Slavery and Augustan Literature
Swift, Pope, Gay

John Richardson

Routledge Studies in Eighteenth Century Literature

Slavery and Augustan Literature

Slavery played an important part in early eighteenth-century English society. It created markets, provided goods and drove political decisions. It also exerted an influence on the ways in which people behaved and thought. Some of the mental habits associated with slavery are to be found in the writing of the period.

Slavery and Augustan Literature investigates slavery in the work of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and John Gay. These three writers were connected with a Tory ministry, which attempted to increase substantially the English share of the international slave trade. They all wrote in support of the treaty that was meant to effect that increase.

The book begins with contemporary ideas about slavery, with the Tory ministry years and with texts written during those years. These texts tend to obscure the importance of the slave trade to Tory planning. In its second half, the book analyses the attitudes towards slavery in Pope's Horatian poems, and *An Essay on Man*, Gay's *Polly*, and Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*. John Richardson shows how, despite differences, Swift, Pope and Gay adopt a mixed position of admiration for freedom alongside implicit support for slavery.

Slavery and Augustan Literature provides valuable insights into eighteenth-century attitudes towards slavery, and the relation of literature to society. It also offers new readings of major Augustan texts and will be of essential interest to students and researchers of eighteenth-century literature.

John Richardson teaches literature at the National University of Singapore. His work on eighteenth-century literature, which has appeared in a number of journals, has been principally concerned with the intersections between politics and literature. He is currently investigating the varied and changing literary representations of war during the long eighteenth century.

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For Fiona, Barbara and Patrick

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Singapore, March 2003

References and short titles

References to works by Swift, Pope and Gay are given with short titles in parenthesis in the text. All other references are given in endnotes. For prose works, including letters, I refer to volume and page number of the edition used. For poems and plays, I refer to the particular work (the poem or play), and give line numbers, book and line numbers, or act, scene and line numbers. Unless otherwise stated my sources for texts are the standard editions listed in the bibliography.

I use the following titles for editions of prose:

Burgess	*The Letters of John Gay*, C.F. Burgess (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
Sherburn	*The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, George Sherburn (ed.), 5 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
Prose	*The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, Herbert Davis (gen. ed.), 14 vols, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939–68.
Journal	*Journal to Stella*, Harold Williams (ed.), 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948.
Williams	*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, Harold Williams (ed.), 5 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.
Woolley	*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, David Woolley (ed.), vol. 1, Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1999.

1 Introduction

Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and John Gay were all connected with the Tory ministry of 1710–14, and with its leader Robert Harley. His ministry made the slave trade a principal – perhaps the principal – element in its financial planning. One of the ministry's earliest tasks was to solve the problem of the national debt which had built up during the first years of the War of Spanish Succession (1702–13). It founded the South Sea Company in 1711 in order to exploit the *Asiento*, the lucrative slave-trading contract with Spanish South America, which was expected to be, and eventually was, the major concession of the peace agreed in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. As G.M. Trevelyan's still trenchant analysis put it, 'the finances of the country were based in May 1711 on the assumption that the *Asiento* . . . would be wrested from France'.[1] This is not to suggest that the ministry invented the slave trade or revelled in its cruelty, but simply that Tory financial policy set out to increase its importance to the British economy. Pope, Swift and Gay all supported this ministry and the peace policy in different ways, and all knew leading ministers. The connection is important because of its impact on their lives and literary careers. It was under the ministry's aegis that they met, became friends, formed the Scriblerus Club, and laid the foundations for their later work. The writings directly produced by the club are of limited interest, but more loosely Scriblerian texts include important works from the 1720s: the *Dunciad*, *Gulliver's Travels* and the *Beggar's Opera*.[2] All three employ, in different degrees and different ways, the irony, generic disruption and satire on learning which were part of the club's social and literary culture. All three, again in different ways, are not only concerned with ethical and political questions but are opposition texts associated with the ousted Tories of more than ten years earlier. There is, in short, a point of contact between Harley's ministry and a number of major canonical texts.

The contact suggests a starting point for enquiry. There are two sets of facts. On the one hand, we have a country involved in the slave trade, and the country's leaders, with whom an important group of writers was closely associated, eager to increase the involvement. On the other, we have the same writers producing works which are centrally concerned with the behaviour

of people and of peoples, and which are committed to an idea of freedom. The contradiction here invites questions about the interactions between slavery and Scriblerian writings. More particularly, it suggests enquiry, first, about the extent to which slavery is a presence – as theme, motif, implicit background – in the works of Swift, Pope and Gay, second, about whether contemporary attitudes towards slavery are echoed in those works, and third, about how answers to the first two questions might affect evaluation. In order to pursue these questions it is necessary to ask other questions as well, concerning the knowledge of, and attitudes towards, slavery in society as a whole. But these are subsidiary questions here. The primary aim of this book is to understand the place of slavery in Scriblerian writing, and it makes three claims. The first is that slavery is more important in Scriblerian writings than is generally recognized. The second is that the writings tend, by and large, to reproduce, perhaps to reinforce, attitudes supportive of slavery. The third is that the presence of such attitudes may affect the way we evaluate the works.

Against the first claim it could be suggested that slavery and related matters are such negligible presences in the writing of Swift, Pope and Gay as to be irrelevant. The realities of the transatlantic slave trade and of plantation slavery seem hardly to have been issues for the three men. Apart from the largely tacit support for the increase in the British share of the international slave trade effected by the peace, there is no outright pro-slavery argument in Scriblerian writings, and anti-slavery sentiments are also rare. Although Pope voices them in *Windsor-Forest* and *An Essay on Man*, he does so in passing and in brief (*Windsor-Forest*, 408; *Essay on Man*, 1.105–8). This apparent silence has meant that most scholars have assumed the connections between slavery and early eighteenth-century literature to be unimportant. In addition to occasional passing references and sections of arguments, there are only few studies devoted to detailed examination of an aspect of the subject, and fewer still that offer broad surveys.[3] Even more convincing evidence of the lack of scholarly interest is the absence in book after book of any index entry for 'slave', 'slavery', 'slave trade', '*Asiento*', or 'plantation'.

The apparent indifference of Swift, Pope and Gay is, however, misleading. Slavery is an important, if at times shadowy, presence in the writing of all three, both in works related to the Treaty of Utrecht and in later works. This is my first claim. The group of texts written between 1711 and 1714, what might be called the Tory ministry texts, is the group with which this book begins. Although there are few direct references to the *Asiento* in them, as indeed there were in the debate at large, the effort to secure the contract exerts a powerful influence. As the fourth chapter shows, it determines the arguments of Swift's *Conduct of the Allies* and associated pamphlets, and it helps shape the visionary rhetoric of Pope's *Windsor-Forest*. Slavery remains important in later works. A key feature of the opposition poet persona that Pope develops in his later work, particularly the Horatian poems, is that he is not a slave.

Gay constructs the plots of two plays, *The Captives* and *Polly*, around the liberation of a slave and the defeat of a slave rebellion. And Swift not only makes servitude a central idea in *Gulliver's Travels*, but he exploits both the language and the psychology of a society involved in slavery for the irony of *A Modest Proposal*. All three writers also betray a kind of fascination with the word 'slave' in their frequent use of it, either as a casual insult, or a definition of an anti-self, or a polemical marker of the most undesirable state of human existence.

Even the brief summary above indicates something of the variety of the references to slavery in Scriblerian writings, and this leads to the question of the attitudes adopted towards it. It is necessary to turn first to attitudes in society at large, a topic I consider in greater detail in the second chapter. Something of their nature and complexity can be seen in the eighteenth-century resonances of the word 'slave'. Two things are important with the word: it seems always to connote real slavery and it often implicitly justifies it. Samuel Johnson defines 'slave' as 'one mancipated to a master; not a free-man; a dependant', adding that 'it is used proverbially for the lowest state of life'.[4] This definition is really four. There are three meanings for the word used in a literal way, as well as a fourth metaphorical (or what Johnson calls 'proverbial') sense. However, the first meaning of 'slave', that is, the first literal sense, is nearly always present at some level in eighteenth-century usage. Whatever else the word was used to mean, it still signified a possessed servant, 'one mancipated to a master'. It is necessary to emphasize this because the way in which different meanings of the word become entangled suggests something about contemporary attitudes. A *Craftsman* of 1735 discusses the willingness of Englishmen to relinquish freedom, as long as they believe the relinquishment to be by their own choice. 'They will not be Slaves,' the writer mocks, 'unless it be their own Way.' Here, 'slave' is being used in Johnson's second literal sense to mean 'not a freeman'. In the *Craftsman*'s next sentences, however, the first literal sense asserts itself. 'They will not wear *Chains*,' the writer adds, 'unless they put them on Themselves. They will not be plunder'd of their *Liberties*; but They will throw them up.'[5] 'Chains' and 'plunder' connote the slavery of bound Africans rather than the milder limitations of freedom that the article is ostensibly discussing. In other words, 'slave' means slave. But by associating slavery with willing servitude, the writer implies further that it is, or it may be, a condition which is accepted or deserved.

Literal meaning is also present when the word is used metaphorically, or put another way, the metaphor is not so dead that there is no live comparison. In this respect, it is different from modern sexual metaphors of insult, where the only live comparison is in the equal contempt attaching to the sexual word and the insulted person. To call someone a 'prick' is not to suggest any real similarity between that person and a penis. The insult 'slave', on the other hand, does mean something connected with real slavery. Aboan, the companion

of the slave-hero of Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*, remarks contemptuously on the cowardice of one of the rebels:

> Fit! hang him, he is only fit to be
> Just what he is, to live and die a Slave:
> The base Companion of his servile Fears.[6]

'Slave' here means both a possessed person, and a contemptible person, Johnson's 'lowest state of life', whose 'servile Fears' and generally base nature suit him for his condition. Again, by suggesting at once both enforced and deserved or accepted slavery, the word implies a kind of justification.

Such usage was common. Indeed, from what one can gather from the writing that remains from the period, the word 'slave' was one of the most favoured terms of abuse among early eighteenth-century Englishmen. The fact that members of a slave-trading and supposedly freedom-loving society should habitually insult each other with 'slave' is suggestive. It implies (though it is not by itself sufficient evidence for) a collective discomfort with the slave trade and an attempt to deal with that discomfort by defensive aggression. At some level Englishmen did not (we might suggest) like the idea of trading in people, or of their own implication, however distant, in that trade. But they contained their dislike, and perhaps their guilt, by using the word in a way that made slaves despicable and deserving of their situation. I argue later that manoeuvres of this kind are characteristic of attitudes towards slavery in the period. Although there is variety in them, there is also a common central feature. It may be described as a managed discomfort, since it is marked by a painful awareness of slavery and an attempt to counter pain with avoidance, aggression or special justification. Such management is essentially dishonest, involving as it does denial of what is known or could be known. However, to assert that is not to point a glib accusing finger at early eighteenth-century Englishmen. It is simply to recognize a kind of behaviour that is common to people of different times and different societies, but that took a particular and identifiable form in the eighteenth century.

Complex contemporary attitudes towards slavery provide the context in which Scriblerian references can be read. There is a methodological point here. Evidence of attitudes is used in this study primarily to illuminate the literary texts that are its subject. Contemporary plays, poems and novels by writers other than Swift, Pope and Gay are sometimes offered as evidence of attitudes in conjunction with other printed evidence. However, I do not use Scriblerian texts in this way because that would be to create a circular argument, showing that attitude A is evidenced by text B, in order to argue that text B contains attitude A. Moreover, it is necessary to use evidence other than the imaginative or literary for the spread of attitudes in society, because literary texts cannot be valid and sufficient sources of evidence for that. To treat literature in this

way has been a mistake of some past studies. Laura Brown, for instance, approaches Pope's major works as 'documents of the ideological structure' of the period, an approach which has two serious problems in it.[7] First the emphasis on 'ideology' and the association with Marxist understandings of ideology produce an implicit denial of human variety and of the individual's limited but real capacity to make choices. Such a denial may be present in most primarily sociological or cultural approaches to literature, and it often leads to distortions. Although the attitudes of people of any culture or sub-culture do bear a strong family likeness, they also betray family differences, and some of those differences are the results of conscious decision. For this reason, I prefer the words 'attitude' and 'opinion' to 'ideology', and I try throughout to retain a sense of individual agency. Second, the assumption which is essential to Brown's study that literary works are representative or typical documents is more convenient than true. That depends upon the works. Polemical texts, at least when the writer is in tune with readers, may well rely upon and reflect widespread assumptions and beliefs, but other works often succeed by being exceptional. Moreover, fictions tend to make different demands from those of polemical texts, assume different kinds of common ground, rely upon different forms of assent. In short, they do not need, or mirror, a set of beliefs shared by writer and readers in the way polemical texts often do. Thus, it is only possible to identify public or general attitudes at all accurately by drawing upon other sources as well as the literary. In the second chapter, I discuss attitudes towards slavery from a range of printed materials, in order, in later chapters, to place the works of Swift, Pope and Gay in that context.

What the later chapters argue is that Scriblerian writings largely reproduce the managed discomfort that characterizes early eighteenth-century attitudes towards slavery. This, my answer to the second question, constitutes the book's second claim. It can be seen at the level of detail, for instance, in Gay's expression of 'due contempt for the voluntary slaves of Birth and fortune' (Burgess, 105). Here, sycophant and slave are gathered into one word, and the contempt directed at the one attaches also to the other. Implicit in the phrase 'voluntary slaves' is the already familiar suggestion that slavery may be a chosen condition, a suggestion that alleviates guilt. A more thorough response to slavery is written into the plot of *Polly*. Gay's concern and anxiety about slavery are evident in the sale of his heroine, in her trials, and in the rebellion of a group of pirates and slaves. However, Polly herself is eventually freed, and the slave rebellion is rendered illegitimate by the confederation of slaves with pirates and by the pirates' prominence in it. This illegitimacy allows Gay to include in his plot the 'proper' defeat of the rebellion, the return of the slaves to their fields and the restoration of the *status quo*. In other words, Gay manages discomfort by freeing his heroine, discrediting rebel slaves and implicitly justifying the institution. *A Modest Proposal* is a more complex work than *Polly* but part of its rhetoric also depends upon one of the mental habits

of managed discomfort. Swift uses the language and assumptions of slavery in order to put his reader in a position something like that of a dealer or investor in slaves, and to imply complicity in the wreck of Ireland. In addition to this assumed slaver's guilt, however, there is an assumption of the pauper's fault, and by extension, of the slave's. This is an important mental manoeuvre in a society involved in slavery, and one connected with the use of 'slave' as an insult. Slavery may be awful, the supporter of slavery suggests, and for people like us unthinkable, but slaves are by nature slaves, or their actions have made them deserve to be slaves, or their enslavement has reduced them to slaves. Human beings, and not just those of the eighteenth century, often make the unacceptable acceptable with dishonesty such as this. It belongs among the important assumptions underpinning *A Modest Proposal*. Swift's best work, however, is more complicated than such a brief account allows, and as I show later, there is in some of it a kind of intense frustration with the contradictory attitudes it embodies.

The presence in Scriblerian writing of attitudes that appear to lend support to at least some elements of slavery leads to the third question of this book. How does the recognition of that presence affect assessment of value? This in turn raises the more general problem of the nature of literary value. Although literary value does not stand in a simple and direct relation to moral or political value, there is some relation, or at least, the widespread assumption of some relation. The post-war growth in the reputation of the Scriblerians has owed much to their perceived moral teaching. To take *Windsor-Forest* as an example, Maynard Mack talks of its 'moral center' and its 'peace-making', Pat Rogers of its 'eloquent prophecy' and its 'vision of international brotherhood', and Howard Erskine-Hill of its 'salient and surprising denunciation of slavery'.[8] A younger generation of critics has challenged this kind of reading, approaching the texts in the manner of Brown as documents of a culture rather than as lessons in life. Even some of these, however, still end up finding lessons in them. Gay has become the rather unlikely hero of postcolonial concerns and radical causes, and Carole Fabricant argues that Swift's successful space-clearing 'has something to teach all eighteenth-century scholars', and in particular, 'committed leftist intellectuals'.[9] The impulse to find ethical and political meaning in imaginative works is a powerful one, and the associated tendency to evaluate imaginative works on the basis of what they mean is almost equally powerful. Indeed, with texts as socially engaged as those of the Scriblerians, it is hard to see how readers could not read and judge them, at least in part, for the positions they seem to take.

The evaluation of texts, though present throughout literary studies, is seldom a pronounced or explicit element of critical writing. Even after decades of challenge, value is a key – perhaps the key – assumption in the discipline. University courses everywhere study Pope in preference to Thomas Tickell or Ambrose Philips, John Milton in preference to Richard Blackmore, and the

teachers of those courses write principally, indeed almost exclusively, about the prominent figures.[10] However, few scholars explicitly defend or define the canon on which the scope of their study is predicated, and few justify the place of a writer or a group of writers in it. Similarly at the level of interpretation, many commentators slide from interpretation of a work to evaluation of it, but the evaluation is usually implicit and embedded in vocabulary rather than an explicit argumentative claim. There is good reason for this way of proceeding. Properly grounded evaluative judgements of texts arise out of, and belong with, interpretative detail. Delivered in a more sweeping way they usually become assertions of preference or so removed from the actuality of the text as to be unpersuasive. Larger arguments about the precise membership of a canon can be still more sterile. Like those of other commentators, most of my evaluative judgements are offered secondarily, and I hope carefully, in the course of the discussion of the texts. But just to be clear from the outset, my general position is that Scriblerian writings are weakened by the presence in them of attitudes supportive, even if ambiguously supportive, of slavery. The stature of an imaginative text is affected, it seems to me, if the text participates in its society's most destructive dishonesties. This is my last and most qualified claim. I consider it briefly in the final chapter, but it is also present implicitly in all those parts of the book that comment directly on Scriblerian texts.

There is one final set of concerns that needs to be addressed briefly in this chapter, those connected with eighteenth-century slavery itself. Britain's involvement in the slave trade and in plantation slavery was increasing and pervasive during the writing careers of Swift, Pope and Gay. The increase in trading can be fairly accurately assessed. The second decade of the century is in some ways the most significant for this study, because of my focus on the Tory peace, and the second half of that decade shows an increase over the first half of 68 per cent in numbers of slaves embarked on voyages beginning in Britain, and an increase of 32 per cent with respect to English registered ships.[11] That increase owed something to the work of the South Sea Company, but it was also an effect of the resumption of trade at the end of the war. Table 1.1 on page 8 demonstrates trends over a longer period.

Pervasiveness is rather harder to measure than volume of trade, but Britain's slave economy seems to have seeped into its society and culture. It was present in the manufactures made for Africa and the commodities returned from America, in the business of large companies and individual merchants, in Britain's small but visible black population, and probably in the conversation of seamen and colonials.[12] Periodicals seldom broached the subject directly or at length, but those that focused on news rather than opinion carried frequent reminders of it. They quoted the price of Royal African Company stock, and their harbour reports named the ships just returned from the triangular voyage to Africa for slaves, to the Caribbean for sugar, and back to Britain. In the early eighteenth century the plantation owner, with 'rum and sugar enough