FAINT SCREAMS:
SWIFT’S “A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG NYMPH” AND THE CRITICS

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The proposal behind this essay is modest enough: I hope to demonstrate, by means of a close look at the strategies of the text itself, that the appropriate affective response to Swift’s “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” is one of revulsion toward the poem’s central character, rather than empathetic and sentimental compassion for her. Of course, this is not to deny the possibility of other readings. Good poetry is sufficiently ambiguous to evoke a variety of significant responses, some of which may have been quite unforeseen by the poet; the text outlines the writer and thereby becomes subject to critical attitudes which may vary widely from those of the age in which it was produced. But my purpose is to uncover that reading of the poem which Swift himself most likely intended us to have, so that when we deviate from that reading, we have at least some idea of the primal Swiftian tenets we are manipulating.

“A Beautiful Young Nymph” is commonly linked to three other so-called “excremental” poems—“The Lady’s Dressing Room,” “Strephon and Chloe,” and “Cassinus and Peter”—all produced by the poet during 1730 and 1731. It seems to me that this connection is a tenuous one, although the ways in which the poems are thematically similar do deserve some comment.

Swift’s mad persona in A Tale of a Tub observes that happiness resides in “a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived.” But it is always and everywhere the role of the satirist to force us to look beyond those comfortable constructs by which we seek to delude ourselves into a facile happiness. These four poems are allied in aiming at a stripping away of such obfuscation. They are similar as well as in their overt physicality, in their insistence upon rubbing the reader’s nose in the most vile (and fundamental) aspects of the human body, and in their common horror at the rank grossness of human flesh when it is divested of all ornament and is operating in its natural state.

But there are important differences among the poems as well. “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” “Strephon and Chloe,” and “Cassinus and Peter” all have as their “heroes” sentimentally-inclined poetasters who derive ultimately from the romantic Petrarchan tradition. They are characters who so deceive themselves about the supposedly angelic natures of their lovers that they leave themselves open to being psychologically shattered by the contravening evidence of the ladies’ stark physicality. Excrement in these poems serves the purpose of what we might call rhetorical gravitation. By means of substituting parodic images of physicality and elimination for the anticipated romantic description, Swift undercuts these swains’ delusive notions—notations which were supported by the sentimental literary conventions of the day. Women here are not so much castigated for defecating, as are their lovers for supposing them incapable of it.

Excrement in these three poems therefore helps to fulfill the traditional corrective aims of satire. When, at the close of “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” we see Strephon “blind/To all the charms of Female kind” (11. 129-30), we understand that he is a satiric victim who parallels the condition of Lemuel Gulliver at the end of his Travels. Both characters are ridiculed for having posited a vision of mankind which is finally supra-
human and which belies the essential nature of the race. A recent article tries to deny this thematic kinship between Strephon and Gulliver by arguing that “Gulliver entertains no illusions about the beastly Yahoos while Strephon has been misled by romantic love.” But this misses the point entirely. Just as the discovery of Celia’s excremental aspects leads to Strephon’s misogyny, so Gulliver’s discovery of his own kinship with the Yahoos—most clearly expressed in the swimming hole incident of Book IV—leads to an unreasonable misanthropy. Gulliver’s world-view is so blighted by this stripping away of illusion that he is blind to the merits of a thoroughly good man, Don Pedro; similarly, Strephon can finally approach even the most beautiful women only by stopping his nose. Denied the numbing lies of romantic idealism, Strephon takes to woman-hating with the acclivity that Gulliver takes to the stables.

The movement from the romantic to the satiric world-vision, therefore, is seen to be fraught with danger. As Nora Crow Jaffe notes, the satiric writer “makes a bargain with the devil” when he seeks to blast comfortable illusions and uncover the damnable facts; an eye, once jaundiced, may come to view everything as being irreversibly tainted, as Swift himself warns in “Strephon and Chloe”:

    But, e’er you sell yourself to laughter,
    Consider well what may come after,
    For fine ideas vanish fast,
    While all the gross and filthy last. (11. 231-4)

Therefore the satirist buys the accuracy of his vision at a frightful price; for that reason, perhaps, he intends to rock the complacent and to disrupt the status quo by hitting at us precisely where we are most vulnerable and most repressed. Where is that? “The history of Swiftian criticism,” replies Norman O. Brown, “... shows that repression weighs more heavily on anality than on genitality.” The violence of the reaction prompted by these poems only substantiates their point of view; when we lose our critical perspective and attack Swift for informing us of Celia’s defecation, we merely recapitulate the error of Strephon and reveal the depths of our own illusions.

“A Beautiful Young Nymph,” then, shares with these other poems the informing theme of sham versus reality and romantic delusion versus satiric accuracy. But there the similarities end. The poem, while grossly physical, contains no mention of excrement per se (save that of a cat). Nor is the poem much concerned with deriding or parodying romantic literary conventions, although the title and Corinna’s name do make allusions in that direction, and a parodic similarity between this poem and Donne’s elegy, “To His Mistris Going to Bed,” has been argued by several scholars.

Unlike “Strephon and Chloe,” for example, “A Beautiful Young Nymph” depends very little on its narrative content. Rather, what we get is a sort of Hogarthian engraving—or a series of them—which portrays a Drury Lane prostitute in the privacy of her bedchamber. Swift etches three separate portraits: the lady’s preparations for bed (11. 1-38), her fitful dreams (39-59), and her waking to disaster (58-64). The “I” of a persona—Swift himself?—then intrudes (65-74) to provide a sort of moral coda (to mix the metaphor) to the whole composition.

The long passage which relates Corinna’s getting ready for bed has elicited some predictable squeals from what Jaffe calls the “shocked school of criticism.” John Midddleton Murry, for example, refers to the “horror” and “nausea evoked by the hideous detail” of the passage, and he chides Swift for his “total lack of charity, his cold brutality, towards the wretched woman who is anatomized... It is utterly inhuman.”

Perhaps. But what happens in this section of the poem must strike the general reader, unless he is either saint (and therefore in no need of Swift’s corrective satire) or prude (and therefore beyond its help), as being genuinely hilarious. The prostitute’s ills are
so calamitous and her prosthetic efforts after beauty are so patently absurd that she calls forth much more laughter than empathy; and this is as it should be. While any of us might respond with the milk of human kindness toward a “beautiful nymph” with, say, a glass eye, that milk becomes distinctly clabbered when we learn that the same woman is bald, has eyebrows made from the skin of mice, has no teeth, props up her breasts with rags, and wears a steel-ribbed corset and artificial hips. The whole sketch is so purposefully and grotesquely overdone as effectively to block any empathetic response on our part. For Corinna is not real: she is neither drawn realistically nor is her body so much flesh and blood as it is steel, ivory, glass and wire. Real people may be tragic; Corinna, a character out of a bizarre Saturday matinee cartoon or a slapstick farce, can never be either real or tragic. And when Murry refers to this preposterous stick figure, this uprooted demi-machine, as a “wretched woman”—that is, as if she were someone we might actually know—we find ourselves laughing at him, too.7

The second section of the poem does provide some problems, and one assumes that it is this passage which especially prompts protective urges within the manly breasts of certain critics. Corinna is now in bed, and she

With Pains of love tormented lies;
Or if she chance to close her Eyes,
Of Bridewell and the Compter dreams
And feels the lash, and faintly screams. (39-42)

But it is likely that Corinna’s “pains of love” are less the pangs of unrequited passion than the surely-requited symptoms of venerable disease, one of her many occupational hazards. Further, if she screams “faintly,” it is because she is, after all, asleep; the adverb should not provoke us into unwarranted pathos. It has been noted that dreams, in Swift, are consistently in accord with the character of the dreamer, so that the lurid nature of Corinna’s phantasms only underscores her own moral wretchedness.8 Her slumber does call up scenes of deportation, abandonment, and constables, but she also

... seems to watch on lye
And snap some Cully passing by. (49-50)

The imagery of this couplet is decidedly predatory, and we should recall that even gentle Gay, Swift’s friend, used a similar trope in his Trivia to warn against contact with the ladies of Drury Lane:9

She leads the willing victim to his doom,
Through winding alleys to her cobweb room.
(Trivia, 3, 11. 291-2)

The most palpable result of such contact is, of course, the “pox” with its “cancers, issues, [and] running sores”—symptoms which Corinna herself helps to disseminate. Further, we learn at the end of this part of Swift’s poem that she numbers among her clients those clergymen

Whose favor she is sure to find,
Because she pays ’em all in kind. (55-6)

So Corinna actively corrupts the representatives of established religion. To be sure, she is as much sinned against as sinning in these unholy relationships, and Swift’s principal satiric target here is probably the clergy, not the bawd. It is clear, however, that the intimacy is corrosive on both sides. Downtrodden and oppressed in most aspects of her life, Corinna nonetheless has the power to contribute to the undoing of the priests of God’s Church. Therefore she must not be viewed sympathetically: as Swift emphasizes at the poem’s end, Corinna represents an outright social menace.

Lest we be lulled into empathy by social or moral ambiguity, Swift abruptly returns us in the poem’s third section to the disjointed world of Max Sennett farce. Corinna wakens to find her glass eye stolen by a rat, her wig infested with her dog’s fleas, and her “plumpers” soiled by her incontinent cat. The reader needs only to visualize this scene to capture its overt hilarity. Further, the insistent animal imagery of the passage should
serve to warn us against taking Corinna’s “mangled plight” too much to heart.

The fourth and final section at last introduces the narrator, the “I” who presumably has told the story thus far. He is at the point of giving up the task:

But how shall I describe her Arts
To Recollect the scattered Parts?
Or show the Anguish, Toil, and Pain. . .

Like Humpty-Dumpty, Corinna here becomes a literal embodiment of the fragmented personality: her “self” is veritably strewn all over the floor, appropriately soiled by rats, fleas, and animal excrement. The “anguish, toil and pain” she must undergo to restore her mechanical, factitious body is, we must remember, effort aimed at moral and physical corruption:10

Corinna in the morning dizen’d
Who sees, will spew; who smells, be poison’d.

(73-4)

This closing couplet recalls that other Corinna—Pope’s in the Dunciad—who “chanced that morn to make” the puddle of urine in which Curll falls. (In fact the name Corinna was used by Dryden, Pope and Swift to refer variously to Mrs. Manley, Mrs. Eliza Haywood, Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas and Martha Fowke; in all cases the name is attached to a woman who is subjected to savage Juvenalian satire.)11 Further, the couplet re-emphasizes the point that Corinna is a sort of walking contagion at loose in the city. Whoever approaches her is indelibly blighted. Pope’s Sappho at least offers one an alternative between libel and infection; Swift’s Corinna imparts only the latter.

In summary, Swift in this poem presents us with what Maurice Johnson has called a picture of “the wages of sin . . . [like] a preacher shouting hell-fire and brimstone, or the photographs in a medical treatise.”12 There is little in what we know of Swift the man or Swift the satirist to persuade us that this poem is other than the “pure invective against vice” that Jaffe takes it to be.13 I have sought to demonstrate that neither does the poem itself, as an artistic entity, contain evidence to convince us that Corinna is any more like Moll Flanders than Swift’s sensibilities are like Defoe’s.

NOTES

1 This grouping is found in Jaffe (see citations below), who adds “The Progress of Beauty” to the list. Brown includes only three of these poems under the “incremental” heading: “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” “Sirephon and Chloe,” and “Cassinus and Peter.” Johnson groups the poems similarly. Murry conforms to Jaffe, but omits “The Progress of Beauty” from his discussion.

2 Rev. of “Swift’s The Lady’s Dressing Room,” by Douglas Calhoun, Scribliarum, 3.2 (Spring 1970), 56.


6 John Middleton Murry, Jonathan Swift (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 439. See Ehrenpreis, p. 33. (Lady Pilkington reportedly vomited upon reading the poem and saw it as “all the dirty ideas in the world in one piece”; see Ehrenpreis, p. 37, and Hunting, p. 74.)

7 “Corinna,” writes Denis Donoghue, “is a machine, her bedroom a factory; when she goes to bed, the factory is shut down”; see Donoghue’s Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 207. As Ehrenpreis (p. 46) notes, the depiction of such mechanical women is a “staple motif in American humorous literature.” Hunting (p. 48) objects that the whore is “not funny” and is “horrible to contemplate”; he accuses (p. 77) Swift of exaggeration: “Surely no such heroine as Corinna ever lived.” This, of course, is exactly my point in the present study.

8 Donoghue, p. 199.

9 It seems likely to me that Swift, in his couplet, makes a scriptural allusion: cf. Proverbs 7.

10 Donoghue (p. 207) rightly refers to Corinna, in her efforts to reassemble her personhood, as “a resourceful mechanic.”


13 Jaffe, p. 105.