



# Jonathan Swift in the Company of Women

*Louise Barnett*

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Jonathan Swift was the subject of gossip and criticism in his own time concerning his relations with women and his representations of them in his writings. For over twenty years he regarded Esther Johnson, "Stella," as "his most valuable friend," yet he is reputed never to have seen her alone. From his time to our own there has been speculation that the two were secretly married--since their relationship seemed so inexplicable then and now. For thirteen of the years that Swift seemed committed to Stella as the acknowledged woman in his life, he maintained a clandestine--but apparently also nonsexual--relationship with another woman, Esther Van Homrigh, or "Vanessa." *Jonathan Swift in the Company of Women* looks again at these much-examined relationships and at others that reveal Swift as a man who enjoyed the company of a number of women as pupils and as ministrants to his various needs.

Swift, a man with a complex private life, was also a writer whose satiric portraits of women could be unsparing. While Swift often criticized women for frivolous pastimes and idle chatter, his most notorious texts on women image their bodies as loathsome: as he once wrote in a serious political tract, a woman is a "nauseous, unwholesome carcass." Such representations cross a line by showing a repugnance for women as a sex, the biological other. They have led, not surprisingly, to repeated charges of misogyny, an issue that *Jonathan Swift in the Company of Women* addresses at some length. This first book-length treatment of Swift and women comprehensively examines Swift's attitude toward women in all their manifestations in his work and life: as intimates, acquaintances, prot?g?s, wives, mothers, nurses, disobedient daughters, young women who marry older men, and--finally--as poets and critics.

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