Three Eighteenth Century Authors

by Martin Blocksidge



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Scope of Topic
This *Bookmark* aims to introduce you to the work of three important eighteenth century authors: Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and Samuel Johnson (1709-1784).

BOOKS TO READ
Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels*
Alexander Pope: *The Rape of the Lock*
Samuel Johnson: *Selected Writings* (Penguin)

NOTES
The eighteenth century is one of the periods of English literary history which many readers know least about. It has been seen as remote and difficult of access, perhaps because relatively few well-known names are associated with it. Chaucer, Shakespeare or Milton, who are all widely read and studied, give us an entry to the ages in which they wrote, but the eighteenth century offers us no immediately comparable figure as a starting point. Also, the literature of the eighteenth century can be seen as stylised and artificial, deriving from Latin and Greek originals which are unfamiliar to many readers. Eighteenth century literature, too, often seems concerned with contemporary issues which are obscure and unfamiliar.

Yet much eighteenth century writing is amusing, witty and eminently quotable. It is social and companionable writing which can afford an easy equality between writer and reader. It is worthy of note that all three of our authors are great letter writers, for example, very conscious of the readers for whom they are writing. The texts featured in this *Bookmark* have been chosen for their accessibility.

Another dominant feature of eighteenth century writing (and a characteristic of the texts which we will be considering) is satire: making fun of something, or holding it up to ridicule. We are all used to satire in various shapes or forms: cartoons in newspapers, TV comedy sketches, impersonations of famous people, are all means by which fun can be poked at institutions or personalities. Much of the best-known eighteenth century literature is satirical in intention.

JONATHAN SWIFT
Gulliver's Travels was published in 1726, thirteen years after Swift had returned to his native city of Dublin as Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral. Swift had been born in Ireland but had spent much of his early manhood in England, where he had led an active life as a writer and political pamphleteer. It is perhaps the generally best-known piece of eighteenth century writing. Its fantasy quality has made the first two parts of it, in particular, well-known as a story for children.

The first of Gulliver's voyages takes him to the land of Lilliput, where the natives are tiny, '. not six inches high . .' . They take great pains to restrict and restrain the immense Gulliver (whom they nick-name 'the man-mountain') and subsequently enlist him as a help against their enemies in war. However, their loyalty cannot be relied upon and he eventually comes to be seen as a traitor to the state.

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The second voyage which Gulliver undertakes is to the land of Brobdingnag in which the relative size of Gulliver and the natives is reversed, and, among the land of the giants, he is viewed as a toy to be cherished and cossetted. After this he visits, more briefly, the land of Laputa, where the minds of the natives are so devoted to 'intense speculation', that they can only be persuaded to communicate with others if they are reminded to do so by being struck on the mouth or the ear. Then follow other voyages, notably to Luggnagg where Gulliver meets the Struldbrugs, or immortals.

The final, and longest section of the book describes Gulliver's voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms. Here he meets two kinds of creature, the dignified horse-like Houyhnhnms and the bestial Yahoos ('I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal'). In the eyes of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver himself is little better than a Yahoo, and he is consequently forced to leave them and return home to the company of his wife and family whom he now perceives to be Yahoos also.

Gulliver's Travels is a perpetually fascinating, eventful and unpredictable narrative which can certainly be read with great pleasure simply as a story. However, an attentive reader becomes quickly aware of a number of other dimensions too. The first two sections of the work make frequent references to politics and power, which are thinly disguised satirical references to contemporary issues and personalities (Swift was a highly political animal). The middle sections ridicule developments in learning and knowledge, and the final ones human pride and complacency.

But there are more over-reaching satirical dimensions. Firstly, *Gulliver's Travels* mocks 'straight' travel-writing (of which there was a great deal in Swift's time) by completely inverting its normal assumptions. Gulliver returns from his voyages not triumphant and enlightened, but disillusioned and revolted. Secondly, Gulliver himself is used as an object of ridicule too. The relationship of the name Gulliver to 'gullible' indicates the way in which he is always impressed and taken in by what he sees. Likewise his perpetually scientific habit of mind, measuring, computing and calculating, causes him to misunderstand those things which are not susceptible to his methods.

Gulliver's Travels is thus a work which can be read on an enormous number of different levels, as a diverting tale, as a work of science fiction, or as a deeply pessimistic portrait of mankind as a whole. The reader is entirely free to make of it what s/he will.

ALEXANDER POPE

Although Pope was twenty years Swift's junior, the two were, for a time, friends and collaborators, and it is quite possible that Pope had an influence on *Gulliver's Travels*. Our next text, *The Rape of the Lock*, was published in its final form in 1717, nine years before *Gulliver*.

Like *Gulliver's Travels, The Rape of the Lock* is a highly comic work with a sting in its tail ' . . 'tis a sort of writing very like tickling . .' Pope said of it. The poem is very much concerned with the details of fashionable social behaviour and indeed was prompted by a real-life situation in which a young man cut off a lock of a lady's hair, much to the latter's offence. Pope makes no effort to re-tell the story as it actually happened, but expands it, makes the events take place at Hampton Court, and represents, through his largely fictional characters the 'little, unguarded follies' of upper class ladies in general. Pope's own description of *The Rape of the Lock* was 'an Heroi-comical Poem', by which he meant a poem written in an apparently serious manner about trivial things for a comic effect. Little events are made to seem great by a distortion of perspective not all that different from that of the first two parts of *Gulliver's Travels*. Writing about one thing in a style appropriate to another has always been a common satirical procedure. A good example of this occurs just before the end of

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the first part of the poem where Pope describes the main character, Belinda, having just risen, putting on her make-up:

> A heav'nly Image in the glass appears,
> To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
> Th'inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,
> Trembling, begins the sacred rites of Pride.
> Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
> The various off'rings of the world appear

By making Belinda into a goddess, and her servant into a priestess, Pope is ridiculing as well as complimenting his central character. He admits her beauty, but clearly finds the elaborate (and artificial) process of making-up absurd, and characteristic of a society which prides itself excessively on appearances.

Pope also introduces into the poem the sylphs, a fairy-like band whose job, apparently, is to protect Belinda and guard her virginity. These parallel the protective gods of Greek and Roman epic poems, but are exploited in *The Rape of the Lock* for their airy nothingness and ultimate uselessness. Likewise, the fourth part of the poem takes us into the Cave of Spleen, a modern version of the ancient underworld.

But above all, the poem abounds in laughingly observed social detail, for example the ritual of coffee-drinking:

> From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,
> While *China's* earth receives the smoking tide:
> At once they gratify their scent and taste,
> And frequent cups prolong the rich repast.

Pope's perpetual presentation of things from unexpected perspectives caused Samuel Johnson to remark of the poem that 'New things are made familiar and familiar things made new'. It is this power of re-creating the commonplace which has made this poem Pope's best-known and most popular. Indeed, one contemporary reported that it was being read avidly even by chamber-maids.

SAMUEL JOHNSON

Johnson is an immense figure. He has often been seen as the supreme embodiment of what the English Eighteenth Century was all about. In particular from the writings of his friend and admirer James Boswell (most notably in his *Life of Johnson*) he emerges as a larger than life character of a kind that the English have always relished. He is notoriously quotable, and many of his famous statements have entered into folklore: 'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life'; 'We would all be idle if we could'; 'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully'.

However, it is quite wrong to think of Johnson purely as a wit. He was by temperament melancholy, even depressive. He was also immensely productive as a writer of works of great diversity. He wrote poetry, had a tragedy produced on the London stage, was the compiler of the first authoritative English dictionary (an immense labour), he was a most influential critic of literature, a prolific journalist, and a considerable classical scholar and author. This is why, instead of taking just one sample work of Johnson's for discussion, I am directing you to the Penguin *Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings*. This gives the best insight into the range of his output.

The eighteenth century is very rich in biographical writing. The kind of 'portraits' or 'profiles' which the modern media often feature were published as pamphlets or short books or as commemorative volumes after a person had died. Apart from *The Lives of the Poets*, the

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Penguin selection contains two notable pieces of Johnson's biographical writing. Both are about men whom he knew well.

The first is *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage*. Although a published poet in his own lifetime, Savage is not an author with whom any modern reader will be acquainted, but this does not matter. The disinherited, illegitimate son of an aristocratic mother, Savage lived a life of aimless penury and fecklessness. Amongst other things, he was accused of murdering a man in a tavern brawl. His impossible conduct was the despair of his friends (of whom Johnson was one, though he all but conceals the fact in his account of the life), and it would be easy to see his life as simply irresponsible and flawed. Johnson does not: he is keenly sympathetic to the human failure of one ' . . whose eloquence might have influenced senates . .' but who 'having no profession, became by necessity an author . .'. The life is eventful, and the tone of Johnson's narrative both comic and compassionate. Indeed it has been suggested that Johnson, himself racked by doubts about his own abilities and prospects, to some degree identified with Savage.

Likewise Johnson's poem *On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet*, celebrates another man who, viewed by conventional standards, was a failure. Levet 'obscurely wise and coarsely kind' was a self-styled doctor, again impoverished, whom Johnson took into his household along with other waifs and strays, and whose patients, drawn largely from the working class, reputedly paid him in gin. Not in any sense a 'respectable' man, yet receiving from Johnson a most dignified tribute:

> Well tried through many a varying year,
> See LEVET to the grave descend;
> Officious, innocent, sincere,
> Of ev'ry friendless name the friend.

Yet it was as a great moralist rather than as a companion of the destitute that Johnson was celebrated during his lifetime. A poem of a different sort, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, shows him in what might be viewed as his public vein. This is a substantial, discursive poem of a sort which the eighteenth century liked, but which can certainly seem forbidding nowadays. The modern reader need not be discouraged though, for in illustrating the limits of human ambition and desire, Johnson again provides compassionate portraits of suffering and tragedy. For example, the case of King Charles XII of Sweden who threw away all the advantages of military victory as result of his unappeasable personal ambition:

> His fall was destined to a barren strand,
> A petty fortress, and a dubious hand;
> He left the name, at which the world grew pale,
> To point a moral, or adorn a tale.

But Johnson also had a keen sense of humour. This shows itself not only in those witty asides which have made him well-known and quotable, but in his acute appreciation (like Swift and Pope) of the absurd. In his account (excerpted from *Lives of the Poets*) of William Shenstone's concern for his landscape garden, Johnson greatly enjoys the prospect of 'the little fellow that was trying to make himself admired' being ridiculed by Lord Lyttleton and his friends walking round the garden the wrong way, in order to expose the artifice of the whole thing ' . of which Shenstone would heavily complain'.

Johnson is a large and complex author, interesting as a human being in his own right as well as for his literary achievements. Life is never quite the same again after encountering him.

FURTHER READING

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is easily available in a number of editions, perhaps the most obvious being in Penguin Classics. *A Tale of a Tub, The Battle of the Books* and other works (edited

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by A. Ross and D. Woolley) are available in a World's Classics paperback. The same editors are also responsible for the Oxford Authors *Jonathan Swift*, available in paperback, and offering a substantial selection from both prose and poetry, including the celebrated *A Modest Proposal*. Two biographies of Swift which are approachable, informative and easily available are David Nokes: *Jonathan Swift: A Hypocrite Reversed* and Joseph McMinn: *Jonathan Swift: A Literary Life*.

Other satirical poems by Pope which are worth reading are *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, the *Moral Essays* (a collection of four satirical poems on various subjects) and *The Dunciad*. Two early non-satirical works are *Windsor Forest* and *An Essay on Criticism*. Most of these can be found in the selection from Pope, edited by Pat Rogers in the Oxford Poetry Library. A larger and more fully annotated selection is in the same editor's Oxford Authors *Alexander Pope*. The Penguin selection is also helpful, though less wide-ranging. A useful biography is *Pope: A Literary Life* by Felicity Rosslyn, and three useful introductory works are Pat Rogers: *An Introduction to Pope*; I.R.F. Gordon: *A Preface to Pope*; and the present author's *The Sacred Weapon: An Introduction to Pope's Satire*.

Dr Johnson's *Rasselas*, the nearest he came to a novel, is available in Penguin Classics, as is the general selection from his work already recommended. A larger selection is available in the Oxford Authors *Samuel Johnson*, edited by Donald Greene. Ever since the eighteenth century, Johnson has been much written about. James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is neither the first nor the most accurate biography, but it is a classic in its own right, perpetually interesting, and making more clear than anyone else can why the figure of Johnson is so fascinating. It is available in full in a World's Classics paperback, and abridged in Penguin Classics. More modern studies of Johnson are W.J. Bate's *Samuel Johnson*, Pat Rogers: *Johnson* in the Oxford Past Masters series, and Robert de Maria's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. The relationship of Johnson and Savage is investigated in more detail by Richard Holmes in *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage.*

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