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Letters to Swift

Sous la direction de **Ruth Menzies et Jean Viviès**

1. Foreword

Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? For ever in the same track – for ever at the same pace? Laurence Sterne¹

Jonathan Swift has been the object of considerable scholarly attention over the centuries and continues to be so, especially this year in France with *Gulliver's Travels* as one of the set texts on the English *Agrégation* syllabus. However, this volume differs from classical academic criticism. Along with fellow members of the LERMA research centre at Aix-Marseille University (more specifically from the “Programme C” on modernity), and other Swift scholars, we wished to edit a collective work on Jonathan Swift but decided from the outset to depart from the critical essay format, as there are already many such books to choose from. We offer here a collection of fictional letters written to the author of *Gulliver's Travels*.

The letters are addressed to Jonathan Swift, either by one of his contemporaries (Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, “Stella”, the Dean's presumed lover and “truest friend,” and Gabriel de Foigny, one of his French sources), or by later writers such as Jane Austen, or by imaginary characters (a physicist, a member of the French Academy, or a contemporary scholar). The idea was to give a free rein to our contributors' imagination and literary bent – which needn't preclude meticulous research –, our purpose being to present varied perspectives on Swift's works, life and legacy in an original form, combining imagination, creative writing and erudition².

Three genuine letters are also included, from Alexander Pope and John Gay, from “Vanessa” (Esther Vanhomrigh) and from Mrs Howard, all early readers of *Gulliver's Travels*,

¹ *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, edited by Ian Campbell Ross, Oxford: World's Classics, Oxford UP, 1983, V, 1, p. 275.

² We are not aware of any examples of similar collections in English. One source of the idea is a French series published by Editions Thierry Marchaisse, « Lettres à... ». While the series includes *Lettres à Sade* and *Lettres à Flaubert*, the only British author included thus far is Shakespeare (*Lettres à Shakespeare*. Edited by Dominique Goy Blanquet, 2014), and the authors of those volumes are all writers and critics signing in their own names.

sometimes even before the book was printed, as Claude Rawson has shown³. A further annexe to the volume includes a seminal article by Rawson, republished here with kind permission of both the author and Routledge, the publishers of *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader*, in which this analysis first appeared.

Jonathan Swift was a master of disguise and deception. The blurring of truth and fiction is prominent in his works, as shown for example in the complex paratextual material of *Gulliver's Travels*, published anonymously in 1726. The interweaving of reality and fiction is also striking in Swift's correspondence, combining motives of wary caution and unrestrained play. He, and his friends too, regularly used Gulliverian names ("Lemuel Gulliver") in their letters. A letter from Mrs Howard (included here) was signed "Sieve Yahoo" ("sieve" being a Lilliputian term for a lady of the court)⁴. Swift invented pseudonyms for himself, such as Isaac Bickerstaff in 1708, as part of a famous hoax to predict, and then to prove, the death of then famous astrologer John Partridge. His first major work, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) evinces a multiplicity of voices leading to its own unreliability as text. Disguise and polyphony are at the heart of Swift's work, and our collection pays tribute to this salient aspect of his aesthetics.

Some of the eleven letters collected here are much shorter than others, sometimes very short. Their style and spelling are also deliberately heterogeneous, as would be found in a scholarly edition of a great writer's correspondence.

The contributors are academics from the field and also include young researchers and PhD students engaged in research on Swift's life and works. The collection opens with a letter transcribed by its author from a BBC Radio 3 programme, "Letters to Writers" (8 November 2016) which, among five fascinating imaginary letters, included Ian Sansom's letter "Dear Jonathan Swift," questioning him about his work.

We hope that these epistolary modest proposals will be of interest to "gentle readers" of Swift's works, whether they be first-time readers or return readers. Unlike "The Blefuscutians – who had not the least Imagination of what I intended, [and] were at first

³ "Vanessa as a Reader of *Gulliver's Travels*", *Swift's Angers*, Cambridge UP, 2014, pp. 163-169.

⁴ See facsimiles of Mrs Howard's letters and of Swift's hand signing 'Lemuel Gulliver.'
<https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2018/06/jonathan-swift-and-henrietta-howard.html>

confounded with Astonishment”⁵, they will recognize in our tentative efforts a homage to Jonathan Swift’s wit and taste for disguises and to Gulliver, a disastrous sailor but a prodigious linguist and a playful polyglot. To the letter.

Ruth Menzies, Jean Viviès co-editors.

⁵ *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Edited with an introduction by Claude Rawson, notes by Ian Higgins, Oxford World’s Classics, 2008. I, 5, p. 46.