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The Freaks of Learning

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The Freaks of Learning

For thee we dim the eyes and stuff the head
With all such reading as was never read
Dunciad, I, 165–66

87
As the Eighteenth Century was trying to draw quietly to a close, with Farmer George brushing the dew from his lawns and William Cowper sitting by the fire with the cup that cheers but not inebriates, there was an extraordinary outbreak of pigs in the social and intellectual life of England. These were not merely pigs of good breeding and impeccable taste; they were creatures of decorous deportment and astonishing learning as well. They appeared in drawing rooms and on stage, and their accomplishments filled the lacunae of magazines and letters and literary causeries. They profoundly impressed some of the greatest geniuses of the age and left a name at which the world grew pale, to point a moral or adorn a tale. Not only did they appear in poems, but poems were written for them; indeed, the Learned Pig was seen as the rival of one of the greatest poets of the age.

"Why pigs?" I hear you cry. Well, pigs are stubborn and contrary, dirty and disorderly, only congenial to man when cut down to size and served at table. The perversity of pigs is legendary, from the Gadarene Swine to Animal Farm, and they provide synonyms for gluttony, stupidity, and contrariness—general pigheadedness. Doubtless it was chiefly the incongruity of these wilful, ignorant beasts when exhibited as docile and intelligent performers which excited remark and speculation. The fact of the paradox was plain to all: the Learned Pig could perform feats not merely remarkable in any animal, such as spelling words and telling time; he could do things which could not be repeated by his human audience, such as card-tricks and mind-reading. What the Learned Pig did was wonderful to those who saw him; how they reacted and explained it is what seems wonderful to us. The comments on the Learned Pig by the men of genius of the age are indicative of the nature of their own genius. The genus of Learned Pig was indeed wonderful, but yet more wonderful was the genius of the scholars and sages and Romantic poets who wrote about him.

These prodigious pigs were remarked by authors as diverse as Dr Johnson and Mary Wollstonecraft and appeared in works as serious as The Prelude and The Statesman’s Manual. They served as subjects for cartoons by Rowlandson and moral essays in children’s books and savage doggerel by Blake, and they illustrated the manners of the English in works by Joseph Strutt and Robert Southey and Thomas Hood. These freaks of learning clearly exercised a fascination among the literary geniuses of the age as they did among the swinish multitude.

These are not merely portly pigs, such as the titan twelve feet long and weighing one thousand six hundred eighty pounds exhibited at a fair in
The literature of the ordinary pig is mostly jocular and focuses largely upon their culinary qualities, as in the epic "Dissertation upon Roast Pig" (1823) by Charles Lamb, whose letters are littered with references to succulent pigs he has known. The mighty Empress of Blandings reigns under the benign eyes of Lord Emsworth and P. G. Wodehouse; pigs rule the world of *Animal Farm*; and a Semichorus of Swine enlivens Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1820). The best-known painter of pigs in the Romantic era was the bucolic inebriate George Morland, and, had it not been for the generous patronage of John Linnell, William "Blake's last years would have been employed . . . [in engraving] a set of Morland's pig and ploughboy subjects."2 Hazlitt compares Sir Walter Scott's fictional talent to that of an actor with a pig: "Sir Walter has found out (oh, rare discovery) that facts are better than fiction; that there is no romance like the romance of real life. . . . With reverence be it spoken, he is like the man who having to imitate the squeaking of a pig upon the stage, brought the animal under his coat with him."3

I have no evidence that Lord Byron was acquainted with Sapient Swine, but he did have one memorable encounter with an Italian pig. As he recounts in a letter of 22 April 1817, his mastiff Mutz was promoted into a *Bear* in the natural History of the Bolognese . . . a character which he has by no means sustained in point of valour—he having been defeated with loss of honour—hair—and almost the small remains of tail which the Docker had left him—by a moderate-sized Pig on the top of the Pennine Alps—the Pig was first thrown into confusion & compelled to retire with great disorder over a steep stone wall but somehow he faced about in a damned hollow way or defile & drove Mutz from all his positions—with such slaughter that nothing but night prevented a total defeat.4

However, these are mere pigs, quite unrelated to the learned wonders who amazed audiences just before and after 1800.


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One wonders whether the Empress of Blandings is descended from Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Pigling Bland* (1913).


Keen scented pigs galloped after game in the royal forests when Mediaeval and Renaissance penal laws made the use of dogs by poachers exceedingly rash, and a handsome black Berkshire sow named Slut joyfully renewed the tradition in the New Forest in the early nineteenth Century—her master, a professional bird-dog trainer, said she was considerably better at her trade of pointing and retrieving than any dog (*Rural Sports*, Vol. III, cited in J. Bryan III. "Slut, the Gun Pig: In Merry Old England, a Berkshire sow learned to hunt," *Blair & Ketchum's Country Journal*, VIII, 11 [Nov. 1981], 35-36).
Sapient Swine performed before multitudes during at least two periods when Romanticism flourished, one beginning in 1784 and one in 1818–1823. The only earlier account I have encountered is from the Fifteenth Century, when the Abbot of Baigne provided for Louis XI “a concert of swine voices” in a velvet pavilion, “a thing as singular as ever was seen.” His choir consisted of “a great number of hogs, of several ages,” which he conducted with “an organical instrument, and as he played upon the said keys, with little spikes which pricked the hogs he made them cry in such order and consonance, as highly delighted the king and all his company.”

But this is scarcely swinish learning on a scale comparable with that seen by the Swan of Lichfield and the Great Bear.

5. Altick, p. 307: The Sapient Pig of 1818–1823 was owned by Mr Pinchbeck (see below) and tutored, according to his publicity, by “Souchanguyee, the Chinese Philosopher.” He answered questions by “pointing to cards, letters, and persons in the audience.”


Robert Herrick is said to have taught a pig to drink from a tankard, and when Grimod de la Reynière had no other guests he would entertain a pig, who sat at table with him.
During the summer of 1784, the first truly educated hog of whom I have record toured the provinces, astonishing farmers at country fairs. Among those astonished was Miss Seward, who told Dr Johnson in 1784 of a wonderful learned pig, which I had seen at Nottingham: and which did all that we have observed exhibited by dogs and horses. The subject amused him. ‘They (said he), the pigs are a race unjustly calumniated. Pig has, it seems, not been wanting to man, but man to pig. We do not allow time for his education, we kill him at a year old.’ Mr. Henry White, who was present, observed that if this instance had happened in or before Pope’s time, he would not have been justified in instancing the swine as the lowest degree of groveling instinct. Doctor Johnson seemed pleased with the observation, while the person who made it proceeded to remark, that great torture must have been employed ere the indocility of the animal could have been subdued.—‘Certainly (said the Doctor), but (turning to me [Miss Seward]) how old is your pig?’ I told him three years old. ‘Then (said he) the pig has no cause to complain; he would have been killed the first year if he had not been educated; and protracted existence is a good recompense for a very considerable degree of torture.’

It was natural to Dr Johnson and his friends to suppose that the pig had been tortured, but evidently this was not the case. Robert Southey remarked that

Any thing that is strange . . . will attract crowds in England. . . . The learned pig was in his day a far greater object of admiration to the English nation than ever was Sir Isaac Newton. I met a person once who had lived next door to the lodgings of this erudite swine in a house so situated that he could see him at his rehearsals. He told me he never saw the keeper beat him; but that, if he did not perform his lesson well, he used to threaten to take off his red waistcoat,—for the pig was proud of his dress. Perhaps even Solomon himself did not conceive that vanity was so universal a passion.8

As Blake remarked in a different context: “Solomon says ‘Vanity of Vanities all is Vanity’ & what can be Foolisher than this [?]”

The common reaction to the Learned Pig’s performance was of course one of enthusiastic credulity in his abilities, which were commonly taken to be supernatural. One “grave old gentleman . . . declared his performances were the effects of the Black Art; that the Pig ought to be burnt, and the Man banished, as he had no doubt but . . . [his trainer] familiarly corresponded with the devil.” Some, “like the ancient Pythagoreans, believing in the transmigration of souls, concluded that the spirit


John Horne Tooke mockingly quotes [James Burnett] Lord Monboddo, Of the Origin and Progress of Language, I [1773], 136, about the capacity of animals to speak: “‘There is a man in England at present, who has practised more upon them and with greater success than any body living’—(I suspect his lordship means the owner of the learned Pig)—‘and he says, as I am informed, . . . That, if they lived long enough and pains sufficient were taken upon them’—(Well, what then?)—‘it is impossible to say to what lengths some of them might be carried’” (The Diversions of Purley, I [1798], 115 fn. [first edition: 1786]). Tooke is probably wrong in his conjecture that Lord Monboddo meant the Learned Pig, for the Pig had probably not yet appeared in public in 1773.


9. The Writings of William Blake (1978), I, 662, inscription on his engraving of “Mirth.” This text is the source of all Blake quotations here.
of the grunting philosopher might once have animated a man.’” The mundane, human agency by which the Pig achieved these feats is described by W. F. Pinchbeck, who says that he himself exhibited a Pig of Knowledge about 1804; he gives detailed directions for training which begin at the beginning: “Take a Pig, seven or eight weeks old. . . .” He warns: “You are not to beat him into the knowledge of your design, but coax him to it, if possible.” The pig is taught at first to pick up the correct card to spell a word when he comes to it by the trainer “snuffing” or “breathing from your nose,” but eventually the secret communication . . . is unnecessary. You may relinquish it by degrees; for the animal is so sagacious, that he will appear to read your thoughts. The position you stand in, not meaning any stipulated place, or certain gesture, but what will naturally arise from your anxiety, will determine the card to your pupil. I will only add, that I have been as much amazed at the performances of this animal, as the spectators before whom I exhibited him.10

The pig’s performances were so successful in the provinces that, not long after Dr Johnson’s death in December 1784, he was brought to London, where he was introduced with a flourish of publicity. An advertisement in the Daily Universal Reporter said that at Sadler’s Wells “will be introduced the amazing LEARNED PIG”:

This entertaining and sagacious animal casts accounts by means of Typographical cards, in the same manner as a Printer composes, and by the same method sets down any capital or Surname, reckons the number of People present, tells by evoking on a Gentleman’s Watch in company what is the Hour and Minutes; he likewise tells any Lady’s Thoughts in company, and distinguishes all sorts of colours . . . .

His appearance provoked a representational cartoon by Thomas Rowlandson of “The Wonderful Pig” on 12 April 1785 (see fig. 1), in the background of which is another ad: “The Surprising PIG, well versed in all Languages, perfect Arithmetician Mathematician & Composer of Musick.”

The Learned Pig also appeared in a caricature by Samuel Collings about 1785 entitled “The Downfall of Taste & Genius” (see fig. 2).12 It shows the impressions of poetry and painting being overwhelmed by a stam-

10. William Frederick Pinchbeck, The Expositor; or Many Mysteries Unravelled . . . comprising The Learned Pig,—Invisible Lady . . . (Boston, 1805), pp. 10, 9, 13, 23, 19, 26. The frontispiece shows “The PIG of KNOWLEDGE!!” spelling “BOSTON.”

11. The Symbolic Pig: An Anthology of Pigs in literature and art, ed. F. C. Silar & R. M. Meyler (1961), p. 61, giving the date merely as “1785.” Altick, p. 40, quotes an ad from a scrapbook in the British Library: “he reads, writes, and casts accounts by means of typographical cards, in the same manner that a printer composes and by the same method . . . sets down any capital or surname; solves questions in the four rules of Arithmeitic,” tells time, &c., ad baccalaureatem. William Hedgepath, the Hog Book (1978), in Chapter v on “Swine in Art, Sport and Show Biz” (pp. 183-220), says “the ‘Learned Pig’ [was] first exhibited in 1784” in London, but Altick more plausibly gives Spring 1785.

In 1785, the wife of Benjamin West recorded in her household expenditure book 2s. “To see the Learned Pig” (R. C. Alberts, Benjamin West (1978), p. 170).

12. In Dorothy M. George, Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Vol. VI: 1784–1792 (1938). No. 6715 is “The Downfall of Taste & Genius, or The World as it Goes” (c. 1785) by S[muel] C[ollings]; and No. 7214 is a print [by Gillray] of 30 June 1787 which includes a [learned] Pig ridden by a monkey whose name, Jacko, is on the saddle. William Blake might have been interested by both prints, because he engraved Collings’s
pede of carnival performers, led by the Learned Pig, directed by a monkey called Jacko, and drummed on by a martial hare. Most of these animals were perennial favourites; only the Learned Pig was a novelty at this time.

It also provoked a somewhat wanton poem in The Public Advertiser of 6 April 1785:

On the Learned Pig

Though Johnson, learned Bear, is gone,
Let us no longer mourn our loss,
For lo, a learned Hog is come,
And wisdom grunts at Charing Cross.

Happy for Johnson—that he died
Before this wonder came to town,
Else it had blasted all his pride
Another brute should gain renown.

On 19 December 1785 Parson Woodforde rode to Norwich, where

After Dinner the Captain and myself, went and saw the learned Pigg at the rampant Horse in St. Stephens—there was but a small Company there but soon got larger—We stayed there about an Hour—It was wonderful to see the sagacity of the Animal—It was a Boar Pigg, very thin, quite black with a magic Collar on his Neck. He would spell any word or Number from the Letters and Figures that were placed before him[,] paid for seeing the Pigg 0.1.0.

There was, of course, something of a clamour in the press. A correspondent of The Gentleman's Magazine, LVII (June 1785), 413, remarked that Maty's [New] Review, VII (April 1785), 289–90, has “got the start of you in his animadversions upon that phenomenon of learning, that formidable rival to other productions of genius, the most wonderful Cheshire Pig.” The New Review note was by the great though then fledgling Greek scholar Richard Porson:

THE LEARNED PIG.

THIS gentleman professing himself to be extremely learned, will have no objection to find his merits set forth in a Greek quotation:

which, no manner of doubt, he will immediately translate for the amusement of the dilettanti who visit him.

"The Sow's Revenge" for The Wit's Magazine, Vol. I (Feb 1784), and because Jacko appears in his Island in the Moon (?1784). The assault of the Learned Pig upon Painting here anticipates his own allegation by twenty-some years.

An undated poster for James L. Hazard's exhibition of the "WONDER and ADMIRATION of the WORLD! THE LEARNED ... PIG" is reproduced in Martin Gardner, "Mathematical Games: How to be psychic, even if you are a horse or some other animal," Scientific American, CCXL, 5 (May 1979), 18.

13. Altick, p. 43.
This, though not very elegant, and probably made from the [dog] Latin, as it does honour to the ingenuous beast, and shews that he is above any sentiment of envy on this occasion, I shall insert.

A gentle pig, this same, a pig of parts,
And learn'd as F.R.S. or graduate in arts;
His ancestors, 'tis true, could only squeak,
But this has been at school—and in a month will speak. 15

*As it is possible that the pig's Greek may want rubbing up, owing to his having kept so much company with ladies, the chien savant has kindly communicated a translation.

It may have been some such reference as this which led William Unwin to compare William Cowper, or at least his poetical éclat, with that of the Learned Pig. In a letter to John Newton of 22 April 1785, Cowper wrote: "You tell me that I am rivalled by Mrs. Bellamy16 and he [Unwin] that I have a competitor for fame not less formidable in the learned Pig. Alas! what is an author's popularity worth, in a world that can suffer a prostitute on one side, and a pig on the other to eclipse his brightest glories?"17 Two years later,

When [Robert] Burns was in Edinburgh, 1787, attending the first edition of his poems there he was asked to be of a party; he thought it was for the purpose of exhibiting [him], answered that he would, on condition that they had also the learned pig present[.] The performance of this animal was then exhibited [in a Grassmarket booth] in Edinburgh for money. 18

Burns seems to have thought of the Learned Pig as a rival to poetry, much as Cowper did.

Mary Wollstonecraft may have seen either the pig himself or the account of him in Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson (1791), for, in her persistent diatribe against Rousseau in her Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), she writes indignantly:

His ridiculous stories, which tend to prove that girls are naturally attentive to their persons, without laying any stress on daily example, are below contempt.--And that a little miss should have such a correct taste as to neglect the pleasing amusement of making O's [as in EMILUS, quoted here], merely because she perceived that it was [made while she was in] an ungraceful attitude, should be selected with the anecdotes of the learned pig. 19

I quote the passage for its illumination of performing pigs, not for its logic.

16. The famous, dissolute, and then decayed actress (1727-88), brought to public attention once more by her Apology for the Life of George [sic] Anne Bellamy (1785).
17. Quoted for me from the incomplete MS in Princeton by my friend Professor James King.
19. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), p. 86. A footnote in Chapter viii cites Boswell's life of Johnson. When Louise Holroyd was introduced to many sophisticated strangers at Bath, she said, "I felt like a Learned Pig" (The Girlhood of Maria Holroyd, ed. J. H. Adriene [1896], p. 77, quoted in E. S. Sunstein, A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft [1975], pp. 52, 362).
It may have been about this time that Bowles & Carver published their anonymous print of “The Wonderful Pig of Knowledge” showing a pig performing in a parlour evidently engaged in spelling “PORC[INE]” (see fig. 3). 20

The pig appeared once more in [William Darton’s] A Present for a Little Boy (1798), in a chapter called “Anecdotes of Tame and Wild Swine”:

As all men are not of the same agreeable disposition, so neither are pigs equally tractable; for some pigs have evinced so teachable a disposition, that children might take a useful lesson from their conduct; . . . several of them have been taught to read, and, in appearance, to spell better than some little boys could, who were several years older.

One pig was shewn in London, that was taught to spell the name of any person or place; several alphabets, in single letters, being placed before him, he pointed out the letters with his snout, and placed them in order, to make out the words required. This pig, in being taught, must have suffered great pain, if not some cruelties; for little boys have obstinate tempers, some have been beaten, others have had their hair pulled, or ears pinched, to make them mind their spelling; how difficult then must it be to teach a pig to converse with men.—We rather suspect some harsh methods must have been used by the teacher of the learned pig, and on that account it appears improper to encourage such shows. 21

And to enforce the point, a useful woodcut shows a pig choosing out cards with letters on them, directed by a man with a wand and watched by two couples with a little boy apiece (see fig. 4).

Learned Pigs were active in children’s books, such as Sarah Trimmer’s very popular Fabulous Histories Designed for the Instruction of Children, Respecting their Treatment of Animals (1786). In Chapter IX, later called The Learned Pig, little Harriet is told by her Mama:

The creature was shewn for a sight in a room provided for the purpose, where a number of people assembled to view his performances. Two alphabets of large letters on card paper were placed on the floor; one of the company was then desired to propose a word which he wished the Pig to spell. This his keeper repeated to him, and the Pig picked out every letter successively with his snout, and collected them together till the word was completed. He was then desired to tell the hour of the day, and one of the company held a watch to him, which he seemed with his little cunning eyes to examine very attentively; and having done so, picked out figures for the hours and minutes of the day. . . .

And do you think, mama, said Harriet, that the Pig knows the letters, and can really spell words? I think it possible, my dear, for the Pig to be taught to know the letters one from the other, and that his keeper has some private sign, by which he directs him to each that are wanted;—but that he has an idea of spelling, I can never believe. . . . I would advise you, Harriet, never to give countenance to those people who shew what are called learned animals; as you may assure yourself they exercise great barbarities upon them. . . . 22


22. Mrs [Sarah] Trimmer, Fabulous Histories (1786), pp. 71–73. Later editions were called The History of the Robin, in one of which (1875) is a delicious chapter heading by Giacomelli exhibiting a bespectacled pig at the crest of a mountain of tomes labeled Platon, Homere, Pope III, Birds, Virgil, Bronte, &c. (see p. 90 above). Harrison Weir (b. 1824), Animal Stories Old and New, Told in Pictures and Prose (1885), p. 54, has two coloured pictures of a Learned Pig named Toby which Weir saw “years
Figure 3

The WONDERFUL PIG of KNOWLEDGE.
Mama would have been much comforted had she known what Robert Southey and William Frederick Pinchbeck knew, that the Pig was trained with gentleness, not with cruelty.

Joseph Strutt used the pig as an illustration of *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* in 1801:

I cannot help mentioning a very ridiculous show of a learned pig, which of late days attracted much of the public notice, and at the polite end of town. This pig, which indeed was a large unwieldy hog, being taught to pick up letters written upon pieces of cards, and to arrange them at command, gave great satisfaction to all who saw him, and filled his tormentor’s pocket with money. One would not have thought that a hog had been an animal capable of learning; the fact, however, is another proof of what may be accomplished by assiduity; for the showman assured a friend of mine, that he had lost three very promising brutes in the course of training, and that the phenomenon then exhibited had often given him to despair of success.23

In *The Prelude* (1805) Wordsworth found the Learned Pig one of the emblems of the nature of London, in a description of the sights of St. Bartholomew’s Fair:

What a shock
For eyes and ears! what anarchy, and din,
Barbarian and infernal. . . .
. . . with staring pictures and huge scrolls,
Dumb proclamations of the Predigies;
. . .
All moveables of wonder, from all parts,
Are here — Albinos, painted Indians, Dwarfs,
The Horse of knowledge,24 and the learned Pig
. . .
All out-o’-the-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts
Of man, his dulness, madness, and their feats
All jumbled up together, to compose
A Parliament of Monsters. . . .
Oh, blank confusion! true epitome
Of what the mighty City is herself. . . . (Book VII, ll. 685–723)

ago . . . at Camberwell Fair” for a penny. The Pig carried a card to a person who called out the number on it, spelled “vittels,” and then disappeared to have some “with a joyful grunt, and the show was over.”

The rustic speaker of Anon., “Ballad for Old-Fashioned Farmers. On the Great Exhibition,” *Punch*, XX (1851), 212, scorned the shiny frivolity of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and much preferred “The Fair as was held nigh our own native town” in days “When we was contented wi our vorevathers’ rules,” where one could view, inter alia, “the ram with six legs and the learned pig,” as my learned friend Professor Desmond Neill points out to me.


24. The Horse of Learning was exhibited at Exeter Change, London, in 1760–72 (Altick, p. 40), and others doubtless were shown later. They may be related to Blake’s “horses of instruction” (who are not so wise as “The tygers of wrath”) in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93), pl. 9 (p. 83) and his *Vala* (1796–1807), p. 25, l. 3 (p. 1110) and to his picture “done many years ago” of “The Horse of Intellect” described in his *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), pars. 88–89 (pp. 854–55). Marilyn Gaull, “Romantic Humour: The Horse of Knowledge and the Learned Pig,” *Mosaic*, IX, 4 (Summer 1976), 42-64, only touches on The Horse of Knowledge and The Learned Pig as incidental illuminations of Romantic Humour.
For Coleridge, characteristically, the Learned Pig is the subject of an adjectival joke; in his *Statesman’s Manual* (1816) is an anecdote of the mistake of a lethargic Dutch traveller, who returning highly gratified from a showman’s caravan, which he had been tempted to enter by the words THE LEARNED PIG, gilt on the pannels, met another caravan of a similar shape, with THE READING FLY on it, in letters of the same size and splendour. ‘Why, dis is voonders above voonders!’ exclaims the Dutchman, takes his seat as the first comer, and soon fatigued by waiting... [droused, until the driver called out:] ‘Are you booked all the way for Reading?’—Now a Reading Public is (to my mind) more marvellous still... 25

It may have been the second, or at any rate, a succeeding Learned Pig of 1818–23 whom Thomas Hood encountered and memorialized in his “Lament of Toby, The Learned Pig,” with its motto: “A little learning is a dangerous thing”:

Of what avail that I could spell
And read, just like my betters,
If I must come to this at last,
To litters, not to letters?

O, why are pigs made scholars of?
It baffles my discerning,
What griskins, fry, and chitterlings
Can have to do with learning.

Alas! my learning once drew cash,
But public fame’s unstable,
So I must turn a pig again,
And fatten for the table.

Of all my literary kin
A farewell must be taken,
Good bye to the poetic Hogg!
The philosophic Bacon! 26

William Blake’s references to swine are somewhat unusual; snoring, human, and learned. On p. 60 of his *Notebook* he wrote:

I askd my dear Friend Orator Prigg
‘Whats the first part of Oratory?’ he said ‘A great wig’.[.]
‘And what is the second?’ then dancing a jig
And bowing profoundly he said ‘a great wig’.[.]
‘And what is the third?’ then he snord like a pig
And puffing his cheeks he replied ‘a Great wig’.[.]

In “The Everlasting Gospel” Blake said that Jesus

turned the Devils into Swine
That he might tempt the Jews to Dine

26. Thomas Hood, *The Comic Annual* (1835), 176-80; verses omitted here imply that the Pig’s original owner was named Mullins, that the Pig knew Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and that he received his directions “Simply by ringing at the nose, According to Bells system” (referring to the “Bei and the Dragon” controversy [1804 ff.] over the Madras System of mutual education between Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster).
Since which a Pig has got a look
That for a Jew may be mistook[.]

Finally, on *Notebook* p. 40 he wrote a fragment of a poem called "Barry":

```plaintext
Give pensions to the Learned Pig
Or the Hare playing on a Tabor[.]
Anglus can never see Perfection
But in the Journeymans Labour[.]
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Hares playing on tabors were an ancient form of fair amusement. Joseph Strutt wrote:

> It is astonishing what may be affected by constant exertion and continually tormenting even the most timid and untractable animals; for no one would readily believe that a hare could have been sufficiently emboldened to face a large concourse of spectators without expressing its alarm, and beat upon a tambourine in their presence; yet such a performance was put in practice not many years back, and exhibited at Sadler's Wells; and, if I mistake not, in several other places in and about the metropolis. Neither is this whimsical spectacle a recent invention. A hare that beat the tabor is mentioned by Jonson, in his comedy of Batholomew Fayre, acted at the commencement of the seventeenth century [1614]; and a representation of the feat itself, taken from a drawing on a manuscript upwards of four hundred years old . . . is given below [fig. 5].

![Figure 5](image_url)

> 27. *William Blake's Writings* (1978), II, 958, 1057, 951. The starting point for the present essay was a belated effort to annotate the last reference, spurred on by Robin Jackson's curiosity about similar references in Coleridge and elsewhere.
I cannot identify Orator Prigg or the Pensioned Pig, but the Hare in Blake’s poem probably represents the artist and dramatist Prince Hoare. Elsewhere Blake wrote of

trembling Hare [who] sits on his weekly paper
On which he used to dance & sport & caper

clearly alluding to Hoare’s weekly periodical called *The Artist* (1807-09). Blake assumes such a clear association between the name of Prince Hoare and prostitution that he need not make it explicitly. The explicit link, as Professor Jackson points out to me learnedly, is in *Romeo and Juliet*, II, iv, where Mercutio is tormenting Juliet’s Nurse:

Mercutio: A bawd, a bawd, a bawd! So no! [A hunting term: “The quarry’s found!”]
Romeo: What hast thou found?
Mercutio: No hare, sir; unless a hare, sir, in a lenten pie, that is something stale and hoare ere it be spent.

[Sings]

An old hare hoar,
And an old hare hoar,
Is very good meat in lent:
But a hare that is hoar
Is too much for a score
When it hoars ere it be spent.

The quarry, Mercutio implies, is a bawd for a whore, and a hoary bawd at that. Blake’s Hoare had printed in his *Artist* for 6 June 1807 a puff for Stothard’s painting of the Canterbury Pilgrims, the idea for which, Blake believed, was stolen from Blake’s design of the same subject; Blake’s point is that Hoare is a stale go-between, a pander for prostituted ideas.

Thus the freaks of learning, the Musical Hare, the Sapient Swine, and the Horse of Learning, become the jokes of genius. It is curious to observe the consistency with which men reveal the characteristic nature of their genius in responding to these Learned Pigs. For Dr Johnson, they provoke ponderous reflections on the preferability of a tortured life to an early death. For Southey, they speak eloquently of vanity. From the learned Porson they elicit jocular quatrains in Greek. For Cowper and Burns, the pig serves as a warning of the vanity of public reputation, at least of *their* public reputation. They remind Mary Wollstonecraft of the masculine prejudice of the world, or at any rate of Rousseau. William Darton makes them an object-lesson to little boys learning to read—and perhaps to their parents not to use harsh methods in teaching. Wordsworth takes the Learned Pig (inter alia) at St. Bartholomew’s

29. *Notebook* p. 22 (*Writings*, II, 935). Anglus may represent Robert Hunt, who had called Blake “an unfortunate lunatic” in *The Examiner* for 1809 (see *Blake Records* [1969], 216), and who is certainly referred to in the lines immediately before those quoted above:

The Examiner whose very name is Hunt
Call’d Death [Blake] a Madman trembling for the affront[.]
Fair as an emblem of man’s “Promethean thoughts” and “dulness,” “true epitome Of what the mighty City is herself.” Coleridge makes the Learned Pig into an instance of Dutch fancy, the waywardness of words and associations. For Tom Hood, poor Toby’s neglected learning provides occasion for facile reflections on the instability of public fame, before they cook his philosophic Bacon. And for William Blake the Learned Pig represents wilfully misguided patronage. Such are the Freaks of Learning.

Thus the Eighteenth Century did not draw quietly to a close after all. As if Revolutions in North America and in France were not enough, there were outbreaks of Romantic Poetry and of Sapient Swine to disturb the peace of the Augustans. What conclusions may we draw, from all this

Learning, that cobweb of the brain,
Profane, erroneous, and vain. (Hudibras, 1. 1339)

If we despair with Edmund Burke in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, we may conclude that “Learning will be cast down into the mire, and trodden under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.” But I think we may more appropriately end with Alexander Pope:

Such labour’d Nothings, in so strange a style,
Amaze th’unlearn’d, and make the Learned smile.
(Essay on Criticism, II. 326–27)

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