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THE BICKERSTAFF CAPER

JONATHAN SWIFT cut many a satiric caper in his warfare on vices in learning and religion, but none was so dazzling as the one he and his company of personae danced around the uncomprehending figure of John Partridge, astrologer. For generations, readers have delighted in the madcap humour of the affair, and in savouring the cunning and genius to be found in its design, but only recently has the scholarly world been reminded of the difference, for satire, between success as a literary entertainment and success in terms of social effect.

There was reason for Swift to satirize Partridge, for in his almanacs Partridge combined false learning with attacks on the Church of England, both heinous in Swift's view and both the sort of thing he had ridiculed a few years earlier in his book-length satire, *A Tale of a Tub*. The age of Swift was the heyday of almanacs. These were usually 48-page booklets containing a calendar, tables of statistics, weather forecasts, astronomical data, advertisements for various publications and medicines, and short pieces of prose and verse—entertainment or propaganda. In Partridge's version, *Merlinus Liberatus*, a large part of the almanac was given over to astrological interpretation and predictions. Of such almanacs authorities have estimated that between three and four million copies were distributed in England through the seventeenth century, and of Partridge's own almanac, it has been estimated, an average of 25,000 copies were sold every year.¹ Almanac-writing was big business, and the authors were far more widely read and probably far more influential than was Jonathan Swift.

But what concerned Swift about the widespread influence of these almanacs, and Partridge's in particular, was the flummery they purveyed. In his predictions, Partridge had achieved the acme of multiple-choice vagueness, safe hedging, and oracular ambiguity, as these samples, culled by a scholar, will illustrate:

The end of this month, or beginning of the next, will undoubtedly give

Violence and violent Actions, and perhaps private murder and such like, &c. (January, 1690).

News from *France*; good enough if it prove true, though perhaps all may not be of my opinion (February, 1701).

. . . his [the French King's] ill Success will be increased, and his Life in danger, either by Discontent or Poyson. It would be strange, if he should die the common Death of all Men (Summer, 1707).

Some old Statesman dies; and some eminent Sea-Commander either call'd in question, or decently laid by (October, 1708). [I.B., pp. 107-108].

Not always was Partridge so vague: after the event he could be precise, as when in 1700 he boasted of his skill in having foretold the death of a Dr. Francis Bernard: "About four years before this Gentleman died, a Person of Honour did request me to try my skill in this Nativity, and tell him when he would dye; I did it, and gave it him under my own hand fixed to the time he died, or near it. . . ." ² Absurd as all this may appear to us, we should remember that in Swift's day many intelligent people believed in astrological influence on human affairs: John Dryden, for instance, Swift's cousin and the leading creative writer of the preceding generation, had himself practised astrology with the most serious intent.³ So Partridge's double-dealing in words and claims to specific foreknowledge represented a serious abuse and imposition on a public already far too willing to believe.

But this was not Partridge's only crime. He prided himself on being a stout Nonconformist who, during the reign of James II, had had to live in Holland—where, incidentally, he claimed to have picked up a doctorate in medicine from Leyden University.⁴ In his *Merlinus Liberatus* for 1706 he accordingly attacked the High Church party of the Church of England, saying

High-Church! the common Curse, the Nation's Shame.
'Tis only *Pop'ry* by another Name,
The Shortest Way, Blood, Ruin to Excess,
Sa[chevere]ll's Brimstone Church is nothing less (p. x).

Again, in 1707, Partridge accused the High Church party of trying

To *Squeeze* the *Subjects*, and Embroil the *Queen*;
To *Cramp* the *Nation*, clog the *Common Cause*,
And set *High-Church* above the *Crown* and *Laws* (p. xi).

In view of the tremendous circulation his almanacs enjoyed, Partridge constituted a threat to the established Church as well as to the state of learning.

Swift knew from his experience in writing *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) that the most effective way of debunking a man and his opinions is to have him discredit himself. In his earlier work, Swift had ascribed to his persona—the fictitious author of the book—various opinions about scholarly matters that Swift wished to ridicule, and had then proceeded to do so by making his persona express those ideas in a most foolish way and finally reveal the fact that not only had he been an inmate of Bedlam but also that he was probably still somewhat insane. If Swift could make his living opponent discredit himself as he had made his fictitious persona do, then he would have achieved a frequent aim of satire: the lowering of a knave in public esteem.

Swift's ultimate goal can be seen as provoking Partridge into saying something that would in itself discredit him or that Swift could take and turn (twist, if you would rather) so that it would appear that Partridge had discredited himself. Partridge could easily be provoked into making a public utterance. Attacks on him by his astrological competitors had caused him to counterattack with various pamphlets, bearing such titles as *The Black Life of John Gadbury* and *The Whipper Whipp'd* (Eddy, p. 34), but in each of these he had proved himself an artful dodger who could give more than he got in serious quarrelling. Swift would have to devise a most unusual situation which would still compel Partridge to speak but which would at the same time render his usual tricks of no avail.

Swift thought of a variation on the mock-prophecy. The witty, see-through kind of mock-prophecy would not serve, for various wits had badgered Partridge with this kind before and he had ignored them or brushed them off (Eddy, pp. 34-36; I.B., p. 104). But a prophecy apparently coming from so serious a rival as George Parker, with whom he had quarrelled before, might hook Partridge. If the pseudo-prophecy could also provide a general satire on astrology, without tipping Partridge off, then the witty and sophisticated members of Swift's audience would be amused and he would make some literary gain. If, then, the competing astrologer should foretell Partridge's death, that would be all the more amusing and ironically appropriate—especially since Partridge had boasted of foretelling Dr. Bernard's death—and Swift would make more literary gain. Then if he could cap the prophecy by providing an account—however fictitious—of Partridge's death, he would escalate the whole affair into waggishness, provide a feeling of completion to the literary

exercise, and so achieve even greater triumph. But also—and more to the point in relation to the ultimate goal—that same account of his death might well provide the kind of most unusual situation in which Partridge would give himself away. How would one who was in the forecasting business himself go about protesting that he was not dead, as forecast and reported, but still alive? And how would he do it when he was completely devoid of humour, as Partridge's style of public quarrelling had given ample evidence to presume he was? Still, of course, to manoeuvre Partridge into a position where his performance would answer these questions would require superlative cunning and inventiveness. These qualities Swift had already revelled in.

His first move was to publish *Predictions for the Year 1708* as by Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq. This was written in a style and manner similar to those of George Parker, one of Partridge's more successful rivals. Like Parker, Bickerstaff complained that the current practitioners of astrological predictions were befouling the noble art, asserted that he alone knew how to practise it correctly, and loftily appealed to gentlemen readers rather than to the common run. Bickerstaff even used two of Parker's favourite words: "lucubrations" for his labours and "Art" to describe his calculations, as distinct from the word "Science" used by Partridge.⁵ From the serious-sounding introduction of eleven paragraphs and the equally serious-sounding conclusion, Partridge would have every reason for believing that in Bickerstaff he had a man who was attempting to set himself up as a serious rival to him.

Since Partridge would not have known any Isaac Bickerstaff, he might well have suspected from the beginning, as later on he certainly did, that "Bickerstaff" was a pseudonym for someone else, but since his was an age of pseudonymity and anonymity in publication, this fact would not in any way have prompted him to doubt the seriousness of what "Bickerstaff" said. The oddness of the name has naturally raised a question as to why Swift chose it. An editorial note written during Swift's lifetime purported to convey Swift's own explanation, "that the Author, when he had writ the following Paper, and being at a Loss what Name to prefix to it; passing through *Long-Acre*, observed a sign over a House where a Locksmith dealt, and found the Name *Bickerstaff* written under it: Which being a Name somewhat uncommon, he chose to call himself *Isaac Bickerstaff*" (I.B., pp. 104-105). This of course says nothing as to why *Isaac* was chosen, and scholars have divided over *Bickerstaff*, some looking for a human source for the name and others feeling that the whole account is a cock-and-bull story, a hoax added to the original hoax. Actually the meaning of the individual names appears to offer explana-

tion enough. *Isaac*, a Biblical concordance will reveal, means "laughter", and the primary meaning of *bicker*, as the *OED* will remind us, is "to skirmish" and "to exchange blows". The name *Isaac Bickerstaff* then indicated that what the persona says will provide the laughter which Swift will use as a stout stick (*cf.* quarterstaff) with which to exchange blows with Partridge. But the "secret" of the name would be safe from the literal-minded Partridge, for only wit would discover it, and Partridge had none of that.

But Swift did have a problem with the date of the publication. Although almanacs usually appeared on the market in early December, Bickerstaff's *Predictions* were not published until the beginning of February (Mayhew, p. 278). Partridge would probably wonder why, if "Bickerstaff" were setting himself up as a rival, he delayed publication so long. Whatever real reasons Swift may have had, he made Bickerstaff offer two seemingly convincing ones (pp. 144, 145): Bickerstaff had waited to see whether the current almanac-writers had changed their erroneous ways (they had not) and he had chosen to begin his predictions, puristically, at "the Beginning of the natural Year", viz., "the Time that the *Sun* enters into *Aries*" (after March 9). Thus Partridge would be satisfied—with professional reasons.

Part of Bickerstaff's *Predictions* provides a satire of astrologers in general, but not from the sceptic's viewpoint. "Having long considered the gross Abuse of Astrology in this Kingdom", Bickerstaff began, "upon debating the Matter with my self, I could not possibly lay the Fault upon the Art, but upon those gross Impostors, who set up to be the Artists" (p. 141). The art itself was noble, and Bickerstaff would in a short time publish a large and rational defence of it, but the current practitioners were "a few mean illiterate Traders between us and the Stars; who import a yearly Stock of Nonsense, Lies, Folly and Impertinence, which they offer to the World as genuine from the Planets although they descend from no greater a Height than their own Brains" (p. 141). He proceeded to illustrate their shuffling, quibbling practices, such as writing "*God Preserve King William from all his open and secret Enemies Amen*. When if the King should happen to have died, the Astrologer plainly foretold it; otherwise, it passeth but for the pious Ejaculation of a loyal Subject: Although it unluckily happened in some of their Almanacks, that poor King *William* was prayed for many Months after he was dead; because, it fel out that he died about the Beginning of the Year" (p. 143). But Bickerstaff himself had devised, after many years of study, a new system of astrological calculation which would set the noble art aright. By means of this system he was able to predict with staggering specificity: on May 7 would occur "th

Death of the *Dauphine* . . . after a short Fit of Sickness, and grievous Torments with the Strangury" (p. 146); and the French King would die on July 29 "after a Week's Sickness at *Marli* . . . about six a-Clock in the Evening. It seems to be an Effect of the Gout in his Stomach, followed by a Flux" (p. 147). After such specificity, the predictions of his rival astrologers would appear vague indeed, and their forecasting ability most feeble. No doubt the wits of the town greatly enjoyed this getting at astrology while all the time seeming to defend it, but Partridge would find nothing suspicious about Bickerstaff's remarks, for they were in keeping with the way the astrologers were used to quarrelling among themselves in public, calling one another quacks and bunglers and seeking to outdo one another in their predictions. Score one for Swift.

But the first of Bickerstaff's predictions must have startled Partridge:

My first Prediction is but a Trifle; yet I will mention it, to shew how ignorant those sottish Pretenders to Astrology are in their own Concerns: It relates to *Partridge* the Almanack-Maker; I have consulted the Star of his Nativity by my own Rules; and find he will infallibly die upon the 29th of *March* next, about eleven at Night, of a raging Fever: Therefore I advise him to consider of it, and settle his Affairs in Time (p. 145).

Startling, yet marvellously appropriate. Partridge himself had forecast, for April of 1708, "a Spring Distemper, that will arise from a Cold and Putrefaction; it seems likely to be a Tertian Ague and Fever, with a Disorder in the Bowels; and I wish it may not prove a Malignant Fever in the Conclusion" (Mayhew, p. 277). Bickerstaff was merely being more accurate in the time of the fever's occurrence, and of course he was merely doing for Partridge what Partridge had done for Dr. Bernard. Even better, Bickerstaff was evidently responding to a challenge which Partridge had himself issued to all his competitors in 1699:

I do friendly and fairly Invite and Challenge my Adversaries . . . to pitch upon five or ten Nativities, and like an Artist to tell the world in print which of them hath no *Hileg* who is *Giver of Life* . . . ; but above all, to tell us when they *will Dye*, with the Astrologic reasons thereof. And I will take the same Nativities, and treat of all those particulars according to my Method and Principles, and then every man may be judge who is true, and Master of his Trade, and who not (p. xi).

If any readers wondered whether Bickerstaff's prediction of Partridge's death would be fulfilled, they would have been gulled and thereby satirized, and if any exposed themselves, especially by inquiring (when the time came) how Partridge died, then that would make for all the more fun. So this, along with the marvellous appropriateness of the prediction, made for literary gain. But more important, it prepared the trap. That trap itself was kept disguised. Everything we have seen about the *Predictions* so far was perfectly in keeping with what an astrologer would do on setting himself up to compete with the current leaders. In addition Swift (through Bickerstaff) used the buckshot approach: Partridge was not the only one singled out, by any means; as mentioned, the French King and the Dauphin had their deaths foretold, as had the Pope his and many others theirs. At home a radical group of Nonconformist enthusiasts (called the Prophets) were derided (p. 146) and Bickerstaff predicted that near the end of August, "much Mischief will be done at *Bartholomew* Fair, by the Fall of a Booth" (p. 148). Partridge would not feel that the prediction of his death was meant to be the principal feature of Bickerstaff's artful lucubrations. At the same time the trap was set. The prediction had been made, and near the end of the pamphlet Bickerstaff remarked, naturally, "A little Time will determine whether I have deceived others, or my self; and I think it is no very unreasonable Request, that Mer would please to suspend their Judgments till then" (p. 149). And of course Partridge was in effect goaded: attacked by a rival he would take seriously he had been mentioned as one of the leading practitioners who erred grievously. He would probably feel that a public counterattack was called for, and if he made none, as the end of March drew near and public anticipation increased he would feel his sense of anger and frustration mount. And when unexpectedly, his death was reported, what would he be likely to do?

Swift had ready "An Answer to Bickerstaff" if Partridge did not answer (see pp. 195-199). Purportedly written by "a Person of Quality" (another persona), it would have served to keep the pressure on Partridge. But there was no need for Swift to publish it. As Isaac Bickerstaff captured the town's fancy other publishers brought out pirated editions of his *Predictions* with the statement "*Partridge* the famous Astrologer is to dye on the 29th of *March*" prominently displayed on the title page (p. xiii), and other wits got into the act with further mock predictions. And Partridge himself replied—or so it would appear. Admittedly the inclusion of Partridge's name in the title of *Partridge's Answer to Esquire Bickerstaff's Strange and Wonderful Prediction*

for the Year 1708 is no guarantee at all that he wrote it—not in the age of hoaxes and misappropriating of authors' names. But internal evidence suggests that it was in fact by Partridge. It differs from the "Answer" Swift had ready, in that Swift presented Partridge as an object of condescension, and it differs from *Squire Bickerstaff Detected* purportedly "By John Partridge", which will be discussed later and which presented Partridge as the butt of a comic narrative. Mr. Partridge's Answer instead presented a serious though scornful counterattack such as Partridge was accustomed to writing, and in the snarling, quarrelsome manner he habitually used. The author shows no evidence at all of having the slightest inkling that Bickerstaff's *Predictions* were in any way satiric: his purpose is instead to scoff at Bickerstaff's ability as revealed in his bloodthirsty predictions and to expose him as a cheat and a mountebank—like all the other rivals of Partridge. To accomplish this latter end, the author begins and ends his pamphlet with a reference to the end of March. His first paragraph concludes with the assertion that "any Man without Learning will prove" Bickerstaff a Cheat "and a Lyar into the Bargain, if he lives but till the 30th of [March]; for 'tis plain, he knows no more of the Art of *Astrology* (in Comparison) than he knows when his Wife will make him a Cuckold" (p. 203). At the end of the pamphlet the author placed this couplet: "His whole Design was nothing but Deceit,/The End of *March* will plainly show the Cheat" (p. 207). Nothing could have served Swift's purpose better than this focussing of public attention on the date of the predicted death. Whether the author was actually Partridge or not, he actively assisted in the preparation of the forthcoming discomfiture.

That came with Swift's second move. On March 30 or 31 he published two further pamphlets, neither under his own name. For one of these, the prose pamphlet entitled *The Accomplishment of the First of Mr. Bickerstaff's Predictions*, Swift provided another persona, a gentleman who had been "employed in the Revenue" and who now wrote, in a public "Letter to a Person of Honour", an "Account of the Death of Mr. Partridge, the Almanack-maker, upon the 29th Inst." Designed in part to "bite" the gullible, to fool them into believing that Partridge had in fact died, the letter is full of circumstantial details of the author's visit to Partridge and of Partridge's death on the 29th. To add to the verisimilitude, the gentleman author stated that "Mr. *Bickerstaff* was mistaken almost four Hours in his Calculation", the time of Partridge's death being "above five Minutes after Seven" (p. 155). And to complete the acceptance by the gullible, the author presented his readers with a question to chew on, a question that took the accuracy of the report for granted: whether

Mr. Bickerstaff "hath not been the Cause of this poor Man's Death, as well as Predictor" (p. 155). Those readers who were gullible enough on March 30 or 31 to believe that Partridge had died as prophesied would then probably learn by word of mouth on April 1 that Partridge was indeed still alive and that they had been "bit", made April Fools.

But the *Accomplishment* did more than bite the gullible. It provided Partridge's own verbatim deathbed confession that all his astrological predictions had been mere "Deceits", credited only by "the poor ignorant Vulgar" (p. 154). The gentleman author asked him "why he had not calculated his own Nativity, to see whether it agreed with *Bickerstaff's* Predictions? At which he shook his Head, and said, O! Sir, this is no Time for jesting, but for repenting those Fooleries, as I do now from the very Bottom of my Heart" (p. 154). After thus learning of Partridge's imposture, we are then informed that "on his Death-Bed he declared himself a Nonconformist, and had a fanatick Preacher to be his spiritual Guide" (p. 155). In this way Swift created a fictitious Partridge as in *A Tale of a Tub* he had created a fictitious narrator and then, again as he had in his earlier work, he made his creature destroy himself in his own words. But, damaging as this would be, it was not of course Swift's ultimate aim. To that purpose the *Accomplishment* is beautifully designed to provoke Partridge into an outburst which Swift could then use to demolish him completely. Not only was he reported dead, as prophesied by a rival, but also he was reported to have confessed to imposture: how could he keep silent?

To goad Partridge further was the aim of the second pamphlet Swift released at the same time. A poem called *An Elegy on Mr. Partridge* (thirteen variant spellings were also used by Partridge), it appeared anonymous and provided testimony from a virtual third party as to Partridge's death. In addition to thus increasing the effect of multiple witnesses, it contained direct satire and jeering. It gibed at Partridge's original trade of cobbling, suggesting that it was the reason why he pronounced *Bo-otes* as *Boots*, and related his astrology to the practice of medicine he pursued on the side:

To shew his Skill, he *Mars* would join
 To *Venus* in *Aspect Mali'n*,
 Then call in *Mercury* for Aid,
 And Cure the Wounds that *Venus* made.

The Epitaph which ended the poem was a sharp goad:

Here Five Foot deep lyes on his Back
 A *Cobler*, *Starmonger*, and *Quack*,
 Who to the Stars in pure Good-will,
 Does to his best look upward still. . . .
 This Earth which bears his Body's Print,
 You'll find has so much Virtue in't,
 That I durst Pawn my Ears, 'twill tell
 Whate'er concerns you full as well,
 In *Physick*, *Stolen Goods*, or *Love*,
 As he himself could, when above.⁶

Jabbed and stabbed, prodded and goaded, how long, indeed, could Partridge keep silent?

Recently scholars have conjectured that the whole Bickerstaff affair was an April Fool's joke and that it ended with the publication of the *Accomplishment* and the *Elegy*, later additions being merely afterthoughts.⁷ As one scholar puts it, the parts of the hoax were so timed—the prediction for March 29 and the publication of the *Accomplishment* and the *Elegy* on the 30th or 31st—that by April 1 “the joke would have exploded, and all of the city of London [would then be] able to enjoy it, with the possible exception of John Partridge” (Mayhew, p. 276). Such a trick would no doubt be waggish, but to see it as an April Fool's joke would appear to confuse the nature of such a joke, which is surely to “bite” a person and then reveal that he has been “bit”. Putting the question “Is that a spider crawling up your arm?” on the morning of April 1 would lead to the victim's thinking, even for a split second, that there was in fact an insect of some kind crawling up his arm, discovering that he had been duped, and then realizing that it was an April Fool's joke. Swift appears to have shaded the same view, as revealed by a passage of his referred to, curiously, by one of the conjecturing scholars. In Letter XIX of his *Journal to Stella*, Swift began his entry for April 1, 1711, thus: “The duke of Buckingham's house fell down last night with an earth-quake, and is half swallowed up;—Won't you go and see it?—An April fool, an April fool, oh ho, young woman. Well, don't be angry. I'll make you an April fool no more till the next time.”⁸ The same gulling temporary acceptance and then revelation can be seen here. Who then would be “bit” in the Bickerstaff hoax? Certainly not John Partridge. He would never have been taken in by the report of his death; some readers may well have been and for them, when they realized the truth, the affair would have been an April Fool's joke; but not for Partridge. And there is so much more in the *Predictions*, *Accomplish-*

ment, and *Elegy*—so much that is obviously designed to goad Partridge into an outburst, that one must surely see the manoeuvring of Partridge as the principal aim of the works—especially when we encounter the *Vindication*, as we shall do before long. Then you, the reader, may decide for yourself.

Even if Partridge kept his silence for the present, the time was steadily drawing nearer when, on publishing the next issue of his almanac, he would face a dilemma. If he said nothing about the report of his death, would not the rascals claim that his book was ghost-written? And if he did mention the report would he not thereby give countenance to them? In such a situation his solution might well be, characteristically, to counterattack and berate the rascals. There is in fact no record of his having made a public reply before the next issue of his almanac, but there was published seventy-seven years later what purported to be a copy of a private letter he wrote to the postmaster in Dublin.⁹ If the letter is genuine, it shows that Partridge thought a Grub Street writer by the name of Pettie was behind the whole affair and that Partridge was in fact exercised by it.

At any rate, in order to keep the pressure on Partridge, a friend of Swift's (Congreve and Rowe have been suggested) published a delightful pamphlet entitled *Squire Bickerstaff Detected* and purportedly "By John Partridge." Written presumably with the cognizance of Swift and possibly with his assistance, it presented Partridge as relating a number of comic inconveniences which befell him as a result of the report of his death. The very night that report occurred, an undertaker called to measure his rooms for funeral draperies; no sooner was he got rid of, than the sexton called to ask whether the grave should be plain or bricked; and so on for the whole night (pp. 219-221).

I could not stir out of Doors for the Space of three Months after this, but presently one comes up to me in the Street, Mr. Partridge, that Coffin you were last buried in, I have not been yet paid for. Doctor, cries another Dog, how do you think People can live by making Graves for nothing? Next Time you die, you may even toll out the Bell your self for *Ned*. A third Rogue tips me to the elbow, and wonders how I have the Conscience to sneak abroad, without paying my Funeral Expences (p. 221).

Bruised and battered by such blows of laughter, Partridge finally retaliated, in his *Merlinus Liberatus* for 1709. Besides making a number of snarling remarks throughout his work, he printed a notice as a kind of epilogue:

You may remember there was a Paper publish'd predicting my Death on the 29th of *March* at Night, 1708, and after the day was past, the same Villain told the World I was dead, and how I died; and that he was with me at the time of my death. I thank God, by whose Mercy I have my Being, that I am still alive, and (excepting my Age) as well as ever I was in my Life; as I was also at that 29th of *March*. And that Paper was said to be done by one *Bickerstaffe*, Esq; but that was a Sham-Name; it was done by an *Impudent Lying Fellow*. But his Prediction did not prove true: What will he say to excuse that? For the Fool had consider'd the *Star of my Nativity*, as he said. Why the truth is, he will be hard put to it to find a *Salvo* for his Honor. It was a bold Touch, and he did not know but it might prove true (p. 225).

Thus Partridge delivered himself into Swift's hands.

About four months later Swift completed his caper. That he should wait so long need not surprise us. He may well have been busy on other things, he may have experimented with various approaches, but in any event had not Partridge put himself on record? Swift could afford to take his time. In March or April of 1709 (Ehrenpreis, p. 207n.) he published *A Vindication of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq; against what is objected to him by Mr. Partridge, in his Almanack for the present Year 1709*. Supposedly written by Bickerstaff himself, this pamphlet finished the demolition of Partridge in two days.

One lay in the arguments used by Bickerstaff to refute Partridge's claim to being alive. The first read thus: "Above a Thousand Gentlemen having bought his Almanacks for this Year, meerly to find what he said against me; at every Line they read, they would lift up their Eyes, and cry out, betwixt Rage and Laughter, *They were sure no Man alive ever writ such damned Stuff as this* (p. 162). Another argument fastened on what could be made to appear an equivocation: in his almanac Partridge had said that "*He is not only now alive, but was also alive upon that very 29th of March, which I foretold he should die on.*" Bickerstaff continued:

By this, he declares his Opinion, that a Man may be alive *now*, who was not alive a Twelve-month ago. And, indeed, there lies the Sophistry of his Argument. He dares not assert, he was alive ever since the 29th of *March*, but that he *is now alive, and was so on that Day*: I grant the latter, for he did not die till Night, as appears by the printed Account of his Death, in a *Letter to a Lord*; and whether he be since revived, I leave the World to judge (pp. 162-163).

To the objection that Partridge still continued to write his almanac, Bickerstaff

replied: ". . . this is no more than what is common to all of that Profession; *Gadbury, Poor Robin, Dove, Wing*, and several others, do yearly publish their Almanacks, although several of them have been dead since before the *Revolution*" (p. 163).

The other way in which Swift finished his demolition of Partridge is reflected in the madcap humour of these "arguments". The Bickerstaff of the *Predictions* had been a serious scholar who intended "to publish a large and rational Defence" of the noble Art of astrology, which, after all, had been "in all Ages defended by many learned Men; and among the rest, by *Socrates* himself" (pp. 141-142). But now in the *Vindication* Swift virtually destroyed the integrity of his persona, making him appear laughable, not only because of the madcap arguments he offered against the "*uninformed Carcass* [which] walks still about, and is pleased to call it self *Partrige*" (p. 162), but also because throughout the entire *Vindication* he insisted upon regarding the altercation with Partridge as a learned dispute between two scholars, in the course of which moreover, Bickerstaff displayed a most learned lack of proportion. Bickerstaff complained of the language Partridge had used towards him: "To call a Man *Fool* and *Villain*, and *impudent Fellow*, only for differing from him in a Point meerly speculative, is, in my humble Opinion, a very improper Stile for a Person of *his Education*" (p. 159). The "Point meerly speculative" was of course whether Partridge was still alive; and that Partridge should have seized on this one prediction and have ignored all the others Bickerstaff also found most unscholarly: "[Partridge made] no Objection against the Truth of my Predictions, except in one single Point, relating to himself: And to demonstrate how much Men are blinded by their own Partiality; I do solemnly assure the Reader, that he is the *only* Person from whom I ever heard that Objection offered; which Consideration alone, I think, will take off all its Weight" (p. 161). Throughout the *Vindication* Swift makes Bickerstaff perform as he made his persona in *A Tale of a Tub* perform: looking to the form of the argument, not the content, and hence making a fool of himself. And Partridge took this fool seriously—took the whole madcap caper seriously: how ridiculous of Partridge! For any man to take seriously what was so obviously laughable shows that he himself must be ludicrous, and since Partridge is so ludicrous—as seen by his own performance—who will credit what he has to say about either astrology or the Church of England?

So, undoubtedly, the wits of England would respond, and for them Partridge had been completely demolished by the blows of laughter rained on him

by Bickerstaff and Co. So "high a Pitch of Reputation" had Bickerstaff achieved with the "Audience of all who had any Taste of Wit", that Richard Steele in 1709 revived him, with his interest in astrology, and used him as the fictitious author of the *Tatler* so as to gain "sudden Acceptance" for his periodical.¹⁰ The wits all agreed, but what about the other 99.99 per cent of the population: how did they respond?

For many generations there has existed a legend that the Company of Stationers (which published all almanacs), on hearing the report of Partridge's death, struck him from their list of writers. In some versions the legend is embroidered to include Partridge's appearing in person before the Stationers but failing to convince them that he was alive. Lately, however, Richmond P. Bond has shown that the legend arose out of a complete misunderstanding of a legal dispute between Partridge and the Company of Stationers (J. P., pp. 63-80). Perhaps feeling strengthened by all the publicity the Bickerstaff affair had given him, Partridge sought to bypass the Stationers, who held a royal monopoly on all almanacs which had been approved by the Church of England (and Partridge's, ironically enough, was among them), and tried instead to publish his almanac for 1710 through a private printer for a greater profit. The Company of Stationers secured an injunction forbidding such publication, and as a result Partridge's almanac was not published for four years. But with the issue for 1714 it resumed publication and continued, successfully, under various titles. Partridge himself died in 1715, wealthy enough to leave substantial bequests (I. B., p. 106), but his almanac, issued under his name, continued for 150 years, more than seven times the posthumous longevity Bickerstaff had commented on in his predecessors.

Nor did his success end there. In 1942 a leading publisher issued a book on the history of astrology. In it the author observed that Swift's "mathematical and scientific equipment was practically nil" while Partridge "was one of the most painstaking of our astrologers and one of the most reliable of the new Placidian-Ptolemaic exponents of astrology."¹¹

Dean Swift, or astrologically speaking merely Isaac Bickerstaff, is often praised for this famous "joke" upon astrology in general and upon Partridge in particular, a man of infinitely superior mental equipment and who at least did not have to obtain his degree "by special grace", a term which at that time meant "special disgrace." . . . One has a feeling that the venerable dean was suffering from an upset stomach on the day when he conceived all this.

To quote the motto appearing in Partridge's posthumous *Merlinus Liberatus*:
ETIAM MORTUUS LOQUITUR.

NOTES

1. Information on almanacs is drawn from two works by Richmond P. Bond: "John Partridge and the Company of Stationers", *Studies in Bibliography*, XVI (1963), 61-62 (hereafter referred to as J. P.), and "Isaac Bickerstaff Esq." in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Carroll Camder (Chicago, 1963), pp. 107-108, (hereafter referred to as I. B.). Professor Bond cites further sources.
2. Quoted in Jonathan Swift, *Bickerstaff Papers*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford 1957), pp. xi-xii. Further references to this text are by page number alone within the text.
3. See *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Walter Scott (London, 1808), XVIII, pp. 133, 206-212.
4. W. A. Eddy, "The Wits vs. John Partridge, Astrologer", *Studies in Philology* XXIX (1932), p. 32.
5. George P. Mayhew, "Swift's Bickerstaff Hoax as an April Fools' Joke" *Modern Philology*, LXI (1963-64), pp. 276-278.
6. Text of the poem drawn from *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1958), I, 97-101.
7. Mayhew, pp. 276, 279, and Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Dr. Swift* (London, 1967), pp. 197, 205-207.
8. Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1948), I, 229.
9. *Gentleman's Magazine*, LV (1785), p. 166.
10. I. B., p. 113, quoting from the dedication of the first octavo reprint of the *Tatler*, I (1710), iv.
11. Ellen McCaffery, *Astrology: Its History and Influence in the Western World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), pp. 328, 327. The next quotation is from p. 327.