

# Swift and the Moderns: A Tribute to Claude Rawson

## Jenny Davidson (Columbia University)

This past spring I taught a new lecture course called Swift and the Moderns that could have been neither conceived nor constructed without Claude's influence: without what I learned from him personally, during my time as a graduate student at Yale in the 1990s; without his work on Rochester, Swift, Pope, Austen, Céline and many others; and without the ways of reading and the literary worlds Claude opened up for me.

I think often of a conversational exchange I had with Claude at a small cocktail party for our graduate student cohort at the townhouse of another professor, the late professor Sara Suleri Goodyear (it was 1996 or thereabouts).

I said to Claude, tipsily, "You are obsessed with cannibalism!"

Claude thought for a moment, then corrected me.

"No," he said, "I am interested in what happens to language in extreme situations."

When I made the decision to go to Yale to pursue my Ph.D. in eighteenth-century British literature, I knew of Claude's research profile without actually having read his work. As an undergraduate, I'd been thinking mostly about fiction and narratology, not satire. But Claude's seminar on Augustan satire was pure magic. I fell in love with the primary texts—Rochester, Swift, Fielding and so many others—but the real eye-opener was Claude's way of reading. His keen ear and eye, his extraordinarily close attention to shifts of diction and tone within a sentence and the traction it gave on the psychological and ethical orientations of the work as a whole, his deep knowledge of a huge swathe of classical as well as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European literary culture, the equally wide-ranging cosmopolitan readerly curiosity that enabled many of his most unexpected and profound juxtapositions and insights—now *this* was something worth aspiring to!

In those graduate school years, I read and enormously appreciated Claude's earlier work on Swift (*Gulliver and the Gentle Reader* [1973]) and Fielding (*Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress* [1972]), but my bibles were the two major essay collections—*Order From Confusion Sprung* (1985) and *Satire and Sentiment* (1993). They represent the very best of what literary criticism can

do when it is attuned as closely to style as to broader literary and cultural patterns and throughlines. I especially enjoy, in these essays, the ways in which arguments worked out at length by Claude in his earlier writing—often by way of brilliant and sensitive extended close readings—reappear, distilled into just a few sentences and perfectly integrated by way of a larger interpretive insight or judgment into a great literary tapestra with no temporal or geographical delimiters. It means that even the short occasional essays (the cleverly titled “π-ious Boswell”!) are rich with a full life’s worth of reading and thinking and writing.

Despite his expertise in mock-heroics, Claude’s generosity as a teacher and mentor has been full-on heroic, epic in an older-fashioned sense. He spent a semester supervising an independent course of reading with me that took us through the major French and English prose satires of the later seventeenth-century. He took me to lunch at least once a term at Berkeley College. He introduced me to the writing of Patrick Chamoiseau, among many others. His hospitality at New Haven’s best restaurants (*sic?*) gave me an impression of what grown-up gastronomic-cum-intellectual life might look like: not least by way of introducing me to what is still one of my favorite cocktails, the caipirinha, based on a sugar-cane liquor called cachaça whose first acquaintance Claude had made by way of a daughter who imported spirits from Brazil. I learned the deep satisfaction of writing dissertation chapters that met with Claude’s approval (“accurate and readable”).

Claude continued to look out for me after I finished my degree. He helped me publish my dissertation as a book, edited by the brilliant Linda Bree at Cambridge; he introduced me in real life as well as intellectually to James McLaverty and Marcus Walsh, both of whose work on annotation would become incredibly important to me; he hooked me up with Robert Mahony and the fabulous Swift Symposium in Dublin. When Claude retired, he asked me to look out for his final Yale doctoral student Nicole Wright, who was then just finishing her dissertation and is now a tenured professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I feel this speaks to the real care he practiced on behalf of his students as well as to the ways in which to be a student of Claude’s was to join a very special and precious community.

Over the last few years, I’ve become aware of a need to define for myself what really matters most in terms of how I allocate my research and teaching time. What is my eighteenth-century, and what parts of it most urgently need to be shared with students and readers as the writings of the period recede ever further into the distance? I’m writing currently about Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a very long book, little read these days and with its

values thoroughly undermined by twenty-first-century critique. But Gibbon *matters*, and so do Burke and Swift and Johnson and so many others. In particular I think of that throughline—it motivated my Swift and the Moderns course in spring 2024—from the intellectual controversies of the Protestant Reformation through to the application of secular humanist textual-critical practices to Biblical texts in the later seventeenth-century. Feed into that stream the writings of Descartes and the new Lucretianism and you have the necessary preconditions for Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, and, after several further decades of intense and disorienting social change, his most brilliant and accessible exploration of what it means to be this animal called man in *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift did not share the underlying assumptions of the twentieth-century writers with whom my course concluded (Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Vonnegut and Sebald and Kluge on the Allied bombing of German cities in WWII), but he anticipated some of their most unwelcome insights about the limits of what it is possible to say in language. The story of modernity is, among other things, the story of what happens to language in extreme situations.

I thank Claude for all he has given me over the years and I never feel more connected to him than when I read and converse with students who are as thrilled by Swift's writing as I was all those years ago in Linsly-Chittenden Hall.