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Against the Experts: Swift and Political Satire

Paddy Bullard

Even when looking the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century, when British satire was at the height of its cultural influence, it is rare to find commentators who had faith in its effectiveness as an instrument of political or social change. The ambition of the age was to produce ‘general satire’, attacking whole descriptions of men and women, if not the entire human species.¹ One of the chief problems with general satire, however, is that the lack of a specific personal target turns the reader’s attention uncomfortably towards the satirist’s motives and purposes. John, Baron Hervey, writing in 1730 against the tide of satirical polemic that had risen since the Scriblerian *anni mirabiles* of 1726-8, was confident that ‘the Honesty of our Minds may recoil against this Propensity to Satyr, and that what is too general, is not universal [...] People may be more shock’d at the Morals of a Satyr, than pleased with his Wit’.² On the opposite side of the debate Paul Whitehead, meditating on the hazards of the satirist’s calling in *Manners: A Satire* (1739), voiced a common sense of abuses outstripping admonitory efforts: ‘Pointless all Satir in these iron Times, /

¹ For a survey of arguments for and against general satire see P.K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1973), 118-145; cf. 73-84, though, for expressions of the ‘orthodox view’ that satire does fulfill warning and monitory functions successfully.

² John, Baron Hervey, *Observation on the Writings of the Craftsman* (1730), 6; see also Hervey’s *A Series of Wisdom and Policy* (1735), 6-7; reflections on satire that is ‘too general’ usually allude to *Gulliver’s Travels*.

Too faint are Colours, and too feeble Rhimes'.³ These attitudes became commonplace in the second half of the century, and the reforming ambitions of satirists were deprecated routinely, even by self-declared satirists like William Cowper:

What vice has it subdued? Whose heart reclaim'd

By rigour, or whom laugh'd into reform?⁴

The most memorable expressions of this theme come from Jonathan Swift, who explored it in the 'Letter from Capt. Gulliver to his Cousin Sympson' added as a preface to *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) in 1735. Half a year after publishing his travels (the Sympson letter is dated 1727) Gulliver 'cannot learn that my Book hath produced one single Effect according to mine intentions'. Seven months should be more than enough time for judges to become 'learned and upright; Pleaders honest and modest, with some Tincture of common Sense... the Physicians banished; the female *Yahoos* abounding in Virtue, Honour, Truth and good Sense'.⁵ It is not immediately clear why Gulliver focuses on the learned professions in this roll-call of the unreformed. Perhaps it is the very busyness of the doctors, lawyers and statesmen – their narrow but instrumental ways of working – that aggravates Gulliver's sense of his own admonitions (and, from our perspective, of Swift's general satire) as pointless.

³ Paul Whitehead, *Manners: A Satire* (1739), 17.

⁴ *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), ii. 147.

⁵ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 10.

In the realm of the state, questions about the efficacy of satire are similarly vexed. Modern historians of the genre doubt that satire had much impact on eighteenth-century political realities. The ascendancy of Tory satirists at the press did nothing to avert the collapse of Robert Harley's Tory ministry in 1714, or to dislodge Sir Robert Walpole during the 1720s and 1730s, even though (as Swift claimed) 'all the writers [were] on one side' during the period – that is, his side, the broad anti-Whig opposition – 'and all the railers on the other'.⁶ In what remains the standard account of relations between satirists and politicians in the early eighteenth century, Bertrand Goldgar finds no evidence of writers urging statesmen to pursue particular measures, or of their campaigns having any discernable political effects: 'the *notion* of all the wit on one side', he concludes, 'had much more political utility than any of the works of wit themselves'.⁷ Satirists adopt shifting *personae*, ironic voices and marginal perspectives, all of which make them ill-suited to the discipline of party organization. 'If satirists for the most part are not committed to a set of political principles', writes Dustin Griffin, 'neither can their work be said to have had much effect on the world of practical politics, either to support tradition or to subvert it'.⁸ Once again it was Swift, whose writings, by Samuel Johnson's estimate, gained him 'such power as... scarcely any man has ever enjoyed without great wealth or higher station', who designed his satires most carefully around their practical limitations. In number 35 of *The Examiner* (22 March 1711) he acknowledged that his attacks on the Whig opposition 'may be call'd Satyr by some unthinking People, as long as that Faction is

⁶ Swift, *PW*, v. 96.

⁷ Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: The Relation of Politics to Literature, 1722-1742* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 218.

⁸ Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 152.

down'.⁹ But as soon as they returned to power, Swift predicted, they would have to acknowledge him, their arch enemy, as their advocate, since all he had done in *The Examiner* was to describe their former measures and predict their future policies. This is at once the essence of Swift's raillery, and the most outrageous of his ironic schemes: to present his satire as the only still and stable truth, and to distort the rest of the world around it.

Critical debates about the political dimension of Swift's writing have tended to dwell on party allegiance and ideological alignment. They usually focus on the social-political structures, in other words, through which a satirist might hope to have an influence on public affairs. Some commentators continue to emphasize the neo-Roman themes of thrift, virtue and liberty that run through Swift's writings, and to stress his basic alignment with Whig principles – Protestant succession to the Crown, frequent parliamentary elections – or even with a Whiggism of the old 'Commonwealthsman' stamp.¹⁰ But the scholarly consensus has moved away from this view. Swift is now seen usually as a Tory by institutional and professional allegiance, and by personal loyalty to fellow veterans of Robert Harley's ministry in the four last years of Queen Anne – albeit a profoundly disaffected Tory by disposition and by experience.¹¹ Questions about Swift's political character form the

⁹ *Swift vs. Mainwaring: The Examiner and The Medley*, ed. Frank H. Ellis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 325.

¹⁰ For Swift's Whig affiliations see J.A. Downie, *Swift: Political Writer* (London: Routledge, 1984), and David Oakleaf, *A Political Biography of Jonathan Swift* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 5; for Old Whig themes see Michael Brown, 'Swift, Satire, and the Problem of Whig Regeneration', *Restoration* 39 (2015), 83-77, at 88-9.

¹¹ F.P. Lock, *Swift's Tory Politics* (London: Duckworth, 1983); Ian Higgins, *Swift's Tory Politics: A Study in Disaffection* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Higgins, 'Jonathan Swift's Political

background of this chapter, but they are not its real concern. The focus here is on how Swift positioned himself against political professionals and experts. Although Swift's family and profession entitled him only to a middling rank in society, his cultural style was aristocratic. He wrote and behaved like a wit, a cavalier, an *honnête homme*:

Humour, and Mirth, had Place in all he writ:

He reconcil'd Divinity and Wit.

He Mov'd, and Bow'd, and Talk'd with too much Grace;

Nor shew'd the Parson in his Gait or Face.¹²

This style – glamorous, unfashionable, and rather absurd in a clergyman – led him into opposition with experts and specialists of all kinds, and put him at odds with what he recognized as a new order of professionals, scientists, bureaucrats, and financiers. As a poet and as a man of affairs Swift aspired to the most general accomplishment, pulled off with the greatest negligence and ease. This cultural self-fashioning is important because it feeds back both into the moral positions he adopted as a satirist, and into the political positions he adopted as a polemicist.

This chapter argues that Swift's concern with expertise in politics was also a widespread, even a dominant one among political writers at the start of the eighteenth century. It shows how Swift and his allies understood expertise in terms of its relation to a broader anti-technical programme of statesmanship, one that also advocated 'common sense' as a positive model for political deliberation and 'wit' as a model for

Confession', in *Politics and Literature in the Age of Swift: English and Irish Perspectives*, ed. Claude Rawson (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3-30.

¹² Swift, *Poems* (Williams), i. 194, 'The Author upon Himself', lines 11-14.

discourse.¹³ Satire was a common medium for articulating this programme, often in terms that were themselves doubled and ironized. Swift and many of his associates deplored secrecy and innuendo in political life and, at the same time, appropriated them as modes for oppositional satire. They painted modern instrumental thinking and modern technocratic politics as dull and clumsy, while adopting the discourses of those experts parodically as ‘mock-arts’.¹⁴ It was the interrelations between this group of satirical themes and political topoi that gave them power and significance at the start of the eighteenth century. Those interrelations now require some reconstruction.

Experts in Early-Modern Political Writing

The expert’s role in government had been an issue for those concerned with political theory long before Swift. A basic problem for anyone trying to trace the history of that concern is that our modern denominative use of the word ‘expert’ to indicate a specialist person dates only to the nineteenth century. In earlier periods the word was invariably adjectival, and closer in meaning to the etymological roots that it shares with ‘experience’.¹⁵ ‘Expert’ persons were associated with practice and habituation, and not with theoretical science or university training, as they are in common usage today. The word has performed a small summersault in signification since the

¹³ See Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 35-54.

¹⁴ See Paddy Bullard, ‘Scriblerian Mock-Arts: Pseudo-Technical Satire in Swift and His Contemporaries’, *Studies in Philology*, 110 (2013), 611-36.

¹⁵ OED

seventeenth century. In his essay 'Of Studies' Francis Bacon presents the relation of 'Expert Men' to learned persons as one of opposition, not identification, as we might expect:

For Expert Men can Execute, and perhaps Iudge of particulars, one by one; But the generall Counsels, and the Plots, and Marshalling of Affaires, come best from those that are *Learned*... Crafty Men Contemne *Studies*; Simple Men Admire them; and Wise Men Use them: For they teach not their owne Use; But that is a Wisdome without them, and aboue them, won by Obseruation.¹⁶

'Expert Men' and crafty men correspond with one another, says Bacon, but it is only expertise modified by observation that has the potential to transform general studies into practical wisdom. The republican James Harrington changed Bacon's emphasis slightly when he quoted these two sentences (reversing their order as he did so, placing more emphasis on the word 'Crafty') in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). Trainee statesmen should certainly drink at the fountains of science, Harrington commented, even if they learn nothing of substance at university: 'But what though the water [ie. academic knowledge] a man drinks be not nourishment? It is the *vehiculum* without which he cannot be nourished'.¹⁷ This is a creative misreading of Bacon's point, which is that learned sciences provide the contents of wisdom, but happen to 'teach not their own use'. The experience that does teach utility is for Bacon a mere vehicle of political science. Harrington, using the same

¹⁶ Francis Bacon, *The Essayes or Counsels, Ciuill and Morall* (1625), 292-3.

¹⁷ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 199.

terms, assumes that only practiced observation of state councils can provide substantial knowledge for government.

Something that Bacon and Harrington share, however, is a sense that the broad categories of learning and experience, when focused on the question of political expertise, ought really to be triangulated against a third category of political doing, which they call ‘craft’. Swift also shared this sense.¹⁸ Learning sits above experience in Bacon’s tricolonic rhetoric, and political craft lies somewhere below it, perhaps providing it with practical foundations, or perhaps subverting it. Harrington’s figurative language inclines more often to the former possibility. Introducing a legislative ‘model’ for Oceana’s constitution, for example, he describes its authors approvingly as master craftsmen, as ‘workmen that squar’d every stone to this structure in the quarrys of antient prudence’.¹⁹ This is a triangle of categories – the scholar, the expert (or person of experience), the craftsman – by which everything that seems solid and foundational in politics and everything that is most provisional and personal can be gathered together.

During the first half of the eighteenth century something surprising happened to this cluster of political keywords. Arguments about statecraft, expertise and the professionalization of politics – arguments that were useful but not important to earlier writers – became central to the public discussion of politics. The most conspicuous indication of this trend was the title of *The Craftsman*, the political journal founded by Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, William Pulteney, and the journalist Nicholas Amhurst, in December 1726, at the start of their determined

¹⁸ See Paddy Bullard, ‘Gulliver, Medium, Technique’, *ELH*, 83 (2016), 517-41.

¹⁹ Harrington, *Oceana*, 72.

campaign of opposition to the administration of Sir Robert Walpole, and a few months after the publication of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift never published in *The Craftsman*, but he identified himself with its cause, and his influence on the journal is pervasive. *The Craftsman* became the longest-running and most famous opposition periodical of the period.²⁰ In the first number 'Caleb D'Anvers' (the journal's fictional editor) tells how *The Craftsman* was chosen as a general title under which to

lay open the Frauds, Abuses, and secret Iniquities of all Professions, not excepting my own [ie. the law]; which is at present notoriously adulterated with pernicious mixtures of *Craft*, and several scandalous Prostitutions.²¹

Caleb's 'chief business', however, is 'to unravel the dark Secrets of *Political Craft*, and trace it through all its various Windings and intricate Recesses'. To the first readers of *The Craftsman* this sort of concern with political deceit, and with the corruption it was assumed to conceal, would have been familiar. It had been the common coin of partisan polemic since the Restoration. Relatively new, however, was the idea that abuses of government were best explained by analogy with a wider scene of corruption among expert members of the learned professions. It is not immediately clear why *The Craftsman*'s founders thought this comparison would be a powerful one. Similarly curious was their decision to describe corrupt professions (and corrupt statesmanship) in terms of their degeneration into 'craft'. Artisans were objects of denigration in classical and humanist culture because their expertise was perceived to be illiberal, their understanding too narrow for the far-reaching affairs of state. It was

²⁰ See Simon Varey, 'The Publication of the Late *Craftsman*', *The Library* 5th ser., 33 (1978), 230-33.

²¹ *Craftsman*, i. 6.

on this basis, for example, that Swift himself attacked lawyers as the professionals who ‘of all others seem least to understand the Nature of Government in general; like under-workmen, who are expert enough at making a single Wheel in a Clock, but are utterly ignorant how to adjust the several Parts, or regulate the Movement’.²² Craftsmen were also expected to be crafty, that is, distinguished by a shallow cunning or a tendency to deceit. In politics this sort of cunning corresponds with the ‘craft’ that Thomas Hobbes (borrowing another phrase from Francis Bacon) called ‘crooked wisdom’, a wisdom that prefers pusillanimous short-term fixes to the long views taken by more magnanimous statesmen.²³ But why did Bolingbroke and Pulteney chose these involved distinctions as the basis for a campaign of popular satire?

Walpole and *The Craftsman*

When satirists wrote during the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century about craft and expertise in politics invariably they had a particular expert in mind: Sir Robert Walpole, the First Lord of the Treasury from 1715-1717 and from 1721 to 1742. Walpole enjoyed the reputation of a supreme political technician. Lord Chesterfield, one of his most effective critics after 1737, stated that ‘he was both the best parliament-man, and the ablest manager of parliament, that I believe ever lived... So clear in stating the most intricate matters, especially in the finances, that, whilst he was speaking the most ignorant thought that they understood what they really did

²² *Sentiments of a Church of England Man* (1711), Swift, *PW*, ii. 23; cf. *Gullivers Travels*, Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 371.

²³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 54; quoting Bacon, ‘Of Cunning’, *Essayes*, 127.

not'.²⁴ This corresponds with J.H. Plumb's summary assessment two centuries later, which emphasizes (without direct reference to Chesterfield) 'the same technical competence, the same clarity, the same simplicity... Walpole's abilities were most clearly recognized in his political *expertise*; in the dexterity with which he managed the House of Commons'.²⁵ 'Dexterity' is a characteristically Swiftian word for describing political ability, and Plumb could almost be channeling Swift's own character of Walpole, sketched in 'An Account of the Court and Empire of Japan' (1728): Walpole 'was perfectly skilled, by long practice,' wrote Swift, 'in the senatorial forms; and dexterous in the purchasing of votes, from those who could find their accounts better in complying with his measures, than they could probably lose by any tax that might be charged on the kingdom'.²⁶

Walpole was a difficult target for literary satirists like Swift because he made no pretense of covering up what those satirists took to be his moral failings. One of Swift's maxims was that 'it is as hard to satirize well a Man of distinguished Vices, as to praise well a Man of distinguished Virtues. It is easy to do either to People of moderate Characters'.²⁷ A reliance on bribery and corruption was the charge repeated most insistently in the pages of *The Craftsman*, charges that Walpole met with bullish

²⁴ Stanhope, Philip Dormer, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, *Characters of Eminent Personages* (1777) 18-19.

²⁵ J.H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole: The King's Minister*, 2 vols., London: The Cresset Press, 1960, ii. 234, 2, Plumb's emphasis.

²⁶ Swift, 'An Account of the Court of the Empire of Japan', *PW*, v. 101.

²⁷ Swift, 'Thoughts on Various Subjects', *PW*, iv. 243.

effrontery.²⁸ Indeed, the first minister's bluff dismissal of the humanistic moral codes rehearsed so noisily by the Patriot opposition often gave a powerful negative energy to his politics. The challenge for his adversaries was to find a way of re-describing as shortcomings what were, in the terms of political realists, substantial strengths. Walpole's authority rested on his understanding of the public finances, and on his effectiveness as a public administrator. So *The Craftsman* set out to present Walpole's technical ability as fraudulent, shallow, corrupt – as an unstable and unpredictable form of expertise.

The satirical strategy indicated by *The Craftsman*'s title took on some of this conceptual instability itself. The metaphors and allegories used by the journal's authors tend to blur the boundaries between straightforward artisanal expertise and despicable Daedalian cunning. In the first number 'Caleb D'Anvers' predicts that he will never run out of material because 'the Mystery of *State-Craft* abounds with such innumerable Frauds, Prostitutions, and Enormities in all Shapes, and under all Disguises, that it is an inexhaustible Fund, and eternal resource for Satire'.²⁹ It was a resource that *The Craftsman*'s authors drew on fairly regularly. The great difference between '*State Craftsmen*' and common artificers, writes 'Jack Hinter' in *Craftsman* no. 8, is that ordinary workmen expect to be rewarded in proportion to the talents, 'and if they do not excel in their Professions, they do not thrive in them. But the Case is very often not the same amongst Those, who govern the great Affairs of the World'.³⁰ A more positive model of Renaissance statecraft follows in *Craftsman* no. 9, which contains extracts from a letter of Polonius-style advice written by Francis

²⁸ Plumb, *Walpole*, ii. 306-7.

²⁹ *Craftsman*, i. 6.

³⁰ *Craftsman*, i. 44.

Bacon to the Duke of Buckingham, concerning the promotion of appropriately talented people to offices of state. ‘The Character of a *great Man* was not to be acquired, in those [Elizabethan] times,’ comments *The Craftsman*,

by understanding the paltry Business of a *Money-Scrivener*, or a *Stock-jobber*; by a Skill in Usury, Brokage, and the Tricks of *Exchange-Alley*; or by colloquing with certain *great Bodies* of Men, in order to defraud, bubble, and beggar the rest of the Nation.³¹

Instead of possessing these Walpolean attainments, a statesman need only prove himself to be ‘a Man of great Knowledge, Depth, and Penetration in publick Affairs’. These positive qualities at first seem almost meaningless in their generality, but they are oriented significantly towards comprehensiveness of understanding. They are at odds categorically with the facility of the political technician, who prides himself instead on ‘*ability*’. ‘What are commonly called *great Abilities*, in this Age,’ according to *Craftsman* no. 99, ‘will appear, upon Enquiry, to be nothing but a little, sordid Genius for *Tricks* and *Cunning*, which founds all its Success on *Corruption*, *Stock-jobbing*, and *other iniquitous Arts*’.³² Here the positive qualities associated with good statesmanship take a pastoral turn, in line with the anti-metropolitan tendency that often accompanies attacks on experts: ‘if you want a Man to employ in any particular *Manufacture* or *mechanic Art*, you will certainly chuse one, who is expert in that Particular; *but in a Shepherd or a Steward, you desire nothing more than Frugality, Labour and Vigilance*’.³³ Such, on the authority of Cicero, were the qualities that Rome expected in her magistrates, and such are the qualities that the

³¹ *Craftsman*, i. 50.

³² *Craftsman*, iii. 92.

³³ *Craftsman*, iii. 93.

British state now requires of its 'stewards'.³⁴ Once again, the generic attainments that we are told to demand of politicians are defined by contrast with the 'expert' specificity of the craftsman's mechanic art.

What are the sources of this awkward, persistent analogy between politicians and artisans? Its origins certainly predate the rise of Walpole. The most prominent seventeenth-century elaboration of the '*State Craftsman*' metaphor appears in the very first paragraph of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, in a rather different form to the one found in *The Craftsman*. Hobbes sets up an elaborate comparison between the artificial life of '*Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch)', and the artificial constitution of 'that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State (in latine Civitas) which is but an Artificiall Man'.³⁵ Hobbes sets up his metaphor to illustrate a materialistic theory of government, so the work of his state artificers is upon the very fabric (that is, the fundamental human materials) of the republic. When Hobbes's contemporaries took up the figure of the craftsman they tended to shift its focus from political making to political doing. In *The Commonwealth of Oceana* James Harrington transformed the idea of the statesman-as-artisan into a complex image of state machinery gripping and turning its various parts against one another, always maintaining the 'rotation' that was essential to his vision of the commonwealth:

The councils of this commonwealth, both in regard of their elections, and, as will be shewn, of their affairs, are uniform with the senat in their revolutions; not as whirlpits to swallow, but to bite, and with the

³⁴ See Cicero, *Pro Cnaeo Plancio*, 62, used as the epigram for *Craftsman*, no. 99.

³⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9.

scruces of their rotation to hold and turn a business (like the vice of a smith) to the hand of the workman. Without engins of which nature it is not possible for the senat, much less for the people, to be perfect artificers in a political capacity.³⁶

Harrington's use of the craft metaphor for political expertise shows a commonwealthsman's optimism about the operability of what are to Hobbes always recalcitrant human materials. Different again is Samuel Butler's portrait of the Presbyterian politician Anthony Ashley Cooper (later first Earl of Shaftesbury, and Dryden's Achitophel) in part three (1678) of *Hudibras*. This is a breathless tale of low cunning, side-switching, and luck dressed up as expertise:

By all these Arts, and many more

H' had practic'd long and much before,

Our *State-Artificer* foresaw,

Which way the World began to draw...

He therefore wisely cast about,

All ways he could, t'*insure his Throat*.³⁷

The difference here is that Butler's Ashley Cooper is someone who operates from the outside on political institutions built up by other hands, almost at arm's length. This is

³⁶ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 123; for prominent use of the same artisanal figure by a royalist, see Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and other Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3-4.

³⁷ Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 245.

distinct from the Hobbesian artificer, whose actions seem positively to constitute the commonwealth, and from the Harringtonian workman, who holds his materials with an anxious grip. The craft of Butler's '*State-Artificer*' is an ephemeral cunning, narrowly political and operative mainly on the material of his own career. It is a diversion from the serious business of state, but it has the potential to cause considerable political damage.

Swift and the Mysteries of Lilliput

Swift was the writer who transformed this statesman-as-artisan figure into a grand satirical theme. Hobbesian and Harringtonian metaphors of political workmanship are mixed together at the very start of the 'Preface' to *A Tale of Tub* (1704), Swift's first major satire, and one for which politics are a marginal but significant concern. The empty tub of the title is a decoy thrown out by sailors on the ship of state to divert a restive popular whale:

The *Whale* was interpreted to be *Hobs's Leviathan*, which tosses and plays with all other Schemes of Religion and Government, whereof a great many are hollow, and dry, and empty, and noisy, and wooden, and given to Rotation. This is the *Leviathan* from when the terrible Wits of our Age are said to borrow their Weapons... And it was decreed, that in order to prevent these *Leviathans* [ie. the wits] from tossing and sporting with the

Commonwealth, (which of itself is too apt to *fluctuate*) they should
be diverted from that Game by a *Tale of a Tub*.³⁸

What Swift finds irresistible is the blend of ordinariness and extravagance in the language that Hobbes and Harrington use to describe political processes. The tenor of that language is witty and rather eccentric, he notices, and yet its vehicle moves irresistibly downwards into a world of artificers and workmen, of mariners and coopers. Of course Swift exaggerates both of these tendencies. He seizes on ‘mechanic’ images of empty barrels, rotating lathes and foundering ships, and turns them into a series of divagating rhetorical automata each with their own artificial life. They generate in turn streams of images and interpretations, possessed of an unpredictable logic, which is harnessed self-reflexively by Swift in his own satire. In ‘The Introduction’ to the *Tale* we are shown three ‘Oratorical Machines’ for the use of ‘Orators who desire to talk much without Interruption’, namely the pulpit (or ‘tub’), the scaffold ladder and the fairground stage. It seems the most reliable ‘machines’ for distracting modern wits away from politics, as the *Tale of a Tub* itself proposes to do, are books, some of which have an animal life of their own in the passage above (as have others in the *Tub*’s first appendix, ‘The Battel of the Books’).

There is an assumption lying behind Swift’s satire here, one that he wants to normalize, and does not think to make explicit: that politics is a vocation for which no expert knowledge (as opposed to general learning) is required, and with which narrow technical training is categorically incompatible. The authors of the Old Whig journal *Cato’s Letters* stated the case straightforwardly in 1721: ‘Of all the sciences that I know in the world’, wrote Thomas Gordon,

³⁸ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), i. 25.

...that of government concerns us most, and is the easiest to be known, and yet is the least understood. Most of those who manage it would make the lower world believe that there is I know not what difficulty and mystery in it, far above vulgar understandings; which proceeding of theirs is direct craft and imposture: Every ploughman knows a good government from a bad one, from the effects of it.³⁹

The three components of Gordon's argument – the idea that the knowledge of politics is easy and open, that it contrasts with closed mysteries of the craftsman, and, implicitly, that it corresponds with the georgic knowledge of the farmer – sit together in way that is familiar from classical and humanist tradition. They are configured similarly, for example, by Xenophon in the *Oeconomicus*: farming prepares men for military and political leadership by making them hardy and generous of spirit, according to Xenophon, where handicrafts make them soft and selfish; husbandry, moreover, is 'easily learn'd, by observing the Workmen now and then, and by consulting those who understand it [...] Artificers, will always keep some Secret of their Business to themselves, but the Husbandmen are open and free in their Discoveries'.⁴⁰ The figure of the virtuous farmer-patriot had less impact on the English political imagination than it did on the commonwealthsmen of the American colonies.⁴¹ The negative side of Xenophon's configuration, however – the denigration

³⁹ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters*, ed. Ronald Hamowy, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), vol. 1, 267 [no. 38, 22 July 1721].

⁴⁰ *The Science of Good Husbandry: or, the Oeconomics of Xenophon*, tr. Richard Bradley (1727), 38, 95, translating Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 15.10-11, 18.9-10.

⁴¹ See Maurie D. McInnes, 'George Washington: Cincinnatus or Marcus Aurelius?', in *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*, ed. Peter S. Onuf and Nicholas P. Cole (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011) 128-68, at 151-153.

of closed craft knowledge, the analogy with civic life – resonated widely, and gives a context for Swift’s satire on mechanics in the *Tale*.

Where the network of values that constructs statesmanship as easy and open (with husbandry as its analogue, and craftsmanship as its opposite) remains largely implicit in the *Tale*, it is fully articulated in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Swift returns to it at several points across Gulliver’s four journeys, and we see it elaborated differently in various moral contexts. In each of the journeys there is technical excellence to be wondered at, since he has the utopianist’s good fortune to be shipwrecked only in advanced civilizations. Lilliput is remarkable for its (relatively) enormous ‘machines fixed on wheels’ and its sophisticated systems of civil bureaucracy; Brobdingnag has its (relatively) fine-fingered carpenters, seamstresses and locksmiths; Laputa, of course, is itself an artificial flying island, although its pilots do not seem to know quite how it works; and the land of the Houyhnhnms has a domestic architecture remarkable in its way for convenience and Stoic simplicity. Moreover, in each of the four journeys the connection between technological regime and political system is made explicit. In Brobdingnag, the wise king is astonished to hear that Europe has produced thousands of technical books ‘written upon the *Art of Government*’: foolish Gulliver is surprised in turn when the king confines ‘Knowledge of governing within very *Narrow Bounds*; to common Sense and Reason, to Justice and Lenity’, and when he argues that the farmer who ‘could make two ears of corn... grow upon a Spot of Ground where only one grew before; would deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country, than the whole Race of Politicians put together’.⁴² In Balnibarbi, the retired statesman Lord Munodi tells Gulliver how expert ‘Professors’ have imposed ‘new Rules and Methods of Agriculture and Building, and new Instruments and Tools

⁴² Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 194.

for all Trades and Manufactures’ on the populace, with famine and impoverishment the consequence of their untried technology.⁴³ The consequences of this specialist meddling are social, but Gulliver also explores their governmental analogue in his account of a similarly disastrous ‘School for political Projectors’.⁴⁴ In the land of the Houyhnhnms, the central criticism levelled by Gulliver’s master at European society – that we have been ‘very successful in multiplying our original Wants, and seemed to spend out whole Lives in vain Endeavours to supply them by our own Inventions’ – is expressed both in disdain for the material overproduction by modern manufacturers, and contempt for the overproduction of civil discourse that Swift identifies particularly with lawyers.⁴⁵ Gulliver’s wisest interlocutors each identify social degeneration and political corruption with the need of learned experts to impose themselves on others.

The clearest statement of this idea, delivered in terms similar to those used a few years before by Gordon in *Cato’s Letters*, is made when Gulliver describes the foundations of the Lilliputian constitution in Part I of the *Travels*. There is a surprising shift of tone here, from the earlier satirical depiction of the Lilliputians as treacherous petty-Machiavellians, to a utopian discourse on their political ideas. As Gulliver reports,

In chusing Persons for all Employments, [the Lilliputians] have more Regard to good Morals than to great Abilities; For, since Government is necessary to Mankind, they believe, that the common Size of human Understandings, is fitted to some Station or other; and that Providence

⁴³ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 256.

⁴⁴ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 275-284.

⁴⁵ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 371, 376, 389.

never intended to make the Management of publick Affairs a Mystery, to be comprehended only by a few Persons of sublime Genius, of which there seldom are three born in an Age: But, they suppose Truth, Justice, Temperance, and the like, to be in every Man's Power; the Practice of which Virtues, assisted by Experience and a good Intention, would qualify any Man for the Service of his Country.⁴⁶

Indeed, it is positively dangerous to entrust public affairs to people distinguished by 'superior endowments of the Mind', because their abilities are likely to be employed in managing and defending their corruptions. Although Gulliver states the idea clearly – that there is no necessary correlation between sound statesmanship and cognitive capacity – there is still considerable circumstantial ambiguity to the passage. Claude Rawson has argued that its altered tone is part of a typically Swiftian literary strategy to unnerve the reader.⁴⁷ Swift is seeking to disconcert political interpretation here as well. It is generally understood that the well-known trials of agility undergone earlier in Part I of *Gulliver* by Flimnap, the Treasurer, and his fellow 'candidates for great Employments', are part of Swift's anti-Walpolean satire against servile, technocratic state-craftsmen. Their dexterity at 'leaping and creeping' is exactly proportioned to their lack of virtue and magnanimity.⁴⁸ However, it is significant that Swift had begun voicing his opinion of those who 'make the Management of publick Affairs a Mystery' as early as 1714, at the end of his brief period of influence as a special advisor to Robert Harley's Tory administration. Indeed, during the decade before Walpole emerged as first minister Swift had despaired of the secretive statecraft of his

⁴⁶ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 86.

⁴⁷ Claude Rawson, *Swift's Angers* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 118.

⁴⁸ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 57.

own political leaders, Harley and Bolingbroke. ‘Mystery’ is a word Swift used to describe Harley’s notoriously secretiveness, his ‘Mysterious and procrastinating Manner’.⁴⁹ One explanation for the elusiveness of Swift’s satire on statecraft in *Gulliver* is that he may have intended it as much for his erstwhile masters – and for Bolingbroke in particular – as he did for his enemy Walpole.

There is evidence to support this hypothesis in several of the pieces that Swift drafted after the fall of Harley’s ministry in 1714. Swift always wrote of Bolingbroke as a person of ‘an extraordinary’ or ‘great Genius’, and claimed to have warned him pointedly that ‘men of great Parts are often unfortunate in the Management of publick Business; because they are apt to go out of the common Road, by the Quickness of their Imagination’.⁵⁰ The possibility that Bolingbroke’s extraordinary mental capacity might be a disadvantage to his politics is explored in *Some Free Thoughts Upon the Present State of Affairs*, a pamphlet that Swift tried and failed to publish in June 1714. It opens with a meditation on the ideas that ‘Politicks were nothing but common sense’, and that statesmen cannot ‘have many Opportunities of shewing their Skill in Mystery and Refinement, besides what themselves think fit to create’.⁵¹ This anticipates a passage in Part III when Gulliver, lapsing into the language of mechanical craft, observes that state intrigues and plots ‘are usually the Workmanship of those Persons who desire to raise their own Characters of profound Politicians’.⁵²

⁴⁹ ‘An Enquiry into the Behaviour of the Queen’s Last Ministry’, Swift, *PW*, viii. 152; cf. *PW*, vii. 74, 178-180; ‘Some Advice to the October Club’, Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), viii. 113; Swift to Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough, 29 May 1714, *Correspondence* (Woolley), i. 601.

⁵⁰ Swift, *PW*, vii. 98; viii. 152; iv.251; cf. viii. 134 on the prodigious ‘accomplishments of his Mind’.

⁵¹ Swift, *PW*, v. 291-2.

⁵² Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), xvi. 282.

Both here and in *Gulliver* Swift adds a providential dimension to the sort of secular maxims found in *Cato's Letters*: 'God has given the Bulk of Mankind a Capacity to understand Reason when it is fairly offered; and by Reason they would easily be governed, if it were left to their Choice'. It is only when severed by statesmen who pretend to great political ingenuity that the thread of natural reason, which should connect citizen with state, is broken. Indeed, their craft lies in the engineering of circumstances in which this rupture can happen. And the great genius whose 'Skill in Mystery and Refinement' Swift means here is Bolingbroke himself, whose political manoeuvres tore apart the Tory ministry in 1714. In July 1714 Swift employed his friend Charles Ford to get *Some Free Thoughts* published anonymously by his own printer, Samuel Barber. When Barber, who did not know Swift was the author, unluckily sought approval for the pamphlet from Bolingbroke, Swift could only laugh: 'how comicall a Thing', he wrote to Ford on 18 July, 'Just as if *the Public Spirit* had been sent to Argyle for his Approbation'.⁵³ Bolingbroke effectively delayed its publication. Within a fortnight Harley had been dismissed from his posts, the Queen was dead, and the political landscape changed utterly.

Swift and Political Satire after 1726

The first edition of *Gulliver's Travels* appeared on 28 October 1726, followed shortly by the launch of *The Craftsman* in the first week of December. There are no direct allusions to Swift's writings in the earliest numbers of the *Craftsman* to support any

⁵³ Swift, *Works* (Cambridge), viii. 481.

conjecture we might make about his influence on the title and framing narrative of the periodical, or on its campaign to expose the ‘secret Iniquities of all Professions’. But references to *Gulliver* become increasingly common as the journal goes on, and Bolingbroke was certainly talking to Swift by the summer of 1727 about helping the opposition’s efforts to ‘revive & animate the paper wars’ of 1711-14.⁵⁴ During Swift’s last trip to England in April-August 1727 he gave Bolingbroke drafts that included ‘A Letter to the Writer of the Occasional Paper’, intended as a contribution to the run of ‘occasional’ and ‘extraordinary’ pamphlets that appeared in support of *The Craftsman*. He was not encouraged to publish, perhaps because the pamphlet attributes to Bolingbroke’s writings a set of equivocal characteristics usually associated with Swift’s own satire:

On the other side, a turbulent writer of Occasional Letters, and other vexatious papers, in conjunction perhaps with one or two friends as bad as himself, is able to disconcert, teaze, and sour us whenever he thinks fit, merely by the strength of genius and truth; and after so dextrous a manner, than, when we are vexed to the soul, and well know the reasons why we are so, we are ashamed to own the first, and cannot tell how to express the other.⁵⁵

Turbulence and dexterity are the sort of qualities that Dryden once associated with Achitophel’s ‘crooked councils’, and it is not surprising that Bolingbroke found their application unhelpful to his cause, however flatteringly they set off the compliment about his ‘strength of genius’. The idea that the *The Craftsman* was set up for

⁵⁴ Swift, *Corr.* (Wooley), iii. 92.

⁵⁵ Swift, *PW*, v. 95-6.

‘vexation’, moreover, is self-projection of Swift’s part: Bolingbroke knew that Swift laid particular claim to that purpose for his own satire. It seems likely that those in charge of *The Craftsman* wanted to keep Swift and the other old Scriblerians at arm’s length from the journal.

We can best see the absorption of Swift’s satire into the fabric of *The Craftsman* in the mock-advertisements that appeared frequently in the journal from its early issues. These contribute to the journal’s anti-Walpolean polemic against expert politicians by deepening a sense of absurdity around the idea that instrumental imperatives could direct civil society, rather than moral ones. The advertisements typically propose fantastic new technologies or projects, creating a strong satirical connection with *Gulliver*, and especially with academy of projectors at Lagado. So *Craftsman* no. 10 advertises a ‘true *political Perspective*, which increases or diminishes any Object at pleasure’, alternately magnifying insignificant dangers and shrinking public debts – a concentrated blend of the crooked technologies of Lagado and Laputan-Brobdingnagian comedies of scale.⁵⁶ Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* essay on Cardinal Richelieu’s academy of politics – itself based on the opening pages of *A Tale of a Tub*, although Swift borrows it back again in Gulliver’s account of Blefuscu’s ‘School of political Projectors’ – is discussed in *Craftsman* no. 170. The author of the number (probably Nicholas Amherst) paints over Addison’s ironic proposals with a further layer of irony:

But I must beg Leave to dissent from that excellent Writer, and cannot help thinking that the Business of *Government* may be much more easily learn’d by Rules and Rudiments, than any other Art, or Science

⁵⁶ *Craftsman*, i. 61 [italics reversed].

whatsoever [...T]he *political Art*, which consists chiefly in *Forms*, *Precedents*, and *Knowledge of the World*, is subject to every Man's Understanding, and requires nothing more than Assiduity and Information.⁵⁷

Amherst's wit here is particularly fine: it takes the humanistic topos of good government being simple, as rehearsed in *Cato's Letters* and *Gulliver*, and misapplies it strategically to a political system that is being narrowed and mechanized by technocrats. There is nothing to Walpolean statesmanship that cannot be learned out of a manual or ledger. Correspondingly, many of the advertisements are for mock-manuals and pseudo-technical treatises: *Craftsman* no. 18 features 'A *New Method of Controversy; Or, An easy Way of shortning Debates, by allowing only one Side to publish their Thoughts*'; no. 56 advertises 'MATCHIAVEL REDIVIVUS; *Or, The MODERN POLITICIAN. In Six Parts. Shewing, [...] the Art of managing a chief Favourite and of tripping up his Heels...*'; no. 202, to take a slightly later example, offers the abstract for 'the Art of Patching up Broken Administrations'; while no. 211 gives 'some Rules for writing in defence of *bad Measures*'.⁵⁸ The influence of John Arbuthnot's fragmentary mock-brochure, *Proposals for printing a very curious discourse, in two volumes in quarto, intituled, Pseudologia Politikē; or, a treatise of the art of political lying* (1712), which was itself an elaboration of the essays Swift wrote on political lying in *The Examiner*, is felt strongly here. Indeed, *Craftsman* no. 39 advertises a new Whig periodical called *The Lye of the Day*, while no. 47 is a 'Persian Letter' about the art and profession of stockjobbers, whose 'commerce is *Lying, political Lying...* They call the chief nominal Commodity in which they deal,

⁵⁷ *Craftsman*, v. 140-5, at 140; cf. *Spectator*, iii. 96 (no. 305, 19 February 1712).

⁵⁸ *Craftsman*, i. 107; ii. 78; vi. 169; vi. 235.

SOUTH-SEA-STOCK. This is worth more or less in *Idea only*, and the *Lye of the Day* takes or does not take'.⁵⁹ In each of these cases the properly moral business of politics has been technologized, a process through which efficiencies and corruptions become indistinguishable.

On the other hand, Swift's influence on *The Craftsman* was limited by the difficulties that Amherst faced when converting *Gulliver's* redoubling ironies into a dynamic polemical strategy. As we have seen already in the case of 'A Letter to the Writer of The Occasional Paper', the ambiguous terms of Swift's satire seem to have raised doubts about their usefulness in Bolingbroke, however much he relished them in private correspondence. Bolingbroke's own polemic practice, if we take the influential 'First Vision of Camilick' (*Craftsman* no.16) as an example, dealt in fairly blunt allegory. Swift's own effort at adopting a similarly straightforward oriental frame in the unpublished 'An Account of the Court and Empire of Japan' (1728), another piece intended for *The Craftsman*, lacks the focus and economy of Bolingbroke's original. Why did Swift fail to engage with the challenge of adapting his own satirical schemes into polemic for the changing political scene? Part of the problem may have been that the conventional commonwealthsman attack on technocratic politics had deep associations with hostility to the Church of England, the clergy being an especially well-established class of crafty 'expert'. Swift took his duties as defender of the church and its servants very seriously, and was particularly scathing when Deist writers like Matthew Tindal used the 'paltry, traditional cant' of connecting statecraft and 'priestcraft'.⁶⁰ In other words, Swift's satire on expert statecraft was subtilized, but also weakened, by his sympathy with the expert classes.

⁵⁹ *Craftsman*, i. 182; ii. 12-15.

⁶⁰ Swift, *PW*, ii. 95.

As Gulliver admits when professing his curiosity about the mechanical academy at Lagado, ‘I had my self been a Sort of Projector in my younger Days’.⁶¹

Swift is fascinated by solid artisanal workmanship, both in the built world and the political state, even though his own ‘trade as a Scholar’ is categorically different from that of the maker.⁶² *Gulliver* shows how sympathetic Swift is with the work of artisans. But an inherited aristocratic-humanist contempt for the banausic arts is still his primary influence when he writes about them. So when Swift imagines in *A Libel on D– D–* (1730), long after his own retirement from politics, what it would be like for his friend Dr. Delany to enter that world, the gulf between scholarship and expert state-craftsmanship becomes a source both of deprecation and of compliment:

True *Politicians* only Pay

For solid Work, but not for Play;

Nor ever choose to Work with Tools

Forg’d up in *Colleges* and *Schools*,

Consider how much more is due

To all their *Journey-Men* than you...

...You, as a *Critick*, are so curious

To find a verse in *Virgil* spurious;

But they can *smoak* the deep Designs,

⁶¹ *CWJS*, xvi. 258.

⁶² Swift to Pope, 10 January 1721, in Swift, *Corr.* (Woolley), ii. 360.

When *Bolingbroke* with *Pult'ney* dines.⁶³

The ironic shifts between approval and satire are neatly poised in this poem: as so often with Swift, they seem at once straightforwardly serious and circumstantially ironic. The master artisan here, for one last time, is Walpole, who is so far gone in opprobrium that Swift can even give him some *bürgerlich* solidity, diverting the satire towards his punctilious ‘tools’ and their vile work. Walpole’s promptness as a paymaster somehow makes their servility more humiliating, as it does again in *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* (1733): ‘A Pamphlet in Sir *Rob*’s Defence / Will never fail to bring in Pence; / Nor be concern’d about the Sale, / He pays his Workmen on the Nail’.⁶⁴ But it also inverts the polite humanist’s value system: the scholar’s learning becomes ornamental, merely ‘curious’, while political jobbers are allowed to negotiate the deeps of political intrigue. For the opposition polemicist, this still concedes too much to Walpole, to the experts, and to the slickly pragmatic political order that they have created. It confers on them the virtues of directness, and the benefits of honest pay. Swift, however, is grappling with a different set of problems to those of the polemicist. In *Gulliver* he seeks to restrain satire’s tendency towards the grotesque and fantastic, towards allegories that are too exuberant, and towards ironies that cannot be resolved. Gulliver’s habit of thinking like an artisan, of looking at the world (and the state) as things that are manipulable and solid to the touch, is crucial to this realist impulse.

⁶³ Swift, *Poems* (Williams), ii. 483.

⁶⁴ Swift, *Poems* (Williams), ii. 646.

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