A Tory Reading of Johathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels

Kuldip Pawa
English 465 - Topics in Critical Theory
Professor Carolyn Lesjak
Tuesday, April 8th, 2014
Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* consists of a lengthy catalogue of the many faults and failings that this supposed Enlightened Age yet cleaves to. In the preamble, along with a long litany of the many necessary reformations the author had sought to bring about through his satire, he notes with dejection that his mock-travelogue has utterly failed according to his intentions since party and faction remain as yet undissolved and that common sense doesn’t yet reign in the realm (6). The central thrust of Swift’s book is an argument against division and party in politics the other cited shortcomings of Georgian England can neatly be fitted into this single moral turpitude. For Swift, factions and the new party politics confound all good government and is the source of pointless rivalries. The partisans under the banners of Whig and Tory see each other across a yawning factional and sectarian divide and can no longer share a common set of values. They give themselves up to vicious dissensions over mere cavils. So no working government seems possible as they all vie relentlessly with each other for royal favor. Swift disparages all such affiliations to party and faction, yet betrays ideological leanings of his own toward a proto-conservative Toryism that he seems to view as basic commonsense that stands on the sidelines of these culture wars, while facetiously espousing an abstract pacifist commitment to avoiding conflict. But in arguing against this infighting at court Swift is already caught up on the fray.

The categories of Whig and Tory are notoriously difficult to pin down but roughly I take Whigs, like John Locke, to be defenders of liberty against the monarch that; share visionary schemes for social advancement; believe in progress offered by natural philosophy; and trust in the innate goodness of man and his capacity for enlightened reason. Tories, by and large, somewhat like Hobbes, defend royal prerogative over liberty; lament the decadence of civilization; see human nature as naturally depraved and as needing the remediation of strict law and order; don’t share the optimistic belief in the usefulness or benignity of the new science; and trust more in the simple virtues over visionary schemes.

With mordant sarcasm, Swift exposes the pretentious absurdity of all our partiality to party affiliations. At the heart of his persuasion campaign is the formulation of policy positions that Swift seems to feel should garner the support of the divided parties. In his own view, he’s merely a hardheaded, clearsighted realist who transcends faction and merely defends a common ground: a limited monarchy in politics; ecumenism in religion; and skepticism in science. The hope is that with the removal of such psychological obstacles to comity we may all eventually come to share the same sentiments and opinions.

In his first voyage Gulliver arrives in Lilliput, the land of miniature people. Gulliver can be seen in this episode, according to Hobbesian political theory, as representative of the collective commons or the royal subjects in the Leviathan State. Hobbes imagined society, in an elaborate metaphor, as a single body, with the monarch as its soul. In something akin to a Hobbesian Social Contract—an agreement among equals in which the governed consent to and thereby legitimize the rule of the sovereign—Gulliver vows, in exchange for freedom from captivity, to accept an oath which regulates his behavior within Lilliputian society. It could, however, reasonably be argued that Gulliver never freely consents to this contract and hence it cannot bind. Yet, while readily admitting that it was “extreme Necessity had forced [him] to submit,” he still feels compelled by honor to uphold this coerced compact with its many mundane claims of obligation (53). And, it
continues to obligate even in the face of conflicting necessity. But Gulliver is no meekly obedient member of the body politic: he refuses to conquer the king’s enemies and to forcibly enslave them, even though this commitment to individual autonomy and dignity puts him in direct violation of the terms of the agreement.

English society of Swift’s day, the early eighteenth-century, was the product of an evolving set of compromises among incompatible but equally desirable goals of respecting individual rights and freedoms and of upholding the existing class hierarchy, which conventional wisdom deemed necessary for maintaining civility and social order. According to respectable opinion among Swift’s contemporaries, order was held together by these sorts of complex and interlocking debts of obligation, duty, benevolence, the observation of etiquette, and the setting of a good example to the lower orders by fulfilling the obligations of the station in life into which one was born. Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels* affirms this older, paternalistic conception of social order, against the destabilizing world of *masterless men*—the putative bane of civilized society, miscreants who refused the authority of their social superiors. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift places a constant emphasis on discipline, restraint, and the acceptance of one’s place in the social order.

Social relations in Lilliput are—as they were in Swift’s England—the payment of debts or the accumulation of some credit that may be drawn on later. To this end, it’s always best to be courteous and affable and to not do something selfish or otherwise antagonize those to whom such debts are due or from whom credits may be accrued. Even the very act of being born was seen as incurring a liability, the one due to one’s parents, to be repaid for the time and trouble our progenitors have invested in our birth and upbringing. Swift must thoroughly support relations of hierarchy and deference since he attacks and satirizes even those, such as John Locke, who were working to dismantle this broadly defined filial piety as part of the whole credit/debt system of obligations. In Lilliput, the state takes custody of children since no obligation exists between parent and child. As Locke writes in his First Treatise of Government (Chapter 6), “We see this Absolute monarchical power of the father, can neither be founded on it, nor consist with it [the fifth commandment]” (186). He adds a few pages later that, “Honor thy father and mother [Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16, Leviticus 19:3, Ephesians 6:2, et cetera] cannot possibly be understood of [to be] political subjection and obedience” (188). The authority of parents over their children, of course, has a direct parallel with the authority of the Chief Magistrate over the multitude. And Locke’s clear intent is to remove the extent and extremity of this executive authority.

The stated reason that the Lilliputians are averse to respecting the family is because it arises out of our irrational feral natures that society must tame, rationalize, and reimagine upon more sound principles: “Men and Women are joined together like other Animals, by the Motives of Concupiscence; and their Tenderness towards their Young proceeds from the like natural Principle” (58). I could cite here many such like instances in which Lilliputian society rationalizes its cruelty, preferring mean calculations of societal and personal profit over principle but I’ll limit myself to just more: The prime consideration against Gulliver’s murder is that the resulting “stench of so large a Carcass might produce a Plague in the Metropolis” (68). The collective societal rearing of children also
illustrates the sort of grand visionary schemes with which Swift seems to take issue, of which I shall have further occasion to enlarge upon in another part of this paper. Swift's caricature of this era in English politics reminds one of nothing so much as exasperatingly quarrelsome small children, endlessly bickering for no purpose of the slightest importance to the world. Swift seems to take particular issue with the fact that Lilliputian politics still remains a private matter between the sovereign and his minions and that their government is little more than a nest of hidden agendas, divisive political disputes, scandal-mongering, backroom schemes, rationalizations, blind vendettas, and intrigues. The Lilliputian Crown's failure then, according to prevailing view of social obligations, is that he selfishly disregards the duties of the lofty position into which he's cast. Supposedly, the emperor and his ministry ought rightly to consider the public weal in managing the state and formulating their policies. Swift seems to find most distasteful the manner in which the Crown indulges his selfish pride by lording over his subjects like an oriental despot of old with moralistic formulas. This is taken to ludicrous extremes later in the book in the episode about the King of Luggnagg whose supplicants are required to crawl before the throne upon their bellies and to further prostrate themselves by licking the ground in their approach.

In Lilliput there's a solemn contrast shown between the stately majesty of the royal office and the repulsively embarrassing pettiness with which the officeholder is preoccupied with his own personal advantage to the detriment of society. Swift thus exposes the contemptible pursuit of personal interests lurking beneath the high-minded rhetoric of divine right and other commonplace views casting the monarch as the nation's parent, the heir to Adam, and the sort. But Gulliver isn't completely liberated from the chains of mystified reverence to this bankrupt ideology. His dominant instinct to stand alone is counter-balanced by his over-whelming obligation to serve the state and indulge his vain love of honors in wishing to retain his empty title of “Nardac.” For the king's part, if there's any doubt about how the potentate views Gulliver's obligations, one need only remember that he, the king, thought Gulliver's disobedience in failing to enslave the Blefuscuians as so high an act of ingratitude and provoking impertinence that he resolves to impose the frightful reprisal of gouging out Gulliver's eyes. Through this as well as other instances, Swift seems to ask if the social contract binds Gulliver to abject submission to the residing power on the throne.

Gulliver does sensibly enough accept the immutability of inequality and hierarchical relationships but he also seeks to accommodate the evolving consensus on the rights of all Englishmen (or at least all propertied Englishmen) as the possessors by birth of some inviolable and inalienable Natural Rights. Gulliver retains some personal belongings that he “did not think [himself] bound in Honour to discover [reveal]” and which are likened to personal reservations of conscience that he feels he's also not bound to disclose (38). Later in the book, Gulliver asks “why those who entertain Opinions prejudicial to the Public, should be obliged to Change, or should not be obliged to Conceal them” (122).

In Gulliver's opinion, the Chief Magistrate does emphatically overstep the bounds of his rightful dominion. For Gulliver does finally aver, with some reservations, that “his Majesty's present Severities acquitted me of all past Obligations” (69). With the sentence of his blinding, Gulliver considers himself as discharged of all former obligation and duty, irrespective of that most solemn oath Gulliver gave to the contrary.
His Majesty's “Prime Minister,” Sir Robert Walpole, is caricatured as Flimnap, the emperor's favorite who's the ringleader of a carnival troupe of servile flatters. Preferment in this government is shown on the basis of the applicant's merits in rope-dancing. Swift thus exposes the absurdly corrupt system of political appointments. One also senses here some tincture of disgruntlement as Swift was himself passed over for any bishoprics in England only to be given the detested deanship of St. Patrick's in Ireland by Queen Anne as a means of banishing this impious courtier to this extremity of the kingdom. But a little later in the first book Gulliver notes that "In choosing Persons for all Employments, they have more regard to good Morals than great Abilities" so that Lilliput is now made a meritocracy (57). Swift seems divided between depicting a dystopia to mock English customs and manners and an Oceania to illustrate an alternative model for England to emulate.

As I've already noted, Swift depicts a society wherein everyone is swollen big with the partiality of their personal interests and as the devoted partisans of party affiliations. They're most deeply riven over whether Lustrog, the great Prophet of religion, had intended that a boiled egg ought rightly to be broken at the small, pointed end or the big, blunt end. Whereof arises the denominations of Big-Endians and Little-Endians. The controversies of belief between Protestant and Catholic factions are thus depicted as pointless conflicts akin to a dispute over the correct means wherein one ought to crack an egg. It would seem that all the knotty and fine points of Divinity and True Doctrine are for Swift all so much of a muchness. And in the same vein, Swift notes, “Difference in Opinions hath cost many Millions of Lives: For instance, whether Flesh be Bread, or Bread be Flesh; whether the Juice of a certain Berry be Blood or Wine” (226). The worst of wars are “occasioned by Difference in Opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent (226). This would certainly have come across as a very offensive opinion to most of Swift's contemporaries. But it often remains uncertain whether Swift is recommending some such viewpoints as worthy of adoption or merely ridiculing them. Gulliver is himself by turns shrewd and naive. Perhaps, as is the nature of a political satirist, Swift is ironically espousing a contrary view to his own only to point out its very ludicrousness or perhaps he's rejecting a popular view only to garner a laugh. This specific position is definitely one with which most of Swift's contemporaries would have taken issue. Catholicism was actively prosecuted with widespread popular support. But I'd suggest that Swift is attempting to defuse this ongoing conflict by genuinely adopting an unpopular ecumenical position.

This latitudinarianism may explain why Swift shows a marked support for the crypto-Romish Charles I with his description of the “Temple”—likened to Westminster Hall where this tyrant had been tried for high treason by the Rump Parliament—which is said to have “been polluted some years before by an unnatural Murder” (29). It would seem that Swift's resolution to such intestine divisions is that all such Religious matters be "left to each man's conscience, or at least in the power of the Chief Magistrate to determine” (48). Swift thus grants each man the liberty of personal conscience to decide his own religion while simultaneously prevaricating that a suitable alternative would also be to accept the doctrine of cuius regio, eius religio. Swift may here again be, through Gulliver, betraying his Jacobite leanings as this passage could clearly be read as a defense of the papist pretender James II's right to ascend to the English throne and to prescribe the superstitious and idolatrous Romish creed to his righteous English
subjects. But I’d suggest that Swift’s policy position is formulated to diffuse all conflict by staking out a middle ground.

The pygmy metropolis is a profusion of false tastes, false appetites, false desires. Perhaps the best illustration of this is the episode wherein Gulliver extinguishes the fire in the royal palace in a most unseemly manner. Assaulted by such insufferable effluvia, the queen believes herself the victim of so grave a crime as requiring nothing less than Gulliver’s death to expiate. Surely, this breach of etiquette is forgivable for having most likely saved her ladyship’s life. Far from any intention to give umbrage Gulliver is motivated by gallantry. All the pride, covetousness (for soiled articles), hypocrisy, oppression, tyranny, unmercifulness, and a pretended rectitude are here illustrated in this single vignette. The Queen’s fastidious disgust at Gulliver exemplifies the over-refinement that itself overruns all bounds of modesty and civility. It’s a strange notion of delicacy and decorum that perversely prefers death over pollution. The Lilliputian adventure is at heart an argument against such overwrought material progress and an argument for a contentment with plain, simple tastes and wares. Gulliver’s Travels seems at times to dwell lovingly on the ordure, miasma, excreta, and other matters of the flesh. There could here also be a veiled attack on the Puritans’ prudish obsessions with the “filth” of sex, profanity, and other vices. The Puritans were dissenters and generally affiliated with the low-church (Whig) party.

Gulliver next travels to Brobdingnag, the land of giants. Western European civilization had by Swift’s time become the architect of a considerable social, intellectual, and technological triumph; it set modern Europe so far apart from all other civilizations as completely as if a new breed of giants had arisen on the planet. But the Brobdingnag episode serves as a poignant reminder that somewhere in the vast unexplored beyond there may yet exist a race of giants who could reduce the grandeur of even the mightiest Englishman to insignificance. But I’ll confine myself here to examining this episode as an internal criticism of English politics and more particularly an attempt by Swift at deflating the pride of his fellow countrymen by presenting through the Brobdingnags an admirable society who are categorically worthy of our emulation. Gulliver is somewhat successful in climbing the social ladder and wins favor at the Brobdingnag court by showing himself to be well-versed in the incontrovertible rules of correct behavior. He displays the appropriate social graces and as having the valued culture and refinement as revealed in learning, manners, speech, and polite usage. But he still comes to accept that for all his polish he can still never be the Brobdingnags’ formal equal in human worth. In the patronizing cant of class apologists, the gentry and nobility were not merely superficially better by some culturally shared convention, they saw themselves as being so naturally superior as to belong to a different species altogether. And this manifest greatness self-evidently justified the division of society into classes.

The overweening ambition of Gulliver, a mere commoner, an inconsequential insect, bent on equality with persons of such lofty eminence makes him look ridiculous. The sheer size of the Brobdingnags makes an absurdity of Gulliver’s inflated boasts of courage and so he rightly becomes the object of ridicule and derision for having such pretensions in foolish disregard of his modest circumstances. Gulliver comes to realize “how vain an Attempt it is for a Man to
endeavor doing himself Honor among those who are out of all Degrees of Equality or Comparison with him” (115). In the presence of such noble colossuses Gulliver becomes as petty as a Lilliputian was for him. The moral is clear: One ought to be ever mindful of one’s station in life and be content with it. One should simply renounce his free will, should abjure one’s hopes and dreams, and should feel privileged to be granted a life of diligent service to such eminent personages. Swift seems to wholeheartedly accept the Grandees’ right to exercise their suzerainty over their “inferiors” as just and appropriate and merely criticizes their sometime self-centered obliviousness.

Because of his diminutive perspective, Gulliver is now acutely aware of every blemish upon such Persons of Great Quality. Meaning that, in their lofty disdain, the mighty may not perhaps see their own glaring inadequacies, their “defects,” and may inadvertently subject the lowly to careless handling (87). Swift thus implicitly criticizes the demeaning indignities he receives at the hands of the court maids, suggesting that, while he may be many rungs of the social ladder beneath them, he’s still deserving of the simple courtesy of being asked his permission in their making use of his body and labors. While he may not be worthy of full moral consideration he still seems to believe he should be regarded as honorific and dignified.

The Brobdingnagian king’s great physical stature directly parallels his equally great moral stature; this prince is clearly being presented as a noble ideal for human imitation. In stark contrast to the Lilliputian monarch, the portrait painted of the Brobdingnag king is of a benevolent, wise, learned, impartial, and compassionate leader who’s genuinely concerned for the interests and wellbeing of his people, even his smallest subject. This Philosopher King is a plain and simple man who refutes any notion that there can be such a thing as a Science of Politics as Hobbes had attempted to formulate it. Good governance His Excellence confines to “within very narrow Bounds; to common Sense and Reason, to Justice and Lenity, to the speedy Determination of civil and criminal causes” (126). Gulliver also greatly admires that His Eminence is a strong monarch who isn’t in need of an extensive ministry; that he doesn’t have to contend with wasteful and invidious partisan politics; that he’s a man of scholarly learning; and that he’s attentive to the wishes of this people. Brobdingnag has a stable republican form of government with the nobles, commons, and the crown equally represented in government, all superintended by the Rule of Law (129). Swift seems to have some crude idea of a Crown-in-Parliament as the ideal conception of governmental schema but doesn’t spell this out in much detail. Other aspects of Brobdingnagian society of note are that it’s largely an agricultural society content to retain primitive techniques, has no standing army, has no financiers who could bankroll the government’s debt, and that learning is limited to what “what may be useful in Life, to the Improvement of Agriculture and all mechanical Arts” (126).

But Gulliver’s partiality to his native land makes him persist in the superiority of European values for their preeminence in brutality and the pernicious art of killing their own kind. It’s clear that such innovations as have a subversive and destabilizing social effect should rightly be proscribed, as His Worship emphatically decrees. By vaunting such divisive technology and finding fault with this wise king’s simple virtues, Gulliver thus betrays his arrogant European pride. Here as elsewhere Swift is rejecting the superfluous and over-refined trappings of so-called civilization. But it’s not merely short-sighted
Eurocentric contempt that makes Gulliver unable to suffer having any potential children born into bondage to such an honorable master and mistress. He chafes at his servile dependence, albeit a dependence upon kindhearted and benevolent masters, but a dependence nonetheless that subjects him to an abject and servile subordination.

It should be noted though that Brobdingnagian society isn’t ideal: they suffer beggars in their streets and entertain themselves with public executions. I’m persuaded to regard these shortcomings in an otherwise perfect society reflect Swift’s Tory acceptance of some irresolvable societal problems that will always be with us, such as poverty (Matt. 26:11, Mark 14:7, and John 12:8). It’s mere meddlesome Whiggishness to seek to remedy these failings with visionary schemes. Swift’s proto-conservatism as evinced here isn’t a dogmatic acceptance of the presumptive authority of tradition but rather a reasoned questioning that remains securely grounded in reality.

In his travels Gulliver quickly adjusts to the prevailing standards of any of the various particular nations in which he finds himself. He’s adept at learning the local languages and becomes inculcated with the foreign modes of thought of the peoples with whom he comes into contact. He becomes so immersed in the various lands in which he sojourns that we’re forced to laugh his absurd allegiances to the strange foreign ideas that take possession of him. The implication throughout the novel is that through long acquaintance Gulliver has likewise imbibed the strange notions prevalent among his own countrymen and is now blind to his native English follies and absurdities. In fact, Gulliver’s very name suggests that he’s too readily gulled into believing. By implication, we can’t avoid questioning our own English beliefs and values that Gulliver so stridently defends. “For indeed, who is there alive that will not be swayed by his Bias and Partiality to the Place of his Birth?” (238).

This is a refrain running throughout the novel; this notion that men grow insensibly attached to the generally received opinions upon which they’re reared. These mind-forged manacles cast so inordinate an influence upon us as to leave us wholly insensible of their operation even while they render us incapable of envisioning a different conception of things; things as they may be rather than how we’ve become accustomed to conceiving them. These reflections are, I’d argue, a direct consequent of Locke’s philosophy. For if we accept that we receive all our knowledge from experience, it necessarily follows that all our beliefs and convictions are derived from our social milieu.

*  *  *

On his third excursion abroad Gulliver arrives in the flying island of Laputia. Herein, with sardonic wit, Swift skewers rational science and the overinflated intellectual pride that sustains it. Swift considers the extravagant notions of the natural philosophers and their visionary schemes for society’s improvement. But these geeks’ understandings have been so overruled by their deluded projects and so enraptured are they in airy speculations as to confound all their daily waking thoughts. They’re so distracted by the contemplation of abstractions as to neglect the necessaries of life: the cultivation of their fertile fields and the management of their homesteads. These Rational Philosophers have wholly forgotten the ties of obligations to their womenfolk and children. These theoreticians think in geometric exactness but the perfection of the practical arts
of tailoring and house-building “they despise as Vulgar and Mechanic” (152). The baneful result is that the denizens of this Utopia walk about with ill-fitting clothes and live in commodious and shoddy accommodations (152). The Natural Philosophers of Laputia are more intrigued by theoretical puzzles than by the pressing practical challenges of their society. Unlike the far-ranging and curious Brobdingnagian Philosopher King, His Laputian “Majesty discovered [showed] not the least Curiosity to inquire into the Laws, Government, History, Religion, or Manners of the Countries where I had been” (155). Swift clearly has no patience for grand schemes of technocrats bent on the wholesale reimagining of society. It’s all just pie in the sky. He thus here again evinces a clear preference for a proto-conservative for the solid, visible, palpable, practical things over the possible, speculative, ideal, and as yet merely possible. It’s unnecessary to reexamine all things to set them down afresh upon first principles.

Swift lambasts the credulity of the age with its wide maw in swallowing the most errant nonsense. In the Academy of Projectors, Gulliver surveys the researches of projectors into the development of contrivances for society’s supposed advancement, including attempts to extract the sunlight that was somehow alchemized into the making of cucumbers; to transmute human ordeur back into the undigested food from whence it arose; to soften marble to serve as pincushions; to breed flocks of naked sheep that would serve no useful end whatsoever; and the generation of a library of random word compilations through a spinning game wheel for the conflation of all possible word orderings out of which may be constructed all possible books of poetry, law, history, and other branches of learning. In short, such researches are useless speculation that hasn’t produced anything of any real value nor shows any serious prospect of doing so.

Theoretical knowledge is thereby shown to be a tissue of fallacious reasoning, quibbling, verbal trickery, specious notions, fanciful conceptions, and withal pointless hairsplitting. Sure, some experimentation may offer some small flourishes upon the present state of arts as we have them but extravagant notions of the revolutionary possibilities opened up by scientific investigation are simply overblown. Besides, much of what we profess to know is merely a matter of human convention: empty tautologies of Aristotelian scholasticism and the blind deference of textmen to Descartes, Galen, Paracelsus, and their ilk. As Swift sarcastically explains, “Modern Philosophy of Europe, whose Professors...in vain to disguise their Ignorance, have invented this wonderful Solution [empty definitions] of all Difficulties to the unspeakable Advancement of human Knowledge” (98). Moliere gave the best illustration of this sort of tautological reasoning in his play The Imaginary Invalid wherein a doctor explains that the reason laudanum makes one drowsy is because it contains within it the “palliative principle.”

The England of Swift’s day was by faltering steps groping toward the establishment of some semblance to modern science. So, far be it for me to fault these misguided innocent discoverers led by the pursuit of truth. But as yet the natural and the supernatural were indistinguishably conflated. In this inchoate and as yet imperfect natural philosophy, alchemy, astrology, and magic were jostling agreeably with chemistry, astronomy, and physics. But Isaac Newton—who had himself indulged in Biblical numerology—had held out the prospect that the universe was capable of human understanding. So there was prevalent in England some inkling that we inhabit a law-abiding universe conceived as a vast
mechanism governed by regular mathematical laws which could be demonstrably established upon principles of reason. Newton and the other members of the Royal Society fermented this new spirit of learning that Swift skewers as an insupportable optimism in the new philosophy and technology. For Swift, “[N]ew systems of Nature were but new Fashions, which would vary in every Age” (184). Swift predicts that Newton’s clockwork universe would itself in time be exploded. The attainment of any meaningful learning beyond the useful arts as outlined in Brobdingnagia is an illusion. These empirics are mere projectors who aren’t making any real intellectual headway. Swift clearly doesn’t share Locke’s confidence in reason and progress. Newtonians, like Locke, are but servile imitator of cultured modes and fashionable vices!

For someone living in a relatively static society experiencing very little change it’s natural to suppose that no radical new discoveries are left to be made. For Swift, the revolutionizing potential of theoretical knowledge dreamed by the radical Baconians is mere bluster and hyperbole. Perhaps, Swift isn’t so much contemptuously dismissing all such attempts out of hand as lampooning the credulity of some to entertain such wild, fantastic, laughable, and strange notions and false opinions.

For Swift the clergyman, the distaste with the bourgeoning natural philosophy may also owe something to Hobbesian conceptions of a godless, impersonal universe that’s explicable purely in mechanical terms. Hobbes had notoriously philosophized himself into principles of impiety and mechanical atheism. Perhaps it may not be immaterial to this discussion to also note that before arriving at Laputia Gulliver, alone among his shipmates, is punished by being set adrift in a small canoe, for the effrontery of entreating his pirate captors to show some Christian compassion. Gulliver suffers this punishment of being set adrift to die on a deserted isle merely for observing that a heathen Japanese is relatively more humanitarian than his fellow Christian, a Dutchman.

On his fourth voyage Gulliver finds himself stranded in the Country of Intelligent horses, the Houyhnhnms. The fauna of this land also includes humanlike creatures called Yahoos who live in a state of filth and depravity. These Yahoos are the wildest and most brutish beasts, thoroughly governed by their animal appetites and passions. They’re a drunk, greedy, corrupt, disputatious, perverted, irrational, venal, and vicious lot and haven’t the least bit of cause to be proud. There’s a disquieting fear here that these animals aren’t really human at all. Or else, perhaps, they’re what Swift would consider the vulgar lower classes of people. But Gulliver repeatedly notes that there is no difference between him and the Yahoos save a few superficial features. As I’ve noted, prior to arriving at Houyhnhnm Land Gulliver had received many savage affronts and abuses at the hands of pirates. I’d suggest that this isn’t an inconsequential detail but rather the direct referent of the revolting barbarity that lies at the root of Swift’s disturbing vision of humanity.

In the Yahoos, it would seem then, that we’re confronted by uncomfortable aspects of our own savage nature and Gulliver is thoroughly disgusted by what he sees. He’s made bashful and prudish about his own everyday natural animal drives, his primitive needs, and his bodily functions; they become matters too vulgar to engage the consideration of a Person of Quality. He can feel only despair and
loathing for mankind to have so much in common with these subhuman wretches. For those who may still be under the illusion of society as a well-mannered tea party, Swift trenchantly presents here this vision of man as little more than a thinly civilized barbarian. Gulliver expatiates on man’s manifest shortcomings; we’re so trivial, and lustful, moved by the meanest motives, utterly inferior to his horse-like hosts, the Houyhnhnms.

Horses have classically been associated with the passions and man has generally been enshrined as the “rational animal,” such as in Plato’s analogy of the charioteer and his two unruly steeds (Phaedrus, 246a). Man, the ensouled animal, is situated in the Great Chain of Being somewhere between angels and beasts. In medieval cosmology, man can and rightly should aspire to the higher spheres since he possesses the immaterial, godlike facility of reason by mortifying his vulgar, corporeal animal natures. As Alexander Pope rhapsodies in his Essay on Man, we occupy a “middle state” (second epistle).

The state of society of these Yahoos can also be seen as analogous to conditions Hobbes describes as the pre-societal Natural State of Man: “where every man is enemy to every man;...continual fear, and danger of violent death [reign]; and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (186). (Part I, Chapter 13). This is man’s underlying natural state and it will reassert itself should we give free vent to our natural inclinations for power, possession, and prestige. The upper crust, Gulliver’s equine hosts, are only comparatively more civilized than the Yahoos, living in grimy huts and in relative poverty. The conditions in which the Houyhnhnms exist harken back to a Lockean Natural State: “Men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them is properly the State of Nature” (280) (Book 2, Chapter 3). For the Houyhnhnms live without laws and in a primitive communalism without a formal political leader.

Swift earlier in the book praises simplicity and condemns over-refinement but Gulliver now subsists on a bare sufficiency to procure merely the necessaries of life. Swift had earlier rejected impractical utopian schemes for our putative advancement through newfangled Natural Philosophy but now dwells in a society that lacks even such rudimentary technology as agriculture, metals, and wheels. Swift had inveighed against all the pointless difference in religious opinion that led to conflict and now finds himself among a people who wholly lack the solace of any religion.

The Houyhnhnms haven’t arrived at any high degree of advancement nor care to. But they also suffer from no diseases of civilization as they have a simple diet of oats. Foremost, Gulliver reveres these most excellent quadrupeds for their preeminence in rationality and virtue (the two are conflated). For this, the Houyhnhnms supposedly deserve to be our masters and we’re only fit to be bridled, spurred, and ridden about like the brute beasts that we are. The lordly horses are admirably represented as the very embodiment of rectitude and the highly coveted Platonic rationality. Until, of course, the reader notices that these truth-loving quadrupeds are cold and passionless and take their supposed “rationality” to perverse extremes: they devalue human life and suffering; they can’t feel empathy or compassion for even their own kind; they hatch disparaging schemes to cleanse the realm of the moral blight the Yahoos present to their delicate sensibilities; they have moralistic obsessions with everyday vices and pontificate on the incorrigible
human tendency to pursue pleasure and self-satisfaction; and they undertake an 
exacting sort of cost/benefit analysis to rationalize their cruelty.

Nonetheless, Gulliver wants nothing more than to be inducted into this 
fraternity of gentle blood and manners and to spend the remainder of his days 
among these eminently rational horses. But it's sheer wishful thinking; it's an 
unattainable goal since his horse masters can only view Gulliver as little more than 
a Yahoo himself. It's patently pathetic the way in which this biped assumes the 
aristocratic airs of his betters and apes their mannerisms, taking on the gait of a 
horse, and even believing himself to be better than his own brethren. Here, 
Gulliver's imposture makes him look especially preposterous, the more so because 
the Houyhnhnm example isn't meant as an admirable goal.

After his enforced banishment from Houyhnhnmia, Gulliver is received 
with much kindness, hospitality, and humanity by a rescuing ship's captain, Don 
Pedro. But Gulliver now harbors so strong an animus toward the whole tribe of 
humanity as to be blinkered to the cordial effusions of this unreserved friendship. 
Gulliver is now a calculating rationalist wholly lacking compassion. He's now dead 
to all the genuine sentiments of fraternal, conjugal, and filial affection. He's now a 
venerant partisan with horse-leanings. In his earlier travels, Gulliver longs to return 
home: "I could never forget those domestic Pledges I had left behind me," he says 
in Brobdingnagia (129). But he's now ashamed to own any such obligation or 
responsibility. Houyhnhnmian rationality makes Gulliver progressively less civil 
and loving toward his wife and children. It simply revolts him to be in the same 
room with another stinking human. He now makes many very chillingly 
disparaging remarks about human companionship: "I began to consider, that by 
copulating with one of the Yahoo Species I had become a Parent of more, it struck 
me with the utmost Shame, Confusion, and Horror" (265).

It would appear that the juxtaposition of the Yahoo's atavistic savagery and 
the bizarre ennobling rationality of the Houyhnhnmns suggests that Swift is arguing 
for balance. In a theme running throughout the novel, Swift takes up many of the 
commonly prized human endowments over the rest of creation and each is 
singularly shown to really be a revolting deformity, defect, irrationality, falsehood, 
or imperfection. We, the Yahoo-kind, should "be content with those Vices and 
Follies only which Nature hath entitled [us] to" and we ought not to indulge in 
excessive pride which is antithetical to our very natures (271). To foster this 
humility, the Lilliput episode should impress upon us that our rightful governance 
over our underlings should be exercised with due modesty and respect which 
means acting in the best interests of our subordinates. Gulliver's voyage to 
Brobdingnag should serve as a reminder that we ought to humbly our pride, mind 
our manners, and accept the prudent management of our betters. The Laputian 
excursion teaches us to not let ourselves be transported upon mystic flights of 
thought suggested by newfangled philosophy. And finally, the Houyhnhnm 
episode is to instruct us in the need to accept that there may well be some 
admirable things in the Natural State and to not get too carried away with 
excessively cruel and heartless practices of keeping the lower orders in line and to 
not aspire to the unrealistic dream of upward mobility.

Gulliver's benighted mind is fettered by an inveterate prejudice and 
brutalizing superstition that perversely makes him persist in his singular difference 
and partiality. But since we are the sum of our experiences, this unthinking 
callousness that Gulliver exhibits isn't some heavy prejudice deeply rooted in the
hearts of men but rather a societal corruption that can be unlearned. We ought therefore to temper the calculating cruelty reared in us by the “civilizing” influence of society by endeavoring toward the establishment of a more excellent state of society leavened by true unity and Christian fellowship rather than pointless strife and division. Swift, the anthropologist, helpfully explains, “Yahoos [are] a Species of Animals utterly incapable of Amendment by Precepts or Examples” (6). But he futilely offers this book anyway, clearly more for amusement than serious correction. Supposedly, if we were corrigeable beasts we would take cognizance of the inward bondage of mind of our received opinions which we parrot and cultivate the enlargement of our own understanding beyond our societal preconceptions to think along the commonsense lines offered us in Gulliver's Travels. We could then theoretically cultivate a more skeptical outlook toward our own adhesion to denomination, party, prejudice, and other differences in thinking.

Works cited:


evines here, as elsewhere, that bourgeoning sense of the Enlightenment notion that all institutions are open to rational questioning. Lockean notion that each of us have equal access to that inner light of natural reason that inheres in us all by our Creator. that basic untutored commonsense to which each man has access. that we’re all as good a judges of of truth and error in such matters as any member of the educated elite. upon the strength of this own personal reasoning. preference for his own informed armchair reflections than the theoriticians

"freedom of debate, all men's reason must naturally lead them sooner or later to recognize the same truths"- Milton’s Areopagitica
Gulliver's Travels is a fantastical adventure story suitable for children and adults alike, as well as a searing attack on the nature of society. In his Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift has done precisely that and has bestowed upon us one of the great works of English literature in the process. A tale recognized far more widely than it is read, the story of Gulliver—a traveler who is, in turns, a giant, a tiny figure, a king and an idiot—is both excellent fun, as well as thoughtful, witty and wise. The First Voyage. The travels that are referenced in Swift's title are four in number and always begin with an unfortunate incident that leaves Gulliver shipwrecked, abandoned, or otherwise lost at sea. The author of these Travels, Mr. Lemuel Gulliver, is my ancient and intimate friend; there is likewise some relation between us on the mother's side. About three years ago, Mr. Gulliver growing weary of the concourse of curious people coming to him at his house in Redriff, made a small purchase of land, with a convenient house, near Newark, in Nottinghamshire, his native country; where he now lives retired, yet in good esteem among his neighbours. Although Mr. Gulliver was born in Nottinghamshire, where his father dwelt, yet I have heard him say his family came from Oxfordshire; to confirm whi Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. Table of Contents. Gulliver's Travels (Fiction, 1726, 256 pages). This title is not on Your Bookshelf. [Add to Shelf] (0 / 10 books on shelf). 0. Introduction. Part i—a voyage to lilliput. 1. chapter I. 2. chapter II. All rights reserved. For information about public domain texts appearing here, read the copyright information and disclaimer. GULLIVERâ€™S TRAVELS into several REMOTE NATIONS OF THE WORLD. BY JONATHAN SWIFT, D.D., dean of st. patrickâ€™s, dublin. [First published in 1726–7.] Contents. The publisher to the reader. A letter from captain gulliver to his cousin sympson. Part I. a voyage to lilliput. Part II. The author of these Travels, Mr. Lemuel Gulliver, is my ancient and intimate friend; there is likewise some relation between us on the motherâ€™s side. About three years ago, Mr. Gulliver growing weary of the concourse of curious people coming to him at his house in Redriff, made a small purchase of land, with a convenient house, near Newark, in Nottinghamshire, his native country; where he now lives retired, yet in good esteem among his neighbours. Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift chapter summaries, themes, characters, analysis, and quotes! Brush up on the details in this novel, in a voice that won't put you to sleep. Swift may not have believed as strongly in the divine right of kings as some dyed-in-the-wool Tories (as you might guess from his satire of kings in Gulliver's Travels). Still, he did generally side with political conservatives on the issues of the day. Everything seemed to be going relatively well until George I took the English throne in 1714. With George came a strongly pro-Whig Parliament. The Whigs were the political enemies of the Tories, and Swift found himself up a creek without a paddle. Facing the end of his political life, Swift headed back to Ireland, becoming dean of St. Patrick's...