

Documenting Eighteenth Century Satire:  
Pope, Swift, Gay, and Arbuthnot  
in Historical Context



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By

Pat Rogers

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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*For Keith Thomas*



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Students of the subject will easily recognize the degree of my indebtedness to a host of editors, historians and literary scholars. Among those whose work I have quarried and who have died since I first envisaged the possibility of this book are Ragnhild Hatton, Maynard Mack, David Nokes, David Underdown, Aubrey Williams and David Woolley. Their achievement lives on.

The dedication reflects my longstanding debt to Keith Thomas, whose work has opened up so many corners of the British past. He may be surprised, but I hope gratified, to find that this extends to the world of the eighteenth-century satirists.



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## INTRODUCTION

The major English satirists of the eighteenth century continue to stimulate readers, and every year they provoke a great deal of valuable critical and scholarly work. We have had important studies devoted to Swift, Pope and Gay, though perhaps Swift is alone in retaining the full share of undergraduate courses in literature that writers of this stamp once claimed. At the same time the long neglected polymath Dr John Arbuthnot seems ready to emerge from the shadows, with an edition of his letters by Angus Ross in 2006 and a political biography by the same scholar scheduled for publication shortly. However, little has been done in recent years to consider the work of the Scriblerian group as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

It is also the case that criticism of this group, as of authors at large, has tended to step back a little from basic archival research. Students have preferred to follow a theoretical or ideological approach, often with great profit. Some general works on satire, too, have illuminated key eighteenth-century texts. Among such books we might instance *The Difference Satire Makes* (2001) by Fredric V. Bogel, as well as *Satire: A Critical Re-Introduction* (1994) by Dustin Griffin and *The Literature of Satire* (2004) by Charles A. Knight. Bogel develops a sophisticated theory of the genre, analyzing what he terms a “double structure” which bridges the rhetorical gap between satirist and satiric object. His examples range from Ben Jonson and Dryden to Byron, but the most detailed exploration is conducted around the main Augustan writings, notably Swift’s poems and *The Beggar’s Opera*. Both Griffin and Knight pay a good deal of attention to the same authors, with especially close attention to *The Dunciad* on the part of Knight. However, the most influential commentator has probably been Claude Rawson, with a succession of books revealing his interest in the twin notions evoked in the title of his collected essays, *Satire and Sentiment 1650-1830* (1994). All readers must feel a debt of gratitude to these critics. But we owe a comparable debt to editors, biographers and scholars who have done so much to open up the personal and historical context of Scriblerian authorship.<sup>2</sup>

While this book does not propound a general theory of satire, the essays do make some modest effort to establish a praxis. Of course, it is never enough merely to collect inert “background” facts. The more important task concerns the *use* we make of such material. We need to

discriminate, for instance, between what could potentially be relevant and what actually does help us to gauge the tone, intention and methods of a particular satire. Each chapter seeks to illustrate the means by which external evidence can support internal clues to enhance our understanding of some representative texts. This approach will never produce a single unquestioned “meaning,” but it can strengthen the grounds for reading the work in certain ways and sometimes for excluding another interpretation. Does it matter if we pick up on every small allusion? *Gulliver’s Travels* survives even though we know little more about the precise targets of its satire than we did a hundred years ago, except in limited areas, and we may well be missing a number of contemporary in-jokes that contemporaries would have spotted. But there is always the chance that rediscovery of topical references will take us further into the work, as in the case of *The Dunciad* and of several poems by Swift.

In fact, the opportunities for first-order research, drawing on unpublished or unexamined sources, have never been greater. The marvellous expansion of electronic aids has made it possible to track down almost instantaneously troves of material which were once very difficult to locate, and in some cases even to transcribe these documents straight into a personal computer. Such material offers up immense possibilities to those studying topics such as Augustan satire, which deal chiefly with historically determined issues. Exploration in this field need not confine itself to the discovery of sources and analogues, though such things still have their critical uses. Rather, the new finds may help us to understand individual works more completely by providing a whole *raison d’être* for their composition, and supplying clues to hidden meanings within the text. One aim of this book is to encourage fresh research which will reveal unsuspected richness in books we thought we already understood – which in the case of these satirists may include items as familiar as *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Beggar’s Opera*. Another aim is to draw attention to less well known works by Scriblerian authors, in the belief that closer examination may uncover a new richness that has been occluded, partly by our own ignorance of the elements that went into their making – now that these elements are more easily detected by the kind of study enabled by modern electronic tools.

General agreement exists that, since the time of Aristophanes, Horace and Juvenal, satire has been among the most historically conditioned of literary genres. However, we need to be clear about the consequences for criticism. Not every stray allusion to a topical affair carries great significance: many of the incidental details about Pope’s dunces were unknown to most contemporaries, and explaining a single reference will

seldom change our overall view of *The Dunciad*. Nevertheless, in combination such buried facts will occasionally supply a vital clue to the workings of this poem. In these chapters I attempt to find documentary evidence which helps to explain the wider themes of a given text, and which will make possible a fuller interpretation of its procedures.

Obviously, there is a great deal more going on in the works of the Scriblerian group than a mere transcription of actuality. They contain elements of the fantastic, the mysterious, the surreal, the romantic, the supernatural, the hyperbolic, the grotesque, the ludic – even the magical at times. We encounter most of these things in *The Rape of the Lock* alone. They constitute the ingredients that Margaret Doody considers basic to fiction, and that have been eclipsed in the reign of what she calls “compulsory realism” in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Swift and his friends did not know they were supposed to follow such a path, and they were not compulsory realists. What does mark off their writings from the bourgeois novel, say, is a willingness to stretch the truth of everyday existence for satiric effect, and in this respect their heir is not Richardson or Austen but Dickens. But they liked to start from the observable, and their work grows much more intelligible as soon as we excavate the roots of their invention, often buried in the humus of history and invisible to a modern eye. Swift’s Partridge is not the “real” astrologer John Partridge; Pope’s Curl is not the historic publisher Edmund Curl; and Gay’s Peachum is not the actual thief-taker, Jonathan Wild. Nevertheless, the better we know these people the less likely we are to misjudge the thrust of the satire in which they appear.

In line with these considerations, the book has been planned to range across different modes of satire, in poetry, prose and drama. It covers some of the best known works of eighteenth-century British literature. For example, a new focus is offered on *The Rape of the Lock* and on poems by Swift, challenging some earlier interpretations. The meaning of *The Beggar’s Opera* is reappraised in the light of fresh information. A major reassessment of *The Dunciad* involves consideration of several elements previously neglected, most notably the role of City of London politics. In addition the book deals with less familiar but important texts of the age, including Gay’s *Trivia*, Pope’s *Epistle to Miss Blount*, and Swift’s poem on *Sid Hamet*. Along with these come works which have been unduly neglected for the most part, despite considerable literary merit: these include Pope’s *Duke upon Duke* and Swift’s *The Bubble*. The best of Pope’s prose works rival his poetry in wit, daring and invention, as Chapter 6 may suggest. One chapter concerns a poem, still virtually unknown, that surfaced in the 1970s, and it offers the first full

interpretation and edition of this item, written by Gay and/or Pope. Another describes a previously unsuspected hoax, almost certainly perpetrated by the Scriblerians, concerning the quest for the longitude. Yet another finds an unsuspected, but close, link between poems by Pope and Pushkin. Several, including Chapters 5, 6 and 13, uncover a topographical element behind the satire. All the studies expose fresh materials, which have not applied to the text in question before now, and seek to offer new insights into modes of Augustan satire.

While each work is considered in its own terms, a number of common issues arise and cross-references naturally emerge. Thus, historical events such as the South Sea Bubble recur, while the use that the satires made of London life appears in several chapters, as do consistent targets of the satirists, such as the rascally publisher Curl and the politician Nicholas Lechmere. One item deals with Swift's response to extreme prophets and another with Pope's handling of the same issue. Commonality is also found in some of the devices and techniques explored, for example the use of proverbial idiom in five of the studies. The target works were all written in the short period from 1710 to 1728 (disregarding the revised version of *The Dunciad*), and they took off from one specific milieu.<sup>4</sup> Probably each of the four writers knew something of them before they reached print.<sup>5</sup> These narrow origins make it all the more remarkable that the satire should remain so potent after three hundred years.

The sources used include numerous unpublished documents, such as wills, inventories, estate deeds, settlements, marriage contracts, criminal records and private correspondence, drawn from a number of repositories. But not all materials that have been neglected exist in manuscript form: others lie hidden in plain sight, overlooked among the bulky files of contemporary newspapers, magazines and pamphlets. Most of these have not been quarried heavily, if at all, before now. Chapter 1 finds a concealed occasion for a poem by Swift, while Chapters 10 and 11 delve at length into the criminological and political background of works by Gay and Pope. Chapter 12 supplies a longer perspective, by relating *The Dunciad* to a pervasive tradition of millenarian thought. In other cases the contextual material explored in the chapters is drawn from literary motifs and conventions of the period. Thus Chapters 8 and 9 investigate the mode of popular balladry as it was reinvented for Scriblerian purposes.

Three of the longest items have never been published in any form. Four more are heavily revised and expanded, with new documentation. Four others have been reordered and brought up to date. The three remaining chapters are corrected and lightly revised versions. The material previously published appeared in general collections or in literary and



scholarly journals – two in the 1980s, others in 2003-2008. None of the chapters has appeared in previous books, other than two items that came out in collections I edited. They follow the broad chronological order in which the works under review were written. All have been chosen to support a single case with regard to “documenting” literature of the past.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One book that partially bucks this trend is Dustin Griffin’s comparative study of the relations between Swift and Pope, published in 2010. See the Select Bibliography at the end of the book (p. 299).

<sup>2</sup> Among the most important contributions are the correspondence of Swift and Pope edited by (respectively) David Woolley and George Sherburn; the Twickenham edition of Pope’s poetry by John Butt and others; the lives of these writers by Irvin Ehrenpreis and Maynard Mack; the letters of Arbuthnot, edited by Angus Ross; and biographies of Gay by David Nokes and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu by Isobel Grundy. For fuller details, see the Select Bibliography, pp 243-5.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> The only text considered in detail here which Swift wrote while working apart from his Scriblerian friends in Dublin is *The Bubble*, discussed in Chapter 9. Even this has a limited “Irish” context, since it deals with an event whose epicentre was London.

<sup>5</sup> An exception may be the earliest item, Swift’s poem on “Sid Hamet,” as this was written before Pope and Gay joined the circle of friends. Equally Swift’s absence in Ireland may have meant that he remained unaware of works such as Gay’s *Trivia* and Pope’s *Full and True Account* until they appeared in print.



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ROD OF MOSES AND THE WAND OF THE PROPHET: SWIFT'S POEM ON "SID HAMET"

On 4 October 1710, Jonathan Swift reported to Stella that he had sent a "lampoon" to be printed. This can be identified as an attack on the recently ousted chief minister, Lord Godolphin, called "The Virtues of Sid Hamet the Magician's Rod," which Swift had begun on 26 September. He worked on the poem for more than week, and found it "very slow" work. It was published by John Morphew, a "trade publisher," by 14 October and according to the author the poem was "cried up to the skies."

As noted by Harold Williams, the name of the hero is based on Lord Treasurer Godolphin's given name together with the supposed narrator of *Don Quixote* (Swift *Poems*, 1: 131-5; *Journal to Stella*, 1: 30, 41, 59).<sup>1</sup> Sidney Godolphin (1645-1712), created first Earl in 1706, held the post of lord treasurer throughout the earlier years of Queen Anne's reign, with the moderate Whig ministry in place from 1702. He managed the monetary side of the War of Spanish Succession while Marlborough conducted military operations, and acquired a reputation as a financial wizard. After the ill-fated impeachment of Dr Henry Sacheverell in 1710, Godolphin lost his grip on power. The Tories came to the fore under the leadership of Robert Harley, shortly to make Swift his principal agent of publicity. Godolphin was forced out of office in August 1710, shortly before the Tories gained an overwhelming victory in the general election. The poll was actually going on around the time Swift wrote his work – voting began in the City of London, for example, on 9 October. To that extent the lampoon may be regarded as a kind of electioneering pamphlet.

### I

The method of the poem hinges on one particular event and utilizes other aspects of Godolphin's career. For some time the queen had shilly-shallied over dismissing Godolphin, and it was only after a number of confusing

signals that she sent him her celebrated letter of 7 August 1710, demanding his resignation in return for a pension of £4,000 per annum: “I desire that, instead of bringing the staff to me, you will break it, which I believe will be easier to us both.”<sup>2</sup> Humiliatingly, the message was conveyed to the lord treasurer by a groom in the service of the master of the horse. In fact he never received any of the promised pension before his death two years later, though Anne did not cease to consult Godolphin privately. Swift refers to this episode specifically in lines 79-80 of “Sid Hamet”:

Dear Sid, then why wer't thou so mad  
To break thy Rod like naughty Lad?

But in fact the staff of office traditionally carried by each lord treasurer had been in question throughout the entire poem, which offer a series of riffs on the basic theme of rods. To break the staff, as Macaulay remarks in describing this episode, was a sign of renunciation of office.

Irvin Ehrenpreis, who denies Swift's poem “the least claim to literary merit, much though its author valued it,” describes the work in these terms: “Rods celebrated in scripture, myth, and fiction are compared with Godolphin's white staff of office.”<sup>3</sup> We need also to recall that Swift's own relations with Godolphin had deteriorated. When he arrived in England in September he got a frosty reception, “altogether short, dry, and morose,” from the former minister – not wholly unexpected in the circumstances. At this, Swift had determined to even the score: “I am come home rolling resentments in my mind,” he told Stella on 10 September. He intended to print his lampoon “for revenge on a certain great person.” The poem created a great deal of interest, not least among leading figures in Swift's circle such as Harley and the Earl of Peterborough; but most readers believed that its author was Matthew Prior, a misconception which both writers appear to have enjoyed. A few days after publication, Swift was able to inform Stella that the verses “run prodigiously” (Swift *Corr* 1: 291; *Journal to Stella*, 1: 6, 13, 36, 60, 65).

In addition to recent events, the text of “Sid Hamet” harks back to earlier phases of Godolphin's career. The rod carried by “Our great Magician”, Sid Hamet, was made of “honest *English Wood*,” but it was then “Metamorphos'd by his Grasp” and grew into a hissing, stinging asp (5-14) – a reversal of the story told in Exodus concerning the rod of Moses. Next Swift invokes a witch's broomstick, calling up the same image of a sabbath held at midnight that Pope used in his *Epistle to a Lady* (*TE* 3.ii: 69). He follows that with a divining rod, which here detects not water but precious minerals (21-34). In this case Sid's “Magick Rod”

enabled him to detect deposits of gold ore in Scotland: this supplies a hit at the way in which the Union was sold to the two parliaments by the ministry in 1707, and the bribery of Scottish leaders in which Godolphin had allegedly engaged. The rod also permitted him to pick out a likely “*Cully*,” or mark, off whom he could make money. He could likewise wield his staff like the caduceus of Mercury (the “opiate Rod” of Hermes, mentioned in *Paradise Lost*, 11: 133) to scatter opium over “the *British Senate*” (40), that is deceive parliament. Here Swift may be thinking of the malfeasance and jobbery which, Tory critics alleged, had permitted City men and contractors to profit from the war.

As well as dowsing, Godolphin’s white staff is adapted to fishing for greedy placemen, who would do his bidding at Westminster. In this capacity as an angler’s rod, it provides a perfect instrument of corruption: “He caught his Fish, and sav’d his Bait” (48). After this the stick transforms into a conjurer’s wand, used to create a magic circle. Sid was able to make an especially large circle, into which he took “mischievous Spirits,” but “when th’ enchanted Rod was broke,/ They vanish’d in a stinking Smoak” (57-8). The meaning is plain: while at the centre of power Godolphin drew into his orbit a number of worthless agents and instruments of his policy, who disappeared as soon as he fell from grace. When Swift wrote the poem, most of the old ministry had resigned, though it was still impossible for Harley to get rid of Godolphin’s coadjutor, the Duke of Marlborough himself. On 20 September the *Journal* lists for Stella some of “the removals,” including leading figures such as Lord Somers and Henry Boyle: “I am almost shocked at it, though I did not care if they were all hanged” (*Journal to Stella*, 1: 24).

In the next section of his poem Swift contrasts Sid’s rod with the sceptre of Agamemnon in the *Iliad*, barren of leaves once its wood was severed from the tree, “As *Homer* tells us o’er and o’er” (69) – most obviously at the moment when Achilles swears on it and then throws it on the floor in his quarrel with the Greek king in the first book of the poem. Inversely the lord treasurer’s wand proves fruitful, shooting out “Golden Boughs, and Golden Fruit” (72), resembling the apples of the Hesperides. It was transmitted to him through “the Hero’s line” (62) as an heirloom, just as the sceptre of Agamemnon was handed down to him from ancestors (*Iliad* 2: 101-8, where however it is made clear that Hephaestus, or Vulcan, had forged the staff in bronze). These lines glance at the insinuation that Godolphin owed his power to his connection with the Churchill family – his son had married in 1698 the eldest daughter and heiress of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, with £5,000 of her dowry provided by Princess (later Queen) Anne. This is not the only

canard to which Swift's poem lends credence. At its conclusion, he distorts the actual sequence of events by suggesting that Godolphin should have kissed the rod and returned it to his mistress (81), that is knuckled under (Tilley R156), whereas in truth he was simply doing the queen's bidding. Swift knew this perfectly well: on 9 September, shortly before composing "Sid Hamet," he had written to Archbishop William King and described how in response to the instructions he had received Godolphin "broke his Staff, and flung the Pieces in the Chimney, desiring Mr. Smith [the chancellor of the exchequer, who was present] to be Witness that he had obeyed the Queen's Commands" (Swift *Corr*, 1: 291).

When Swift writes that Godolphin chose "to break [his] Rod like naughty Lad" (80), we can hardly fail to hear a contrast with the end of *The Tempest*. There of course Prospero abjures his rough magic, and declares, "I'll break my staff," voluntarily renouncing his supernatural powers along with his legitimate rule. Against this Godolphin appears as a usurper like Antonio, brought to book by the true monarch, who strips him of his unearned influence. Reacting to his dismissal like a badly behaved schoolboy, he deserves to feel the master's cane – or "rod," as it was normally called when wielded by the most famous disciplinarian of the age, Dr Richard Busby of Westminster school. Pope allots Busby a speech in Book 4 of *The Dunciad*, uttered by a spectral form holding in its hand "the Virtue of the dreadful wand" (*TE* 5: 355). The note to this line ran, "A Cane usually born by Schoolmasters, which drives the poor Souls about like the wand of Mercury."

According to "Sid Hamet," the minister would have done better to turn his staff into "a *Newmarket* Switch" (84). This alludes to Godolphin's interest in horse racing, along with his estate and stables close to the town – more of the minister's ill-gotten gains, from Swift's point of view.<sup>4</sup> A riding-rod, according to *OED*, was "a stick or switch carried in the hand when riding." Instead Sid has made it into a "Rod for [his] own Breech" (84) – a form of self-chastisement (Tilley R153). Its next incarnation may be "a *Rod in Piss*" (86), a punishment in store (Tilley R157). We know very well the sanction that many Tories envisaged for the former lord treasurer: they wanted to see him impeached – but the queen would never have contemplated such a thing. With this flurry of proverbial usages, the poem completes its denunciation of Godolphin – and by implication the whole Whig ministry – as a party of corrupt tricksters, analogous to "the conj'ring Tribe" of strolling mountebanks and cheating illusionists. In this light "Sid Hamet" has more artistic coherence, and more political edge, than we have previously realised.

Ehrenpreis contends that the weight of allusion caused Swift his problems in writing the poem. “Most of the rhythms are doggerel,” he asserts, “the language is generally clumsy; the tone, erratic. The images are more mean than homely, and the wit is palpably forced. Almost inevitably the end limps and sounds awkward, though Swift tries as usual for a hammerblow.” The critic’s dislike of “*Sid Hamet*” may go back to an underlying thread he discerns, that is “a dense unintentionally phallic imagery, suggesting that Swift was symbolically castrating a father figure.”<sup>5</sup> This reading seems farfetched, insofar as the staffs which provide Swift’s analogues were all familiar in scripture, literature, mythology and folklore, and none was created for the purpose by the poet. The force of the ending is lost unless we take account of the build-up of coarse proverbial usages in the latter stages of the work. By this means Swift effects a swerve to a new sense of his key word – the rod of punishment, which should now be exercised on Godolphin himself. Last, like all previous commentators, Ehrenpreis missed two elements vital to the design.

The first of these is a wide-ranging current of allusion to the staff both of Moses and of his brother Aaron (often interchangeable in subsequent exegesis, Jewish and Christian alike). This constitutes the key image, set in motion at the very start:

The *Rod* was but a harmless Wand,  
 When *Moses* held it in his hand,  
 But soon as e’er he *lay’d it down*,  
 ’Twas a devouring Serpent grown.

(1-4)

The lines allude to a scene in Exodus 4:2-4, which editors have annotated. But although Swift does not mention other episodes, a reader in his day would automatically recall familiar passages from the scriptures, where the rod is seen as the symbol of Moses’ authority over the Israelites. They would remember incidents, too, where the staffs of both Moses and Aaron exercise miraculous power during the plagues, akin to that of the “magicians” (e.g. Exodus 7-8), following an instruction for Aaron from Moses to cast down his rod before Pharaoh so that it becomes a serpent. In Numbers 20: 11, the brothers strike the rock to produce water for the congregation to drink; and of course Moses parts the Red Sea with his staff in Exodus 14. Finally, as related in the book of Numbers 17: 1-17, Moses prophesies that Aaron’s rod will “[bring] forth buds, and [bloom] blossoms” – compare *Sid Hamet*: “*Sid*’s Scepter, full of Juice, did shoot / In golden Boughs, and golden Fruit” (71-2). The trope was used by

another poet in the same year, in a savage attack on the Whig Junto which also implicated Godolphin:

On his right Hand was old *Vulpone* plac'd,  
 With Wealth, and ev'ry Thing but *Merit* grac'd:  
 A Man whose Arts, and undiscover'd Wiles,  
 Had vested him with wrong'd *Britannia's* Spoils;  
 And whose all powerful and commanding Wand,  
 Like *Aaron's*, had distress'd and vex'd the Land.<sup>6</sup>

We should look in vain for any Lawrentian sense of phallic power as Swift takes over the biblical text. Moses and Aaron use their staffs to ward off evil and defeat the oppressive empire of Pharaoh, casting out plagues, producing life-giving nourishment from the desert, and helping the Israelites to freedom. By contrast Godolphin does the exact opposite: he acts like a conjuror rather than a prophet, and he produces rich pickings for himself in the form of “Juice”, gold to augment the family coffers. By his misuse of the emblem of his authority, he betrays the beneficent empire of the queen, embodied in the “honest *English Wood*” of the white staff. All in all, Godolphin becomes the antitype of Moses, standing as the leader who misleads his people and undermines the authority vested in him. Unlike the prophet, he uses hocus-pocus to delude his followers. Moreover, as we have seen, the rod's power to “divine” (31) suggests another form of staff – one indeed that was popularly known as a Mosaical rod.

Satirists generally try to limit the range of allusions. But Swift could not restrict the scope of his opening reference: his first readers simply knew too much about the subject.

## II

A second layer of implication is present in “Sid Hamet.” It has passed unobserved that Swift took his title, and several leading ideas for the poem, from a topical story in the periodical press. This appeared in nos. 4 and 9 of a new *Tatler*-style journal called *The Visions of Sir Heister Ryley*, which ran for about a year: its author was the projector Charles Povey.<sup>7</sup> He was a man of considerable energy and initiative, whose career has not been very fully studied. In an age of projectors, he became notorious as the most ingenious of all company promoters. His Laputan schemes included a fire-bomb, that is extinguisher, and a new coin of gold and silver “to give in exchange for South-Sea stock and Paper Money” (Read's *Weekly Journal*, 19 November 1720).



The ostensible theme of Povey's journal is the need for a reformation of manners, particularly in the area of sexual behavior. However, a titillating quality in the stories printed may point to the real sales appeal of the *Visions*. Of the two issues in question, the first introduced a French pseudo-prophet, James Aymar. The second was headed "The Continuation of the Virtue of *James Aymar's Wand*," and described how the cheat met his downfall. Povey mentions the wand's "virtue" several times in the text. These issues are dated, respectively, 28 August and 8 September 1710. They concern Jacques Aymar-Vernai, a peasant from Dauphiné, who became prominent around 1692 and set off a fierce debate on the alleged powers of the divining rod. He claimed that he could track murderers and thieves with the aid of his rod. Aymar became the centre of widespread debate for a time, involving Nicolas Malebranche and more tangentially Antoni van Leeuwenhoek among others, but the episode had dropped out of sight for some years. Interest in England was kindled once more by the French prophets, who operated in England from 1706.<sup>8</sup> Most people would have remembered at least the outline of Aymar's story and the controversy it sparked.

The vigour of the analogies set out in "Sid Hamet" is much increased if we recall Povey's two papers. In the transcription which follows, the text is taken from the collected edition "printed for the author" and sold by a variety of tradesmen and tradeswomen. No date is supplied on the title page, but the volume almost certainly appeared soon after the final number of the journal on February 21, 1710[11].

*From my House in St. James's Square, August 25.*

They who assert. That in such a Polite Age as this, it is mere trifling to attempt to impose upon the World. have in some respect, Reason on their side; but all things considered they do not argue right. There are a great many more private Persons at present than formerly, ho are able to resist the Force, and stop the Course of Illusion. I own it, but withal reply, our Age is as easie to be impos'd upon as any whatsoever. And after what we have seen concerning an Explication of the Apocalypse,<sup>9</sup> we have no reason to say that the World is grown more cunning now a-days. In truth, it is not; all the Delusions which tickle Men's Fancies, go down glib with them. They are not asham'd when they are convinc'd that they have been overseen: neither have they the less respect for them who have out-witted them; and they cry out as loud as ever against those who have not faith enough to be deluded; a pretty instance whereof we have in the Case of *James Aymer* [sic], a Frenchman, who pretended to find out all the Faults and Actions of Men, be they never so secret, only by the Moon of a pretended Wand, which he always carryed about him. Never did any thing make a greater Noise, or occasion the Writing of so many Books about the

Miracles this Person was said to do. I am certainly informed that several Politicians in the Court of *France* thought at first, that by the Virtue of this Wand they should in a short time gain great Advantages over their Enemies the Allies: but it is evident they were mightily disappointed in their Expectation. Should I enlarge upon the Story; the single History of this Matter only would fill a whole Volume, and perhaps expose the People of *France* to more contempt than all the Writings of our Historians have done. It's true, if *James Aymar* could have made his Pretensions good, it might have gain'd the King many Signal Victories: For then that Prince could have told what his Enemies had consulted in their Councils against him, long before they were capable of pulling their Designs into Execution: Nay, he could have told by Virtue of this Wand, whether a Battle or a Siege would have turned to Honour, or have proved fatal to his Affairs. . .

Struck by the potential opened up by the wand, the author decides to make his readers "a little merry":

If this great Prophet had been a true one. it might have carried the Reformation of Manners throughout the whole world, more effectively than the Missionaries with all their Art and Pains have hitherto done: For should such a Man be seated on the Stage of this Terrestrial Globe; Jealousie, that Pest of a married Life, would soon be banish'd all humane Society. Neither the *Italians* nor the Eastern Nations would then have occasion to set Guards over their Wives, or watch them with *Argus's* Eyes themselves; each Man would trust to their Honesty, and they need but bring them to the Test of the Wand, and the Men would not only free themselves from wracking Cares, which too often hasten their Ruin; but they would perceive themselves under the Necessity of maintaining their Conjugal Vow, if they had any value for their own Reputation. The being call'd to the Court and appearing before a Prince, would strike less Horror into the Mind of the Guilty, than the Arrival of an *Abaris*.<sup>10</sup> The greatest number of Offences, the most dangerous Sins, such I mean, as are committed under the hopes that they'll never rise up to their publick Shame; would be entirely suppress'd by thinking on the Wand.

At this point the author quotes a short passage from one of Horaces's odes,<sup>11</sup> and launches into an argument that "this Wand would be of wonderful Advantage to the World, it would ease the Publick of the Funds it is obliged to establish for the Maintenance of Foundlings: For it would discover those who are their Parents, and force them to maintain them themselves: Besides, it would enhaunce the Fear of the evil Consequence; which Dread is such a restraint upon Incontinency, that without it there would be more frequent and more scandalous Acts of Uncleaness committed."

After this bawdy episode, Sir Heister brings himself up with a jerk to the events in hand:

But to come a little closer to the Matter. I shall relate a Passage or two concerning the pretended Virtue of *James Aymar's* Wand. The Prior of the Charter House of *Ville neuve* in *Avignon*, travell' d through *Orange* with *James Aymar*,<sup>12</sup> by whose Assistance he pretended to discover several Boundaries of Land that were lost; but by chance he was made use of upon another Occasion. Three Days before, A Child was laid at the Gate of the Convent of the Capuchins:<sup>13</sup> The Rector of the Hospital desired *James Aymar* to discover who did it. To this he readily consented, came to the Capuchin's Gate, where the Child had been laid, and in the View of a great Multitude, took the Way which the motion of his Wand directed to, and went to a Village of the County of *Venaisin*, nam'd *Camaret*, and from thence into a Farm-House, which he said positively was the Place where the Child was born. I forgot to tell you that in the way, he met with a Man on Horseback, and that by the motion of his Wand, he discover'd that he was the Father of the Foundling. The Judge of the Place, either of his own accord, or at the Sollicitation of some Persons concerned, desired *James Aymar*, and these who set him to work, to make no farther Enquiry, and that he would cause the Child to be taken home again, which was accordingly done. The Conclusion of this notable Story, with an Account how *James Aymar's* Wand came to lose its admirable Virtue, and the Disappointment many of the People of *France* met with, upon the Discovery of the Cheat, must be reserv'd to fill up part of another Paper.

So ends the first issue relating to Aymar's wand.

### III

Two weeks later, a second paper embellishes on the theme:

*From my House in St. James's Square, September 7*

*The Continuation of the Virtue of James Aymar's Wand.*

Many of the People of *France* were so prejudiced in favour of this Impostor, that they made him do things which he never thought of, and found out Reasons to excuse him when he did not succeed. He impos'd on the Publick by the appearance of a simple and rustick Air, and speaking only the Gibberish of his Country; but he was in the bottom nothing less than what he appeared to be. The Motion of his Wand was the Cause of the Illusion. The People saw the forked Stick turn so dexterously in his Hand, that they did not perceive the insensible Motion of his Fist, which determined it to turn forcibly and quick, by the Spring which he gave to his Wand.<sup>14</sup> Besides his apparent natural Plainness, he affected to be devout, went often to Confession, every Day to Mass, and shewed other external

Tokens of a great Sense of Religion; and affirmed that he had very carefully preserved his Virginity, without which (as he said) he could not succeed with his Wand. He would not walk in the Streets in the Day-time, for fear, as he said, of being murdered by Thieves and Pick-Pockets. But all this was only, because the Night served better for his Tricks.

Yet, however ridiculous Aymar might appear, he did not want admirers among the people:

Some wanted to know when a Peace would be concluded; others were very desirous to be informed how many Victories the King should get the next Campaign. Some ask'd him whether he could not discover the Thieves, who were guilty of such a Robbery, at such a time, in such a Place, &c. Others were eager to be certified, whether such a Saint was not the true one, rather than that of another Parish, which bragg'd of having him also. Others brought Relicks to him, to know whether they really belong'd to such a Saint. A Young Silk-Weaver, who was contracted, gave him two Crowns to know whether the Woman he was contracted to had her Maiden Head or no. Those who shard the Profit took care to bring Grist to the Mill, and made them pay the Money before hand. Such a Man as this at *London*, with his Wand, would be a certain Gain, and an inexhaustible Mine<sup>15</sup> for those who should have a Share in the Profit; since it is well known that several of our Petty-Conjurors,<sup>16</sup> who do not pretend to perform a thousandth Part of the Miracles attributed to *James Aymar*; gain to themselves considerable Estates, by the good Opinion that the well disposed People of *Great Britain* have of them. If this Trade of the Wand had gone on in *France*, the Persons who suspected others, and those who were suspected, would have strove who should pay him best. He would have got Money out of the Husbands and Wives, the Gallants and their Mistresses. The Wand would not have moved but for those who gave most.<sup>17</sup> I believe that if the Mystery of these sorts of pretended Prodigies could be discovered, we should find that there is a Combination of People always at the Head of the Plots, who, upon the first broaching of the Cheat abroad, go about and boast of an extraordinary Talent, and endeavour under-hand to establish the Belief of it; witness the late *French* Prophets. But there are some Cheats who have no need of Emissaries; the Credulity of the Publick is a sufficient Preparation for their acting the Imposture. . .

At this point the author announces that he will “proceed to shew the full Discovery of the Cheat of this Wand,” as it is “well worth Observation”:

. . . The Court of *France* hearing of the great Miracles performed by Virtue of the said Wand in several Provinces ordered *James Aymar* to be sent for to *Paris*, to make some of his Experiments before the Prince of *Conde*, whose extraordinary Abilities proved fatal to the Impostor and his

Followers, and soon pull'd down the Trophies set up by the Partisans of *James Aymar*. This poor *Ignoramus* was so wretchedly baffled in the Tryal he made of shewing his Art in the Palace of *Conde*, that his Reputation became a Bankrupt for ever. The Publick was made acquainted with all the Transactions, and it was in vain to plead Uncertainties in the Case; since it was by order of that Great Prince that the World was informed of the Cheat. Nevertheless all this would not do with some People, but they were for assigning some Reason for the Miscarriages of the Wand; among these was M. *Vallemont*, who has lately publish'd, *A Treatise concerning the Secret Philosophy of the Diviner's Wand*.<sup>18</sup> That Author goes about to explain, how the Peasant of *Dauphine* might be mistaken in the Tryal of his Skill before the Prince, though he had really the Power and Gifts of which he boasted. This sort of Philosophers, as well as the Unfolders of Prophecies, (for both of them are of the same Stamp) are a kind of Enthusiasts, who will never own themselves to have been in the wrong; and who, though they are convinc'd of the Falsity of the things they have advanc'd, treat with a haughty Air those Men of sound Judgment who will not espouse their whimsical Notions.

And so to the climax of the case:

But notwithstanding what this and other Authors wrote to support the Credit of the Wand, and keep the Delusion on foot; *James Aymar* himself at last confessed to the Prince of *Conde*,<sup>19</sup> that he knew nothing of all that had been attributed to him, and that what he had hitherto done was to gain the Pence. Whereupon the Prince ordered him to retire as soon as possible to his own Village, because being no Longer under his Protection, the People whom he had accus'd would stop him. I had forgot to mention one thing which was more especially remarkable in this Story: The Magistrates of the City of *Lyons* had such a mighty Veneration for the Miracles done by the Wand, that they caused an innocent Man to be put to a cruel Death upon the bare Impeachment of this Impostor; and many other Acts of Injustice of the like Nature were committed in several other Provinces of the Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

Aymar stands here as a type of the false conjuror, deluding people by the dexterous motion of his wand. There are hints of the political theme drawn out by Swift: "our Petty-Conjurors," a phrase used by Povey, is highly relevant to Swift's view of statecraft. The appeal of a flashy magician to the get-rich-quick mentality is equally well conveyed. Finally, Aymar is shown predicting the date of the peace, a matter of widespread concern in 1710. We need to keep in mind another fact: the term "wand" has lost currency except in relation to a conjuror's spells, but in this period it was regularly used in the sense of a staff of office, such as the lord treasurer's white rod.

Swift, of course, had a marked addiction to mock astrology; apart from the Partridge papers involving “Isaac Bickerstaff,” a recent example can be found in his “Famous Prediction of Merlin, the British Wizard” (1709). The Aymar papers were a real gift to him. Out of the hints supplied by Povey, he builds up an allegory of politics as a rascally trade carried on by “dexterous” showground illusionists. No doubt he recalled the scare over French prophets in 1707; but the direct occasion for this attack on the impostures of statesmen was provided by both articles in *The Visions of Sir Heister Ryley*. A number of verbal parallels reinforce the effect, not to mention the title, drawn by Swift from the heading to Povey’s second paper. *The Visions* gave Swift a starting point and a model: the notorious Aymar served as the type of a charlatan and cheat. First described as a Wand” (1), a term Povey uses no less than twenty-two times, the staff of office is reduced in “Sid Hamet” to the level of a conjuror’s prop. Equally, the “trial” that Aymar underwent in Condé’s palace may suggest an event which did most to bring down Godolphin, that is the arraignment of Sacheverell by the peers in Westminster Hall. Certainly his banishment by the prince parallels Godolphin’s dismissal: the clear implication is that the minister will be exposed when the enquiries into the financial management of the war are concluded. Meanwhile he deserves to be cudgelled like a common thief. G.M. Trevelyan once regretted the fact that the queen “chose to dismiss the Treasurer as a squire would discharge a cheating bailiff.”<sup>21</sup> That is exactly how Tory polemicists attempted to portray the nature of the transaction.

By this means Swift implicitly aligns Godolphin with notorious rogues of the age. Even the title, with its punning reference to “virtue,” carries an underlying reference to the claims of quacks and astrologers – an association the Scriblerian group liked to make in political satires. The magical potency of the white staff, in conjuring up the perquisites of wealth and power, shows up the lack of true virtue – moral value – in its owner. According to manuals of black magic, the conjuror should take a rod of hazel and recite a prayer of consecration, invoking the powers of darkness to endow the wand with the “virtue of the rods of Jacob, of Moses and of the mighty Joshua.”<sup>22</sup> Nowadays conjurors are people who perform in theatres or at children’s parties: Swift recalls a time, only a very few generations back, when people genuinely believed that the black arts (or even, misused, white magic) could be enlisted to assist in Satan’s campaign. For Swift, we might say, politics was itself a sort of black art. It is no news that the Scriblerian group interested themselves in folklore, superstitions and popular beliefs (see also Chapter 12). What emerges here