the vehicle of *delusion*? How shrunk is every thing, as it appears in the glass of nature? so, that if it were not for the assistance of artificial *mediums*, false lights, refracted angles, varnish, and tinsel; there would be a mighty level in the felicity and enjoyments of mortal men. If this were seriously considered by the world, as I have a certain reason to suspect it hardly will; men would no longer reckon among their high points of wisdom, the art of exposing weak sides, and publishing

infirmities; an employment in my opinion, neither better nor worse than that of *unmasking*, which, I think, has never been allowed fair usage, either in the *world* or the *play-house*. (113-114)

Here, Swift imitates the style of a pseudo-intellectual who criticizes the institution of criticism. This passage works on several parodic levels. Swift's goal is to unmask, but here, he reviles the act of unmasking. He says the opposite of what he means. Swift's *narrator* advocates the preservation of delusion, but, with endless addresses to the reader, musings on the writing process while writing, and interruptions to his own story, he does nothing to preserve the delusion of his own fiction.

Swift does not offer a seamless work of invisible construction, he offers a work that feels *mid*-construction: incomplete and rife with contradiction. The text begs criticism, imitates criticism, and explicitly condemns criticism. Swift paints critics in a wildly unfavorable light. He characterizes the "true" critic as "a discoverer and collector of writers faults" (58) who descends from "a race of men, who delighted to nibble at the superfluties..." (59). So why does Swift disparage the act of criticizing literary works and then offer a "sloppy" piece of writing that implores criticism? It is because the *Tale*, with the level of engagement it demands from its readers, does more to ask us to examine the structures to which we are accustomed than to examine the text itself. In a story where the chief thread cannot be followed because it does not adhere to a familiar structure, the reader might be nudged to consider the underpinnings of *other* familiar structures. This idea is supported by Weinbrot's point about Menippean satire, that an attack on one institution is an

implicit attack on another. The “broken” structure of *A Tale of a Tub* replicates the broken structures of learning, government, and religion. The *Tale* disorients its reader to beg his or her reassessment of *all* structures so familiar that they are no longer visible.

VIII. An Exposition on Character

In the argument that precedes the *Tale* and the *Battle*, Swift describes the two pieces as “Treatises writ by the same Author, most of them mentioned in the following Discourses; which will be speedily published.” He then lists eleven “discourses” meant to characterize the works that follow. An insurmountable task considering the breadth of these works and their resistance to straightforwardness, this is the first indication that the *Tale* will be funny. Though insufficient, this preliminary summation is not entirely misleading. With these opening discourses, Swift immediately links textuality and orality. The discourses include “A general History of Ears” and “A Critical Essay upon the Art of Canting, Philosophically, Physically, and Musically Considered.” Though silly, these anterior descriptions cue us to the importance of voice in the work, and set up a dichotomy between speaking and listening, or, for Swift, pontificating and listening badly. Pontificating and listening badly are Swift’s fundamental accusations against his contemporaries.

Swift uses the polyphonic approach to imitate the cacophony of *debate* – debate on Christianity, governing practice, and scholarship – and to predict the dissolution of central authority. The *Tale* resounds with futility: the victor in an argument is often the *loudest* voice, and the voices of powerful men that ring out on

either side of a conflict will never ring in harmony. Swift does not offer a solution, only viciously echoes an impasse. Where he *could* offer a clear voice of true morality, he chooses instead to reproduce the raucous hive where the queen bee is absent. The unspoken proclamation is that no single technology can rescue a state so deeply steeped in corruption. To elegantly reiterate the impossibility of harmonization between institutions, Swift works for sound on the page, but despite a distinctive speech-like quality, the text remains silent. Swift strives for *noisiness* in a soundless object. The ensuing chaos implies that noisiness is unfit for print. The text is a deliberate act of ineffectuality.

The very first of the discourses, and our introduction to the work, is, “A *Character* of the present Set of Wits in this Island” (emphasis mine). This depiction offers a useful model for thinking about the text, and informs my small intervention to relay the complexity of this text. At the time Swift is writing, “character” takes on several primary definitions, notably tied to printing and materiality (an association perhaps unfamiliar to a contemporary reader). As per the OED, “character” is “A distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise made on a surface; a brand, stamp” or “Any emblem or material representation; a symbolic expression, an outward sign.” It is also, “A member of a set of symbols used in writing or printing to represent linguistic elements...” At the time of the *Tale*’s publication, “character” could refer to “A particular person's style of handwriting...” *and* “A general kind or style of print, handwriting, or inscribing letters and symbols; a typeface, a script.” Of course, the word additionally refers to a distinctive feature of a person or thing, with

special attention to morality. This definition is relatively new in the late seventeenth century, however. “Character” in reference to one’s *general* personality is not yet in common use, whereas “character” in reference to one’s defining *physical* features *is* in common use.

If the *Tale* is “A Character” in terms of a stamp, or a mark engraved in a surface, this implies a sense of longevity that directly contradicts the “present Set of Wits” when considered in the greater context of the work. As previously noted, Swift continually expresses a fear of proliferation and correlates the increase in printed works with a fragility of their expression. The narrator proclaims that Modern works, due to rapid production, are discarded before being given the chance to appreciate. In his “Epistle Dedicatory to His Royal Highness Prince Posterity” he describes the endangerment of printed works in the Modern age:

To affirm that our age is altogether unlearned and devoid of writers in any kind, seems to be an Assertion so bold and so false, that I have been sometime thinking, the contrary may almost be proved by uncontroulable Demonstration. It is true, indeed, that although their numbers be vast and their productions numerous in proportion, yet are they hurried so hastily off the scene that they escape our memory and delude our sight. (14)

The narrator will continue to cite anonymity as the greatest threat to an author in the age of mass print. The *Tale*, as exemplary of the Modern book, should risk this instant death, but by establishing it as a “character,” Swift gestures to the desire for

permanence that spurs the authorial impulse. The material overtones carried by “character” in Swift’s time stand against the notion of texts as “vapors” that Swift will return to time and again. This engages the constant tension that will be felt by the reader between Swift himself, who presumably hopes to write a powerful text, and the naïve, Modern narrator who fears his text will be supplanted by a torrent of clone texts. In the same “Epistle Dedicatory” the narrator bemoans the *literal* ephemerality of the Modern book. With so many printed works in circulation, he describes the unfortunate phenomenon of vanishing:

When I first thought of this address, I had prepared a copious list of *titles* to present *Your Highness* as an undisputed argument for what I affirm. The originals were posted fresh upon all gates and corners of streets; but returning in a very few hours to take a review, they were all torn down and fresh ones in their places. I enquired after them among readers and booksellers, but I enquired in vain; *the memorial of them was lost among men, their place was no more to be found*; and I was laughed to scorn for a *clown* and a *pedant*, devoid of all taste and refinement, little versed in the course of *present* affairs, and that knew nothing of what had passed in the best companies of court and town.

(14)

The “argument” is that Modern books are of substantial value, they simply do not have the opportunity to resonate with their readers. With trend cycles in hyper-acceleration, it is impossible to get an accurate reading of the cultural temperature.

However, the narrator contends that the *Tale* is indispensable to mankind and thereby immune to this vaporization.

If the narrator's culture changes at the rate he alleges, there is no way for the *Tale* to be an emblem or material representation of the "present Set of Wits in this island." However, using the classification of "character" grants the work a *sense* of materiality that is crucial during the lapse of the Licensing Act when *actual* materiality no longer validates the quality of a book's contents. Remember that Swift characterizes the growing information system as a lawless deluge of paltry, pirated texts, where flurries of printed material clamor for popular consumption. The central authority on "good" language dissolves, and authority is vested in a diverse population of avid media consumers. Books, once products of painstaking efforts, yield to confectionary fiction. Government sanctioned newspapers bend to quickly scribbled pamphlets by the politically informed... or uninformed. The *Tale*, in its utter fragmentation, is meant to offer a terrifying glimpse into the future of literature if the press is not controlled.

For real life readers with a book in hand, the emphasis on the book's materiality is nonsensical, but for Swift's narrator, printed words are as immaterial spoken ones. They actually disappear into thin air. The narrator continues in the "Epistle Dedicatory" to describe the grim fate of books rendered passé:

But your *Governour*, perhaps, may still insist, and put the question; what is then become of those immense bales of paper, which must needs have been employed in such numbers of books? Can these also

be wholly annihilate, and so of a sudden as I pretend? What shall I say in return of so invidious an objection? It ill befits the distance between *Your Highness* and me, to send you for ocular conviction to a *jakes* or an *oven*; to the windows of a *bawdy-house*, or to a sordid *lanthorn*.

Books, like men their authors, have no more than one way of coming into the world, but there are ten thousand to go out of it and return no more. (14-15)

Here, the narrator likens Grub Street to a literary graveyard, or a public toilet. Grub Street sees the birth of “immense bales of paper,” but also their untimely deaths, and books enjoy no afterlife. More than a bale of paper, the narrator labels the *Tale* as a character: a physical and symbolic marker of his time, perhaps as an appeal to endurance. At the level of the narrator, this is the gesture of an author seeking to bolster his or her reputation. In a world of vanishing books and lookalike treatises, *this* text is the one that memorably encapsulates the present age, and *this* text will grant authorial legacy. At the level of Swift, deeming his book “A Character of the Present Set of Wits in this Island” is a startlingly plain indication of what he will do, that is, paint a ridiculous portrait of his contemporaries.

Then we come to the equally plausible idea of “character” as a member of a set of symbols. If we think of the *Tale* in this way, bearing in mind the idea that Modern texts are extinguished before they are properly considered, then the *Tale* is an original element in a class of other original elements. A is not like B is not like C and so on. Though this seems like an unlikely (and generous) reading of “A Character of

the Present Set of Wits in this Island,” it allows for the possibility, even the satiric possibility, that many brilliant and original Modern works go unnoticed, and the *Tale* is simply one of them, not representative of them.

Additionally, we have the possibility of “character” as either a distinctive handwriting or a typeface. This definition is of particular interest because it suggests that printed books strip the author of some individuality. “Character” as distinguishable handwriting is tied to a human individual and implies unique style along with recognition on the part of the reader. With mass print and the standardization of type, this aspect of the author’s person is lost, perhaps adding *more* significance to authorial voice.

In Swift’s time it was not uncommon for authors to pay special attention to typeface and develop a typographical style. This maintains at least a semi-original material style using the configurations of print technology. The *Tale* is a shining example of such experimentation. Swift never allows the reader to forget the mechanic processes that produce the text in hand. Dustin Griffin writes on this extensively⁹:

Like no text before 1700, *Tale of a Tub* winks at, nudges, and otherwise manipulates its reader by means of a battery of typographical devices. The elaborate title page, the liberal use of italics and CAPITALS, shoulder notes and footnotes, asterisks and daggers,

⁹ Griffin, Dustin. "Interpretation and Power: Swift's Tale of a Tub." *The Eighteenth Century* 34.2 (1993): 151-68. *JSTOR*. Web.

even the hiatuses—all of these serve as ways of pointing the way, of drawing the reader’s attention, or of stimulating her curiosity, in short, of interpreting, in a way that is only made possible by the pressman’s type. (159)

By considering the *Tale* a typographical character, it becomes a material representation of the society that produces it. In Swift’s case this representation, as Griffin points out, resists uniformity by all possible means. It also gestures to and exploits its generative infrastructure. Perhaps, in its stubborn defiance of neatness that should distinguish print from handwriting, it even abuses its creator. I want to stress that by using the word “character,” Swift offers the piece as *either* a one-of-a-kind book, or simply a kind of book, and this paradox embodies the work as a whole.

Finally, we come to the idea of character in terms of *moral* character, which underscores the *Tale* as a dissertation on the corruptions of Christianity, the Commonwealth, and all systems of learning in England. To evaluate the text for its *morality* is to mine it for humanistic potential. By deeming the text a character in the moral sense, Swift preempts his use of “books like men” to draw a strong correlation between texts and their authors. If the text itself is a “character” or *has* “character” it is not only a material representation of its surrounding culture, but also an ethical representation of that culture, and in the case of the *Tale*, *many* ethical representations. “A Character on the present Set of Wits in this Island” adequately introduces the text as one character that aspires to encompass many characters, and a text that aspires to transcend its own textuality with sound.

“Character” as a member of a given fiction *was* in use during Swift’s time, though more often in regards to drama than works of prose. Still, this definition reinforces the impossibility of the text as a human figure. Books are in fact *not* like men in the sense that their representation is fixed and their interpretation often at the discernment of an unknown reader. If a text does contain an ethical code, it will always remain uncertain. This idea plays out nicely with the *Tale* especially when the many subsequent keys and versions are considered. The *Tale* is a puzzling character that to this day begs classification under a set of obvious moral values, and resists this classification.

If “character” is read as “symbol” it means that the “*Set of Wits*” (my emphasis) is reduced to a single representation: a rhetorical fallacy that Swift will criticize repeatedly by committing repeatedly. In a rare moment of what feels like sincerity, he writes: “For, what man in the natural state, or course of thinking, did ever conceive it in his power, to reduce the notions of all mankind, exactly to the same length, and breadth, and height of his own? Yet this is the first humble and civil design of all innovators in the empire of reason.” (110) Of course, if we apply this logic to the text as a product of the “empire of reason,” we have a text that is utterly reductionist, and therefore utterly ridiculous. As readers who have made it beyond the hundredth page of this text, we are asked, then, to consider the value of ridiculousness, or at least ridicule. The *Tale* cannot be an *accurate* representation of the “Set of Wits in this Island”, because one cannot be many. But a showcase of many voices filtered through Swift’s singular contempt can still offer valuable

representation. These parodies, hyperbolic and satirical, achieve Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Swift's representation of a "set" in one treatise by one author offers the opportunity for logical reconsideration by exploding logical fallacy. So while Swift viciously attacks the use of generalization by generalizing, or by the reduction of a whole set of wits to a single character, it only works to fortify his piece.

Swift poses as the consummate Modern who speaks for all Moderns, and the consummate Hack who speaks for all Hacks. The inconsistency of voice in this text, the constant shifting of registers, gestures to the impossibility of his task. The chaotic effects of polyphonic technique suggest that a single character cannot convey a set of wits and also retain structural integrity or stable identity. It is important to emphasize that Swift not only invokes multiple voices, but borrowed voices. As previously mentioned, the Modern narrator employs age-old maxims, Latin phrases, and classical mythology to establish his authority. This is Swift's way of demonstrating the Moderns' failure to create original works. Any attempts at literary ingenuity are thwarted by intellectual debt to the Ancients. The Moderns cannot be free from the conventions of language and still be intelligible. The Modern identity is not new and singular, but inherited and fragmented.

Anne Coterill writes on this aspect of the Modern/Hack identity in *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature*: "The voice of the Hack ventriloquizes the digression as a 'modern' state of disconnection from physical, literary, or spiritual fathers that makes orderly linear narrative no longer possible." (297) Coterill supports the notion that the narrator of the chief thread is connected to a literary tradition that

makes the narrative intelligible, while the narrator of the digressions is rootless and therefore unintelligible. She describes a kind of interception, where the Modern/Hack holds the author of the chief thread hostage, and subverts his mission. Cotterill's argument pits two voices against one another, and does not account for their intermingling or the invocation of *additional* voices.

It might be useful to view the text as a series of characters, a "Set of Wits," intended to give an *impression* of Swift's present. An impression does not imply total accuracy, but a hollow reflection. The text as impression also detracts from the significance of the narrator's persona, and, like character, opens the possibility for the text as an imitation, a symbolic mark, or a sensibility. In the foreword to my edition, Robert Folkenflik writes:

Swift's narrative strategy in the *Tale* has been misunderstood partly because we think in terms of novelistic characters. He himself says that in the work he 'personates' various figures, that is he parodies them closely... What holds this satire together is the Grub Street hack-pendant-virtuoso who narrates it; but he may shift at any moment through Swift's personations into one or another particular favored target. (x)

Swift calls his treatise a "Character" and brings us a *character(s)* – a singular expression of plurality. "A Character on the Present Set of Wits in this Island" as a discourse to summarize the *Tale* is Swift's first exercise to demonstrate the evasiveness of essence, or the insufficiency of the literary mode to encapsulate the

properties of culture. I view the remainder of the text as a repetition of this exercise, where Swift tests his hypothesis in different voices.

IX. Conclusion

To enhance my contention that the *Tale* forms an impression, I will close with a note on clothes. When Swift begins the story of the three brothers, he provides a pseudo-historical background of their ancient universe so that we can fully appreciate the importance of the coats they inherit. He writes a kind of creation story, where, if we follow the allegory, we get a pre-Christian explanation for the formation of their beliefs. The religion of the idol-worshipping ancestors of the three brothers is rooted in the idea that the universe comprises a “large *suit of cloaths*”. (45) According to this system, people are no more than micro-sets of clothes that duplicate the larger universal structure.

A person’s identity, then, is equated to their clothes: “If one of them [humans] be trimmed up with a gold chain, and a red gown, and a white rod, and a great horse, is it called a *Lord Mayor*; if certain ermines and furs be placed in a certain position, we stile them a judge...” (46). The narrator explains that titles are not earned by birth or merit, but by dress. Clothes so acutely determine character in this system that, “the outward dress must needs be the soul” (46).

It is for this reason that the three brothers feel pressured to alter their coats despite their father’s forbiddance. Unable to keep up with present fashions if they leave the coats intact, their identity is at stake. They risk potentially disastrous *misidentification* and certain ridicule. Peter, Martin, and Jack are only as much as

their clothing reveals about them. Their opportunities for power are expressly dictated by their outerwear. Of course, Swift points to *his* society's obsession with appearance. With the allegory, he faults the high cultural value of material wealth and the confusion of beauty with goodness. He offers a world where fashion is not condemned for its artifice, but solely enjoyed, and so he demonstrates the dangers of conflating exteriority and interiority.

In Swift's story, the characters engage a sartorial dogma where morality is measured in embroidery, lace, and fringe. The brothers' incessant desire to stay current frames the problem of the text as a whole. No better than the Moderns who leap coltishly from trend to trend in an effort to stay ahead of the future, the brothers cannot substantiate their misinterpretation of the will. No better than the bales of paper that litter Grub Street, the brothers cannot acquire a true, grounded identity. The Moderns, when detached from the Ancients, have no lexicon for persuasion, the printed word carries no value when unlicensed, and the brothers, once they reject the demand of their father's will, have no means for singular identity and dissolve their fraternal bond.

At the risk of stretching it, I want to extend the metaphor of the suit of clothes to the text. If an author's text is his or her set of clothes, the text offers a superficial authorial identity to readers and critics. This is especially pertinent for Swift, whose career was perhaps injured by the *Tale* once he was revealed by Curll to be the author and accused by Wotton of sacrilege. The *Tale*, however, makes every possible attempt to scream "The clothes do not make the man!" while it simultaneously

demonstrates that a material presentation, like clothes, or a book, can offer a valid representation of human character. I have attempted to show Swift's use of anti-mimetic, polyphonic methodology as a powerful means of cultural representation that speaks to the very impossibility of cultural representation, for all its complexity and malleability.

Midway through the story, the narrator describes the material evolution of the brothers' coats, and it functions analogously to the *Tale*:

I ought in method, to have informed the reader about fifty pages ago, of a fancy *Lord Peter* took, and infused his brothers, to wear on their coats whatever trimmings came up in fashion; never pulling off any, as they went out of the mode, but keeping on all together; which amounted in time to a medley, the most antick you can possible conceive; and this to a degree, that upon the time of their falling out, there was hardly a thread of the original coat to be seen, but an infinite quantity of *lace*, and *ribbands*, and *fringe*, and *embroidery*, and *points*... (85)

Just as the brothers compile their identities with infinitely layered coats that bear the weight of every passing trend, Swift's text is an assemblage of imitations that do not belong to him, are not inherent to his person, but are *curated* according to his singular placement in his own history.

One of the many copy-and-paste instances in this text comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, where Horace cites instruction and diversion as the highest poetic aim.

The narrator claims this idea as his own, and offers his own take:

I do affirm that, having carefully cut up human nature, I have found a very strange, new, and important discovery: that the public good of mankind is performed by two ways - instruction and diversion. And I have further proved my said several readings... that, as mankind is now disposed, he receives much greater advantage by being diverted than instructed... whereas, in the present universal empire of wit and learning, there seems but little matter left for instruction. However, in compliance with a lesson of great age and authority, I have attempted carrying the point in all its heights, and accordingly throughout this divine treatise have skilfully kneaded up both together with a layer of *utile* and a layer of *dulce*. (78)

This is my final iteration of the *Tale*'s endeavor to be (at least) two things at once. Of course the *Tale* diverts and instructs. The *Tale* is not only the proverbial tub that distracts and delights the reading public, but *A Tale of a Tub*. It is not "the" tale of "the" tub, as *The Battle of the Books* denotes "the" specific event it describes. It is a tale primed for multiple applications and educational purpose. It is not "the" original tale, but a tale, that embeds the qualities of countless tales that precede it. Like Bakhtin's hopes for the novel, the *Tale* forms "a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality." (61) Perhaps a commonality between genre busting, anti-mimetic texts is that they offer hypotheses *for* rather than answers *to* the culture that produces them. The *Tale* parades as a work in progress; it delights in its

incompletion and fights for life in a world where books are quickly subjected to death. To be alive, for this book, means that it must maintain its character: polyphonic, multi-dimensional, contradictory, unfinished, and most significantly: inscrutable.

But, fashions perpetually altering in that age, the scholastic brother grew weary of searching further evasion, and solving everlasting contradictions. Resolved therefore at all hazards to comply with the modes of the world, they concerted matters together, and agreed unanimously, to lock up their father's will in a strong-box... and trouble themselves no further to examine it, but only refer to its authority whenever they thought fit. (52)

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