

Jonathan Swift. “A Description of a City Shower” (1710)

Headnote The poem was first published in the *Tatler*, no. 238 (17 Oct. 1710) and was reprinted in Pope and Swift’s *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1711), *Miscellanies. The Last Volume* (‘1727’ for 1728), and in *The Works of J.S., D.D.* (1735). The text used here is based on *Works* (1735).

The poem, a favorite of Swift’s, was “written between 10 October (or just before) and 13 October, when [Swift] had already dispatched the verses to the *Tatler* [a periodical, begun by Richard Steele in 1709]” (Rogers). On 7 Oct. 1710, Swift wrote to Stella, “And now I am going in charity to send Steele a *Tatler*, which is very low of late” (Ross); on 12 Oct. 1710, Swift wrote to Stella, “I have finished my poem on the Shower, all but the beginning” (O Hehir 120n.5). Swift and Steele were close friends around 1708-9, but “political differences drew them apart, and they were engaged in bitter pamphlet battles at the time of [Robert] Harley’s administration [1710-14]” (Rogers). The poem thus occupies a liminal position in the relationship between Swift and Steele, as it was written just after the general election of 1710, which brought in a large Tory majority in the House of Commons, in support of Harley’s ministry, formed after the Whig ministry had been dismissed by Queen Anne earlier in the year (see line 41, below).

The poem transposes the traditional idealizing, mythic pastoral mode to a contemporary, urban setting to produce a satiric “urban pastoral” or “mock pastoral”; this feature of the poem is highlighted in *Miscellanies. The Last Volume* (1728), where the poem is subtitled an “imitation of Virgil’s Georg[ics]” (Rogers). “The mock-pastoral form of ‘town eclogue’ had a short but distinguished period of favour. Beginning with Swift’s *Description of the Morning* [1709] and *Description of a City Shower* [1710] [and *A Town Eclogue* (1711)], it achieved further currency in [John Gay’s] *Trivia* [1716] (an urban Georgic, more strictly . . .) and in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Court Poems* (1716). Moreover, there is an element of this fashionable vein in [Alexander] Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* [1714]. . . . Swift was the most important pioneer, however” (Rogers 644). On this view of the poem, the classical antecedents to and allusions in Swift’s poem provide “the counterpoise for Swift’s low *mimesis* here”: “the mode in which Swift chooses to present London ‘just as it is with all its deformities’ announces that the crude actual is being weighed against a high style deeply involved with ‘nature drawn on the most pleasing side’” (Savage 141).

O Hehir notes that when the poem was first published in the *Tatler*, it was accompanied by a different and “slightly misleading headnote . . . [that] compared Swift’s city shower to ‘Virgil’s land-shower . . . a shower of consequence . . . bringing matters to a speedy conclusion between two potentates of different sexes’” (O Hehir 108). The allusion here is to *Aeneid* IV. 160-68, which recounts how a storm “brought Dido and Aeneas into a cave, and left them there not overly honestly together” (Dryden, “Dedication of the Aeneis”; quoted in O Hehir 113). O Hehir sees an oblique echo of this scene in lines 39-40 of Swift’s poem, but what is more important for him is the epic (rather than pastoral) literary background evoked by the headnote in the *Tatler*. O Hehir calls attention to “the famous description of a storm in harvest” in Virgil’s *Georgics* I, 316-34 as the general source for Swift’s “mock-georgic” procedure in this poem: “The famous storm itself—its sudden violent onslaught of wind and rain upon the peaceful scene of a farmer hiring his harvesters, the rising deluge sweeping ‘out from the field and its ditches to the great river, out from the great river to the greater sea,’ and the consequent terror of men and beasts, and even of inanimate nature, at the power of Jove—serves both as general model for Swift’s entire poem and

as particular model for his storm's outbreak and for the consequent behavior of his citizens. The weather-signs described by Vergil in lines 351-463 provide the model for the 'Prognosticks' of Swift's first twelve lines, and the flooding of the Eridanus in lines 481-483 anticipates the flood of Swift's terminal triplet" (O Hehir 109). For O Hehir, however, the poem's primary concern is not literary or generic parody but social and moral commentary on what Swift depicts as a degenerate city: "Though the evidence bears out the eighteenth-century assumption that the over-all form of the 'City Shower' is in some way that of a georgic, the case cannot be said to be proven for the further assumption that the main intention of the poem is to ridicule either the genre itself or its exemplars, whether Vergil's originals or Dryden's translations. The poem's import seems [rather] to lie within its own terms, and to be primarily an oblique denunciation of cathartic doom upon the corruption of the city" (O Hehir 118).

Roger Savage seems to arrive at essentially the same conclusion, though he gives it a more literary, less exclusively moral, inflection: "this is the theme of the *City Shower* throughout—the ludicrous attempt of an imperfect, trivial London to live up to classical dialects and situations" (Savage 143). But Savage goes on to argue that there is a "positive vitality" in Swift's descriptions of the lowness of modern London, "a vitality which is its own justification and which has an effect transcending mere parody. Almost in spite of itself, mockery of inept classicism here leads to a vivid rendering of modern nature" (Savage 145-46).

Here and in what follows, I make use of the following references:

- O Hehir = O Hehir, Brendan. "Meaning of Swift's 'Description of a City Shower.'" *ELH* 27 (1960): 194-207; repr. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Jonathan Swift's Poetry*. Ed. David M. Vieth. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1984. 107-21.
- Rogers = Rogers, Pat, ed. *Jonathan Swift: The Complete Poems*. London: Penguin, 1983.
- Ross = Ross, Angus and David Woolley, ed. *The Oxford Authors: Jonathan Swift*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984.
- Savage = Savage, Roger. "Swift's Fallen City: 'A Description of the Morning.'" *The World of Jonathan Swift: Essays for the Tercentenary*. Ed. Brian Vickers. Oxford: Blackwell / Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1968. 171-94; repr. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Jonathan Swift's Poetry*. Ed. David M. Vieth. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1984. 123-52.
- Spacks = Spacks, Patricia Meyer, ed. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964.

"A Description of a City Shower"

Careful observers may foretell the hour
 (By sure prognostics) when to dread a show'r:
 While rain depends, the pensive cat gives o'er

Line 1 prognostics] Indications, signs, omens.

Line 3 depends] Is imminent.

Line 3 gives o'er] Abandons (Spacks).

Her frolics, and pursues her tail no more.
Returning home at night, you find the sink 5
Strike your offended sense with double stink.
If you be wise, then go not far to dine,
You'll spend in coach-hire more than save in wine.
A coming show'r your shooting corns presage,
Old aches throb, your hollow tooth will rage. 10
Saunt'ring in coffee-house is Dulman seen;
He damns the climate, and complains of spleen.
 Meanwhile the South, rising with dabbled wings,
A sable cloud athwart the welkin flings,
That swilled more liquor than it could contain, 15

Line 5 you] you'll (in *Miscellanies*, 1711) (Rogers).

Line 5 sink] Sewer; or cesspool (Spacks). On 8 Nov. 1710, Swift wrote to Stella: "I'll give ten shillings a week for my lodging; for I am almost stunk out of this with the sink, and it helps me to verses in my *Shower*" (Rogers).

Line 9 shooting] Experiencing a sudden, keen pain.

Line 10 aches] Pronounced 'aitches' (Rogers).

Line 12 spleen] "A word of rich connotation, ranging from 'melanhcolia' to 'ennui,' and covering most of the modern depressive conditions" (Rogers). The condition was the object of much medical and social attention in the early 18th century, in works such as Bernard Mandeville's *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions, vulgarly call'd the Hypo in Men, and Vapours in Women* (1711) and George Cheyne's *The English Malady* (1733); it figures prominently as the Cave of Spleen in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), IV, 17-88. To the extent that the spleen was seen as characteristic of the climate of England and constitution of Englishmen, "Dulman" (line 11) can function as a type for the (urban) Englishman, the representative of "a dull, sluggish race," as Edmund Burke writes in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). (Swift often invokes a climatological discourse of national characters in his writings, emphasizing the cold, sluggish, rude character of the English world.)

Line 13 the South] The south wind. Cf. the description of the Biblical flood in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667):

 Meanwhile the Southwind rose, and with black wings
 Wide hovering, all the Clouds together drove
 From under Heav'n; the Hills to their supplie
 Vapour, and Exhalation dusk and moist,
 Sent up amain. (XI, 738-42)

Line 14 welkin] The vault of heaven, the sky.

And like a drunkard gives it up again.
 Brisk Susan whips her linen from the rope,
 While the first drizzling show'r is borne aslope;
 Such is that sprinkling which some careless quean
 Flirts on you from her mop, but not so clean. 20
 You fly, invoke the gods; then turning, stop
 To rail; she singing, still whirls on her mop.
 Not yet the dust had shunned th' unequal strife,
 But aided by the wind, fought still for life;
 And wafted with its foe by violent gust, 25
 'Twas doubtful which was rain, and which was dust.
 Ah! where must needy poet seek for aid,
 When dust and rain at once his coat invade?
 Sole coat, where dust cemented by the rain
 Erects the nap and leaves a cloudy stain. 30
 Now in contiguous drops the flood comes down,

Lines 15-16 Cf. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "yond same black cloud, yond huge one, looks like a foul bombard that would shed his liquor" (Trinculo, 2.2.20-22) (Rogers). See also, Sir Samuel Garth's *Dispensary* (1699): "And Sots o'ercharged with nauseous Loads reel home."

Line 18 *is borne aslope*] Falls slantingly.

Line 19 *quean*] Hussy, harlot (Rogers); jade, bold, ill-behaved woman (Spacks).

Line 20 *Flirts*] Flicks (Rogers); flings suddenly (Spacks).

Lines 23-24 O Hehir sees a Biblical antecedent for this image of animate dust (fighting "still for life"), sustained by wind: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of Life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). "Swift's couplet has an Old Testament reference, and . . . to some extent the wind-enlivened dust is mankind. To that same extent the threatening 'Deluge' [line 32], or 'Flood' [lines 31, 63], takes on the retributive coloring of its counterpart in Genesis. . . . 'all in whose nostrils was the breath of life . . . died' [Genesis 4:22]. At the end of Swift's poem no creature is left alive that comes 'tumbling down the Flood'" (O Hehir 118).

Line 26 In *Works* (1735), a note indicates the parallel with Sir Samuel Garth's popular mock-heroic poem, *The Dispensary* (1699): "'Tis doubtful which is sea, and which is sky" (V, 176) (Rogers); "Swift was dining occasionally with Garth during the weeks in which the 'Shower' was written" (O Hehir 112).

Lines 29-30 In *Miscellanies* (1711), the lines read: "His only coat, where dust confused with rain, / Roughen the nap, and leave a mingled stain" (Rogers).

Threat'ning with deluge this devoted town.
To shops in crowds the daggled females fly,
Pretend to cheapen goods, but nothing buy.
The Templar spruce, while ev'ry spout's abroach, 35
Stays till 'tis fair, yet seems to call a coach.
The tucked-up sempstress walks with hasty strides,
While streams run down her oiled umbrella's sides.
Here various kinds, by various fortunes led,
Commence acquaintance underneath a shed. 40

Line 32 devoted] Doomed, (in high-flown language) (Rogers); religious, loyal, faithful (the epithet is, of course, ironic) (Spacks). O Hehir, who emphasizes the idea that Swift's London is doomed, "set apart for destruction," notes that storms and floods were often taken, in the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity, as prognostications of civil tumult and the anger of the gods: "The floods in *Georgic* I portended the death of Caesar and the dissolution of the state; the flood in *Aeneid* II. 305ff. depicted the burning of Troy. Even Homer's flood in *Iliad* XVI described a military defeat of the Trojans. Troy had been doomed, and Vergil prayed that a like fate might be spared Rome, the new Troy. London—or Troynovant, or Romeville [or Augusta]—believed itself the heir of both ancient cities. . . . Swift, however, offers no prayers for the safety of the newest Troy, doomed like its predecessors" (O Hehir 115). Instead, O Hehir argues, Swift paints a picture of a city marked by corruption, rot, and hypocrisy.

Line 33 daggled] Bespattered; "a favourite word of Swift's" (Rogers).

Line 34 cheapen] Bargain for; haggle over the price.

Line 35 Templar] Law student or barrister; resident of one of the Inns of Court (Lincoln's Inn, Gray's Inn, the Inner Temple, the Middle Temple, more particularly the latter two), which controlled the apprenticeship of lawyers and admission to the bar. Perhaps there is also a contrasting echo, here, of the "knights templar," the order of knights formed for the protection of the Holy Sepulchre and of Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land (the order was founded ca.1118 and suppressed two centuries later in 1312). Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* (1727-41) notes that "Temple" refers to these "two inns of court, thus called, because anciently the dwelling-house of the knights~templars. . . . They are called the inner and middle temple, in relation to Essex-house, which was also a part of the house of the templars, and called the outer temple, because situate without Temple-Bar" (*OED*, "temple" n.1, II.5.a).

Line 35 abroach] Awash, streaming or gushing water.

Line 38 oiled umbrella] "Umbrellas (of oiled silk) were at this time for women only" (Ross).

Lines 39-40 The way in which "various kinds" "Commence acquaintance" may carry lewd connotations, reinforced by an allusion to Aeneas and Dido's dalliance in a cave during a storm in the *Aeneid* (see headnote) and by the earlier evocation of the figure of a "tucked-up sempstress" (line 37), who seems akin to "Each ready seamstress" mentioned in the poem "A Town Eclogue"

Laocoön struck the outside with his spear,
 And each imprisoned hero quaked for fear.
 Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,
 And bear their trophies with them as they go:
 Filth of all hues and odours seem to tell 55
 What streets they sailed from, by the sight and smell.
 They, as each torrent drives, with rapid force
 From Smithfield or St. Pulchre's shape their course,

“Swift may have in mind gangs of rowdy [aristocratic] young men, like the Mohocks who came to notice some eighteen months later” (Rogers). “Gentlemen” in this era could wear swords as part of their ordinary dress. “For a similar reference, see [John] Gay’s *Trivia* (1716), III, 254” (Rogers).

Lines 47-52 Swift’s epic simile here draws on Virgil’s *Aeneid* II, 40-56, which tells the story of the Trojan horse. “The trembling of the Beau [in Swift’s poem] derives from Vergil’s storm in *Georgics* I: ‘Terra tremit, fugere ferae, et mortalia corda / per gentes humilis stravit pavor’ (330-331); but that the Greeks in their horse ‘quak’d for Fear’ is nowhere intimated by Vergil. Swift’s supplement is justified by a separate tradition going back chiefly to *Odyssey* XI. 523-532” (O Hehir 111).

Line 53 kennels] Open gutters along the streets.

Line 58 Smithfield . . . St. Pulchre] Smithfield market, home to butchers’ shops and cattle and sheep pens (Ross). St. Sepulchre’s Church in Holborn. The offal and refuse from Smithfield “ran down Cow Lane to meet, at Holborn Conduit [line 60], the drainage from the St Sepulchre’s Church area running down Snow Hill [line 59]; the joint flow ran west until it fell into the Fleet River, or Ditch, then open and navigable, at Holborn Bridge [line 60]” (Ross). Cf. Gay’s *Trivia*: “from Snow Hill black steepy torrents run” (III, 330). The physical refuse depicted here also evokes and emblemizes the moral associations of Smithfield and St. Sepulchre’s. As Pope notes in the *Dunciad* (I. 2n.) “Smithfield is the place where Bartholomew Fair was kept, whose shows, machines, and dramatical entertainments, [were] formerly agreeable only to the taste of the Rabble” (quoted in O Hehir 116). O Hehir adds: “From the year 1123 until its suppression as a nuisance in 1855, Bartholomew Fair was notorious for profligacy, insolent violation of the law, and obscene plays. In 1708 unsuccessful attempts were made to suppress the Fair, and it was legally restricted to the three days, August 23-25. Despite the law, it seems often to have run as long as six weeks” (O Hehir 116). The area of St Sepulchre’s, O Hehir argues, was not an exemplary source of physical filth at all, but “the church had always been closely associated with crime. Newgate Prison was directly across from the church. . . . By reason of various pious bequests, the great bell of St. Sepulchre’s commenced to toll on execution days when the procession left Newgate for Tyburn. Outside the church a nosegay was presented to each condemned criminal, and the cortege then proceeded along precisely the route of Swift’s torrent: from St. Pulchre’s down Snow Hill to its junction with Cock Lane and Cow Lane—the site of Holborn Conduit (taken down in 1746)—and thence to Holborn Bridge. (From the Bridge, of course, the route to Tyburn has no parallel in the ‘Shower’)” (O Hehir 117). Hence, from

And in huge confluent join at Snow Hill ridge,
Fall from the Conduit prone to Holborn Bridge. 60
Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,
Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood.

Smithfield and St. Pulchre's "the literal offal of society plunges toward Fleet Ditch, the notorious cloaca of eighteenth-century London. If the form of Swift's concluding lines alludes to lax observances of the laws of verse, the content alludes to abuses of the moral and the civil laws" (O Hehir 117).

Line 62 sprats] A kind of small sea-fish.

Lines 61-63 In *Works* (1735) the following note appears: "These three last lines were intended against that licentious manner of modern poets, in making three rhymes together, which they call *triplets*; and the last of the three, was two or sometimes more syllables longer, called an *Alexandrian* [alexandrine]. These triplets and alexandrians were brought in by Dryden, and other poets in the reign of Charles II. They were the mere effect of haste, idleness, and want of money; and have been wholly avoided by the best poets, since these verses were written" (quoted in Rogers; Ross: the latter has "These triplets *or* alexandrians were brought in by Dryden . . ."). "The note is patently Swift's own: he says exactly the same thing in almost the same words in a letter of 12 April 1735 . . . , adding characteristically that [Alexander] Pope had recently 'out of laziness' reverted to using occasional alexandrines" (Rogers). In this letter of 1735, "Swift boasted that 'above twenty-four years ago' he had been so enraged both at the triplet—'a vicious way of rhyming, wherewith Dryden abounded'—and at the 'Alexandrine verse at the end of the triplets'—'likewise brought in' by Dryden—that he had 'banished them all by one triplet, with an Alexandrine, upon a very ridiculous subject'" (O Hehir 110). Rogers also quotes David Ward's assessment of the actual effect of these last lines, intended as a send-up of a modern literary mannerism by Swift: "Oddly, the avowed object of the last three lines misfires . . . The comic stretching both of rhyme and rhythm gives the verse a welcome irregularity and flexibility of movement. The tumbling effect produced mimics precisely the flooding sweep of water and offal and rubbish into the river" (Ward, *Jonathan Swift: An Introductory Essay* [1973], 189; quoted in Rogers).