When Joel Weinsheimer and Jeff Smitten took over Studies in Burke and His Time in 1976 and rechristened the journal as The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation two years later, the new editors noted that “since its inception . . . the journal has continually expanded its scope, growing from a concentration on Burke and politics to its present multidisciplinary breadth.” If that impetus toward interdisciplinary expansion reached a methodological turning point in 1978, the subsequent history of ECTI has indicated the commitment of new generations of editors—Bob Markley (1982-present), John Samson (1986-1990), Bruce Clarke (1988-1997), Joel Reed (1992-2001), Hans Turley (1997-2005), and Tita Chico (2001-present)—to an ongoing dialogue among various approaches to the eighteenth century: old and new historicisms, feminist theory, cultural studies, hermeneutics, and cultural materialism. As the first journal to bring the discourses of theory into eighteenth-century studies in a self-conscious way, ECTI remains open to any critical methodology committed to a rigorous, self-critical examination of the ways in which we read literature and culture between 1660 and 1830. Yet in the last twenty years, our understandings of “literature” and “culture” have themselves undergone a significant revaluation. The nature of interdisciplinary studies imagined in the 1970s has long since been transformed, in this journal and elsewhere, into a range of dialogic inquiries that continually redefine our understandings of both the long eighteenth century and the ways in which we write about it.

The essays published over the past two decades reflect our commitment to work that pushes readers to think anew in theoretically self-conscious terms, whether in topic or methodology. As every issue of The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation indicates, we define “the eighteenth century” in broad terms. Our contributors give voice to a range of cultural and national traditions, and represent not only a number of disciplines, but testify to the significance of cross-, inter-, and multi-disciplinary work in twenty-first century scholarship. While the term “theory” in our title comes from an earlier time, the so-called “theory wars” of the 1970s, the subtitle of the journal—Theory and Interpretation—signals our continuing commitment to theoretically-informed rigor and variety, where the very terms of analysis are themselves objects of analysis.

Our recent and forthcoming special issues reflect this intellectual endeavor. In 2003, our long-time editorial colleague Hans Turley edited a double issue entitled, “Preposterous Pleasure: Homoeroticism and the Eighteenth Century,” a collection of essays devoted to re-thinking what queer theory means in eighteenth-century studies. Robert Markley’s 2004 special issue, “Europe and East Asia in the Eighteenth Century,” features work that moves beyond the Eurocentric boundaries that have typically characterized readings of the Far East. Upcoming issues similarly forge new connections among and between disciplines to enhance our
critical conversations, to recast our understandings, and to pose new questions. Essays collected in a special issue, edited by Sharon Harrow, to honor J. Douglas Canfield’s contributions to eighteenth-century studies, focus on issues of economics and class; our 2006 special issue, edited by Ruth Perry, features essays on ballads and songs in the eighteenth century. The articles we publish in our other issues each year similarly exemplify cutting-edge work, offering theoretically sophisticated analyses of nationalism, gender and sexuality, race, royalism, imperialism, abolition, anatomy, the grotesque, credit, and historiography, among other topics. If the academic terrain in 2005 looks very different from that of 1978, our editorial commitment to innovative scholarship remains the same.

Penn Press is now publishing *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, but we have included on this website an expanded, on-line version of our Essay-Review section. The *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* publishes substantive reviews, 1200 to 2000 words in length, that discuss recently published scholarly works in the contexts of current developments and debates in and among disciplines. Given the number of books in eighteenth-century studies published each year, we are committed to using this site as a means to supplement those reviews that are printed within the journal itself. Reviews that appear on-line this fall will be indexed as ECTI 45 (2004), Supplement ([http://ecti.english.illinois.edu/links-content.html](http://ecti.english.illinois.edu/links-content.html)). In this respect, the on-line presence of the journal will strengthen our commitments to both cutting-edge work and continuing dialogue.

Tita Chico, University of Maryland
Robert Markley, University of Illinois
Essay - Reviews

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Sarah Alderfer, "Politics, Deception, and the Novel"

Susan Carlile, "Politics: The Business of a Woman"

Shelly Charles, "L’homme sans qualités; l’abbé Prévost, ou l’écrivain à l’école du commerce"

Ian Higgins, "Jonathan Swift's Political Biography"

Elaine McGirr, "Genre and Gender: Time for an Inclusive Literary History"

Sally O'Driscoll, "Nostalgia for 'Inherent Perfection': The Incorporation of Balladry into Poetry Itself"

Laura Rosenthal, "Men Behaving Badly"

Beth Kowaleski Wallace, "Oh You Beautiful Doll: Objects in Eighteenth-Century Culture"

The Editors would like to thank the following Editorial Assistants for this volume: Ly’Tanya Culbert, Kolbe Krzyzanowski, Marie M. Mayhugh, Rebekkah Owens, Sandi Parker, and Erin York.

Volume 52, 2011, Supplement

Marilyn Francus, "The Authoress in Winter"

Tonya Howe, "Taking the Coquette Seriously"

Edward Jacobs, "Shrinking Historicism"

Phebe Jensen, "Oral Culture and Religious Identity"

Bridget Keegan, "What Do Servants Want?"

Donna Landry, "Green and Peasant Land?"

John Patrick Montaño, "A Variety of Viewpoints: Charles II and the Cavalier Parliament"

Daniel O'Quinn, "The Structural Transformation of Domiciliary Entertainment"

Alaina Pincus, "Situating Freethinking in the Early Enlightenment"

Jerry B. Vannatta, M.D., "Anesthesia and Literature: Breathing 'the Vapour of
Jonathan Swift’s Political Biography

Ian Higgins
The Australian National University

David Oakleaf’s *A Political Biography of Jonathan Swift* (Pickering & Chatto, 2008) is a welcome addition to the publisher’s Eighteenth-Century Political Biographies series edited by J. A. Downie. Jonathan Swift was a master of the closely allied forms of political pamphleteering and satire. In this lucid and accessible book, Oakleaf offers an informed, nuanced, and generally careful account of the political life and works of this famous polemicist and satirist.

In Swift’s lifetime politics and aesthetics were intertwined, and Oakleaf observes how Swift’s literary triumphs were also political ones. The biography is based on primary and secondary sources that will be familiar to specialists. While it does not offer new information or a revisionist interpretation, this new biography of Swift is acute in emphasizing how the cultural memory, experience and anticipation of war, Swift’s Irish perspective on English affairs, and his identity as a minister of the established Episcopal Church of Ireland are central to his writing, inflecting his attitudes in affairs of church and state. The book properly insists on Swift’s prickly independence as a writer and points to the paradoxes of his political life. Swift struggled to define himself in relation to contemporary party politics without compromising his independence and it has proved notoriously difficult to place Swift on the political spectrum of his time. His rhetoric displayed an extremism that did not always reflect what appears, on the extant evidence, to have been his actual, more conservative political positions. This study draws on existing scholarly work to situate Swift in his historical context while indicating how this edgy, retro satirist still arrests attention and provokes readers today. As Oakleaf concludes: Swift’s “passions were . . . perhaps more extravagant than his positions, but his anger and the intensity of his horror at human oppression somehow allowed an intolerant sectarian cleric born in the seventeenth century to find voices in which readers today can address their own problems” (201). Swift’s satire has real targets and punitive intensity, but it is usually presumed not to be entirely negative; that it was part of Swift’s attacking purpose to imply positive alternatives to what the satire exposes and repudiates. A task for the political biographer is to try to identify what Swift’s political views and alternatives might have been.

The introductions to the standard twentieth-century edition of Swift’s prose works, edited by Herbert Davis and others, presented Swift as essentially a moderate in religion and politics, someone who avoided “the Extremes of Whig” and the “Extremes of Tory,” as Swift himself put it in his position statement of 1708, *The Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man.* ¹ Davis averted his attention from evidence of extremism. He was disturbed, for example, by Swift’s violent invective against Ulster Scots Presbyterianism, but opined that Swift’s immoderate attitudes on the subject were out of character. The contrast between such a modern reading of Swift’s political writing and the view of many contemporary Whig readers is stark.
For them Swift was an extremist, “a Divine that scatters Fire-brands, Arrows, and Death,” as the Irish Whig Matthew Concanen put it in 1727, a Sinon fanning the flames within the walls of King George’s Whig realm. While Oakleaf has written a fine book that can be highly recommended, it does tell a familiar modern story about Swift’s politics. Swift shares animosities rather than principles with those on the political extremes of Whig and Tory. Really, Swift was a moderate to be situated on the broad middle ground occupied by pro-Revolution Tories and constitutionally conservative Whigs (5, 44). He was a High Churchman and a Whig. Like the editor of this series, Oakleaf considers Swift’s well-known self-description as an Old Whig to be an accurate likeness (4). Swift wrote in the Sentiments that to “enter into a Party as into an Order of Fryars, with so resigned an Obedience to Superiors, is very unsuitable both with the civil and religious Liberties, we so zealously assert.” Swift’s polemical writing and political statements, whether on the Whig or Tory side in affairs of Church and State, reflect a strong degree of idiosyncrasy and independence, as do the marginal annotations he made in books he read. However, I think that a High Churchman advancing Old Whig maxims against Whig government ought to have been given more scrutiny than is provided in this book.

Swift received preferment from the Whigs in the 1690s. He was a protégé of the Williamite Sir William Temple, received an Antrim parish under the Whig Lord Capel, and became a chaplain to another Whig, the Earl of Berkeley. However, Swift’s High Church confession, particularly his hostility to Dissent, seems to have been a problem for English Whigs, because although he solicited further preferment it did not materialize from the Whig side of politics. By 1710, Swift had gravitated to Robert Harley whose High Church allies included Francis Atterbury (an admirer of Swift’s writing who became his friend) and Thomas Lindsay (who, like Swift, began his political career with preferment from Lord Capel and ended it with the reputation of being a Jacobite). As Oakleaf shows, Swift wrote for the new Tory government because he believed in its causes, especially its aim of ending the war with France. The sometime-Whig was now a naturalized Tory. Appointed Dean of St Patrick’s by the Tories, Swift would remain loyal to the Tory government leaders in the worst of times after the Hanoverian accession. This enemy of parties did let slip that the Tories were “my party” in a letter to the High Church Tory leader Bishop Atterbury in 1717.4

Oakleaf says that even “as a Tory” Swift “worked best and most closely with Old Whigs like Harley, resisting the commitment to a more thoroughly partisan politics” (4). It might also have been noticed that when the Tories were in power, Swift collaborated with the High Tory Lindsay in a thoroughly partisan attempt to place Tories on the Irish Episcopal bench and in positions of influence. Swift was particularly concerned to purge Old Whigs from office. In a paper submitted to Harley, Swift marked out the famous Old Whig Robert Molesworth as “the worst” of the “very bad” Whig Privy Councillors, one of the principal targets in a desirable Tory party-political revolution in Ireland.5 A defining characteristic of Old
Whiggism is its anti-clericalism. In associating Swift in an essentialist way with Old Whig politics, Oakleaf does occlude what he elsewhere in the book contends is crucial for our understanding of Swift, that is, the political implications of his identity as a High Churchman.

Oakleaf comments that Swift’s “distrust of standing armies and preference for annual parliaments align him with his usual Old Whig stance,” but he notices that Swift felt that these principles were not fashionable among the Whigs. Swift wrote that “by advancing certain old whiggish principles . . . I have passed for a disaffected person” (162). Swift was right and deliberately ingenuous. In fact, hostility to standing armies and support for frequent parliaments were not always the Old Whig line. The Old Whig’s Cato’s Letters (1720–23), for example, fearing High Church counter-reformation and Jacobite counter-revolution admitted the necessity of standing armies and septennial parliaments. Molesworth supported Whig government measures such as an augmented standing army and a Septennial Act as necessary security for the Hanoverian succession. When Swift wrote as a Whig, publishing A Discourse of the Contests and Dissentions (1701) and Temple’s Letters (1703), he apparently approved of a standing army and foreign military intervention. But in A Tale of a Tub, unpublished at this time, and in his later Tory writings and Gulliver’s Travels (1726), Swift savages standing armies. Swift’s usually unqualified and destructive opposition to standing armies aligns him not with an Old Whig but with a consistent country Tory and Jacobite stance during his political lifetime. Similarly, support for annual parliaments was a Jacobite stance from almost the beginning of William III’s reign. The Jacobite Charlwood Lawton’s clandestine Some Reasons for Annual Parliaments, in a Letter to a Friend (1693), for instance, is a classic epitome of the Jacobite case, arraigning a despotic monarch and government. In 1693, William III was in breach of the Triennial Act of 1664, not having held a general election since 1690, and he was using his veto to prevent a Triennial Bill in 1693. Swift’s first experience of high politics was as an emissary for Temple attempting to persuade William III to accept the bill for three-year parliaments. Swift’s support for frequent and indeed annual parliaments, whether seen as Whig or as “disaffected,” might have been contextualized in line with the emphasis of this book on Swift’s Irish perspective. The Irish Protestant community had consistently desired annual parliaments as a constitutional right and as a means of limiting the duration of financial supply to the court administration.

One of the repetitions in Oakleaf’s book is the assertion that Swift supported the Glorious Revolution and was always committed to the Revolution settlement. Swift is seen as an uncomplicated Whig on this point. Swift’s views on the events of 1688–89 might have been scrutinized more in line with the importance Oakleaf accords to Swift’s High Church religious views, particularly his hostility to Protestant Dissent and especially to Scots Presbyterianism. And Oakleaf might also have attended more to Swift’s three kingdoms perspective. We have a contemporary Swiftian response to the Revolution in Ireland in his first published poem, “Ode to the King on His Irish Expedition”(1691). The poem reflects the fact of war and the breakdown of government. James II had abandoned the Anglican community of allegiance. William III was the military instrument to reconstitute the political
authority of the ethnically English and the Church of Ireland as by law established. The poem applauds William’s victory against James II and Louis XIV in a war of kings, but Swift looks to William to address what is presented as the chronic problem in Ireland and suppress Ulster Scots Presbyterianism. It is highly questionable whether Swift supported the Revolution settlement in Scotland; indeed his sympathies seem to have been with the Jacobite counter-revolution there. In Sentiments, Swift says that for a Church-of-England man the abolition of episcopacy would be a scandal and calamity. In private marginalia Swift blamed William III for the abolition of episcopacy in Scotland in 1689 and praised the Jacobite leader Viscount Dundee as the best man in Scotland. Swift was the ghost writer of Memoirs of Captain John Creichton (1731), a sympathetic account of an Episcopalian Jacobite soldier who fought against the covenants, and then against the Williamite revolution. Swift’s marginalia in histories of the time indicate that privately Swift regarded the Williamite Revolution as a premeditated usurpation. In England, Swift gives unqualified support to what the historian Mark Goldie has called the Anglican Revolution of 1686–88: the Church of England’s attempt through civil disobedience to thwart James II’s experiment in Roman Catholic and Dissenter absolutism by opposing his prerogative toleration of Roman Catholicism and Protestant Dissent. Revealingly, Swift approved the Whig Lord Somers when “pleading for the Bishops whom King James had sent to the Tower” but arraigned Somers for his Williamite Whiggism presented as a post-1689 Puritan political revival: “the old Republican Spirit, which the Revolution had restored, began to teach other Lessons: That, since we had accepted a new King from a Calvinistical Commonwealth, we must likewise admit new Maxims in Religion and Government” (quoted in Oakleaf, 49). Swift’s allegory of the Revolution in A Tale of a Tub (1704) presents Peter (Roman Catholicism) collaborating with Jack (Protestant Dissent) to dispossess Martin (the Church of England). After the Revolution, Jack is still dangerously at large with power.

Born after the Stuart restoration, in Charles II’s reign, Swift died in the year of the failed Stuart restoration attempt of 1745. The Stuart dynastic revolutionary alternative to the post-1689 settlement was a fact of Swift’s adult political life. The consonance of Swift’s political rhetoric with Jacobite polemic (which had appropriated the political ideologies of ancient constitutionalism and classical republicanism and was certainly not the Roman Catholic royalist absolutism of Whig caricature) gave Swift’s work a dimension of polemical provocation and seditious significance. Oakleaf acknowledges but also tends to occlude Jacobite connections reiterating that Swift had never taken Jacobitism seriously although the Tory party and ministry for which he wrote were suspected of Jacobitism. Actually, all we really know is that the evidence upon which a judgment on the subject might be made has been destroyed. Swift told Lady Elizabeth Germain in 1735 that when he was leaving England after the death of Queen Anne he had burned all the letters he had received from the Tory ministers over several years. The Duke of Ormonde had been alarmed by reports that Swift’s papers had been seized by the Whig authorities in 1715, but trusted that Swift’s prudence would prove his innocence. Technically, Swift’s correspondence with known adherents of the Pretender put him
in breach of the treason statutes. Considering the fact that one could be charged with high treason and incarcerated for possessing letters from Charles Wogan, as had happened to the lawyer Francis Glascock in the 1720s, it is a rare good fortune that Swift’s famous correspondence with the Irish Catholic Jacobite exile has survived. Swift’s praise of the Irish Jacobite diaspora in his first letter to Wogan of 1732 is well known.

This book negotiates the received scholarly interpretations of Swift’s politics to give a discriminating account of the current state of knowledge. When it gives attention to the topical particularity of Swift’s writing it discloses an interesting and alarming political writer who does not fit into any simplifying modern historical categorization. The book is clearly written. The rather frequent use of exclamation marks in the book can be excused as the punctuation is certainly prompted by the subject of this biography!

NOTES

1. Herbert Davis is the editor of the standard edition of Jonathan Swift’s prose works; some volumes were edited with other scholars. For characterizations of Swift’s religious and political moderation, see Davis et al., ed., The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift, 16 vols. (Oxford, 1939–74), 2:15–17 and 3:24. For Swift’s “Extremes of Whig” and “Extremes of Tory,” see The Sentiments of a Church-of-England Man, With Respect to Religion and Government [1708], 2:25.


February 11, 2009

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Dear Dr. Higgins:

We are pleased to accept your essay-review of David Oakleaf’s A Political Biography of Jonathan Swift for publication in the Annual Supplement of The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation. Your piece makes a valuable contribution to discussions about Swift’s political interests, and we are delighted to have the opportunity to publish it. Our Managing Editors will be in touch with you if they have any questions about copyediting matters, and please do not hesitate to get in touch with me if you have any questions.

With Best Wishes,

Robert Markley
Professor
Editor, The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation