

DENIS JOHNSTON'S JONATHAN SWIFT *

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I am not a Swift scholar. Not being a Swift scholar, I both enjoyed and was impressed by Denis Johnston's 1959 biographical study *In Search of Swift*.¹ On the other hand, I understand that most of you, being Swift scholars, may just possibly have enjoyed it, but were not impressed by it. I am not entirely convinced the correct attitude here is so obvious, but it would be absurd for me to come to any biographical conclusions of my own, and in any case Swift's biography in itself is not my primary concern. I am more concerned with Johnston, and the reaction by the Swift scholarly establishment to what at least he considered his important contribution to Swift scholarship. This reaction, perhaps along with other disappointments of his life connected with the theatre and broadcasting, has contributed to a certain cynicism and bitterness that prevailed in Johnston's later life, not unlike that which characterized Swift's own old age. This is despite Johnston's very real successes in several fields of endeavour. Johnston, among other things a university teacher, clearly saw his scholarly work to be a compelling combination of original research, disciplined logical conclusions, and brilliant insights, likely to revolutionize the prevailing biographical perspective of Swift. He expected to make a considerable academic stir, and in fact had already eighteen years earlier made a minor one. The earlier one having been quite negative, however, he expected this one to be better received. It was not.

Johnston had reason to be confident in his own abilities. Before embarking on any of his various careers, he had written a dissertation for an advanced law degree at Harvard on the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, and in so doing satisfied his supervisor, who was to become one of the American Supreme Court's most distinguished Chief Justices. As a playwright, he had had mixed receptions, some of his plays being highly controversial, though, disappointingly for Johnston, not so controversial as O'Casey's. He liked being provocative, but however much controversy he stirred, or did not stir, he was considered for a time by many to be the brightest new playwright talent in the Irish theatre. At this point, he left the theatre for a career in broadcasting.

Early in his new career, in March, 1938, Johnston produced what was a pioneering spectacle in broadcasting, a documentary dramatization of the 1688-89 siege of Londonderry, called "Lillibulero." The programme required a year's preparation, including considerable research on an historical period that coincides with Swift's life. Then, only two months later, in June, he produced for radio the first version of his Swift play, entitled "Weep for Polyphemus," which also involved considerable historical research. Johnston's studies for the two projects overlapped, with one possibly generating the other. The Swift research may, in fact, have begun earlier. However that may be, the radio play embodied in inchoate form much of the theory that was to be developed more fully later in *In Search of Swift*.

Johnston's broadcast career, from 1936 to 1947, provided him with more satisfaction, success, and distinction than he was to know before or since. Beginning with BBC radio, he quickly moved to the infant medium of television where he helped to develop basic production techniques and in a sense actually to define the medium. During World War II, he was a BBC war correspondent, in north Africa and continental Europe, introducing several innovations to war reporting, and after the war became the first Programme Director of BBC Television. He also wrote an artful book on his war experiences entitled *Nine Rivers from Jordan*. So, with a strong sense of his own sophistication and worldliness, combined with his intellectual prowess as well as his legal and investigative reporting experience, Johnston's scholarly endeavours over Swift in the mid 1950s must have seemed to him well within his capacities. The subject was a fascinating but relatively easy challenge, and his creative work for the stage and broadcasting would allow him to give his academic production an artistic form that would make it unusually enjoyable reading for the genre.

But the fact is that Johnston had already been disappointed with the academic community's failure to take him seriously on the subject of Swift, and *In Search of Swift* is really a desperate attempt to correct matters. This book was expected to open the eyes of Swift scholars to the important revelations which he had already presented to them in various forms on several occasions over the previous twenty years. His Swift play as transcribed from radio to the stage and called *The Dreaming Dust* was produced at the Gaiety Theatre as early as 1940 by Edwards' and MacLiammoir's Dublin Gate Theatre Company, but was not published until 1954, when it was included in a book entitled *The Golden Cuckoo and Other Plays*. Speaking of *The Dreaming Dust* in the introduction to that book, Johnston anticipates *In Search of Swift*:

One would imagine that at this distance, it is not a matter of any very great importance to suggest that Swift was a bastard. But unfortunately it involves the statement that a great many books, to which many years of study have been devoted, are at fault in their facts, and that more than one respectable tome has been

written without a proper check of the original documents that it quotes. In the circumstances it is perhaps not so surprising that I have unwittingly got myself into a lot of hot water over Dr. Swift, and am unlikely to get out of it until I have made matters worse, by writing a tome of my own a tome studded with footnotes and terminating with a Bibliography, which, God knows, will make dull reading.

This book was published five years later, though whatever else it is, most would agree it is not “dull reading.”

Most would agree, that is, but not all. Frank Kermode, in his review entitled “The Dean Drank Coffee,” in *The Spectator* of 6 November 1959, says the book tends to be dull because of too much detail and documentation. It does seem difficult for Johnston to win. In fact, many of the reviewers do credit Johnston’s painstaking research and his uncovering of many previously accepted errors. Finally, Kermode says he hopes Johnston “is right, not only because Swift deserved his coffee, but because everything that weakens the myth of his insanity helps his books to a better reading.”

It is not my intention to review the reviews. It is sufficient to say that the book was reviewed extensively and with considerable interest, and that the reviews were mixed, with the most serious, and ultimately the most influential, coming down against Johnston, particularly against his evidence for a January date for the death of Jonathan Swift the Elder, a date that would have made it impossible for him to be Swift’s father. Other evidence and aspects of Johnston’s scholarship are both praised and criticized. Johnston’s speculativeness is condemned, often because it conflicts with the reviewer’s own speculations. In one or two cases it does seem that the criticism is more abusive than convincing, as in Frank Brady’s “Swift: Scholarship and Fancy,” in *The Yale Review*. Matthew Hodgart, on the other hand, in “A Question of Paternity” in *The Guardian* of 8 November 1959, has no real objection to Johnston’s argument, and says that his “publication of the documents is admirably thorough,” but objects to his tone, his apparently “talking crossly to himself rather than addressing the jury with the eloquence of which he is capable.”

Defending his endeavours in his introduction to the book, Johnston gives Hodgart the grounds for his criticism:

... for nearly twenty years I have been an unwilling target for a succession of adverse comments on a short paper that I read to the Old Dublin Society in 1941, and that subsequently appeared in the Journal of that body. And as this annoyance is a continuing one, and shows no signs of coming to an end, a man who happens to have been serious in what he said is driven eventually to make matters either worse or better by repeating his point in louder and better documented tones. As a general rule no one will ever come to one’s rescue in such matters except oneself.

Looking back at that Old Dublin Society paper, “The Mysterious Origin of Dean Swift,” published in the June-August 1941 number of the *Dublin Historical Record*, we find that it itself responds to even earlier disappointment over not being taken seriously when his thesis was artistically expressed in his 1938 radio play. In that paper he explains:

The theory that I propose to offer as an explanation of the mystery surrounding the life of this perhaps greatest of all Dubliners is one that I embodied in a radio programme some three years ago. Although it was propounded in the most public and universal manner known to science, no attention was paid to it whatsoever, and the whole thing was, presumably, dismissed as an invention of my own for purely dramatic purposes. Nevertheless it was based upon several years of exceedingly interesting research in and around this City of ours, and I am glad to have this opportunity of bringing some of the results of my investigation to the notice of those interested in the mind that conceived *Gulliver* and the *Drapier Letters*.

As I have indicated, this paper had been preceded the previous year by *The Dreaming Dust*, the stage adaptation of his radio play. Between the 1941 paper and the 1959 book, the radio play was adapted for television in 1947 with the new title “Weep for the Cyclops,” and *The Golden Cuckoo and Other Plays* was published in 1954, with its introduction and the first publication of *The Dreaming Dust*, as one of the “other plays.” In fact, Swift appears to have been approaching an obsession for Johnston, as he explored his biographical theory in one medium after another, the only result being that in one medium he was ignored, in the other reviled. Writing in the 1954 introduction, now an academic himself, he says with barely concealed fury:

When originally produced on the radio—that is to say by the most universal means known to science, and to the largest audience possible—it produced no critical reactions whatsoever. Nobody takes what they hear on the radio seriously, except News and invasions from Mars. In stage form it evoked very little more response. But then I read a short paper on the subject to the Old Dublin Society, which published it in its journal, at which point the reactions were catastrophic. I had invaded the realm of scholarship, and violent as the reactions of an audience may be to a Point (sic), they are nothing to the reactions of the owners of any literary Tom Tiddler’s Ground, towards inter-meddlers from other departments.

So, with what to Johnston were ever more compelling arguments and evidence on the subject repeatedly being rejected, and finally not taken seriously at all, it is not difficult, for all his urbane pretence of modesty and lofty insouciance, to imagine his frustration leading to an almost Swiftian sense of outrage.

Not surprisingly, this outrage becomes increasingly unveiled when not even Johnston's well documented "tome studded with footnotes and terminating with a Bibliography" is received seriously. And nowhere is his outrage vented more clearly than in his review of Volume I of *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age* by Irvin Ehrenpreis, in which review, coming four years after the publication of *In Search of Swift*, he says contemptuously:

It is not easy to make Swift dull, and while Professor Ehrenpreis comes very close to performing this feat, thanks to some peculiarities in his prose, the substance of his comments on most of the Works that he has dealt with to date are both informative and helpful. This applies particularly to *The Battle of the Books*, which he evidently enjoys. It is when he approaches the biographical snake pit that one wishes he had posted some warning notices before inviting his students to accompany him down the primrose path leading to "Mr. Swift."

The compliment to Professor Ehrenpreis, you will notice, is brief, mild, and sarcastic, sandwiched as it is between caustic criticism, which he elaborates as he focuses on his own area of painstaking research:

... a sound historian might say that the best way to determine whether the residence in Dublin of Sir John Temple, Irish Master of the Rolls, during the closing years of his life, is a fable or not would be to examine the records of King's Inns, of which Sir John was a Bencher, or to make inquiries of the Dublin Corporation. Professor Ehrenpreis prefers to settle the matter by citing Professor Woodbridge of Middletown, Connecticut, who says what he thinks is "likely" on the subject, having been unaware that Sir John's signature appears continuously in the Minutes of the Inns throughout the relevant period. The reason for this preference is sophisticated and is not a mere mistake. So also there are valid reasons outside a detached objectivity for Professor Ehrenpreis' views on the coming of the Swift family to Ireland, on the location of Uncle Godwin's residence, on the probable ownership of the house in Hoey's Court in which Swift says that he was born, and most significant of all, on the problem of the date of the death of Jonathan Swift, the elder. He finds evidence on all these points in books that he admires, and it is in line with what he wants to say about Swift. What he omits to mention is that there is source material which whether he accepts it or not tends to contradict him on all these points.

Provokingly enough, three years after Johnston's own "important discoveries" had been published in "respectable" academic form, neither his name nor his work is mentioned even in a footnote by Ehrenpreis. No one likes to be treated with the contempt this omission implies. The closest Ehrenpreis comes to recognition that Johnston ever had a word to say about Swift was to declare on the first page of his preface that the first "fable" he was going to "eliminate" was that either Swift or Stella was a bastard. Actually, when it comes to it, he does not really bother to "eliminate the fable;" in fact, he never even mentions it at all. Moreover, it seems there is nothing in Ehrenpreis's biography that makes Johnston's theories unlikely. Quite the contrary! That Swift is not always accurate in his own account of events touching his life is clear. Temple's taking Swift into his family as he does, his distance from his rather dour wife after losing so many children, this combined with his amorous enthusiasms and his vanity in talking about them, Swift's mother's odd behaviour, and Stella's high standing in Temple's family, even, arguably, the extent of Swift's loyalty to Temple, all contribute to Johnston's case, at least circumstantially, and suggest that at least a refutation is called for.

Johnston's theory in regard to Stella had been entertained by others. His Swift argument was more adamantly rejected. But Ehrenpreis says nothing about either of them. Whatever mistakes he may have made, Johnston prides himself on his meticulous documentation. Ehrenpreis, so meticulous and so thorough on other matters, simply makes different assertions on this subject. Right or wrong, then, Johnston's indignant response to Ehrenpreis's "authoritative" work following so close upon his own published treatment of the subject is not surprising. Then, too, more personally, Johnston's mild anti-semitism must have further exacerbated his feelings, especially in the context of his sense of his Anglo-Irish heritage, his consequent strong feeling of kinship with Swift, and his own particular identity with St Patrick's. Certainly, Ehrenpreis's being Jewish was not the main cause of Johnston's annoyance, but it did lend additional pique. His personal territory had been violated by someone who did not belong, and who did not even pay his respects to this rightful member of the clan.

Four years later, in 1967, the Swift Tercentenary Year, and the year of publication for Ehrenpreis's second volume, Johnston, in a contribution to a Swift celebratory pamphlet, again presses his attack against the scholarly establishment, and, by implication, against Ehrenpreis in particular:

. . . the trouble starts between those who have written their books in the easiest way, by treating everything that they have been told as the truth, and the others [like himself], who believe nothing that they are told until they have been to see what is to be found in the Record Office, or in the basement of the Custom House. Nobody likes to have it shown that he has not checked his facts properly, least of all when it may mean bringing out a revised edition or adding a shameful page of *Errata*. So the books, once published, have to be stood over as a matter of professional integrity, and the sceptical snoopers are either ignored or dismissed as gossips or busy-bodies.

Volume 2 of *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age* surely infuriated Johnston even more than had the first volume. Recognizing the very monumental dimension and overwhelming erudition of the book, he must have been all the more frustrated. There was still no recognition that he existed. But more importantly, it was a matter of the pot calling the kettle black. Many of Ehrenpreis's speculative conclusions are particularly well informed, his insights sound, even brilliant, but when he discusses the reasons for Esther Johnson and Rebecca Dingley coming to Ireland, for example, he is more speculative than Johnston ever is. Even more striking is Ehrenpreis's account of Tisdall's marriage proposal to Hetty, where he simply announces that "according to Swift only a single obstruction stood in the way of his own offer to marry Mrs Johnson, and that was a determination never to marry at all." Rarely is Ehrenpreis so unquestioning. Without any previous indication of movement toward this decision, and while he certainly questions Swift's statements elsewhere, he simply accepts Swift's word on this subject. Ehrenpreis does, however, give reasons for this "determination" a few pages later: "*To press my own speculations on the episode still further,*" he says,

I may describe Swift's immediate, unthinking response to the news of Tisdall's designs on Hetty as elementary panic. With more pains than most men devote to choosing a spouse, Swift had re-created the domestic pattern which gave him the deepest comfort. As a dependent, compliant confidant, part daughter, part pupil, part mistress, Hetty was a miraculous prize. Every assistance he gave her made her more his own. He could be uniformly benevolent because she must be uniformly docile. It was not conceivable that he should find yet another fatherless young beauty, equipped with intelligence and polite breeding; that he should isolate her too from her family and obligate her to the point where she would indulge his unspoken wishes.

Ehrenpreis's analysis, speculative though it be, may be absolutely correct, but Swift appears here worthy of a character out of Molière, or to be the "monster" he is called by one of the women in Johnston's play. Johnston is kinder. Even more astonishing to him than this version of Swift's behaviour, however, was the notion that Stella would be willing to play such a role. Ehrenpreis explains Hetty's opting for spinsterhood and continuing her ambiguous relationship with Swift as resting on the pleasure of continuing Swift's good company and worldly associations, as well as with the general disadvantages of marriage for a woman in the eighteenth century. Whatever personal appeal Tisdall lacked, these explanations seem to me inadequate. Spinsterhood is the least of it, when one considers Hetty's bizarre relationship with Swift. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that Ehrenpreis be right regarding Stella as well as Swift, but his conclusions are again *entirely speculative*. Johnston could not have been pleased to have been attacked and then rejected for his own informed speculativeness, and at the same time to see Ehrenpreis's speculations on the same subject, which Johnston found preposterous, accepted with enthusiasm.

The number of Johnston's writings about Swift is considerable, though there is an inevitable redundancy among them as he repeatedly presses his thesis. These writings were produced over a period of over thirty years, from the radio play in 1938 to a book review in 1970: expository works in the form of lectures, articles, and reviews, and the book; dramatic works for stage, radio, and television.

Clearly, Johnston identified with Swift. At least there are interesting parallels between the scholar and his subject, and it may well be that these apparent likenesses enticed Johnston to his subject in the first place. Both men unquestionably made many enemies, both real and imagined. Moreover, they both took a certain perverse satisfaction in doing so, and were more than normally paranoid and vindictive. Johnston refers to "the Dean's habit [in the *Autobiographical Fragment*] of producing facts in his old age that do not always agree with versions he had already written down." Johnston himself was to do precisely the same thing. He spent his last years revising the diary he had been keeping for over sixty years, often inserting in relevant places long passages which appear to have been written at the times of the events described, but which were in fact inscribed from memory in his old age, with all the hazards to accuracy this method suggests. Johnston comments in regard to Swift's identical procedure in the *Autobiographical Fragment*, which, he says,

has certain peculiarities that strike the eye at once. First of all, it is written in the third person, as if JS, aware of the fact that future biographers would be interested in his background and early life, was eager to give them what appeared to be some outside party's objective outline of what was to be said on the subject, and to save them from the labour of any independent research, or even of thinking up phraseology of their own. . . . For

what, after all, could be more convenient and authentic than a man's own account of himself always assuming that his intention is to inform us, and not the reverse?

Allegedly, this was Bernard Shaw's method as well as Swift's: leaving to posterity, by means of extensive autobiographical writings, an account of things as he wished them to appear rather than as they were. Johnston, who in his youth sat at Shaw's feet, refers to this policy: "Shaw," he says in his 1954 introduction, "used to object strenuously to any independent investigation of his youth. But as soon as he saw that the enquirer was going ahead with it anyhow, he would immediately bury the writer under a mountain of voluntary information." Johnston, in his own very extensive diary, his own "autobiographical fragment," certainly has "future biographers" in mind as he writes, and wishes to be as accommodating as were Swift and Shaw. In fact, Johnston's assiduous journal-keeping (a journal which he specifically directed in his will to be made freely available to scholars) suggests an imitation of Swift writing his *Journal to Stella*.

"As a man," Johnston says of Swift in his 1941 paper, "a large number of intelligent and sensitive women admired and respected him at all stages of his life, and at least two of them loved him, one of them better than life itself." Johnston, even more than most men, would have liked this statement to apply to himself. A passage in his diary from September 1939 seeks to justify his fascination with his subject. It is simply headed at the top of the page with the word "Polyphemus," a reference to the first version of his Swift play. Under it, we find the following list (the list itself being reminiscent of Swift's own list-making habit):

Because it is of Dublin.
Because it is of the great eighteenth century that still lives in odd corners there.
Because it is of Saint Patrick's, with grand organ music, and a strange epitaph upon the wall.
Because it has humour and guts and a queer satirical twist.
Because it [is] about a great man who, in a way, I understand.
Because it enshrines both the love and the hatred of love that torments me too.
Because of the two women, both of whom appeal to me.
Because of the magnificent ready made material.
Because of the insoluble mystery of it all.
Because of the Shakespearean proportions of the characters and the superb tragedy of the plot.
Because it is difficult but worth while.
Because it lightens my own darkness, for I also have loved two women at the same time, wished them both well and inevitably failed them both.

The impersonal observations are mixed with, and ultimately dominated by very personal ones. It has already been noted that Johnston's investigations in the end exonerate Swift of charges that he behaved so badly in his personal life. Johnston may have wished for a similar kind of sympathetic understanding for his own behaviour.

Clearly, he was anxious to identify with Swift. In an "Oration delivered by Hilton Edwards from a script prepared by Denis Johnston on the tercentenary of Swift's birthday in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin", on 30 November 1967, Johnston imagines Swift speaking out on current issues:

Can we not hear Swift calling for the creation of a few Communist cells—dummy ones, if you insist, but as formidable in appearance as possible. For why, he would ask, must Ireland be left out of the world-wide distribution of the American tax-payers' money? What have we done that we alone must pay for the equipment of our Army out of our own pockets. It is because we have no Communists. Let us arrange to have some as promptly as possible, even if we have to pay them a small fee to put up a show, before everything has been emptied down the drain of Vietnam, and the last available dollar has been spent on giving tanks and napalm to the Jews and the Pakistanis.

Perhaps the views expressed here in rather heavy-handed satire could be Swift's as well as Johnston's, as Johnston would like to believe. The two men shared, each in his own generation, an intolerance which comprises one of the least attractive features of their characters.

Swift has, of course, been the object of interest and admiration among many of the most important Irish writers of this century. His name has been one to conjure with, as Yeats does so effectively in some of his greatest poems. Joyce's *Ulysses* is punctuated with Swift quotations. And Denis Johnston's own urbane and witty, often patronizing and abusive satire dictates that he was an admirer of Swift's, as were Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. Pride in their Anglo-Irish heritage, of which Swift was a brilliant component, contributed most visibly to Yeats's and Johnston's enthusiasm for him. Both, as well as Lord Longford, wrote plays about him. And, aside from the play specifically about him, Swift's was one of Johnston's dancing

shadows in his first play *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* ó one of the great literary voices in the play, quoted in order to provide satirical comment on contemporary Irish values.

In fact, Johnston claims that it was not academic ambition or scholarly interest, but his problem as a playwright that set him off on his Swift scholarship. While his enthusiasm for Swift was already well in place in the late 1920s when he was writing *The Old Lady Says 'No!'*, Johnston tells us in his 1941 paper that he “first became fascinated by the problem of Swift after seeing Lord Longford’s play at the Gate Theatre [in 1933] ó a play that brought very vividly before my mind three interesting and vital characters, two women and a man, in a very peculiar and obscure relationship with each other.” He goes on to elaborate, as an introduction to his paper:

What particularly caught my attention after reading several of the published biographies was the fact that the more one read about them ó the deeper one delved in an effort to reconstruct their story ó the more puzzling became the problem of their collective behaviour. It was no good explaining the matter away by saying that the central character, Swift himself, was a very unusual person and could therefore hardly be expected to act in a normal way, because unfortunately the problem of conduct did not end with Swift. It appeared that not only did the Dean require some explanation, but so also did his two women, his mother, his father, his uncle, his patron, his nurse, and his wife’s duenna—in fact everybody in any way closely connected with him, a perfect nest of extraordinary people! Yet few of them gave the impression of being in any way abnormal.

Yeats’s Swift play, *The Words upon the Window Pane*, produced in 1934, the year following Longford’s, does not clear things up, but instead makes them worse, “drawing Swift,” as it does, “as a man haunted by the fear of madness and unwilling to marry on that account. Yet,” says Johnston, “there is nothing in Swift’s works or correspondence to suggest any fear of insanity, least of all a fear that would prevent his marrying.” Yeats, in writing his Swift play, was undoubtedly much more concerned with myth-making than he was with biographical accuracy. But Johnston implies that his own fascination with the subject came to a head when he tried himself to write a play about Swift, and the matter of dramatic realism became a problem. As he says in the 1954 introduction, in his usual condescending tone when speaking of scholars out of English Departments,

There are a great many books on Swift, and what struck me at an early stage of my research was the fact that, however satisfactory they may be to writers of dissertations in the English Departments, to a man of the Theatre, who had to make sense of the story, they were a total loss. . . . [A] Dramatist . . . is only concerned with personal history, and . . . cannot be expected to write a play without proper motivation of the behaviour that he describes.

And in the last introduction Johnston wrote for the play, now specifically for *The Dreaming Dust*, an essay called “Period Piece,” he explains:

A character in a play has to be explained sooner or later to the player who is expected to portray it, and this is no easy task if his or her behaviour bears no resemblance to any known pattern of human conduct, or even to some convention of the stage. Yet here we have a set of characters actually taken from life, the oddness of whose conduct is inescapable, whatever their real motives may have been. . . . While biographers can be intimidated by authorities, playwrights are even more intimidated by the need to make sense that can be explained to a cast.’

In a 3 December 1947 radio broadcast dealing with the three figures, Johnston had maintained that while men tend to believe in, and adore, the sad, devoted and self-effacing, but mythical, Stella, women find her at best unbelievable and at worst boring; they prefer the more real flesh-and-blood Vanessa.

Johnston puts this female cynicism into his play, as the actress playing the double role of Stella and Pride (one of the Seven Deadly Sins) angrily interrupts the action and complains of being given a part that makes no sense. (The play, I should explain, consists of a series of vignettes from Swift’s life, linked by commentary among a group of actors who meet in St Patrick’s Cathedral after having played in a masque of the Seven Deadly Sins. Each vignette portrays Swift as embodying a different sin, and the actors double in their roles as characters representing the Sins in the linking material and as characters out of Swift’s life in the vignettes.) In the vignette just previously presented, Stella has received the letter from Vanessa asking if she is Swift’s wife. At this point, breaking out of her role as Stella and returning to the present as an actress playing the Sin of Pride, she says, “I am not Stella in any sense of the word. I’m not even a credible woman. What woman in her senses would behave like this?” To which the modern Dean of St Patrick’s, who has been playing Swift before the interruption, replies:

Dean (*nervously*). Your behaviour is perfectly reasonable. A very wonderful woman.

Pride. Perfectly reasonable!

Dean. It has satisfied generations of biographers.

Pride (*scornfully*). Swift's biographers—not hers. It's strange for his story that she should be content to live her life as his unacknowledged mistress.

Dean. No! As his secret wife.

Pride. That is worse! If I am your wife, why shouldn't I be recognized? Am I something to be ashamed of?

And so on, continuing to express Johnston's difficulty with accepted versions of the story. Pride says, several lines later: "If I am Stella, I must be a real woman—not a wraith invented by some biographer to explain *his* behaviour." No woman, the actress argues, could possibly behave as Swift's male biographers tell us Stella did. As Johnston says, the playwright must be able "to make sense that can be explained to a cast." Johnston, whose own female dramatic characters, he has noted, tend to be "killers," becomes a former-day feminist.

At the insistence of the indignant actress, the scene moves back in time to a private conversation in the garden at Laracor, where Swift discloses to Stella that while she is Sir William Temple's daughter, he is Sir John Temple's son, hence William Temple's half-brother, and Stella's uncle. And when Stella concludes that "it is a sin for [her] to love" him, Swift explains: "More than a sin, Hetty. It is a crime . . . a crime against Church and State. Do you realize what this means in a world that is filled with bitter enemies? Above our heads hangs the unspeakable charge of incest." This revelation settles the matter between Swift and Stella for a time. But what Swift does not then foresee is the complications that arise because of the sexual attractions of Vanessa, and the fact that he is not so different from other men after all.

In the scene where Stella has received Vanessa's letter, Stella reverses her relationship with Swift, becoming the wise tutor, and he rather a confused pupil. Eventually, Stella diffidently asks: "Presto, are you . . . after all . . . are you only . . ." And he breaks in:

Yes, I'm only a man just like other men! Why not? Time and again I asked myself, what before God, is the impediment? Have I wife of my own, that I must fly from her? Am I to chase after trulls and trollops all my life to keep my thoughts from honest women?

For Ehrenpreis, Swift is not "just like other men." For all his recognition of Swift's human frailties and foibles in other aspects of his life, Ehrenpreis does not allow for them in the Dean when it comes to sex, and maybe he is right. While the information Ehrenpreis provides on their relationship leaves the question quite open in my mind, perhaps nothing physical did occur between Swift and Vanessa. But for Johnston, who approached Swift from the perspective of his own life experience, this does not make sense. Swift had to be as sexually vulnerable as Johnston was himself. The circumstances of Johnston's love life were of course different from Swift's. He did have two wives after all, and hardly the same moral qualms. But, like Swift's, Johnston's love life was complicated—despite the diary entry quoted earlier, it involved three concurrent women against Swift's measly two!—and caused him to have a guilty conscience, even as he rationalized his behaviour. At least in part of this dramatic outburst by Swift can be heard Johnston's plea for tolerance for himself.

Ehrenpreis's and Johnston's speculations on the subject of Swift's love life are different. Whether or not Johnston's biographical theories are correct, they are not entirely unreasonable. Moreover, they make pretty good drama, being more interesting than theories about Swift's lack of money, the surfeit of fruit, the fear of madness, or simply Swift's own eccentricity. Right or wrong, Johnston enhances Swift's humanity, and he feels a strong sense of kinship with him. In the larger picture, Johnston, like Yeats, took refuge from disappointment by joining company with Swift in projecting his own "savage indignation."

* 'Denis Johnston's Jonathan Swift,' *Reading Swift: Papers from The Third Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Real & Stover-Leidig (München, Germany, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1998).