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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

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"When Epimetheus oped the locks": The Scatological Verses of Jonathan Swift as Statements of Misandry

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Citation:

Melissa M. Sexsmith: "When Epimetheus oped the locks":The Scatological Verses of Jonathan Swift as Statements of Misandry. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2006. Volume 1 Number 1.

Abstract

Jonathan Swift, one of the most famous satirists in the English canon, is renowned for his misogyny and his general misanthropy is infamous; some of the most reviled allegedly antifeminine works he produced are included among a small collection of poems composed by him in the 1730s, known as the "scatological verses." Each of these poems deals with the ostensibly degrading topic of women's bodily functions. Each presents women in a decidedly unsavoury manner, according to the predominant contemporaneous conventions. However, upon closer examination, it is revealed that the victim of Swift's ruthless satires may not in fact be woman, but rather, *man*. Through his expressions of "pity" toward the impractical male "heroes" of the poems, and his deliberate inversion of imagery in the Hesiodic myth of Pandora (placing the blame squarely on Epimetheus' shoulders), Swift endeavours to illustrate that the contemporaneous patriarchal culture and its unrealistic standards of

femininity are deeply flawed.

In a literary tradition and a concomitant cultural milieu wherein an androcentric philosophy had been the predominant intellectual standpoint for thousands of years, and in which misogynic sentiments had been widely promulgated through literature from the time of such ancient philosophers as Aristotle, Juvenal, and the apostle Paul, male writers in the Neoclassical period found ample precedent upon which to fashion their own antifeminist polemics. Indeed, the female gender had found itself denigrated in western literature for millennia, in the tomes of philosophical thought produced by the Greeks and Romans, as well as in the Bible and other early Christian writings; for example, those of the second-century theologian Tertullian, who (rather famously) stated of woman: "You are the Devil's doorway. ...It is your fault that the Son of God had to die" (*De Cultu Feminarium* I.1). Much later, during the Renaissance period in England, the pamphleteer Joseph Swetnam would write regarding the female gender: "they lay out the folds of their hair to entangle men into their love; betwixt their breasts is the vale of destruction; and in their beds there is hell, sorrow, repentance. Eagles eat not men until they are dead, but women devour them alive" (201). The practice of composing tracts of antifeminist invective was one that continued into the Neoclassical period, whose literature — especially that which was composed during the median part of the age, at which time the use of satire came to the fore — often exhibits a certain proclivity for the misogynic.

The foundation for all misogynic sentiments from the time of the very earliest antifeminist writings is the Edenic failing of the first woman, Eve. This is, for example, the basis of Tertullian's comment above. In all Western cultures, there has been some version of the tale of humanity's "great fall," and it has been reproduced repeatedly throughout the history of the male canon of literature. In the Christian myth, Eve, the first woman, leads man into sin. In the Greek tradition the tale involves Pandora, another representation of the entity 'first woman,' who releases into the world all manner of evil. In all versions of the myth, however, whether Christian or pagan, woman invariably is the ultimate cause from which follows an infinite series of subsidiary causes and effects, the end result of which is essentially that man suffers. Out of these myths arise the precepts upon which misogyny is built. In the Greek myth, Pandora is created as "a specious gift from the gods to men, in fact a plague and a curse, and the subtlety of the curse [is] that man can be satisfied neither with her nor without her" (Kane 122). Pandora is irresistibly beautiful and alluring, leading Epimetheus to accept her as a gift from the gods despite his brother's warnings, but she is also created with a "deceitful nature" (Kane 122), and she will ultimately cause the downfall of humankind, just as does her counterpart Eve in the Hebrew version of the myth. Deeply pervasive, and thoroughly grounded in the most commanding of classical authorities, the image of the female as a goddess-like plague upon mankind, and as being

intrinsically linked to evil, remained the predominant image of woman essentially until the explosion of the feminist movement in the twentieth-century. Resultant of the fact that the neoclassical era was so strongly informed by the sensibilities of the ancient authorities, this image dominated with particular force during that period. The Popean perspective, for example, is that: "every woman is at heart a rake" (Epistle 216).

Such strongly vituperative statements regarding the 'second sex' are not merely the postulations of a select few harshly misogynic male writers, but rather are accurately representative of the ubiquitous cultural ethos of eighteenth-century England. Having arisen out of these thousands of years' worth of misogynic sentiments, the neoclassical milieu was characterized by a strong patriarchal and antifeminist disposition. In the twentieth century, Pollak would describe the typical eighteenth-century view of woman thus: "women universally possess unregenerate natures which irredeemably condemn them to lives of vanity and ignorance" (Poetics 42). The former part of the above statement (regarding women as possessors of unregenerate natures) is not unique to the neoclassical era; however, the latter part of the statement (that women are vain and ignorant) is a uniquely eighteenth-century addition, which emerges as a result of the sociological changes that were occurring at the time. Barely preceding the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the neoclassical period saw the development and rapid expansion of a middle class in British society, as well as a significant increase in the standard of living, especially among this particular cohort. Although these social and economic developments provided women of the middle class with greater liberty in terms of leisure time, simultaneously it deprived them of their status as wage-earners and productive members of society, leading to an ever greater subjugation of the sex.

As a result of the emergence of this new requiescent class of woman, eighteenth-century women began to be portrayed as idle and vain strumpets. Pope's *Belinda* (*The Rape of the Lock*), for example, who rises at noon and then passes her day at playing cards, is an epitomic representation of the neoclassical literary portrayal of woman. Even the female writers of the period acknowledge the position of subservience into which they are relegated by the male social hierarchy; Mary Astell, for example, in her "Reflections upon Marriage," acknowledges the active subjugation of her sex by the patriarchy, stating that women who attempt to "improve themselves" are "driven back by the wise jests and scoffs," and going on to describe the manner in which traditionally, literature has portrayed men as having "greater capacities" while presenting women as the "slaves" of men (2283). The reciprocal relationship between literary and socio-cultural elements was such that the cultural image of femininity arose out of the literary tradition in equal degree to which it (simultaneously) fed contemporary literary representations of the female gender. It is thus that the cycle of antifeminist writing perpetuated itself in this period.

Along with Alexander Pope — his contemporary and close friend —

Jonathan Swift is perhaps the best-known satirist of the neoclassical age, and possibly one of the most infamous misogynists in British literature. It is from Swift's pen that have flowed such inglorious images of femininity as that of "[woman as a] nauseous unwholesom living Carcase" and of woman without her "paints" as "the ugliest sight I have seen, pale, dead, old and yellow" (quoted in Flynn 110). The "haughty Celia" (2), the victimized and degraded female character of Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room" is (similar to Pope's *Belinda*) another of the prototypical neoclassical literary depictions of femininity — at least insofar as she is represented in the poem's opening lines — requiring "five hours" (1) to dress, and subsequently emerging from her chambers the true image of a "goddess" (3). It is the accepted critical stance regarding this and many of the other works of Jonathan Swift that they are deeply misogynistic and that this misogyny is evidenced in the awful satirization and sordid representation of all things archetypically feminine in the works. John Middleton Murray, for example, one of the most preeminent writers to have written a biography of Swift, declares the theme of these works to be "so perverse, so unnatural, so mentally diseased, so humanly wrong" that "one jibs even at copying" lines from one of the verses (440). Hesitating even to categorize Swift's works as real art (he uses the derisive expression "such a 'poem'" in referring to "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," for example (438)), Middleton Murray states that the "horror" inherent in these works "proceeds ...from the writer's total lack of charity, his cold brutality, towards the wretched woman ...It is utterly inhuman" (439). Middleton Murray clearly displays a strong emotional reaction to these particular works; however, his criticism is perhaps somewhat myopic and too highly informed by this initial reaction to the repulsive nature of the verses, and thus may be seen to be in ignorance of the deeper social significance of the works. Though the initial response of the reader may be one of outrage regarding Swift's indelicate treatment of femininity, it is the postulation of this paper that upon further examination the reader will undoubtedly discover that Swift does not in fact intend these works to be antifeminist or misogynistic, but rather intends them as a reflection of his commitment to the revelation of the flaws of contemporaneous society, and that indeed they are quite clearly misandric in their implications.

In "The Lady's Dressing Room," Swift inverts the archetypal image of 'female goddess,' and delights in his own meticulous effacement of the image. Through the deliberate projection of masculine characteristics ("hairs that sink the forehead low, / Or on her chin like bristles grow," (57-58) for example) onto the "goddess" (3) Celia, and the revelation of the revolting degree of her humanness ("Celia shits!"), Swift deprecates the dominant image of the female as the paradigm of goddess-like perfection and purity. The imagery in the poem offers a systematic replacement of characteristics of feminine beauty with elements of the grotesque. Through the eyes of the voyeuristic and intrepid Strephon, Swift explores the secrets of feminine beauty; Strephon, far from finding himself in a world of wondrous sights and miraculous beauty, instead finds himself transported to a hellish world of disarray, waste, and filth. He

observes "A paste of composition rare, / Sweat, dandruff, powder, lead and hair" (23-24), "A nasty compound of all hues" (41), and, most repulsive of all, "Those secrets of the hoary deep" (98). Olfactory images are equally as prominent (and as nauseating) as the visual images in the poem, as when Strephon encounters "pinners reeking" (53), and the "excremental smell" (111), among others. While the poem bombards its reader with appalling images of filth and bodily fluids, and while this (seemingly) negative portrayal of femininity has led critics to view the piece as antifeminist, in truth none of the discoveries that Strephon makes can be said to be fundamentally untrue of womankind. Through the "inventory" (10) provided by Strephon, Swift presents us with an image of a Celia who "shits," "sweats," "spews" and "spits;" her body produces "ear wax" and "snot" (118,45, 42). She resorts to the use of ghastly compositions — "night-gloves" fashioned from the hide of her own beloved former pet, for example (29) — in order to achieve the status of "goddess" (3). However crudely these facts are presented in the poem, they are nonetheless the realities of womanhood in Celia's time, and thus their description cannot in any way be said to be antifeminist — Swift tells us that women defecate, but indeed, they do! The female subject, therefore, is not the focus of Swift's satirical jest. Rather, it is the male, and his unrealistic expectations of femininity. It is "wretched Strephon" (129) that is subject to the "pity" (129) of the narrator. The poem's intent is thus to highlight the absurdity inherent in the belief that women are incapable of producing the same bodily fluids and excremental waste as do men.

The expression of such sentiments can be found in a number of Swift's works, most notably a group of poems known as his 'scatological verses,' a group of poems composed in close succession to one another, whose focus is upon the bodily functions of the female gender, and among which is included "The Lady's Dressing Room." In "Strephon and Chloe," for example, Swift, using a sardonic tone, describes the "beautiful nymph" (3) Chloe thus:

No humours gross, or frowzy steams,
 No noisome whiff, or sweaty streams,
 Before, behind, above, below,
 Could from her taintless body flow.
 ...Her dearest comrades never caught her
 Squat on her hams to make maid's water.
 You'd swear, that so divine a creature
 Felt no necessities of nature. (11-20)

Here, our hero Strephon is mortified to learn that his new bride — a "Venus-like" goddess whose "fragrant skin / Exhaled ambrosia from within" (87-88) — is capable of urination, and thus is "as mortal as himself at least" (186). In an appeal much akin to the previously examined declaration regarding Celia's capacity for defecation, Strephon exclaims "Ye gods, what sound is this? / Can Chloe, heavenly Chloe piss?" (177-178). Once again, though his presentation is crude and his imagery unsettling, Swift never speaks in

inaccurate or demeaning terms of the female gender. As a matter of fact, it is once again Strephon and the other similarly disillusioned members of his sex who are the subjects of Swift's sarcastic denigration. Husbands like Strephon are described as being "deluded" (143) in their belief that their wives are goddess-like in their purity and cleanliness, while parents are playfully warned to keep their daughters from "guzzling beer" and "[tasting] what causes wind" (116, 124), for "Carminative and diuretic, / Will damp all passions sympathetic; / And, love such niceties requires, / One blast will put out all his fires" (133-136). Here Swift suggests that the masculine obsession with female beauty is a dangerous threat to human happiness, as it deludes man and leads him to utter disenchantment. Upon marrying the goddess of his dreams, man will undoubtedly discover that she is in fact as mortal, as imperfect, and indeed even as uncleanly as he is. These statements clearly emphasize the capriciousness of male lust and implicitly challenge the prevalent emphasis upon the physical attractiveness of the feminine.

By criticizing the absurd posturing of the dominant patriarchy, Swift — acting in a manner characteristic of many of his other writings — expresses a broader intent: to shed light upon the failings of British patriarchal society as a whole. Notorious even in modernity as a misanthropic malcontent, Swift wrote many of his most famous pieces as cynical and satiric statements on the degenerate state of contemporaneous British society. Just as in his famous "A Modest Proposal," Swift's intent is not truly to present a convincing argument for the cannibalistic consumption of children, but rather to illuminate for an English audience the circumstances of destitution and misery being experienced by the Irish people, in the same way, it is not his intent in these works to display the degenerate nature of woman, but rather to present his male audience with an alternate image of femininity that, though rather revolting, is much closer to truth than their prevailing delusion.

Perhaps the single most telling indication of Swift's true ideology comes in the seventh movement of "The Lady's Dressing Room," which relates the Greek myth of Pandora's Box thus:

As, from within Pandora's box,
When *Epimetheus* oped the locks,
A sudden universal crew
Of human evils upward flew;
He was still comforted to find
That hope at last remained behind. (83-88,
emphasis mine)

This passage has monumental implications upon the work as a whole, for while the legendary account has Pandora opening the container in which all evil was contained, thus causing the downfall of man from a state of pleasure to one of toil and pain, here Swift transfers the blame from Pandora to her husband, Epimetheus. Swift's deliberate alteration of the myth, incriminating

man as the cause of his own demise, functions as a startling admission by a member of the male patriarchy that perhaps the female gender ought not to be subjugated in the manner that she has been for the entire course of Western literary history. In fact, through the inversion of the myth and the presentation of the male as the responsible party, Swift not only challenges thousands of years of literary tradition, but also dismantles the very threshold of misogyny. Woman's subjugation by man has no basis if not in the Greek or the Hebrew myths of the weakness of 'first woman,' with all later antifeminist writing taking one or the other of these texts as its precedent. And so, if in Swiftian ideology we find that Pandora is innocent of having released all manner of evil into a world wherein "before this men lived free from ills, hard toil and oppressive sickness" (Hesiod quoted in Kane 122), we must logically assume that simultaneous with the erasure of her guilt comes her elevation from subjugated to at least equal status.

Further still, by substituting Epimetheus as the responsible party in the fall of humanity, Swift effectually exposes the male gender to the same manner of defamation that has traditionally been imposed upon the female gender as a result of the Eve/Pandora myth. Indeed, were the Swiftian version of the myth alike to that which has been historically disseminated among all Western cultures, not only would the male gender have no basis upon which to slander their female counterparts, but the logical and theoretically commensurate reaction of the female gender would in fact be to subjugate and malign the male gender. Truly, in a parallel history wherein the very basis of gender relations had been grounded in a myth whose outcome was opposite to that of the Pandora/Eve myth, man very likely might have found himself the subject of such defamatorily misandric allegations as "You are the Devil's doorway." Perhaps through the inversion of the role of responsibility, attributing to Epimetheus the blame traditionally attributed to Pandora, Swift wishes to inspire in his male readers an objective reconsideration of the manner in which they continue to subjugate the female gender, and to present them with the possibility that they too could just as easily be placed in such a position of gender-based oppression.

In these works, Swift has endeavoured to invert the classical view of femininity, and consequently to invert the image of man as dominant over the weaker woman. Woman is shown to be capable of the same humanity as is man, which constitutes and iconoclastic rebellion against the neoclassical image of the female-as-goddess. Man, meanwhile, is presented as a deluded and flawed entity, and is ultimately consigned to the very position which for millennia he has relegated woman. In lowering man to this position of subjugation and simultaneously elevating woman to the coveted place of power over man, Swift illustrates very clearly that his feelings towards the male members of his race are feelings of disgust and abhorrence (similar to those historically articulated in reference to women), while his attitude towards the females is characterized by a much more sympathetic stance. And so it can be seen that the 'scatological verses' of Jonathan Swift perhaps ought not to be

viewed as they have been by the majority of literary criticism, that is, as antifeminist writings produced by a heartless and misogynic poet. Rather, these works perhaps ought to be read as representative of his "commitment to honesty, however unpleasant, and [his] recognition that honesty may often involve unpleasantness because of the deeply flawed nature of the human character" (Nokes, 180).

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ISSN 1718-8482

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