Modest proposals

Jonathan Swift was a prescient satirist of authors, publishers – and bankers, but in his more rebarbative moments, was he his own worst enemy?

THOMAS KEYMER

Jonathan Swift
A TALE OF A TUB AND OTHER WORKS
Edited by Marcus Walsh
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£12.99 (£10.99)
978 0 521 82814 9

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LITERARY CRITICISM

An Illustration From The Battle of the Books (1760 edition)

...truct shows little sympathy about the stigmatiza-
tion of the mendicant friar who is dying to work; they are not afraid to steal, nor ashamed to beg, and yet are too proud to be seen with a ‘budge’ – and even less about the expensive unemployed. In another of his arresting distinctions between venem and humanitatem, he does not seem to mind, and thereby be less burdensome to the People.

The selective vision that characterizes Swift’s Irish Writings involves not only exclusions like this but also tendentious annotation. A welcome inclusion is Swift’s slyly anomalous broadside of 1738, “An Excellent New Ballad; or The True English Dean to be Hunged for a Rape”, which recounts the disgrace of Thomas Sawbridge, an English cleric preferred to a County Wexford dean in 1728, who two years later was acquir-
ed of the rape of Susanna Runcorn in Dublin, probably after buying her off. For Fabricant and Mahony, the poem insinuates “that England has it, with Sawbridge and by other means, ‘raped Ireland’, in which they ask that Sawbridge’s recent employment “in chaplain for the East India Company in – by which means they could hardly represent Britain’s imperial reach and sense of impunity”.

For all that, this line is not an impossible approach, and Swift had an established habit of figuring Ireland as a victimized maiden, as in his early “Story out of Legend”, or in a 1720s, Socratic protest against the 1701 Union between England and Scotland in which figure inpectu the Irish, or the 1760s, sinking stat noth of the border. But the “Injured Lady” is plainly alluring, and noth-
ing complicating its overt message. The “True English Dean” is a text of a much more slip-
pery kind, not least in its wittily self-impli-
cating complaint about Deans sent over from England, a category to which Swift himself came close. If Swift even knew of Saw-
bridge’s Indian past he fails to mention it, and does not have the chance case that Runcorn, whom Sawbridge met in Chester and first assaulted in mid-ocean, may have been English or Welsh. For the other hand, the poem makes a great deal of a sepa-
rate episode in Chester, when another attempted rape by Sawbridge is beaten off by an Englishwoman who “sah’d her Honour much more than her Life”, it then compares Sawbridge with the Londoner (though Scott-
born) raep Colonial Francis Charteris, whose subsequent pardon was widely blamed on him. Perhaps Sawbridge the lesser of his kind. It is a pity that readers to find in this ballad the wholesale denunciation of monopolistic “English” or “British’s sense of impunity” that Fabricant and Mahony insist us to find, is to unclear why he inserted such contrary signals. Yet with modest adjustment the kind of reading they advance makes sense. When it suited him, Swift could condone any of his modern critic-
s for Anglicophobia, but this is not a poem about England raping Ireland. Like so much else by Swift, and by the English satirizes with whom he aligned himself, it is a poem in which expressive, exploitive, uncriticial figures like Sawbridge and Charteris stand

LS T S JANUARY 7 2011
Wrought and wrote

ELIZABETH SCOTT-BAUMANN

Susan Frye

PENS AND NEEDLES
Women's textiles in early modern England
9780134243866

"Lauretta flanked by Chastity and Liberality", one of five hangings showing the Virtues at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, c.1573

Women held the needle and men held the pen. This gender division was frequently articulated in the early modern world, though often in paradoxical circumstances. Anne Bradstreet wrote in her preface to The Tenth Muse, "I am obnoxious to every cropping tongue,... Who says, my hand a needle better fin", though this concern did not prevent her writing an ambitious poetry collection including a historical epic, often seen as the most distinctly masculine of genres. In fact, as Susan Frye convincingly demonstrates in Pens and Needles, early modern writers were just as likely to connect the two arts as to divide them by gender. Esther Ingles was a professional screenwriter and illustrator whose miniature books include a virtuoso range of calligraphic scripts including one where the letters are composed of dashes, to look as if they had been stitched on to the paper. Frye is interested in the use of manuscripts and needlework as gifts, in forming relationships, declaring social and political loyalties and in the way in which women were "authors" of both textiles and texts. Her book draws together women from a range of social strata, with chapters on royal and aristocratic needlework, domestic sewing, professional artisans and literary works by Shakespeare, Mary Wroth and Mary Sidney Herbert.

Levin Trelawny was court miniaturist to four English monarchs. Born into the Groom-Bruges school of artists, she apprenticed in Italy, became an English subject and was paid an annuity for her work. Trelawny's life is as interesting as her individual works, not least because of the difficulties of attribution. Jane Segar (or Segar) tried to attract Elizabeth I's attention and patronage after Trelawny's death, by creating an elaborate calligraphic manuscript version of The Prophets of the Ten Sils on the Birdbird of Christ. For the book's cover, she used a technique called "verre églomisé" which involved painting with gilt or colour on glass, together with an inscription in shorthand. This was a bursar's display of Segar's talents, and it is poignant that it may never even have been read by Elizabeth I. The extraordinary nature of the book lies partly in Segar's use of an Elizabethan system of shorthand, or "charactry", devised by Timothy Bright. This was apparently based on ancientRunes and was written vertically. Segar provides two English translations of each Latin prophecy, one in normal script and one in shorthand. These translations, then, reflect ideas about prophecy. The texts in shorthand seem opaque, unreadable, but they can be interpreted by the right reader, like the prophesies themselves. In an original poem by Segar, she depicts herself as "characters" with which to write about Elizabeth. Segar uses the combination of calligraphic scripts, book design and craftsmanship, shorthand and translation to present herself and all her skills to the queen in this one book.

Not only were writing and sewing considered to be connected arts, but one could be used to praise the other. John Taylor's popular farcical book, The Needles Excellency, featured his sonnets praising the needlework of Catherine of Aragon, Mary and Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Sidney Herbert. The Sidney family (especially the siblings Philip, Robert and Mary and Robert's daughter Mary) seem definitively to have held the pen in greater esteem than the needle, but Frye explores the importance of sewn artefacts to the writings and lives of Mary Sidney Herbert and Mary Wroth. As the Sidney family's place at court was often not secure, they sought favour through gifts such as a particular kind of veil that Elizabeth coverted, as well as of upcots and boar meat. Mary Sidney Herbert's poem "Even Now That Care", which praises but also cajoles Queen Elizabeth, relies on textile imagery. She describes the process of writing collaboratively with her brother, Philip Sidney, as weeping: "but shee did waippe, I weep'd this wobb to end". The poems they have woven together, psalms translated into a dazzling variety of forms, become "a liv Creee bee to be bestowed by here". Frye sensitively draws out the implication of this robe, It is both a gift for Elizabeth and a gift to be bestowed by her. There is also a hint of poetic coercion, as "litterie" implies affiliation, reminding the Queen of a politically contentious moment that she and the Sidneys are on the same side. Elizabeth is reminded of her debts to the Sidney family as they also offer their service, clothing themselves poetically in their uniform.

Using textiles as a proof of identity or sign of love becomes central, and centrally problematic, to Shakespeare's Othello and Cymbeline. Desdemona's lost handkerchief, "spotted with strawberries" is one of the "proofs" of her infidelity which leads directly to the bedsheet that, Othello asserts, "lament'st, shall with lust's blood be spot't" with her death. While these readings of canonical literary texts make compelling reading, Susan Frye's book is most fascinating in drawing out the histories and texts, both written and sewn, of less well-known women, and showing that they saw their needlework as equally articulate, valuable and astute as their words.