

Jonathan Swift  
 “The Art of Political Lying”  
*The Examiner*

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) was a poet, essayist, and Anglican priest born in Ireland of English parents. He was appointed Dean of St Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin in 1713. Most widely known today for his satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), he was a major figure in the English literary era known today as the “Age of Pope and Swift.” He wrote poetry as well as essays for various journals and is considered England’s greatest satirist. For example, he edited and wrote a number of satirical pieces for the Tory paper, *The Examiner*, where “The Art of Political Lying” was published on November 9, 1710. The quotation at the beginning, taken from the Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, describes the realm of Rumor, where stories from Olympus, Hades, and Earth fly in through every window and door and reverberate and echo, creating a mighty din. In her palace live Credulity, Error, groundless Joy, Fear, and baseless Whisper.

Swift’s essay is discussed in a recent article in *The Daily Beast*, “[How Jonathan Swift Attacked Fake News](#),” by Joh Stubbs.

Information readily available on the internet has not been glossed. Additions are in brackets [like this].

Equibus hi vacuas implent sermonibus aures,  
 Hi narrata ferunt alio: mensuraque ficti  
 Crescit, et auditis aliquid novus adjicit auctor.  
 Illic Credulitas, illic temerarius Error,  
 Vanaque Laetitia est, consternatigue Timores,  
 Seditioque recens, dubioque auctore Susurri.  
 Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. XII. 56-61.

With idle tales this fills our empty ears;  
 The next reports what from the first he hears;  
 The rolling fictions grow in strength and size,  
 Each author adding to the former lies.  
 Here vain credulity, with new desires,  
 Leads us astray, and groundless joy inspires;  
 The dubious whispers, tumults fresh designed,  
 And chilling fears astound the anxious mind.

I am prevailed on, through the importunity of friends, to interrupt the scheme I had begun in my last paper, by an Essay upon the Art of Political Lying. We are told the devil is the father of lies, and was a liar from the beginning; so that, beyond contradiction, the invention is old: and, which is more, his first Essay of it was purely political, employed in undermining the authority of his prince, and seducing a third part of the subjects from their obedience: for which he was driven down from Heaven, where (as Milton expresses it) he had been viceroy of a great western province; and forced to exercise his talent in inferior regions among other fallen spirits, poor or deluded men, whom he still daily tempts to his own sin, and will ever do so, till he be chained in the bottomless pit.

But although the devil be the father of lies, he seems, like other great inventors, to have lost much of his reputation, by the continual improvements that have been made upon him.

Who first reduced lying into an art, and adapted it to politics, is not so clear from history, although I have made some diligent inquiries. I shall therefore consider it only according to the modern system, as it has been cultivated these twenty years past in the southern part of our own island.

The poets tell us, that after the giants were overthrown by the gods, the earth in revenge produced her last offspring which was Fame. And the fable is thus interpreted: that when tumults and seditions are quieted, rumors and false reports are plentifully spread through a nation. So that, by this account, lying is the last relief of a routed, earth-born, rebellious party in a state. But here the moderns have made great additions, applying this art to the gaining of power and preserving it, as well as revenging themselves after they have lost it; as the same instruments are made use of by animals to feed themselves when they are hungry, and to bite those that tread upon them.

But the same genealogy cannot always be admitted for political lying; I shall therefore desire to refine upon it, by adding some circumstances of its birth and parents. A political lie is sometimes born out of a discarded statesman's head, and thence delivered to be nursed and dandled by the mob. Sometimes it is produced a monster, and licked into shape: at other times it comes into the world completely formed, and is spoiled in the licking. It is often born an infant in the regular way, and requires time to mature it; and often it sees the light in its full growth, but dwindles away by degrees. Sometimes it is of noble birth; and sometimes the spawn of a stock-jobber. Here it screams aloud at the opening of the womb; and there it is delivered with a whisper. I know a lie that now disturbs half the kingdom with its noise, which, although too proud and great at present to own its parents, I can remember its whisper-hood. To conclude the nativity of this monster; when it comes into the world without a sting, it is still-born; and whenever it loses its sting, it dies.

No wonder if an infant so miraculous in its birth should be destined for great adventures: and accordingly we see it hath been the guardian spirit of a prevailing party for almost twenty years. It can conquer kingdoms without fighting, and sometimes with the loss of a battle. It gives and resumes employments; can sink a mountain to a mole-hill, and raise a mole-hill to a mountain: hath presided for many years at committees of elections; can wash a black-a-moor white; make a saint of an atheist, and a patriot of a profligate; can furnish foreign ministers with intelligence, and raise or let fall the credit of the nation. This goddess flies with a huge looking-glass in her hands, to dazzle the crowd, and make them see, according as she turns it, their ruin in their interest, and their interest in their ruin. In this glass you will behold your best friends, clad in coats powdered with *fleurs-de-lis*, and triple crowns; their girdles hung round with chains, and beads, and wooden shoes; and your worst enemies adorned with the ensigns of liberty, property, indulgence, moderation, and a cornucopia in their hands. Her large wings, like those of a flying-fish, are of no use but while they are moist; she therefore dips them in mud, and soaring aloft scatters it in the eyes of the multitude, flying with great swiftness; but at every turn is forced to stoop in dirty ways for new supplies.

I have been sometimes thinking, if a man had the art of the second sight for seeing lies, as they have in Scotland for seeing spirits, how admirably he might entertain himself in this town, by observing the different shapes, sizes, and colors of those swarms of lies which buzz about the heads of some people, like flies about a horse's ears in summer; or those legions hovering every afternoon in Exchange-alley, enough to darken the air; or over a club of discontented grandees, and thence sent down in cargoes to be scattered at elections.

There is one essential point wherein a political liar differs from others of the faculty, that he ought to have but a short memory, which is necessary, according to the various occasions he meets with every hour of differing from himself, and swearing to both sides of a contradiction, as he finds the persons disposed with whom he hath to deal. In describing the virtues and vices of mankind, it is convenient, upon every article, to have some eminent person in our eye, from whom we copy our description. I have strictly observed this rule, and my imagination this minute represents before me a certain great man [the Earl of Wharton] famous for this talent, to the constant practice of which he owes his twenty years' reputation of the most skillful head in England, for the management of nice affairs. The superiority of his genius consists in nothing else but an inexhaustible fund of political lies, which he plentifully distributes every minute he speaks, and by an unparalleled generosity forgets, and consequently contradicts, the next half hour. He never yet considered whether any proposition were true or false, but whether it were convenient for the present minute or company to affirm or deny it; so that if you think fit to refine upon him, by interpreting everything he says, as we do dreams, by the contrary, you are still to seek, and will find yourself equally deceived whether you believe or not: the only remedy is to suppose, that you have heard some inarticulate sounds, without any meaning at all; and besides, that will take off the horror you might be apt to conceive at the oaths, wherewith he perpetually tags both ends of every proposition; although, at the same time, I think he cannot with any justice be taxed with perjury, when he invokes God and Christ, because he hath often fairly given public notice to the world that he believes in neither.

Some people may think, that such an accomplishment as this can be of no great use to the owner, or his party, after it has been often practiced, and is become notorious; but they are widely mistaken. Few lies carry the inventor's mark, and the most prostitute enemy to truth may spread a thousand, without being known for the author: besides, as the vilest writer hath his readers, so the greatest liar hath his believers: and it often happens, that if a lie be believed only for an hour, it hath done its work, and there is no further occasion for it. Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect: like a man, who hath thought of a good repartee when the discourse is changed, or the company parted; or like a physician, who hath found out an infallible medicine, after the patient is dead.

Considering that natural disposition in many men to lie, and in multitudes to believe, I have been perplexed what to do with that maxim so frequent in every body's mouth, that truth will at last prevail. Here hath this island of ours, for the greatest part of twenty years, lain under the influence of such counsels and persons, whose principle and interest it was to corrupt our manners, blind our understanding, drain our wealth, and in time destroy our constitution both in church and state, and we at last were brought to the very brink of ruin; yet, by the means of perpetual misrepresentations, have never been able to distinguish between our enemies and friends. We have seen a great part of the nation's money got into the hands of those, who, by their birth, education, and merit, could pretend no higher than to wear our liveries; while others, who, by their credit, quality, and fortune, were only able to give reputation and success to the Revolution, were not only laid aside as dangerous and useless, but laden with the scandal of Jacobites, men of arbitrary principles, and pensioners to France; while truth, who is said to lie in a well, seemed now to be buried there under a heap of stones. But I remember it was a usual complaint among the Whigs, that the bulk of the landed men was not in their interests, which some of the wisest looked on as an ill omen; and we saw it was with the utmost difficulty that they could preserve a majority, while the court and ministry were on their side, till they had learned those admirable expedients for

deciding elections, and influencing distant boroughs, by *powerful motives* from the city. But all this was mere force and constraint, however upheld by most dexterous artifice and management, until the people began to apprehend their properties, their religion, and the monarchy itself in danger; when we saw them greedily laying hold on the first occasion to interpose. But of this mighty change in the dispositions of the people, I shall discourse more at large in some following paper; wherein I shall endeavor to undeceive or discover those deluded or deluding persons, who hope, or pretend it is only a short madness in the vulgar, from which they may soon recover; whereas, I believe, it will appear to be very different in its causes, its symptoms, and its consequences; and prove a great example to illustrate the maxim I lately mentioned, that truth (however sometimes late) will at last prevail.

### Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. While it may be true that everybody lies, at least at one time or another, lies told by politicians and others in power are particularly pernicious, since trust is lost not only in the politician but also in the office he or she holds when the lie is discovered. In the United States today, politicians are held in particularly low esteem. According to a Pew Research Center Poll in April of 2017, only 20% of Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (4%) or “most of the time” (16%). As Swift says of one politician at his time: “He never yet considered whether any proposition were true or false, but whether it were convenient for the present minute or company to affirm or deny it; . . .” How should a citizen react when it has been shown that a politician lies repeatedly? Should you just shrug it off? How do you react? Discuss with your group and the class.

2. Today many people get their news from Twitter feeds and Facebook, and lies and “fake news” stories are rife on these media. Many people and states deliberately spread such stories to sow distrust and dissention in an effort to promote an ideological agenda or to make researched reports that appear in the public press appear fake. As Swift says, “the vilest writer hath his readers, so the greatest liar hath his believers: and it often happens, that if a lie be believed only for an hour, it hath done its work, and there is no further occasion for it. Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect.” How do you determine if a story you read on a social media platform is true or false? Take one story you have read and research it to determine if it is true or false. Then write a paper reporting on what you found.