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Jonathan Swift as a prose writer (1667-1745)

Swift would have been among the first to smile at any claim being advanced for him on the score of his being a great poet, though he always longed to excel in poetry, yet in bulk his verse is considerable. His poems were in large extent recreations of verses to his friends; squibs and lampoons on his private and political enemies, including the famous one on Partridge, the Quack astrologer; and one longish one, Cadmus and Vanessa (1743) which deals with his affections for Esther Vanhomrigh. In his poems he is as a rule lighter of touch and more placable in humour than he is in his prose. His favourite meter is octosyllabic Couplet which he handles with dexterity that reminds the reader of Butler in Hudibras. He has lapses of taste when he becomes coarse and vindictive, and sometimes the verse through mere indifference, is badly strung and colloquially expressed. Almost in

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one found Swift attained to a mastery of English prose, and then maintained an astonishing level of excellence. His first noteworthy book was *The Battle of Books*, published in 1704. The theme of this work is a well-worn one being the dispute between ancient and modern authors. At the time Swift wrote it his patron, Sir William Temple was engaged in a controversy on behalf of the ancients, and Swift's tract was in support of his kinsman's views. Swift gives the theme a half-allegorical, mock heroic setting in which the books in a library at length literally contend with one another. The handling is vigorous and illuminating and refreshed with many happy remarks and allusions. The famous passage where a bee, accidentally blundering into a spider's web, argues down the bitter remarks of the spider, is one of Swift's happiest efforts. *A Tale of a Tub* also published in 1704, though it was written as early as 1696 is regarded by many as Swift's best work. It certainly reveals his power at its highest. It is a religious allegory perhaps suggested by the work of Bunyan on three men Peter who stands for the Roman Catholic Church, Jack, who represents the dissenters and Martin the personification of the Anglo-Anglican and Lutheran churches each of the three has a coat laid to him by his father, and they have many experi-

ences beginning with the changes that they make on the coats, that have been left to them. The book was intended as an attack on the enthusiasm of Roman Catholics and dissenters alike, and culminates in a far fiercer attack upon Jack. But though Martin escapes comparatively lightly, Swift's contempt is poured on so many of the fundamental principles of religion that he led many to suspect his own Christianity. Indeed, the scope of the work widens until it becomes a merciless dissection of human nature in general, and of intellectual pride and religious hypocrisy in particular. Within the narrative are digressions on such subjects as critics and the value of madness to the community, which reveal the deep irony of Swift's satire at its best.

A Tale of Tub is full of wit and brilliant in its imaginative power and the incisiveness of its thought. The style is terse and has a sustained vigor, pace, and colorfulness which Swift did not equal in his later works. Many years after the writing of the book he was heard to mutter, while looking at a copy "

Good God! what genius I had when I wrote the book!