

Gibbon's 'earliest use of irony' revealed by manuscript

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The newly discovered manuscript, written in French by a 19-year old Edward Gibbon.

A newly-discovered manuscript may represent Edward Gibbon's earliest experiment in the irony for which he would become famous, an Oxford University English academic has found.

Professor David Womersley of Oxford University's English Faculty discovered the manuscript written by the 19-year old Edward Gibbon, which had been left in the attic of a house in Lausanne for many years.

The manuscript reveals what may be Gibbon's earliest use of [irony](#) as scholarly polemic -- a technique he polished in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The full manuscript can be viewed in this week's *Times Literary Supplement*.

It also reveals that some memorable turns of phrase in Gibbon's most controversial use of irony in chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall* were borrowed from a Christian apologist writer who had been on the sharp end of Gibbon's barbs.

'This new manuscript, although quite short, gives an important insight into the origins of Gibbon's distinctive ways of thinking and writing,' said Professor David Womersley.

'The paper is important because it is perhaps the earliest example of the adolescent Gibbon experimenting with irony for purposes of scholarly polemic - a technique which made *The Decline and Fall* notorious.'

He added: 'Exploration of the context of the manuscript leads to the surprising discovery that some memorable turns of phrase in Gibbon's most controversial use of irony in chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall* came from an unexpected source: *Lettres sur le déisme* by the Swiss academic theologian Jean Salchli, a critique which Gibbon himself criticised.

'This discovery is striking. A contemporary parallel might be Conservatives using the language of the 'Third Way' to attack the policies of Tony Blair.

'It also suggests that the stylistic roots of Gibbon's undermining of the Christian religion are not to be found among the enemies of Christianity but rather among its defenders. This may help to explain why orthodox thinkers found *The Decline and Fall* at once maddening and

unanswerable.'

Gibbon's papers were left in Lausanne, Switzerland after his death in 1794. Most were sent back to England but others remained in private hands. Some of these have now been presented to the Archives de la Ville in Lausanne, where this manuscript had been mis-described, and so overlooked.

It is however identical in size, paper quality and handwriting to the manuscript journal Gibbon kept while touring Switzerland in September and October 1755 (now in the British Library).

Gibbon was born in 1737 and died in 1794. A Member of Parliament and historian, his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788.

Professor Womersley said: 'The Decline and Fall represents the greatest and most sustained act of historical imagination in world literature, so it is fascinating to see how Gibbon's mental and literary world was furnished and what shaped it.

'This manuscript is particularly intriguing because it contains the seeds of ideas and styles that would in a few years become enormously important.'

Edward Gibbon attended the University of Oxford at a young age but left when he converted to Roman Catholicism. He later renounced Catholicism and reverted to being a conforming, if undevout, member of the Church of England.

More information: A fuller version of Professor Womersley's article will be published in an academic journal in the near future.

Provided by Oxford University

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