



كلية الآداب

حوليات آداب عين شمس المجلد ٤٦ (عدد إبريل – يونيو ٢٠١٨)

<http://www.aafu.journals.ekb.eg>

(دورية علمية محكمة)



جامعة عين شمس

The Significance of Clothing Imagery in Selected Works of Jonathan Swift

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine the significance of clothing imagery in selected works of Jonathan Swift. In certain works, Swift uses clothing as a tool for exposure and protection. Swift has also used clothing in manifesting his attitude toward mankind and showing the duality of human nature. In the selected works, clothing functions in a way that symbolizes the tension between innocence and avarice, the ancients and the moderns and as a means of protection in the cases of identity crisis.

Throughout the works of Jonathan Swift, the discrepancy between appearance and substance is usually accentuated by an inconsistent "persona's conscious understatement" (Lund 520). In order to heighten dramatically his reader's emotion, Swift keeps a deliberate distance using, mainly, clothing imagery as a device for exposure and protection. Clothing has always been a symbolic device for the contrast between innocence and depravity. For Swift, who hated humanity and loved individual men, clothing was a good device for revealing the duality of human being's nature. According to Nigel Dennis' little exaggerated expression, "The student of Swift, if he pleased, describes all Swift's opinions in terms of nakedness and clothing" (53). This paper is an attempt to examine the imagery of clothing in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," "A Tale of a Tub" and *Gulliver's Travels*. In these works, Swift uses clothing symbolically as a tool for exposure and protection and to reveal his attitude towards mankind and their dual nature. Furthermore, Swift highlights the function of clothing as a symbol of the tension between innocence and avarice, the ancients and the moderns and a way of protecting the protagonist in cases of identity crisis.

By describing first the Irish children as "all in rags" following the beggars of the female sex, the projector in "A Modest Proposal" brings the issue of Irish poverty into relief. In fact, "A Modest Proposal" is the short form of the original title of Swift's Pamphlet: "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country and for Making them Beneficial to the Publick." He makes it clear that he seeks to "find out a fair, cheap and easy Method" for making the poor and starving children of Ireland into "sound and useful members of the Commonwealth" (27).

Throughout Ireland, the poor children lead a miserable life because their parents are too poor to feed or clothe them. The persona proposes a solution to this social as well as economic problem: feed those children until they become fat and then they can be served as food on the tables of the country's rich land-owners. At the age of one, poor children are to be sold to the meat market, which will, in its turn, help in solving the social, political and economic problems of unemployment and overpopulation.

Furthermore, their poor families will spare the expenses of raising them, and at the same time, they will get extra income from the sale. Thus, the proposed solution is in the well-being of all: the poor families, the wealthy and the whole nation. The persona also expects that husbands will treat their wives with more respect, and that the families will give greater value and care to their children.

The persona's modest plan is "for preventing the children of the poor in Ireland from being a burthen to their parents or country; and for making them beneficial to the publick" (23). Counting the quadruple charge of nutriment for a twelve-year old boy or girl in merchants' reckoning, the

projector humbly offers to public that a young healthy, well-nursed one-year old baby will be fit for the most saleable commodity; the infant's flesh will be best served for landlords, and the skin flayed from the carcass will make admirable gloves for ladies and summer boots for fine gentlemen, . . . etc. Intoxicated with his "solid and real" intention against the "vain, idle, visionary" (25) countermeasures, the projector becomes an ironic persona who is unconscious of the contradiction between the humane intention and the inhumanity of the proposal. This dark, apathetic irony provoked by the seemingly sincere projector paradoxically reminds the reader of the circumspective insight on Swift's anger and desperation on Irish situations. Here, clothes symbolize strongly the tension between innocence and avarice. The landlords, ladies and gentlemen's bodies nourished by infant's flesh and skin are the morbid costume showing their corrupted senses devoid of spirits.

The language of clothing is very conspicuous as well upon the conflict between the ancients and the moderns in "The Battle of the Books". The ancient figures such as church fathers, Homer, Plato, Aristotle and Sophocles are described very attractively in their appearance. For example, "Virgil appeared in shining armor, completely fitted to his body," and "Boyle observed him (Phalaris) well and soon discovering the helmet and shield of Phalaris . . . new polish'd and gilded" (395). On the other hand, shabby, ill-fitting costumes indicate moderns. Dryden is described as wearing "the helmet nine times large for the head" and possessing "weak and remote" voice (390). Wotten and Bentley's appearances are also sardonically delineated; "But W-tt-n heavy-arm'd, and slow of foot, began to slack his course; when his lover B-ntl-y appeared, returning laden with the spoils of the two sleeping ancients" (395). Swift's mock-heroic irony upon the moderns reveals the moderns' shortcomings in writing and exposes a compulsive, clothed text woven between author's desire and despair. Between the lines, the violation and loss, the suppression and emphasis exist; the human beings' garments are transformed to the authority and the soul through the clothing allegory on the learning.

The vestmental allegories are shown in the religious regard in "A Tale of A Tub", Swift's first major work which was published in 1704. This work tells the story of three brothers who represent the main branches of the Church: Peter represents Catholicism; Martin represents Anglicanism, while Jack represents Protestantism. It is known that this tale is Swift's major satire on religion. More specifically, it is a satire on religious excess.

Throughout the seventeen sections, the persona, Hack, reveals the internal contradiction in his dramatized monologue. Though in the "Apology" Hack is introduced as the writer who "had endeavoured to strip himself of as many real prejudices as he could" (265), he soon confesses that his work is "the fruits of a very few leisure hours" and "the production

of that refuse of time" (279). As J. R. Clark analyses, Hack is characterized by "the absence of duration, past and memory" (128). That is, Hack is short of the consistent causality and bounded to the instantaneousness and present. Here the disintegration of Christianity is represented through clothing. Upon his death-bed, the father leaves his will concerned with coats to his three young sons; Peter, Martin and Jack indicate respectively Popery, the Church of England, and the Protestant Dissenter. After father's death, the three brother-adventurers, who arrived at the proper age for producing themselves, come up to town to seek their fortunes, and fall in love with three ladies. They are the Dutchess d'Argent, Mademoiselle de Grands Titres, and the Contess d'Orgueil (i.e. Covetousness, Ambition and Pride) (302), which were the three great vices in the corruption of Christianity. Influenced by these ladies of top fashion, Peter first adds a shoulder-knot to his coat. The original coats which father gave his sons were very good clothes: "they were all of a piece but at the same time very plain, and with little or no ornament" (306). As this implication shows, the father's coat means the doctrine and faith of early Christianity and so it is absolute and simple. By adding the shoulder-knot to the coat, Peter comes to introduce the pageantry and the unnecessary ornaments in the church (306). After two days, as human happiness is of a very short duration and shoulder-knots have their times, the three brothers come up all in new fashion. They wear the flame-colored satin for linings (purgatory), gold lace (lofty ornament), and silver fringes (the pomp of habit). Yet as fashion perpetually alters in that age, the brothers, who grew weary of searching further evasions, lock up their father's will in a strong box.

During this process, clothes philosophy, which is popular in town, is introduced. After referring to the goose whose food is human gore, the persona introduces the worshippers of the tailor-god. For them, the universe is a large suit of clothes which invests everything; "the earth is invested by the air; the air is invested by the stars, and the stars are invested by the primum mobile; look on this globe of earth, you will find it to be very complete and fashionable dress" (304). Yet by using the "*reductio ad absurdum*," which is one of the Swift's favorite tropes, in the process Swift draws the false conclusion, which actually proves wrongness of the act of clothes philosophy.

In section four, Peter has the other two brothers know that he is their elder and consequently his father's sole heir. He ordered them to call him "Father Peter" or "My Lord Peter." Peter's invention of sovereign remedy for the worms and the whispering-office is also the parody for ridiculing the penance and the auricular confession in the Church of Rome. At last, poor Peter, who kept his brain so long and so violently upon the rack, was grown distracted and run mad with contradiction.

Recognizing that there is hardly a thread of the original coat to be seen over the infinite ornaments, Martin and Jack try to reform their

vestures into the primitive state, proscribed by their father's will. Martin strips away a medley of rags, laces, rents and fringes (religious reform). Jack dresses up necessity into a virtue; he turns into his own ragged, bob-tailed condition. Here begins a mortal breach among three brothers.

As Swift took "A Tale of A Tub" from an anecdote about Diogenes, who likes to stay in a tub (Dennis 54), Swift provided the disparity between Peter's gaudy plumage and Jack's lurid tatters with many-sided satires. Although in "The Drapier's Letters" Swift chooses the drapier for speaking to the whole people of Ireland, he usually likes to deal with clothes as the civilized artifice affected by vanity and ostentation. The ostentatious artifice, shown by the contrast between the plain man and the ornamented man leads us to recognition of disillusionment.

Another important work of Swift is *Gulliver's Travels*, which was published in 1726. This work may be viewed as an adventure story for children. However, it can also be viewed as a sharp political and social satire. Furthermore, Swift may have parodied the travel books that were popular in his age. In this satire, Swift tells the story of Dr. Lemuel Gulliver, the adventure-loving physician who travels to imaginary exotic lands. In his travels, Gulliver's ship is either seized by pirates or shipwrecked. In addition to telling wonderful adventures, Swift satirizes many political events and institutions in the England of his age. His satire falls also sharply and harshly on scientists and those who consider rationalism the greatest value of all. At the end of the book humans and their follies become the target of his scathing criticism, which has made many critics believe that he was a misanthrope.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, the persona approaches the major fictions' protagonists by his experiences as a hero. Gulliver is the persona who usually fails to grasp the meaning of what he sees. Despite his serious attention to events, Gulliver never detects dual, antithetical meanings beneath the surface. As Roger Lund points out, "Gulliver seeks to cast out the mote from his brother's eye while ignoring the beam in his own" (503). Gulliver's growing downfall is basically caused by this distracted vision, or his simplicity of the discrepancy between appearance and substance. The vestmental languages are very profuse about covering Gulliver's naked simplicity and ornamented civilization. In Lilliput, where everything is one-twelfth his accustomed size, three hundred little tailors were ordered to make a suit of clothes after the fashion of that country:

The Queen likewise ordered the thinnest silks that could be gotten, to make me cloaths: not much thicker than an English blanket, very cumbersome until I was accustomed to them. They were after the fashion of the kingdom, partly resembling the Persian, and partly the Chinese; and are a very grave decent habit . . . I was put to bed; however, I received no other damage than

the loss of a suit of cloaths, which was utterly spoiled (78—80).
Later Gulliver joins in festival where he offers his handkerchief as a drill field:

I took nine of these sticks, and fixing them firmly in the ground in a quadrangular figure, two foot and a half square, I took four other sticks, and tyed them parallel at each corner, about two foot from the ground; then I fastened my handkerchief to the nine sticks that stood erected; and extended it on all sides, until it was as tight as the top of a drum; and the four parallel sticks rising about five inches higher than the handkerchief, served as ledges on each side (27-28).

The prizes rewarded for competing for official favor are the threads, which represent the various orders of the Garter, the Bath and the Thistle as Walpole created or invented the Order of the Bath for enticing the opposite politicians (Rowse 168).

In Brobdignag, whose inhabitants are twelve times Gulliver's size, the Queen orders the thinnest silks to make Gulliver clothes after the fashion of the kingdom. Gulliver also fabricates toy chairs for the queen and weaves seats from her huge hair. The king of Brobdignag, whose model is a statesman Sir William Temple (Lund 505), mocks at human pretensions, especially at Englishmen's figures in dress and equipage. As only children and a dwarf are described as malicious in this country, size denotes morality. The small, inconsistent Gulliver comes to have self-deception and fears to look into the mirror.

In Laputa, the flying island of metaphysics, Laputan clothes do not fit, and they reflect the beliefs of the people of that country. They have many decorations such as astrological symbols and musical figures:

Their outward garments were adorned with the figures of suns, Moons, and stars, interwoven with those of fiddles, flutes, harps, trumpets, guitars, harpiscords, and many more instruments of musick, unknown to us in Europe (119).

Laputan tailor, who is perpetually conversant in lines and figures, measures and surveys Gulliver but fails to fit him by mistaking his calculation. Soens notes that "Laputa" means the "whore" in Spanish; reasonable Laputan absurdity of their garments coincides with Martin Luther's description of "That Great Whore, Reason!" (47).

In "A Voyage to the Houyhnhms," the first thing that perplexed the horses about Gulliver was what he was wearing:

The two horses came up close to me, looking with great earnestness upon my face and hands. The grey steed rubbed my hat all round with his right fore hoof, and discomposed it so much, that I was forced to adjust it better, by taking it off, and setting it again; whereat both he and his companion, (who was a brown bay) appeared to be much surprised; the latter felt the lappet of my coat,

and finding it to hang loose about me, they both looked with new signs of wonder. He stroked my right hand, seeming to admire—the softness, and colour; but he squeezed it so hard between his hoof and pastern, that I was forced to roar, after which they both touched me with all possible tenderness. They were under great perplexity about my shoes and stockings, which they felt very often, neighing to each other, and using various gestures, not unlike those of a philosopher, when he would attempt to solve some new and difficult phenomenon (170).

But the most perplexing thing to the horses was his gloves:

I happened to wear my gloves, which the master grey observing, seemed perplexed; discovering signs of wonder what I had done to my fore feet; he put his hoof three or four times to them, as if he would signify, that I should reduce them to their former shape, which I presently did, pulling off both my gloves, and putting them into my pocket. This occasioned farther talk, and I saw the company was pleased with my behavior, whereof I soon had the good effects (175).

Gulliver is horrified when the horses compare him with the disgusting tailless monkeys, Yahoos. Yet Gulliver's clothes become the protection for this dangerous identity crisis. As Houyhnhm means "perfection of nature," Gulliver's desire to keep his clothing a secret implies the denial of truth:

...it is my custom to strip and cover myself with my cloaths: it happened one morning early, that my master sent for me, by the sorrel nag, who was his valet; when he came, I was fast asleep, my cloaths fallen off on one side, and my shirt above my waiste. I waked at the noise he made, and observed him to deliver his message in some disorder; after which he went to my master, and in great fright gave him a very confused account of what he had seen. . . I had hitherto concealed the secret of my dress in order to distinguish myself as much as possible, from that accursed race of the Yahoos; but now I found it in vain to do so any longer. Besides, I considered that my cloaths and shoes would soon wear out, which already were in a declining condition, and must be supplied by some contrivance from the hides of Yahoos, or other brutes; whereby the whole secret would be known. I therefore told my master that in the country from whence I came, those of my kind always covered their bodies with the hairs of certain animals prepared by art, as well as for decency, as to avoid inclemencies of air both hot and cold; of which, as to my person, I would give him immediate conviction, if he pleased to command me; only desiring his excuse, if I didn't expose those parts the nature taught us to conceal (178)

Such reasoning didn't convince the master horse; for he found it very strange and couldn't comprehend "why nature should teach us to conceal what nature had given" (178). After the master told him that he and his family were not ashamed of their bodies, Gulliver tells the reader ". . . I first unbuttoned my coat, and pulled it off. I did the same with my waistcoat, I drew off my shoes, stockings, and breeches. I let my shirt down to my waiste, and drew up the bottom, fastening it like a girdle about my middle to hide my nakedness" (179).

His clothes become very significant as they function as a symbol of the physical and psychological barrier separating Gulliver from the Yahoos:

My master observed the whole performance with great signs of curiosity and admiration. He took up all my cloaths in his pastern, one piece, and examined them diligently; he then stroked my body very gently, and looked round me several times; after which he said, it was plain I must be a perfect Yahoo; but that I differed very much from the rest of my species, in the whiteness of my skin, my want of hair in several parts of my body, the shape and shortness of my claws behind and before, and my affectation of walking continually on my two hinder feet (179).

Gulliver feels uneasy at this attitude of his master, for he has great contempt and hatred towards the Yahoo whom he views as an "odious animal." Therefore, he requests a favor from his master: that he keeps this as a secret: ". . . that the secret of having a false covering to my body might be known to none but himself, at least as long as my perfect cloathing should last" (179). To this his master consents, and his secret was kept until his clothes began to wear out. But then, his master was impressed by his skills and capacity to reason and speak, not by his covering of the body, which distinguished him from the Yahoos. Later, the master expressed his view that there is no problem in covering the human body with clothes: "He had therefore begun to think it not unwise in us to *cover* our bodies, and by that invention, conceal many of our deformities from each other, would else be hardly supportable" (196).

On the other hand, to the Yahoos exposing parts of his body was understood differently. This sends out messages that he is one of them:

And then I have reason to believe, they had some imagination that I was one of their own species, which I often assisted myself, by stripping my sleeves, and shewing my naked arms and breast in their sight, when my protector was with me: at which times they would approach as near as they durst, and imitate my actions after the manner of monkeys, but ever with the signs of hatred (200).

As Martin Price indicates, Gulliver's clothes are the symbols of "temperance covering the human passion" and indicate humans' "ontological position" of neither beasts nor angels at the same time. Like clothing, which is one of the most sophisticated artifact, the institution, which is another

artifact made by human beings, can be always the denial of truth. By degrees Gulliver adapts to the Houyhnhms way of life like making clothes and stockings of animal skins and shoes of Yahoo skins. Yet Gulliver is finally banished by the Houyhnhms' fear for this revolt with other Yahoos. In this regard Gulliver's extreme attitude, by rejecting mankind as horrible Yahoos, to aspire to be a Houyhnhnm, is Swift's scathing indictment of human beings' confusing the accidental and the essential through the symbolic attention to clothing.

In conclusion, Swift's satire, which is characteristic in duality, such as between nakedness and clothing, the ancient and the modern, and persona and the author, has universally achieved its significance. Swift's excessive emphasis on clothing imagery is obvious. Clothes philosophy shows Swift's manipulation of clothing in his works. Furthermore, Swift manages to employ clothing imagery as a tool for exposure and protection. For Swift, clothing serves as a device revealing the duality of human nature.

الملخص**دلالات الملابس في أعمال مختارة للكاتب جوناثان سويفت
عبدالقادر خطاب**

تتناول هذه الورقة دلالة صور الملابس في أعمال مختارة للكاتب جوناثان سويفت، حيث استخدمها الكاتب كأداة للكشف والحماية. كما قام سويفت بتوظيف الملابس لتوضيح موقفه تجاه البشر وإظهار ثنائية الطبيعة البشرية. وفي الأعمال التي تم اختيارها لهذه الورقة تم توظيف الملابس كرمز لحالة التوتر ما بين مفهومي البراءة والجشع، والكتاب القدماء والحديثين، إضافة إلى كونها وسيلة حماية في حالات أزمة الهوية.

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