

interpretation

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interpretation

Volume 15 numbers 2 & 3

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Credulity and Curiosity in *A Tale of a Tub*

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I wish to suggest a new interpretation of *A Tale of a Tub*. My starting point will be the central crux of "A Digression on Madness," where Swift seems to formulate the theme of the *Tale* in the most general terms¹. Interpretation of these two paragraphs is problematic because they seem to contain a double contradiction. In the first, a defense of the "common forms" as the rational alternative to "Cant and Vision" merges into a seeming acceptance of the fact that "what is generally understood by *Happiness* is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived," and a consequent rejection of "The Art of exposing weak Sides, and publishing Infirmities; an Employment neither better nor worse than that of *Unmasking*. . . ." In the second, the criticism of the exposé of "weak sides" is elaborated on, while conversely, there is praise for the philosopher who "can find out an Art to sodder and patch up the Flaws and Imperfections of Nature." However, all this is again contradicted in the—surely ironic—conclusion to the two paragraphs, where he who can "enjoy the Fruits of this noble Art" (of "soddering" and "patching") is said to have reached the "sublime and refined Point of Felicity, called, *the Possession of being well Deceived*; the Serene Peaceful State of being a Fool among Knaves."² Moreover, many critics feel that Swift's own moral realism is alluded to in the images of the "stripped beau" and the "flayed woman," which induces them to take the attack on "curiosity" ironically.

These details effectively refute those who find a straightforward argument for "credulity" or "curiosity" in these paragraphs.³ An alternative possibility—that Swift's satire is purely negative or a mere "register of furiously conflicting tensions," which points to no final meaning⁴—can only be admitted if there is no evidence that Swift has concealed an answer to his riddle in the *Tale*. I believe that there is a solution which takes full account of the starkness of Swift's dilemma: to unmask is deeply antisocial, but to content oneself with the play is foolish. It is fudging the issue to settle for a simple compromise such as "Swift commends but does not idolize intellectual curiosity,"⁵ for the limits which

1. *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), ed. Nichol Smith & Guthkelch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 171–74.

2. Leavis, "The Irony of Swift" in *Swift*, ed. E. Tuveson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964.)

3. See for instance, D. Donoghue, *Jonathan Swift—A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 7–8, 55–57; and R. Elliott, "A Tale of a Tub: an Essay in Problems of Structure," *PMLA*, 66 (1951), 441–55.

4. R. Adams, *Strains of Discord* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1958), p. 160.

5. P. Reilly, *Jonathan Swift, The Brave Desponder* (Manchester Univ. Press, 1982), p. 167.

must be set on enquiries could only be established by enquiries which themselves venture beyond the limits they set. Swift's riddle demands a completely different sort of answer. The biggest clue is the description of the "Life in the common Forms": a man who lives such a life has no "Thought of subduing Multitudes to his own *Power*, his *Reasons* or his *Visions*; and the more he shapes his Understanding by the Pattern of Human Learning, the less he is inclined to form Parties after his particular Notions; because that instructs him in his private Infirmities, as well as in the stubborn Ignorance of the People."

My suggestion is that these lines reveal Swift's subject to be, not simply the desirability of enquiry, but also the desirability of *communicating* the results of one's enquiries. Swift does not say that the "Pattern of Human Learning" discourages the man who "shapes his understanding" by it from *forming* "particular Notions" which are potentially in conflict with the "common Forms," but rather that it disinclines him from "*forming Parties*" after these "Notions." Similarly, the "Art of exposing weak Sides, and publishing Infirmities" seems to refer to the dissemination of insights into the depths rather than the process of arriving at them in the first place. To "unmask" is not to realize the falsity of the play but to *publicize* that realization. Swift also distinguishes carefully between the philosopher who "patches up the Flaws of Nature" and the man who "enjoy[s] the Fruits of this noble Art." The former is not himself deluded but encourages delusion in others. Moreover, the "curious" philosopher is criticized because he "enters into the Depth of Things, and *then comes gravely back with Information and Discoveries that in the inside they [the Depths] are good for nothing*" (my italics). This, I would suggest, is in harmony with the "Digression" as a whole, which culminates in an assault on the modern rhetoric of enlightenment—"Cartesius reckoned to see before he died, the Sentiments of all Philosophers, like so many lesser Stars in his *Romantick* System, rapt and drawn within his own *Vortex*"—and in a warning which concerns the expression of thought rather than the thought itself: ". . . it is a fatal Miscarriage, so ill to order Affairs, as to pass for a *Fool* in one Company, when in another you might be treated as a *Philosopher*" (*Tale*, pp. 167–68).

My suggestion is that those critics are right who find an echo of Swift's own moral realism in the curious philosopher's probing of the depths, but that his approval of such enquiries is perfectly consistent with his disapproval of a general "unmasking." This is because Swift makes a radical distinction between the few who enjoy enquiring into the depths and the many, whose predominant passion is not "curiosity." This distinction first comes to light in the account of the man who "passes his Life in the common Forms." His "Notions" resemble the "discoveries" of the "curious philosopher" in that they are both unpleasant in a sense—"private Infirmities"—and difficult to promulgate, unlike "a strong Delusion," which always "operates from *without*, as vigorously as from *within*." The difference between such a man and the "curious philosopher" is not inward, as at first appears, but outward: "the 'Understanding' of such a man" has been

“shaped by the Pattern of Human Learning,” which informs him that it is unwise to come “gravely back with Informations” concerning the worthlessness of the depths. This is pertinent because he is also said to be in a “State of Serenity,” which indicates that the “outside” is not “infinitely preferable to the *In*” for everyone.

There are unobtrusive qualifications in the argument as it progresses: we are told that “what is generally understood by *Happiness*” is “*a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived*”; but this may constitute a criticism of that “general understanding” and imply that there is another less popular definition. There is also evidence that the persona is repelled by the depths, not because they are inherently repulsive, but because he himself pursues “what is generally understood by *Happiness*.” He is, I would suggest, naturally disposed to be “credulous” rather than “curious,” like those who propagate and believe “Cant and Vision.” His experiments imitate those of the “curious” philosopher but are not embarked on out of curiosity. Rather, they are undertaken as a rather wearisome task, “in order to save the Charges of all such expensive Anatomy for the Time to come,” when he is already convinced that such enquiries “pervert Nature.” The persona is to be taken seriously as a spokesman for the majority of men, but not for the “curious” few, which explains why critics find both a seriousness in Swift’s demonstration that most men are disposed to relish delusions and an irony in his proof that happiness must be based on delusions.

However, this merely seems to raise the same problem in a different form—the “curious” man who cannot communicate his discoveries is as much a “Fool among Knaves” as those who are taken in by every “strong Delusion.” The argument against “unmasking” ignores the fact—which the *Tale* amply demonstrates—that the deluded fanatic is politically dangerous and must be actively resisted. However, the fact that the “curious” cannot reveal the truth does not necessarily leave them at the mercy of the “credulous.” There are still the opinions Swift calls the “common Forms,” which, as we have seen, are no closer to the “depths” than the “Cant and Vision” of the fanatic; but which at least conserve order, if only because they are widespread and traditional. It is open to the “curious” man to defend these vigorously even though he himself recognizes their falsity. I would suggest that the true conclusion of Swift’s argument is provided by the persona when he mentions the belief that Brutus “only personated the *Fool* and *Madman*, for the Good of the Publick” (*Tale*, p. 175).

The difficulty here is that Swift himself must be numbered among the “unmaskers” whom he criticizes, if, as I have argued, the “common Forms” are here revealed to be no less delusory than the “Cant” of the fanatic. I believe that the complex form of the digression is designed to avoid this difficulty. To “unmask” is to destroy the delusions of those who define happiness according to the “general understanding” as “*a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived*.” If a way could be found to address only the “curious,” then the falsity of the “Forms” could be freely admitted. The obscurity of the digression allows Swift to address

his remarks on the need to defend the “Forms” only to those who are disposed to skepticism about those “Forms” in the first place, for only these are likely to be “curious” readers who will puzzle over the problems set by the digression until they penetrate to some of its secrets. Those who “cream off Nature” on the other hand, will also stick to the witty surface of the *Tale*, “leaving the Sower and the Dregs, for Philosophy and Reason to lap up.”

Swift later acknowledges that “curiosity” is the “Handle” by which he hopes to gain “a firm Hold upon [his] gentle Readers” (*Tale*, p. 203); while the distinction between the superficial and the enquiring reader is stressed in the next section of the *Tale*, where the persona discusses the effects that the “Digression on Madness” is likely to have on various readers:

Readers may be divided into three Classes, the *Superficial*, the *Ignorant*, and the *Learned*: And I have with much Felicity fitted my Pen to the Genius and Advantage of each. The *Superficial* Reader will be strangely provoked to *Laughter*. . . the *Ignorant* Reader (between whom and the former the Distinction is extremely nice) will find himself disposed to *Stare*; which is an Admirable Remedy for ill Eyes, serves to raise and enliven the Spirits, and wonderfully helps Perspiration. But the Reader truly *Learned*, chiefly for whose Benefit I wake, when others sleep . . . will here find sufficient Matter to employ his Speculations for the rest of his Life (*Tale*, pp. 184–85).

I believe we should see in this more than a satire on esotericism. Swift implies that his text quite deliberately distinguishes between readers and allows only a few a sight of its depths. Those who desire only entertainment are not encouraged to understand the *Tale*. They are not inclined to “stare” or “perspire,” which are the outward signs of a fertile bafflement, which leads the “ignorant” reader to puzzle over the text. The dichotomy of “ignorant” and “superficial” corresponds to that of the “curious” and the “credulous.”

The difficulties of the crux arise because Swift is addressing contradictory teachings to those who “laugh” and those who “stare.” The “common Forms” first come to light as the rational alternative to “credulous” delusions. Accustomed as they are to reading the persona’s words ironically, “superficial” readers are unlikely to see that the attack on “unmasking” is serious. They will not recognize that belief in the “common Forms” is incompatible with “curious” enquiries into the depths. If the criticism of the “cutting, opening” reason is taken seriously, it will teach a salutary lesson. It is not made evident that the “Life in the common Forms” of those who “shape their Understanding by the Pattern of Human Learning” is primarily a refraining from “unmasking.” Leavis’s puzzled recognition that the criticism of “unmasking” and “curiosity” is not simply ironic (see above) is the reaction Swift planned only for his “curious” readers. The puzzlement may give way to “learning” if it is sufficiently intense—this, I believe, is what Swift meant by describing staring as “an admirable Remedy for ill Eyes.” As I have indicated, the next step is to find in the criticism of “un-

masking,” not an attack on philosophical enquiry itself, but on those who communicate the results of those enquiries indiscriminately. Finally, Swift’s advice is that we must not merely conceal certain depths but actively defend certain surfaces, “personating the Fool for the Good of the Public.”⁶

One problem remains: if the conclusion of Swift’s argument is that the “common Forms” must be supported, why does Swift bother to present this argument, even on a submerged level? Why did he not simply put into practice the conclusions which he had arrived at without endangering the “common Forms” by covertly admitting their delusory character? Clearly, one answer follows from the view that the search for knowledge brings happiness, at least to a few: Swift would wish to encourage the “curiosity” of some of his readers purely for its own sake. However, there is also a practical reason for Swift’s discussion of the arguments which led to his robust defence of the “Forms”; indeed this “curious” level in the text is as deeply political as his defence of Anglicanism, since it attempts to avert the threat posed to religion itself by the “unmasker,” who is potentially more dangerous than the “credulous” fanatic.

This is apparent in the “Preface,” where the persona affirms that the main purpose of the *Tale* is to oppose the “numerous and penetrating” Hobbist wits, who “pick Holes in the weak sides of Religion and Government” (we can note how the surface/depths imagery pervades the *Tale*). The strange thing is that the “Grandees” who oppose the wits seem inadvertently to admit the justice of their criticisms, when they interpret the whale as “Hobs’s *Leviathan*, which tosses and plays with all Schemes of Religion and Government, whereof a great many are hollow, and dry, and empty, and noisy, and wooden, and given to Rotation” (*Tale*, pp. 39–40). However, when they come to interpret the tub which the whale “tosses and plays with,” they do not draw the conclusion that it refers critically to the established regime, but identify it with the *Tale* itself, which is thereupon commissioned to divert the freethinkers from their destructive work. The parable thus has an innocent meaning, but also, on a less noticeable level, an implication that Swift is secretly in agreement with the freethinkers’ criticisms of Church and State.

I will argue that Swift counters the freethinkers by a concealed argument that runs throughout the *Tale*. On this level he admits the falsity of the “common Forms,” although he appears to demonstrate their validity on a level of the text aimed at “superficial” readers. Swift’s skepticism comes to light only as a part of his opposition to “unmasking” and his advocacy of the practice of “personating the fool for the good of the public.” The seriousness of his political purpose is revealed throughout by the lengths he goes to in order to conceal the *Tale*’s depths.

6. There is little space to suggest a context for Swift’s thought here. One can briefly point to Plato’s *Statesman* for the same paradoxical combination of far-reaching skepticism regarding traditional beliefs and reluctance to criticize them openly (see especially, 300e–301a. See also the *Republic* 538a–e).

The "Introduction" opens with an enquiry into the methods by which one can "be heard in a Crowd."⁷ It is at once intimated that the philosopher qua philosopher cannot be a powerful rhetorician because the "Foundations" of his "Basket" are "often out of Sight, and ever out of Hearing" (*Tale*, pp. 55–56). To "be heard in a Crowd" one of three "Oratorical Machines" must be used: one must become a preacher, a poet, or a writer of "Productions designed for the Pleasure and Delight of Mortal Man." Concealed beneath the persona's reifications and his Modernist assumptions we find the teaching of the "Digression on Madness," namely that the philosopher must emerge from the "curious" depths to work within the "credulous" sphere if he wishes to have any influence over the majority of people. The retreat from philosophy is a movement towards religion or "entertainment."

The satire on Lucretian rhetorical theory which follows is obscure, but the quotation on the title page of the *Tale* reveals the nature of Swift's interest in *De Rerum Natura*: it is taken from a passage in which the poet claims to be the first popularizer of Greek philosophy. In his egalitarian rhetoric of enlightenment, Lucretius attempts to bring the philosopher's basket down to earth and give equal shares of words to all: "if the Audience be well compact, every one carries home a Share, and little or nothing is lost."⁸ Contrasted to this, I would suggest, is the "yet more refined . . . Structure of our Modern Theatres": the "refinement" is that they are constructed on a number of levels, which allows "weighty Matter" to descend to the "critics" in the pit, while the more entertaining and superficial elements soar up to be "greedily intercepted" by a "suitable Colony" (*Tale*, p. 61). Here, Swift introduces the major theme of the remainder of the "Introduction," namely, the multileveled text, which caters for all the different types of reader, revealing its deepest meanings only to the "critics" among them.

The executioner's ladder is the second of the three "Machines." It represents "Poetry" and, mysteriously, "Faction." Swift tells us, in one of the *Tale's* most deliberately enigmatic passages, that it is "an adequate symbol of . . . Poetry . . . because climbing up by slow Degrees, Fate is sure to turn [its orators] off before they can reach within many Steps of the Top: And because it is a Preferment attained by transferring of Property, and a confounding of *Meum* and *Tuum*" (*Tale*, pp. 62–63). By linking poetry both to faction and criminality Swift recalls the idea, familiar to the Renaissance, that the poet stands outside the common assumptions and values of his society; but by comparing it to the executioner's ladder he implies that it also protects those values in a sense: Many are "turned off" before they can "attain a transferring of Propriety." The distinctive aspect of po-

7. This is technically a *divisio*, indicating that the subject of the *Tale* is rhetoric—H. Kelling, "Reason in Madness—A Tale of A Tub," *PMLA*, 69 (1954), pp. 198–222. I would add that what follows reveals Swift's theme to be the tension between philosophy and the need to "be heard in a crowd."

8. For Lucretius' attempt to popularize Greek philosophy see L. Strauss, "Notes on Lucretius" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 92.

etry is its ability to select those fitted to question the “common Forms” by forcing readers to “climb up by slow Degrees” to its critique of established customs.

That this is Swift’s view is, I believe, confirmed in the final section of the “Introduction,” where the persona moves on to exonerate Grub Street from the charge of triviality, and to blame its low reputation on the “superficial Vein among many Readers of the present Age, who will by no means be persuaded to inspect beyond the Surface and the Rind of Things.” Because “*Wisdom . . . is a Nut, which unless you chuse with Judgement, may cost you a Tooth, and pay you with nothing but a Worm,*” the “Grubean Sages have always chosen to convey their Precepts and their Arts, shut up within the Vehicles of Types and Fables,” which has meant that “transitory Gazers have so dazzled their Eyes, and fill’d their Imaginations with the outward Lustre” that they have not looked beyond the surface of the text. The persona hopes to rectify this, and “travel in a compleat and laborious Dissertation upon the prime Productions of our Society, which besides their beautiful Externals for the Gratification of superficial Readers, have darkly and deeply couched under them, the most finished and refined Systems of all Sciences and Arts” (*Tale*, pp. 66–67).

The persona’s project does not make sense in his own terms, for if wisdom is dangerous in the way he outlines, what purpose can it serve to remove the careful concealments of the Grub Street “Sages”? This alerts us to the fact that it is not easy to account convincingly for the *Tale*’s frequent assaults on occultism, which was hardly a serious threat at the time Swift was writing (e.g. pp. 97–99, 126–29, 155–57, 185–87, 285). As I have demonstrated, the “curiosity” paragraph indicates that Swift is secretly serious about the idea that wisdom may “cost you a Tooth.” The reference to Socrates’ “outward Lustre” which concealed his wisdom is significant here because it is only partially mistaken: Socrates’ wisdom was hidden, but by his ugliness rather than his “Lustre.” The real drift of the satire is precisely opposed to the apparent one: Swift is ridiculing the persona’s project of “unmasking” rather than the concealments of his Grub Street predecessors (who bear an intriguing resemblance to the Ancients in their opposition to the “two *Junior* start up Societies,” Gresham and Wills, *Tale*, p. 64).

The “Introduction” strikes the reader at first as a disparate collection of trivial and entertaining satires, but a concealed argument comes to light if the text is examined closely. Swift’s reasoning on this level is as follows: since the majority of people are not philosophically inclined they must be influenced through their religious belief and through their love of entertainment, while philosophy must be reserved for the “curious” reader, because it is dangerous or unlawful in some unspecified way. The *Tale* itself both illustrates and utilizes its own teachings, if we can believe the persona’s typically grandiose claim that in “the common Entertainments of Wit and . . . Style . . . as well as the more profound and mystical Part, [he has] throughout this Treatise closely followed the most applauded Orig-

9. See Plato’s *Symposium* 215–22.

inals" (*Tale*, p. 71). The implication of this study is that the literal level of Swift's irony is often closer to his real meaning than he indicates. The persona's concern with "being heard in a Crowd" is also Swift's, which is why the philosopher's basket is "often out of *Sight*" in the *Tale*.

Wotton argues that Swift is a freethinker on the grounds that Anglicanism is implicated in the satire of Catholicism and Puritanism, as it too is symbolized by a coat (Wotton's "Observations upon the Tale of a Tub" (1705), in *Tale*, p. 322).¹⁰ There is some evidence for this view—coats are clearly a "surface" in a work which at one point represents popular delusions as surfaces. Moreover, Swift alludes to the role of clothes as "a cover for Lewdness as well as Nastiness" (*Tale*, p. 78): Clothes both hide and protect the naked body.¹¹ When Jack ground away his coat he "proceeded a Heathen Philosopher" (*Tale*, pp. 199–200).

Yet if this is Swift's point he does not encourage his readers to notice it. The aspect of Christianity which first comes to light is its injunction against covetousness, ambition and pride, which the brothers gradually begin to neglect (*Tale*, p. 74). If Christianity is a delusion it is surely a healthy one. Moreover, Wotton's account omits the very obvious fact that the *Tale* first strikes the majority of readers as a satire on the two principal enemies of Anglicanism. The implications of the comparison of Christianity to the coats remain implications, like the Observer's comparison of Church and State to a hollow tub. Like the Observer's parable, Swift's allegory doubles as a radical critique and a robust defense of established "Forms." Swift's satirical defence of Anglicanism constitutes his descent from the philosopher's basket to the Pulpit and the Stage-itinerant. As the "Preface" explains, satire is supremely entertaining precisely because it does not touch readers personally, or "raise their Envy," but flatters them with a feeling of superiority (*Tale*, pp. 50–53). The attempt is less to humble the pride of the Nonconformists than to channel that of the Anglicans. In this way Swift hopes to render the idea of an established religion fashionable once again.¹²

However, the allegory does not simply constitute the *Tale*'s surface: "Sartorialism" parodies materialistic philosophies as well as Catholicism.¹³ On this level it represents a society in which the "Forms" are observed outwardly but no longer believed in. The realization that "Religion is a *Cloak*" threatens public morality. Swift stresses the inevitability of the practical consequence of the Sartorialists' metaphysics heavily: "These *Postulata* being admitted, it will follow in due Course of Reasoning . . ." The "grandees" of Sartorial society are cyni-

10. See also M. Dargan, "The Nature of Allegory as Used by Swift," *SP*, 13 (1916), 155–79; C. Rawson, "The Character of Swift's Satire" in *Focus on Swift* (London: Sphere, 1971), p. 56.

11. One recalls the way Gulliver's clothes disguised his physical resemblance to the Yahoos—M. Byrd, "Gulliver's Clothes: an Enlightenment Motif," *Enlightenment Essays*, 3, 41–46.

12. See Sheridan, one of Swift's early biographers, in *Swift. The Critical Heritage*, ed. K. Williams (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 227.

13. P. Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 84.

cal in their attitude to the moral imperatives which they are supposed to obey, because they are no longer thought to stem ultimately from God. "The Stars are *invested* by the *Primum Mobile*" only in the most literal sense: justice is invented by man. To be "styled a Judge" it is enough that "certain Ermins and Furs be placed in a certain Position" (*Tale*, pp. 77–79).

Swift could not be said to disagree with the Sartorialists' vision of the "horrid Gulph" beneath the "*Superficies*" (*Tale*, p. 76). After all, he himself figures religion as a cloak. He reveals, however, that when this knowledge begins to permeate through the "grandees" of a society the door is opened to scheming knaves, who propagate "strong Delusions." Nevertheless, the Sartorialists' pretense of belief is better than open atheism, as the "Digression concerning Criticks" intimates. Here, the satire seems to be directed at the Modern critic's concentration on the negative aspects of the texts he examines, but Swift is attacking something more threatening than a failure in emphasis. The anti-Herculean Modern critic aims to ". . . hunt the Monstrous Faults bred within [texts]: to drag out the lurking Errors like *Cacus* from his Den . . . Or else to drive away a sort of *Dangerous Fowl*, who have a perverse Inclination to plunder the best Branches of the *Tree of Knowledge*, like those *Stymphalian Birds* that eat up the Fruit" (*Tale*, p. 95). Now the "Faults" are not simply unpleasant but actively dangerous, and Swift's warning, as in the "Digression on Madness," is directed at those who communicate their knowledge of them. To these we can contrast the traditional opponents of the Modern critic, who have voiced their opinion "with abundance of Caution, adventuring no farther than *Mythology* and *Hieroglyphick*" (*Tale*, p. 97), and the "*Dangerous Fowl*," who delight in knowledge but keep it to themselves. The need for Swift's own "abundance of Caution" is evident when we consider that the subject of the allegory is biblical criticism, and that the new textual criticism which Swift satirizes here had been used to deny that a single, authoritative version of the Bible existed.¹⁴ It is a measure of the greater depth at which the digressions operate compared to the main allegory, as well as of Swift's secretiveness, that they alone admit that errors may reside in the authoritative text itself, rather than the interpolations of the critics.

The allegory illustrates this "curious" point even as it entertains "superficial" readers at the expense of the Catholics and the Calvinists. Thus Jack and Martin (who represent the Protestant dissenters and the Anglican church) keep their criticism of Peter's regime to themselves at first, but finally rebel openly, after the rediscovery of the will has led them to realize the full extent of his corruption (*Tale*, pp. 117–22). Swift's approval of Martin's "revolution," and his critique of Sartorialism reveal that his opposition to "dragging out lurking Errors" does not mean that he simply advocates a passive, outward conformity (the life of a fool among knaves). The ways the two brothers use their knowledge of the will are covert paradigms of the way all private insights into the flaws of the "com-

14. J. Levine, "The Design of A Tale of a Tub," *ELH*, 33 (1966), pp. 198–217.

mon Forms” should and should not be used. Since the allegory cannot overtly point beyond the “credulous” sphere, the rediscovery of the divine law takes the place of the “curious” discoveries of the “Digression on Madness.”

Through the example of Martin, Swift makes the general point that the wise man actively defends certain salutary beliefs which he knows to be false. We are told that, where Martin “. . . observed the Embroidery to be workt so close, as not to be got away without damaging the Cloth, or where it served to hide or strengthen any Flaw in the Body of the Coat, contracted by the perpetual tampering of Workmen upon it; he concluded the wisest Course was to let it remain, resolving in no Case whatsoever, that the Substance of the Stuff should suffer Injury” (*Tale*, p. 136). In Swift’s account the Anglican reformers understand that most people are Christians because they have been brought up to be so. To inform them suddenly that doctrines they had considered central to their faith are no longer officially recognized would be a disruptive “unmasking” which might lead to a more far-reaching skepticism. Martin accepts that superstition must continue to play a part in the Anglican Church. My suggestion is that there is an implicit analogy between Peter’s “Embroidery” and the coats themselves, since both are surfaces which “hide” and “strengthen.” Through Martin, Swift illustrates Plato’s teaching that it is unwise to reveal the falsity of traditions which promote honorable behaviour.¹⁵ He shows also that this recognition does not lead to passivity: the philosopher may institute positive reforms as long as he works within the “credulous” sphere.

In the “Digression in the Modern Kind” the persona explains that he has “dissected the Carcass of *Humane Nature*, and read many useful Lectures upon the several Parts, both *containing* and *contained*; till at last it *smelt* so strong, I could preserve it no longer.” Nevertheless, he is “ready to shew a very compleat Anatomy thereof to all curious *Gentlemen and Others*” (*Tale*, p. 123). His experiments have shown him “that the Publick Good of Mankind is performed by two Ways, *Instruction*, and *Diversion* . . . and accordingly throughout his Divine Treatise, [he has] skilfully kneaded up both together with a *Layer of Dulce*” (*Tale*, p. 124). The persona is illogical in the same way as in the “Introduction,” where the recognition that wisdom is a nut, “which unless you chuse with Judgment, may cost you a Tooth, and pay you with nothing but a *Worm*,” did not prevent him from “displaying by Incision” the secret meanings of his more prudent predecessors. Here he discovers that discoveries cannot be communicated except under a “*Layer of Dulce*,” but, rather than putting his knowledge into practice, he freely reveals the results of experiments, by which he himself is revolted, to “all curious *Gentlemen and others*.” The italics indicate Swift’s opposition to indiscriminate enlightenment.

The persona goes on to advertise a miraculous “nostrum” by which “*an infinite Number of Abstracts, Summaries, Compendiums, Extracts* . . .” may be

15. *Republic* 538d–e.

immediately absorbed; and then to deny that Homer was “as eminent a *Cabbalist* as his Disciples would represent Him,” since he betrays among other things a “gross Ignorance in the *Common Laws of this Realm*, and in the Doctrine as well as the Discipline of the Church of *England*” (*Tale*, pp. 126–28). The satire on the persona’s occultism obscures Swift’s opposition to the Moderns’ devices to make learning easily accessible; while the esoteric meanings he hopes to find in Homer are so ephemeral and absurd that it is these that we laugh at rather than his search itself. Between the superficial diversion into which Modern learning decays in Section VII (“I have sometimes *heard* of an *Iliad* in a Nutshell; but it hath been my Fortune to have much oftener *seen* a *Nutshell* in an *Iliad*”—*Tale*, p. 143) and the “dragging out of lurking Errors,” there is a compromise, exemplified by Homer’s multileveled texts.

The digressions thus discuss and illustrate the proper way to convey “curious” meanings. They complement the allegory, which deals with the methods by which the wise man can benefit the “credulous” majority. Here, albeit on a “credulous” level, where the authority of the Bible is taken for granted, Martin’s combination of private skepticism and public support for Anglicanism also represents a mean—in this case between the Sartorialists’ unconcerned outward conformity and the Aeolists’ rejection of everything outward.

Aeolism, like Sartorialism and “Martinism,” refers not simply to the history of Christianity but to a particular view of the use to which knowledge of the “weak sides” of the “common Forms” should be put. I would agree with critics who find in the portrayal of Aeolism a satire on Hobbist freethinkers¹⁶ without denying the importance of the “superficial” satire on Puritanism by which Swift himself defends the “forms.” I would argue that the dangerous outspokenness of the Puritans in their attempt to restore the true, divine law is analogous to an even more dangerous effort on the part of the freethinkers to convey the truth about that law.

In language that parodies Hobbes Swift satirizes the Aeolists’ “mysteries.” Swift concentrates on their rhetoric: they believe that wind “ought not to be covetously hoarded up, stifled or hid under a Bushel, but freely communicated to Mankind. Upon these Reasons, and others of equal Weight, the Wise *Aeolists*, affirm the gift of BELCHING, to be the noblest Act of a Rational Creature.” The portrayal of the Aeolists lends a universal significance to Jack’s destructive efforts to restore his coat to its original state. Here, all rhetorical theories which deny that there is an occasional need to hide the truth are satirized. Jack is Swift’s cautionary illustration; warning both the Nonconformists and freethinkers that the strength of the “common Forms” resides in their traditional character. To reveal the falsity of the “Forms” is more likely to result in anarchy than radical reform (*Tale*, pp. 150–53).

Swift concludes the section by emphasizing that the “Frontiers of Height and

16. R. Hopkins, “The Personation of Hobbism in Swift’s ‘A Tale of a Tub,’” *PQ*, 45 (1966), pp. 372–78.

Depth, border upon each other.” He has indeed shown that materialists are the enemies of enthusiasts but share with them a common outspokenness. Swift drives home the point that his opposition to the Aeolist devil (materialism) is as deep as his contempt for their windy gods in his hostile portrayal of “the Camelion, sworn Foe to *Inspiration*, who in Scorn, devoured large Influences of their God; without refunding the smallest Blast by Eructation.” The nature of Swift’s alternative to both is indicated by the second “devil,” “. . . a huge terrible Monster, called *Moulinavent*, who with four strong Arms, waged eternal Battel with all their Divinities, dextrously turning to avoid their Blows, and repay them with Interest” (*Tale*, pp. 158–60). The windmill is an apt symbol for the “curious” man, who, realizing that happiness for most men is “a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived,” and that there is no “Quality of Mind, where in all Nations and Ages of the World have so unanimously agreed, as that of a *Fanatick* Strain, or Tincture of Enthusiasm” (*Tale*, p. 266), decides to utilize the most benign of the manifestations of this general “credulity” rather than making a pointless (Chameleon-like) effort to remove delusions which spring from a deep, and almost universal, psychological need. The same point is made via the ironic parallels Swift draws between the Aeolists and the secret societies of wise men which were believed by many to have controlled the oracles (*Tale*, pp. 155–57).

Through Martin, the *Tale*’s allegory indicates that the curious man may avoid the extremes of disruptive unmasking (Aeolism) and the passivity of the “fool among knaves” (Sartorialism). The enigmatic *Moulinavent* passage suggests that the advice to Wotton to turn from “vain Philosophy” and concentrate on “the Propagation of a new Religion” is meant seriously in a way (*Tale*, p. 169). This advice concludes a discussion of how to “distinguish and adapt [one’s words], with respect to the Differences of Persons and of Times” (p. 168), which was initiated in the “Introduction,” where the Pulpit was the first alternative to the less popular philosopher’s basket for those with “an Ambition to be heard in a crowd.” The melancholic, “curious” man can indeed become the “author of the greatest actions” if he “shapes his Understanding by the Pattern of Human Learning” and “pass[es] his Life in the common Forms” (*Tale*, pp. 162, 171).

In a postscript to the *Tale*, the “Mechanical Operation of the Spirit,” Swift elaborates on his concept of playing the “Fool for the Good of the Public.” As in Section VIII, there is a parody of mechanism running beneath and counter to the satire on Puritanism addressed to the “credulous” or “superficial” reader, and again secrecy is a major theme: the persona constantly speaks of himself as an initiate, who must be “excused from divulging” or is not “allowed to discover” many of the secrets of the Mechanical Operators (*Tale*, pp. 270 and 273). This directs our attention to a paradox: his argument is that since the majority will “be born to Heaven upon nothing but [an] Ass” it is necessary to simulate “religious enthusiasm” in order to be of any benefit to them. However, his careful analysis of the “spiritual mechanism,” would, if taken seriously, itself render the technique useless, since it depends on the “credulous” audience believing the “enthu-

siasm” to be of divine origin. The fact that it is not taken seriously is, I would suggest, a measure of Swift’s superior caution rather than of any scorn for such pretenses. It is the openness of the persona’s materialism which is satirized.

The “fragment” culminates in the persona’s argument that religion is a sublimation of sexual desire. Orpheus, “one of the Institutors of . . . Mysteries” which exemplify this fact, “was torn in Pieces by Women, because he refused to *communicate his Orgyes* to them; which others explained, by telling us, he had *castrated* himself upon Grief, for the Loss of his Wife” (*Tale*, p. 285). There is a tension between the institutor of the cult and its votaries, arising from the fact that the former is not himself moved by the passions on which he plays. The principal object of the “curious” man’s desire is knowledge, which distinguishes him from the majority of men. If he wishes to exert an influence over the “credulous” he must disguise this distinction. One must marvel at the skill with which Swift avoids arousing a similar animosity in the *Tale*. Once laid bare, his teaching is exposed to the charge of paternalism from those who reassess his view that political society is best founded on the “common Forms,” either because they believe that the majority are capable of rationally perceiving the importance of virtuous action for themselves or because their sights are not set on promoting virtue but on ensuring that all are free to pursue happiness as they conceive it.