

Jonathan Swift Contra John Dunton

In 1705, there appeared the very peculiar Life and Errors of John Dunton, “Written by Himself in Solitude.” This book traces the life of John Dunton, Bookseller and founding member of the Athenian Society, in whose honour Swift penned his first published work, “An Ode to the Athenian Society” (1691). This Dunton proudly recalls:

“Mr. Swift, a Country Gentleman, sent an Ode to the Athenian Society, which being an Ingenius Poem, won prefix to the Fifth Supplement of the Athenian Mercury.”

The epithet, “a Country Gentleman”, is partly Dunton’s creation and partly Swift’s. Swift’s introductory letter mixes self-aggrandizement with self-effacement. Clearly, he took this step toward publication with trepidation, fearing on one hand rejection and on the other, public exposure. One of his later thoughts expresses what must be a universal ambivalence among authors towards publication:

“A Copy of Verses kept in the Cabinet, and only shewn to a few friends, is like a Virgin much sought after and admired; but when printed and published, is like a common whore, whom anybody may purchase for half a crown.”

In preparation for so momentous a step, Swift puffs himself up into a figure of the Country Gentleman (he conspicuously signs the letter “Moor Park”) who explains his acquaintance with the Mercury:

“about two Months ago passing through Oxford, a very learned Gentleman there, first shew’d me two or three of your Volumes.”

After viewing “all the four Volumes with their Supplements”, he composed the Ode and “sent it to a Person of very great Learning and Honour, and since to some others.” These naturally recommended immediate publication. These events could all be true, and in a sense are – he was residing at Moor Park; he was arranging his MA at Oxford; he very likely showed the poem to Temple, and Temple, who was to be a contributor to the Mercury himself, would have probably recommended its publication.

Swift then composes a letter that will exude gentlemanly ease and detachment, and will feign an utter disregard for the work. He compliments the Athenians by agreeing to “submit it wholly to the Correction of your Pens.” The energy of the entire effort is

defensive, on one hand elevating the author and the Athenians while on the other hand reducing the poem to a trifle.

The poem was accordingly published, and proudly presented to the World. It is an extended panegyric upon “Ye Great Unknown”(e188) who sit benignly “On Learning’s high-establish’t throne” (e294), and this in itself warns that a mistake is being made, or at least a link is being established of which Swift would soon be ashamed.

His exaggerated anxieties about entering print and the protective measures he took become somewhat comic when the identity of the Athenians becomes clear. The Athenian Mercury was the product of a collaboration between a number of fringe characters including John Dunton, Richard Sault, John Norris and Samuel Wesley, all of whom wrote to supplement or supply their incomes. This does not really malign the project of the Athenian Mercury for each in fact possessed a measure of specialized knowledge and their answers to public questions indeed hold some interest if in fact Swift took the time to view “all the Four Volumes with their Supplements.” The Athenian Mercury set up to answer the questions sent by their readers, and these answers are, in fact, clear, conservative and well thought out. For example on 9 May, 1691, the question posed was “Whether has Gunpowder or Printing done the greatest Mischeif to the World?” The response is one Swift would no doubt accept:

“Printing has done more service and disservice too to the world, not only because ‘twas in acting, but also because its Consequences reach beyond the Effects of Gunpowder. Again, as the Cause is nobler than its Effects, Printing is more prejudicial than Gunpowder, since Gunpowder would be seldom employ’d in any Great Execution, if printing did not first raise such disputes and distractions as are the Cause of it.”

Another question asks “Whether a Tender Friendship between two Persons of a different Sex can be innocent?”, and the answer must put us in mind of Swift’s attitude to Stella:

“A Strict Union of Soule ... is the Essence of Friendship. Soule have no Sexes ... All the fear is lest the Friendship should in time degenerate, and the Body come in for a share with the Soul, ... , which if it once does, Farewell Friendship, and most of the Happiness arising from it.” (April 28, 1691)

Finally, the pertinent question of whether “Wise Men or Fools are the most happy in this World?” The answer bears on the Hack’s celebration of being “a Fool among knaves” and on the life of Swift:

“There’s but one right line, and infinite crooked ones; one Wisdom, but Follies innumerable; one real Goodness, but diverse appearances of it; and but one best way to everything, and to judge of everything, to wit, Reason or Understanding . . . the Fools happiness consists in a privation of Grief, and the happiness of a Wise Man, in the possession of Good. . . the possession of good is preferable to the Fools privation of grief, . . . a wise man that wanted his Good would be more miserable.”

This periodical gave sensible and politically conservative answers with Richard Sault covering mathematics, Wesley taking theology and John Norris offering general help – each having considerable knowledge and education. Its purpose is set out in the Preface to the first volume of the then Athenian Gazette:

“Which Design of ours, if it any way tends either to satisfy the Curious, to divert the Grave, to establish the Doubting, or to baffling the Common Objections of the little-wou’d-be-wits, and Pretenders to Philosophy and Reason; who set up for no Religion, because they never understood any; it will be, as we hope, no disservice to the Public.”

Swift could easily accept the entire project particularly the attacks on the “Atheists of the Age” (Ode).

The central figure behind the Athenian Society is John Dunton, a successful Bookseller who had proved adept at speculating on public tastes, though personal carelessness kept him in a constant state of distress. Although it was not obvious at the time Swift penned his ode, it soon became clear that Dunton was exactly the sort of fringe character in the book trade that a more established Swift could only view as a public menace.

John Dunton was born 4 May 1659 and died “in obscurity” in 1733. He was born to a line of clergymen and his father had been a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. His father sent John to a school in Dungrove for his early years as his mother died shortly after his birth, but then undertook his education for the clergy at home. A flighty youth, John refused to learn languages though he agreed to “dabble in philosophy.” Later in life he could freely admit that his personal conduct was little hampered by his ethical studies.

Accordingly, at the age 14 he was apprenticed to Thomas Parkhurst, a London Bookseller, where he learned to “love books.” His apprenticeship was forever hampered by the distractions of love and politics. He was an early public figure when he helped

raise a petition of 5,000 Whig apprentices and gave a feast for 100 friends to celebrate the “funeral” of his apprenticeship. He began business by taking half a shop and here he began to converse with the “Hackney Authors” who he made a career of employing though he virtuously complained of their impositions. He made some astute purchases and met success with Doolittle’s “Sufferings of Christ”, Jay’s “Daniel in the Den” (which portrayed Shaftesbury and the Grand Jury), and a sermon by John Shower, all of which sold well. This, he recalled, gave him an “ungovernable itch for speculations.”

He began to look for a wife and on 3 August 1682 married Elizabeth, the daughter of Samuel Annesley whose other daughter married Samuel Wesley. John and Elizabeth settled at the Black Raven in Prince’s street and there prospered until the depression in trade caused by Monmouth’s revolution 1685. At this time, Dunton proposed a voyage to New England where he was owed £500 and where he could sell some of his stock. At home, he had become security for a brother’s debt (£1200) which caused him much trouble. In October 1685 he sailed from Gravesend and arrived in Boston after a four-month Voyage. He returned in the autumn of 1686 after a number of adventures including meeting Elliot, the “Apostle to the Indians.” Upon his return, he was in danger from his brother and sister-in-law’s creditors and had to spend 10 months within doors until he made for Holland and Germany. Returning in November 1688, he managed to settle with his creditors, and opened a shop with the sign of the Black Raven; he operated at this address for 10 years with some success. In 1692 he inherited an estate from his deceased cousin and became a Freeman of the Stationer’s Company.

He later claimed that he had published 600 books and repented only 7, which he piously advised his readers to burn. The worst was the “Second Spira” by his fellow Athenian Richard Sault, which sold 30,000 copies in six weeks making Dunton a reasonable profit. Dunton was a tireless projector and his most remarkable venture was the launch of the Athenian Gazette, afterwards the Athenian Mercury, which appeared from 17 March 1689/90 to 8 February 1695/96. For this large scale project he enlisted the help of Richard Sault, Samuel Wesley and John Norris; (the original agreement between them (dated 10 April 1691) is in the Rawlinson MSS, in the Bodleian). These were the members of the Athenian Society.

Richard Sault is a mysterious figure who died in abject poverty in Cambridge in 1702. He was a man who had acquired a solid knowledge of Mathematics and who accordingly ran a Mathematics School in Adam's court from 1694. He is described as "a gentleman of courage, and a little inclined to passion", and Dunton records one occasion when Sault drew on Tom Brown, a rival publisher. He took scientific questions for the Mercury.

It was Sault who in 1693 presented Dunton with a document reputed to be from a third hand and entitled "The Second Spira, being a fearful example of an Atheist who had apostatized from the Christian Religion and died in despair at Westminster." The Original "Spira" had been a 16th Century Italian tragic biography. Sault professed to know the author and supplied witnesses as to the document veracity. Later Dunton realized that this highly popular piece was based on Sault's own "unlawful freedoms."

In 1702, "Mr. Sault, the Methodizer, removed to Cambridge, where his ingenuity and exquisite skill in algebra got him a very considerable reputation." He died in May 1702 being "supported in his last sickness by the friendly contributions of the Scholars, which were collected without his knowledge or desire." He was during his life given to signing himself FRS, though he was never a Fellow of the Royal Society.

Samuel Wesley (1662-1735) was a Divine, a Poet and father to John and Charles, later the founders of Methodism. He was a fellow student, for the dissenting ministry, with Daniel Defoe; he was early into print, writing "lampoons both on Church and State", and on Thomas Doolittle, head of a rival (Presbyterian) Academy.

He walked to Oxford and entered Exeter College as a servitor in August 1683, receiving his BA in 1688. He continued to publish anonymously through John Dunton. He found the atmosphere of Oxford highly congenial and this, along with the works of Tillotson, drew him over to high conformity. In 1688 he contributed to "Strenae Natalitiae Academiae Oxoniensis" in honour of the birth of the pretender. He was ordained into the Church by Thomas Sprat in August, 1688. He served a chaplaincy on a Man-of-War before moving to London, where he married a daughter of the non-conformist Samuel Annesley. On Dunton's Mercury he took the theological questions which indeed comprise the bulk of the publication. A growing family and a series of accidents saw him imprisoned for debt in 1705 for a number of months. In 1716, the Epworth Rectory, where he was there residing, was the scene of unaccountable noises and

disturbances until 1717; he kept a meticulous record of each incident, and concluded the causes to be preternatural. Joseph Priestly published the account in 1791.

John Norris (1657 – 1711) was an occasional contributor to the Mercury who refused all payment. He had been educated at Winchester and Exeter College, Oxford (BA 1680) where he proved himself to be an “excellent Scholar”; he was even appointed to a vacant post at All Soul’s during a dispute at the college. A taste for Platonism and the mystical were his intellectual trademarks. In 1683 and 1684 he corresponded with Henry More the foremost of the Cambridge Platonists. He, like Wesley, was a firm supporter of the Church and opposed dissenters and Whigs alike. In 1684 he took his MA and was ordained. He published a “Miscellanies”, including some religious verse, which was reasonably popular and became of interest to the later Blair. Indeed all his works were popular but he never received much from their sale. Dunton described him as learned in all fields and a ready source of information. Norris even entered the religious controversies attacking the Quakers on one side and Toland’s deism on the other. He also corresponded with May Astell and Locke’s friend, Lady Masham. His major work was an “Essay towards the Theory of an Ideal and Intelligible World” which appeared in two parts in 1701 and 1704. He is of interest as the sole expositor of Malebranche in England and as a representative, like Shaftesbury, of the legacy of Cambridge Platonism. Norris also attacked Locke, who responded by calling him “an obscure, enthusiastic man.”

Finally, there is a link between the Athenian Society and Charles Gildon (1665 – 1724) who wrote a “History of the Athenian Society” in 1691. He was a Roman Catholic who had been trained in France for the priesthood. He squandered his father’s estate by the time he was 20, was converted to Deism, and became, as Dunton explains, a hireling of the Whigs. He also wrote a “Life and Adventures of Defoe” and has the honour of appearing in the Dunciad.

After the Athenian Mercury, Dunton was increasingly thrown onto his own devices including his pen. His first wife having died in May, 1697, he married Sarah Nicholas in that same year, but her mother suspected that the marriage had financial overtones. Dunton made off for Dublin where he held a book auction and quarreled with the Dublin Bookseller Patrick Campbell. Returning to London, he found that his

relationship with his new wife and mother-in-law had further deteriorated. The pressures on him soon found their way into print.

In 1706 he published “Dunton’s Whipping-post, or a satire upon Everybody” to which was added “The Living Elegy, or Dunton’s Letter to his few Creditors” in which he declared to possess an estate worth £10,000 with which he will repay his debts in full on 10 October 1708. During the Tory Ministry he wrote Whig pamphlets including “Neck or Nothing”, a particularly popular attack on Oxford and Bolinbroke. In 1717 he made an agreement with Defoe to commence a weekly called the “Hanover Spy.” At this time he set out to win a reward from the Whigs with “Mordecai’s Memorial, or there is Nothing Done for him” where he complains about his lack of preferment while Steele and Hoadly rise. In 1723 he made an “Appeal” to George I, listing some 40 Whig tracts. Nothing came of these pleas and he vanished into obscurity where he died in 1733.

There is a manifest instability in Dunton’s character and this comes through in his writings in such a way that a link suggests itself between him and Swift’s creation in A Take of a Tub of a “Hack.” If we look at the “Preface to the Reader” for The Visions of the Soul, Before it comes into the Body we see a peculiarly “Swiftian” style manifested well before the Tale is completed:

“In the whole Discourse I have advanc’d many things wholly new and unblown upon...If I am asked for my Authorities, I answer, What appears reasonable, wants no other Recommendation than being so.... I have done, and doubt not but to meet with both Applause and Hissing, and in both Parties, from such as think themselves sufficient Judges: But I beg their Pardon, if I’m concerned at neither; being resolv’d to continue as Secret and invisible as the Beings of Pre-existing Spirits” (1692).

Throughout a relentless energy drives the prose in an incessant inquiry and monologue. The question is posed if “Their Booksellers, and Mr. Smith, the Coffee-man, want also to know whether there be any Cure for the Athenian Itch?”

The turn of the century saw a type of derangement beset Dunton and his Life and Errors (1705) gives a bizarre portrait of a Swiftian Hack writing desperately to remain afloat above creditors and madness:

“Having given this Account of my Person, I shall next tell ye with what Soul ‘tis acted – This House of mine, is fill’d with a Rambling Tenant, and being Born to Travel, I am ever pursuing my Destiny; so that you may call me a citizen

of London, and of the World; yet where e'er come, I love [to] be guest at, not known, and to see the World unseen; and for this Reason, I'm now learning The Art of Living Incognito. I must here (to my mortification) reckon myself among the number of Scribblers, for my (present) Income wou'd not support me, did not I stoop so low, as to turn Author, but (I find) 'twas what I was Born to, for I am a Willing and everlasting Drudge to the Quill, and am now writing A Farewell to Trade. My constant Sickness and Debts have rather made me An Author (than Soldier) of Fortune, and therefore I'm very thankful to that kind Muse that assists the unfortunate: For cou'd I not compose a Few Sheets, for the Press, I might now starve, for 'tis not Two Rent of my whole Estate will repair the Damage I receiv'd by the Late STORME; and therefore as I now Scratch my Head for-a-living (and with the Threadbare – Tribe, live in Rhime) 'tis a comfort I am wholly at the Mercy of that kind SAMARITAN (The Reverand Mr -) who being a Man of Taste and True Compassion and Goodness, will never stain his Cloath, for he knows in a few years I shall pay him all, and every Body else, to a half Farthing.” (p.320)



John Dunton (1659 - 1733)



Jonathan Swift (1667 - 1745)