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John B. Moore, in his article ‘The Rôle of Gulliver’, describes Swift’s antihero as ‘an entirely credible and probable person, at the same time precisely the person to enforce Swift’s demonstration.’¹ In this, he is combining two distinct, yet not necessarily antithetical, critical views: one is that Gulliver is a consistent person and should be dealt with as a character in his own right, the other is that Gulliver is a *dramatis persona*, a mask or mouthpiece through which Swift himself speaks. The opposite view is expressed by Tilton, who, in ‘*Gulliver’s Travels as a Work of Art*’, asserts that the ‘artistic whole’ of the book relies on ‘the development of Lemuel Gulliver as a psychologically real individual character’.² Despite his wavering, Moore largely agrees with those critics who think that Swift wrote *Gulliver’s Travels* with a particular moral agenda in mind. He suggests, ‘to infect others with his own ardent misanthropy, Swift could not have chosen a more effective human instrument than Lemuel Gulliver’.³

A critic who stands firmly in the ‘*dramatis personae*’ camp is Irvin Ehrenpreis: ‘I do not suggest that the Houyhnhnms or any figures in the satire possesses a consistent character. The voice throughout is that of Swift. He employs Gulliver and the other persons as either straightforward or ironical mouthpieces; they have neither consistency, nor the life of

¹ John Moore, ‘The Rôle of Gulliver’, *Modern Philology*, 25.4 (1928), 469–80 (p. 469).

² John Tilton, ‘*Gulliver’s Travels as a Work of Art*’, *The Bucknell Review*, 8 (1959), 246–59 (p. 246).

³ Moore, ‘The Rôle of Gulliver’, p. 470.

characters in the novel'.⁴ Here, Ehrenpreis is making a distinction between the characters we encounter in novels, and the multi-layered personas we experience in satire. According to this line of thinking, when it comes to satire, the constructs we call 'characters' are not characters at all. They are elaborate guises used to espouse an authorial agenda, or, to use Moore's word, to subtly 'infect' the reader with a particular worldview. At the other end of the critical spectrum, Samuel Monk writes that:

[Gulliver] is a fully rendered, objective, dramatic character, no more to be identified with Swift than Shylock is to be identified with Shakespeare. This character acts and is acted upon; he changes, he grows in the course of his adventures. Like King Lear, he begins in simplicity, grows into sophistication and ends in madness. Unlike King Lear, he is never cured.⁵

This essay will not be arguing that the primary goal of *Gulliver's Travels* is to 'infect' its readers with Gulliver's misanthropy, nor will it follow Monk in interpreting the ending of the *Travels* as a tragedy. Rather, I use a close analysis of the character of Gulliver to reemphasise what critics often lose when they suppose that Gulliver is a mouthpiece or spokesperson for Swift—namely that *Gulliver's Travels* is hilarious, and can also be read as a light-hearted, joyful, and, in some ways, affectionate ridiculing of how we (humans) are. I will be positing a third alternative to the debate over Gulliver as character verses Gulliver as prop: that Gulliver is neither wholly psychologically real nor a mere vehicle for misanthropy. He is, instead, a caricature, an exaggeration of an English coloniser who is endowed with considerable flaws used for humorous, rather than misanthropic, effect. Indeed, it is the exuberance of Gulliver's character traits, including his misguided misanthropy, that Swift uses as an instrument of comedy. Ultimately, this essay will argue that a sympathetic reading of Gulliver offers a humorous rather than a misanthropic view of the protagonist, and, through him, of Swift himself.

⁴ Irvin Ehrenpreis, 'The Meaning of Gulliver's Last Voyage', *REL*, 3 (1962), 18–38. Reprinted in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ernest Tuve (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 101–10.

⁵ Samuel Monk, 'The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver', *The Sewanee Review*, 63.1 (1955), 48–71 (p. 56).

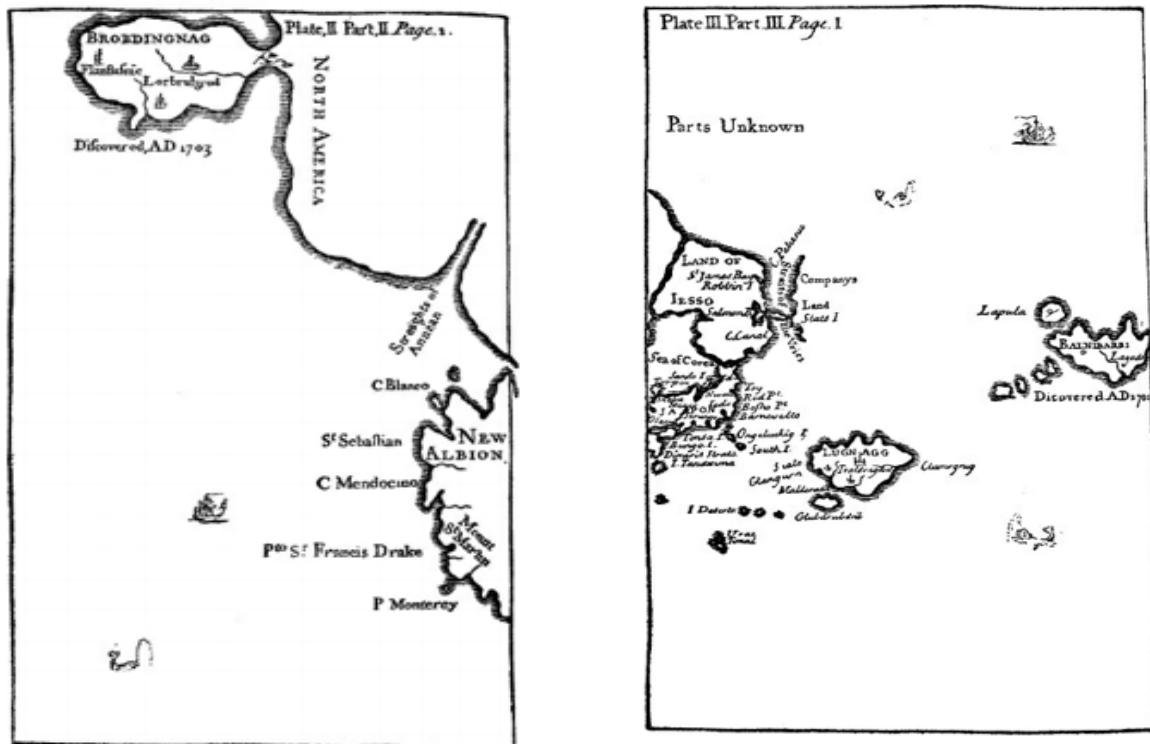


Figure 1 Voyage to Brobdingnag⁶

Figure 2 Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudbrib, and Japan⁷

‘Ironical mouthpieces’: The character of Lemuel Gulliver

Names are important in *Gulliver's Travels*—the reader gets the sense that they are being mocked merely in attempting to pronounce the tongue-twistingly consonant-cluttered word Brobdingnag—and there is some disagreement about how we are supposed to respond to the name Gulliver. Are we meant to look down on him and laugh at his foolishness as his name is so close to ‘gullible’? Should we empathise with him and absorb the lessons he learns on his

⁶ English School, ‘Map of Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudbrib and Japan’, in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 1st edn (1726) <<https://www.bridgemaneducation.com/en/asset/380283/summary>> [accessed 23 August 2018].

⁷ Ibid.

travels? Or are we supposed to question our own gullible natures by believing anything that this obvious fabricator tells us?

Much of the humour in *Gulliver's Travels* relies on readers believing in, and even feeling affectionate towards, the naïvely pompous title character. A pertinent question for eighteenth-century readers, as it still is today, is how much they could trust the printed word. A friend of Swift's overheard an Irish Bishop saying that he did not believe a word of *Gulliver's Travels*, and that the book was 'full of improbable lies'.⁸ When he heard this, Swift was delighted because the book is presented as if it is a true account of a man named Lemuel Gulliver. In the book, Swift gives the dates of his sailings, and details the weather and maps of the places that Gulliver is supposed to have visited. Many of them correspond to real places—Brobdingnag is just off North America, the third book is titled: 'A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudrib, and Japan'—Japan being the surprise addition—and the island of the Houyhnhnms is supposedly somewhere near Australia.⁹ Besides the great care Swift has taken to ensure the reader believes that Gulliver is a real traveller, it is also significant that the prose does not conform to Swift's default style. As a rule, Swift favours short, sharp sentences, so the verbosity we find in *Gulliver's Travels* is unusual, suggesting that he is experimenting with a new voice. In this, Swift is using Gulliver's fastidiousness to mimic similar texts such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. However, rather than a bland everyman like Crusoe, Gulliver has his own clearly defined characteristics.¹⁰ He is a haughty, pretentious figure, a self-appointed representative of late seventeenth-century Britain—prejudiced, biased and, although not particularly sharp, as human as anybody. This is an impression to which his pedantic mode of expression and obsessive attention to detail only adds.

⁸ Jonathan Swift, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by H. Williams (Charlottesville: InteLex, 2002), III, p. 1726.

⁹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. by Claude Rawson with notes by Ian Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 139. Often referred to as *Travels* outside parentheses within the running text.

¹⁰ John Mullan, 'Swift, Defoe, and Narrative Forms', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650–1740*, ed. by Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998), pp. 250–75.

Gulliver, not known for his sense of humour, self-importantly defends his matter-of-fact style by insisting that ‘my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee’ and, a little later, he reinforces the point: ‘I write for the noblest End, to inform and instruct Mankind.’¹¹ Gulliver’s pronouncement is often cited alongside Swift, who wrote something similar in a letter to Alexander Pope: ‘The chief end I propose to myself in all my labors is to vex the world rather than divert it.’¹² Swift also wrote a poem in which an imaginary defender of Swift’s work explains that his writings are ‘designed to please and reform mankind’.¹³ Taken together, these comments suggest that Swift felt some kinship with his misanthropic creation, and we might suspect that that the book contains more instruction than entertainment. Indeed, eighteenth and early nineteenth-century critics went so far in conflating the voice of Gulliver with that of Swift that many were incensed by Swift’s prose—dismissing both the author and the protagonist as equally mad, bad, and dangerous.¹⁴ William Makepeace Thackeray said that Swift should be ‘hooted’ because he had written a book ‘filthy in word, filthy in thought . . . raging [and] obscene,’ and Swift’s contemporary, Lord Bolingbrook, believed *Gulliver’s Travels* to be ‘a real insult to humankind’ and part of Swift’s abominable plot to ‘depreciate human nature.’¹⁵

Swift was thought to have gone mad in his final years, and there is further biographical evidence to suggest that he was a misanthrope.¹⁶ In the same letter to Pope, Swift wrote, ‘I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities... But principally I

¹¹ Mullan, ‘Swift, Defoe, and Narrative Forms’, p. 272; Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, p. 273.

¹² Swift, *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, III, ed. by H. Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 102.

¹³ Joseph McMinn, *Jonathan Swift: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 144.

¹⁴ This is not a blanket statement. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote: ‘Here is a book come out, that all our people of taste run mad about. This is no less than the united Work of a dignified clergyman, an Eminent Physician, and the first poet of the Age, and very wonderful it is, God knows’ (Mary Montagu and others, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1898).

¹⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, ‘Swift: The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century’, in *The Complete Works of William Makepeace Thackeray* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1891), x, p. 406; Swift, *Correspondence*, p. 182.

¹⁶ Dr Samuel Johnson called the elderly Swift ‘a Driv’ler and a Show’: see Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 318. Recent biographers, however, have refuted the accusation of insanity: see, e.g., John Downie, review of *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age, III: Dean Swift*, by Irvin Ehrenpreis, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 18 (1988), 300–02.

hate and detest that animal called man.’¹⁷ It is a shocking statement, especially considering Swift was an ordained Priest at the time of writing. However, the letter by no means identifies Swift with the character of Gulliver, since the apparent vehemence must be tempered by what comes after it: ‘although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth’. As a satirist, Swift chastised generalities and groups: nations, professions, communities—in other words, man understood as an abstraction. While Gulliver ends up eschewing the whole human race, including his wife and children, what Swift expresses in his letter is certainly a hatred towards abstractions and generality, but also a regard for individuals.

‘I used to think my job as a satirist was corrective surgery, albeit with a cudgel rather than a scalpel,’¹⁸ says political satirist Martin Rowson, ‘but it’s not about that at all. It’s not to make our subjects become better people by pointing out their idiocies. It’s to make us feel better about them. It’s to make us laugh.’¹⁹ While it would be wrong to attribute the outlook of a modern satirist to Swift, Rowson’s view does present an attractive alternative to the thesis that Gulliver is a vehicle for Swift’s misanthrope: satire need not have a direct moral function. Perhaps, as Rowson says of his own work, Swift’s satire is about laughing at the terrible and disgusting things that surround our lives, from the daily reality of defecation to the people who think they can lead us and control our destiny. With permission from Rowson, we could, for once, take Swift at his word when he says, ‘I tell you after all, that I do not hate mankind: it is vous autres who hate them, because you would have them reasonable animals, and are angry for being disappointed.’²⁰ Swift’s thesis here is that human

¹⁷ Swift, *Swift's Correspondence*, ed. by F. E. Ball (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1913), p. 276.

¹⁸ Contemporary readers often thought of satire as medicinal and cast Swift as a sadistic doctor. ‘He is fond of probing wounds to their depth, and of enlarging them to open view’—Lord Orrery; ‘Like the hasty surgeon of a crowded hospital he... applies the incision knife and caustic with salutary, but with rough and untamed severity’—Walter Scott. See: John Boyle, Hamilton Boyle, and Jonathan Swift, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift in a Series of Letters from John Earl of Orrery, to His Son, the Honourable Hamilton Boyle* (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1752), in *Swift: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Kathleen Williams (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 116–17; Jonathan Swift, Walter Scott, and John Cumming, *The Works of Jonathan Swift: Containing Additional Letters, Tracts, and Poems, Not Hitherto Published, With Notes, and a Life of the Author* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1814).

¹⁹ Martin Rowson, ‘Episode 243’, in *Chimera Obscura* <<http://chimeraobscura.com/vm/episode-243-martin-rowson>> [accessed 22 August 2018].

²⁰ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 292.

beings are, by their very nature, unreasonable, and impossible to reform. Ultimately, then, *Gulliver's Travels*, with its wholly unreasonable protagonist, is neither corrective surgery with a cudgel nor an elaborately disguised ploy to 'infect' its reader with a particular worldview; it is simply an ingeniously impish caricature of natural and unavoidable human folly.

Why do we laugh?

It is an old question, and the best answers are always somewhat imperfect. Laughter is, by its nature, ephemeral, involuntary, and often difficult to pin down. In his book, *On Humour*, Simon Critchley outlines three types of laughter: the laughter of incongruity, the laughter of superiority, and the laughter of community.²¹ Incongruity is the most familiar: laughter is often an instinctual response to seeing something in the wrong place, the wrong time or the wrong situation.²² This is the humour of childhood: a dog dressed up as a duck, for example, would be endlessly hilarious to a four-year-old. This is what utopian—or, indeed, dystopian—fiction such as *Gulliver's Travels* often does—it gives the reader a world like our own, but different in bizarre ways, so that we can take an incongruous perspective on our own society.²³

Superiority and community are slightly more nuanced forms of humour, and they have a rhetorical purpose in that they are designed to persuade and have an emotional impact on the reader. The laughter of superiority is the laugh derived from making someone feel small and demeaned, but the laugh rarely belongs to the most powerful.²⁴ Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes'—in which the king is tricked into going on parade

²¹ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²² Critchley, p. 2.

²³ See Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 28, in which Gulliver's pocket-watch is described from the Lilliputian perspective.

²⁴ Critchley, p. 12.

with no clothes on by an impish tailor—is a good example of the laughter of superiority directed against those in power.²⁵ The laughter of community creates shared bonds between individuals—usually over a common frustration. Shared laughter creates social cohesion that can help groups bond, and, at the same time, community humour often incorporates the laughter of superiority, such as when a community ‘in group’ constructs others as outsiders.²⁶ The final type of laughter identified by Critchley—and the one perhaps most relevant to Swift—is the laughter of disruption. This comes out of a new work on humour by Diane Davis, who puts a postmodern spin on the subversive potential of humour, and its ability to challenge, and even change, the ways we set up our societies. In her book *Breaking Up (at) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*, she shows how laughter has the potential to destroy an idea or a shared belief, forcing us to replace it with something else. In her introduction, she writes, ‘we westerners have a tendency not to laugh enough and not to appreciate laughter enough... we do not want to crack up, and we do not want to deal with a world that is cracking up and is cracking us up—with or without our consent.’²⁷ Destructive laughter, she argues, quoting Michel Foucault, is the sort of laughter that ‘invites us to laugh with that laughter that shatters “all the familiar landmarks of our thought.”’²⁸ While there are many examples of incongruous, superior, and communal humour in *Gulliver’s Travels* that I will draw on, I will primarily focus on the fourth kind: the humour of disruption.

Books One, Two and Three

²⁵ Hans Christian Andersen, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’, from *Fairy Tales*, trans. by Tiina Nunnally, ed. by Jackie Wullschlager (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 91–98.

²⁶ Critchley, p. 13.

²⁷ Diane Davis, *Breaking Up (at) Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 258.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

*‘Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the Right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison’—Lemuel Gulliver*²⁹

Gulliver, a ship’s surgeon, undertakes four voyages to imaginary lands. First to Lilliput, where inhabitants are six inches tall, and correspondingly petty. Next is to Brobdingnag, where the rulers display a kind of magnanimity and farsightedness, and then to Laputa, the flying island, and then finally to a land governed by rational horses, the Houyhnhnm, whose tranquil, ordered lives are troubled only by the presence of odious Yahoos—bestial creatures who bear an astonishing physical resemblance to human beings. At each stage of his journey, Gulliver lands in unfamiliar surroundings and must begin gathering the experience that will make up what John Locke, in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, calls the ‘materials of Reason and Knowledge’.³⁰ While Gulliver is a prideful ingénue in the first book, each stage of his journey breaks down his self-esteem and further disabuse him of his treasured Anglo-centric worldview. Every time he returns home between journeys, he understands more and more about the brutish nature of his own race. It is an enlightenment of sorts, but one that will eventually culminate in radical misanthropy and madness. Gulliver’s misanthropy, however, does not infect the reader, for they are experiencing what Davis calls the ‘humour of disruption.’³¹ While the world of *Gulliver’s Travels* has removed what Davis calls our ‘familiar landmarks,’ the reader is well aware that this fantastical world is absurd and that Gulliver is an unreliable narrator.³²

Lilliput and Brobdingnag are in many ways mirror images of each other. In both places, Gulliver meets creatures that are exactly like humans, except for their size. The Lilliputians are six inches tall, making Gulliver a giant by comparison. The inhabitants of

²⁹ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, p. 78.

³⁰ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Pauline Phemister, abridged edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 54.

³¹ Davis, p. 9.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Brobdingnag, on the other hand, are seventy-two feet tall and have appropriately sized surroundings. This makes tiny Gulliver, with his miniscule voice and his ability to live in the equivalent of a matchbox, little more than a curiosity—a pet to be showcased at freak shows. These radical shifts in perspective are most pronounced in Gulliver’s encounters with women, whose physicality, enlarged tenfold in Brobdingnag, take on a revolting appearance. Gulliver describes how he first viewed the nursing of a child in the land of the giants: ‘The Nipple was about half the Bigness of my Head, and the Hue both of that and the Dug so varified with Spots, Pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous.’³³ This prompts Gulliver to ‘reflect upon the fair Skins of our English Ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own Size, and their Defects not to be seen but through a magnifying Glass.’³⁴

He also recalls the opposite impression when he was in Lilliput:

I remember when I was at Lilliput, the complexion of those diminutive people appeared to me the fairest in the world; and talking upon this subject with a person of learning there, who was an intimate friend of mine, he said that my face appeared much fairer and smoother when he looked on me from the ground, than it did upon a nearer view.³⁵

Gulliver is by no means fully enlightened by this realisation, however. Even though he is able to note the relativity of perspective that size produces—and finally comes to understand ‘that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison’—he is not yet able to see the defects in his own culture.³⁶ He boasts of European civilisations, specifically singling out the courts of justice ‘over which the Judges, those venerable Sages and Interpreters of the Law, presided, for determining the disputed Rights and Properties of Men, as well as for the

³³ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, p. 82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78. Insisting on the relativity of human culture, Swift draws attention to the ways in which a colonial power like England must co-opt and repress local habits and customs in favour of a homogeneous political and cultural perspective. Swift’s specific historical references serve to remind us that the local, the specific, and the native all risk being erased under the pressure of a universalising colonial enterprise. In this, Swift seems to foreshadow the dangers of a Global Economy.

Punishment of Vice, and Protection of Innocence.’³⁷ Gulliver’s seeming inability to ascribe meaning to past experiences is highlighted when he reports that he could personally inform the king about the courts because he was ‘formerly almost ruined by a long Suit in Chancery.’³⁸ Despite his own run-in with the corrupt judicial system, Gulliver is blind to its problems even after the king presses him with pointed—and, for the reader, rhetorical—questions: Did party in religion or politics have any weight in the scale of justice? Did the lawyers or judges have any part in penning those laws, which they assumed responsibility for interpreting and glossing upon? Did they ever plead for and against the same cause and cite precedents to prove contrary opinions?³⁹

When the king ends his exhaustive inquiry into the social and political arrangement of Europe, the reader is not surprised by his judgement, although Gulliver is deeply resentful. This scene evokes the humour of superiority, since we see what Gulliver cannot, but it also evokes the more uncomfortable humour of disruption. ‘From what I have gathered from your own relation’, the King concludes, ‘[humans are the] most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.’⁴⁰ As Critchley writes, humour ‘is an event of defamiliarisation... that allows us to see ourselves and our condition from the outside and, above all, to see the historicity and therefore the alterability of what constitutes our reality.’⁴¹ This is what is happening with the radically altered perspectives in the first two books—it is our everyday world which Swift has reduced to the absurd by playing around with scale. Due to the Brobdingnagian perspective, the reader is able to see human folly, and human pride particularly, with a clear-sightedness that a literally short-sighted Gulliver cannot. In other words, this sort of humour allows the reader to stand outside their usual gaze and look at something like war or the justice system with larger,

³⁷ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, p. 117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴¹ Critchley, p. 10.

fresher eyes. From here, the familiar social mores suddenly seem not only counterintuitive but also, particularly in the case of war, utterly unjustifiable. Despite this, the first two books hold back from pure disruptiveness and anarchy as, while Gulliver has left the land of the giants with his pride somewhat wounded, he has retained the wrong principles of the English colonialist. He is still a figure of ridicule, and his observations are partial. Following this line of thinking, Gulliver is at the centre of a radical thought experiment designed to discombobulate the reader, and, as we experience perspectival shifts along with the protagonist, shock us out of our habitual ways of thinking.

As I have shown in the previous paragraphs, there is certainly a degree of didacticism in the disruptive humour of the first two books, but there is also base comedy. Here, the humour is mostly based on incongruity and can be found particularly in the inflation, and then radical deflation, of Gulliver's pride. This is the humour of superiority—the reader's superiority to the gullible Gulliver. For instance, Gulliver, having been worshipped following his heroics in battle, is suddenly charged with treason when there is a fire in the queen's quarters, and he puts it out by 'discharge of his Urine.'⁴² Often, too, the humour recalls those experiences of childhood, shared by us all, in which an overblown sense of greatness or competence backfires. At the end of chapter five, Gulliver tells of how his attempt to show off his physical prowess landed him, quite literally, in cow dung:

There was a cow-dung in the path, and I must needs try my activity by attempting to leap over it. I took a run, but unfortunately jumped short, and found myself just in the middle up to my knees. I waded through with some difficulty, and one of the footmen wiped me as clean as he could with his handkerchief; for I was filthily bemired, and my nurse confined me to my box until we returned home; where the Queen was soon informed of what had passed, and the footmen spread it about the court; so that all the mirth, for some days, was at my expense.⁴³

⁴² Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 61.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

In the Brobdingnagian court, Gulliver is greatly offended by the Queen's maids of honour, by whom he is regarded as a creature of no consequence, as they strip to the skin in front of him. This is a double-edged piece of satire because we laugh at Gulliver, who is tiny relative to these women, feeling affronted by the giantesses' disregard for his diminutive manhood.

As well as humour, there is also pathos in these two books, and this is helped by the fact that the reader inhabits Gulliver's experience so viscerally. In Lilliput, Gulliver becomes hyper-aware of his outsized body, as he must consider every movement lest he unwittingly crush one of the Lilliputians. Then, in Brobdingnag, it is Gulliver who is the tiny one and his body is always in danger, vulnerable to even the tiniest of animals like ants and rats.

Although the reader does not necessarily feel kinship with Gulliver, we are fond enough of him that we do not want to see him trampled. On arrival in the land of the giants, he is discovered by a farmer scything in a field. The farmer soon realises that the tiny man can be exploited, and he exhibits him for money. The person Gulliver credits with his preservation in that country is the farmer's daughter, a nine-year-old girl he calls Glumdalclitch, or Little Nurse. Of course, everything is relative in *Gulliver's Travels*, and his 'little nurse' is 40 feet tall. These moments of pathos and gentleness are rare, but they are highly significant.

Glumdalclitch not only displays care and affection towards her charge; she also acts as a school mistress, teaching Gulliver the Brobdingnagian alphabet so he might better learn their ways. While there is no doubt that *Gulliver's Travels* rails against some of the bitter realities of human society, images like this remind us that the picture is not entirely bleak, and that *Gulliver's Travels* is very easily adapted into a children's book.

Like a caricaturist, Swift takes certain features of human nature and emphasises them for comic effect. We might recognise in ourselves, for example, the tendency towards intellectual arrogance and abstract thinking that Gulliver encounters in the inhabitants of the third book. Here, Gulliver travels to a variety of islands, where he meets bombastic theoreticians engaged in foolish experimentation; there are philosophers who are so deeply

immersed in thought that they have to employ flappers to flap them into consciousness of the real world; there is ‘a most ingenious Architect’ who has contrived a new method of building houses by beginning at the roof and working downwards to the foundation.⁴⁴ Finally, in a moment that could easily double as a Pythonesque skit, Gulliver encounters a great physician, who, experimenting with a pair of oversized bellows to draw the wind out of a flatulent dog, is surprised when it explodes. The scientist then endeavours to restore the dog to life with the same bellows.⁴⁵ Here, Swift is employing the humour of community, uniting the undereducated eighteenth-century readership against the absurd scientists who believe they can control God’s creation. For Swift, unlike the enlightenment scientists of the day, human intelligence and reason is not an intrinsic good, and its misuse is ripe for ridicule.

Book Four

‘I hope I may with Justice pronounce myself an Author perfectly blameless, against whom the Tribes of Answers, Considerers, Observers, Reflectors, Detectors, Remarkers, will never be able to find matter for exercising their Talents’⁴⁶ – Lemuel Gulliver

Houyhnhnmland, the land of the horse-people, is not meant to be pronounced by those with a human physiognomy, although this is a skill that Gulliver develops in his three years amongst them. While it is supposed to sound like a horse’s whinny, we are told that, etymologically, the name means ‘perfection of nature.’⁴⁷ The Yahoos, on the other hand—humanoid creatures that lack language, dignity, and any social graces—are motivated entirely by bestial impulses and libido. The horse people initially think Gulliver is a yahoo, and, living among these two species, Gulliver gradually realises that he, and, by extension all humans—with our base desires and uncontrollable foibles—has more in common with the Yahoos than with their neighbours. The satire becomes especially explosive when the Houyhnhnms, debating

⁴⁴ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, p.146 and p. 167.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 274

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

what they could do to keep the Yahoo pests under control, recall a strange cruelty that Gulliver previously shared with them about how humans treat horses: ‘Castrate most of the males before they reach adulthood. Surely a fine plan for dealing with the unruly yahoos?’⁴⁸ Gulliver is forced to return to Europe because the supremely rational horse people come to the decision that he is, after all, a ‘perfect Yahoo’—bestial, savage, and uncivilised.⁴⁹

At this point, Swift has such a deadpan, detached tone that it is difficult to get a sense of his ambition. Certainly, the final pages of the book are incongruous, but the humour seems to have given way not just to disruption but also to bleakness, and, on returning to England, Gulliver is disgusted by his wife and children and favours the company of the horses.⁵⁰ According to critics who take Gulliver, and, indirectly, Swift at his word, the book ends without any sense of hope or resolution. Gulliver is so enamoured with what he sees as a utopian ideal amongst the Houyhnhnms that, on having to confront humanity in all its rawness, he is driven finally into misanthropy, isolation, and outright insanity. Here, in interpreting the outcome of the *Travels* as an unmitigated tragedy and, substituting Swift for Gulliver, commentators such as Thackeray have found in Gulliver’s return evidence of Swift’s disgust with mankind.

Humour is notoriously slippery and ephemeral, and it is unsurprising that there is little scholarly consensus about how exactly the satire in *Gulliver’s Travels* functions. Swift writes a series of purportedly posthumous poems posing as various people discussing his legacy. In one poem, an imaginary defender of Swift’s work explains that his writings are ‘designed to please and reform mankind’.⁵¹ However, if Gulliver is Swift’s ironical mouthpiece, and we are to take Gulliver’s gradual education over the course of the four books seriously, Swift is a cynic. He patronises benevolent improvers like Gulliver, believing them to be naïve and misguided. As we have seen from the Lilliputian King, the ‘people’ of *Gulliver’s Travels*,

⁴⁸ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, p. 254. This is almost an exact recasting of Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁵¹ Joseph McMinn, *Jonathan Swift: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 144.

especially those in power, often cannot be reasoned with—and surely an author of such a novel would think that any project aiming to reform this race is destined for failure.

Furthermore, despite the seriousness of Swift's 'reform mankind' letters, there is also a tongue-in-cheek playfulness in others. For example, in September 1725, Swift exhorted Pope to 'embrace' Gulliver's message 'and procure that all who deserve my esteem may do so too.'⁵² This is written in the same mode as the proposer rather than in earnest. If, then, more of Swift's missives are written in faux, rather than actual, seriousness, it follows that Swift may not be taking his self-appointed role as a reformer of mankind quite as seriously as we might think. Swift certainly turns the satire on himself, as, through Gulliver—the ultimate social reformer and hapless author of his travel memoirs—Swift seems to be ridiculing himself and people like him that think that the world can be improved by modest proposals. Thus, if we resolutely keep Swift the author separate from Gulliver's narration, we can still find joyfulness and humour even in this last and most bleak book of the travels.

In a paper on *A Modest Proposal*, Robert Phiddian makes the point that 'a typical reader, whether of 1729 or today, has always known that she or he is reading a text by Swift, the author of that deceptively complex masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*.'⁵³ By book 4, the reader has certainly given up any pretence that Gulliver is a real traveller, or that Houyhnhnms Land is a real place. Indeed, Gulliver has been a consistently unreliable narrator, and there is no reason to assume that Gulliver is the stand-in for a normal, sane human.⁵⁴ When he first arrives in the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver even questions his own sanity: 'I feared my Brain was disturbed by my Sufferings.' He thinks, indeed hopes, that he might be dreaming: 'I rubbed mine Eyes often, but the same Objects still occurred. I pinched my Arms and Sides, to awake myself, hoping I might be in a Dream.'⁵⁵ Even if

⁵² Swift, *Epistolary Correspondence: Letters from September 1725 to May 1732* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1824), p. 4.

⁵³ Robert Phiddian, 'Have You Eaten Yet? The Reader in *A Modest Proposal*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 36.3 (1996), 603–21.

⁵⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 292.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Gulliver's pinching is enough to convince him that he is awake and sane, it may not be enough to convince the reader. He is a befuddled and raving madman or an unusually dense coloniser who made one voyage too many, rather than a person to be taken at his word. As Phiddian says, readers have been 'drawn into the insanity of the situation... and egged on to a grim sort of laughter.'⁵⁶

I would argue that the laughter may not be so grim as Phiddian would have it. Gulliver, when recast as a mere gullible traveller—a character in his own right—cuts an idiotic figure as he canters around the land of the Houyhnhnms, rejecting the real humans who surround him. Indeed, Gulliver's final comprehension of his own identification with the Yahoos—his reverse enlightenment—comes when he is attacked by a female yahoo who:

inflamed by Desire, as the Nag and I conjectured, came running with all Speed, and leaped into the Water within five Yards of the Place where I bathed. I was never in my Life so terribly frightened; the Nag was grazing at some Distance, not suspecting any Harm: She embraced me after a most fulsome Manner; I roared as loud as I could, and the Nag came galloping towards me, whereupon she quitted her Grasp, with the utmost Reluctancy, and leaped upon the opposite Bank, where she stood gazing and howling all the time I was putting on my Cloaths.⁵⁷

In this description, we detect not an ardent misanthropist or even a grim satirist, but hints of the same narrator who, in the wonderfully scatological poem 'Cassinus and Peter', exclaims: 'Nor wonder how I lost my Wits; Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia shits!'⁵⁸ Gulliver's metaphorical crash back down to earth, when viewed through this lens, is inordinately funny. Therefore—to abduct and adapt Moore's quotation from the beginning of this article—to infect others with his own wicked, acute, and often bawdy sense of humour, Swift could not have chosen a more effective human instrument than Lemuel Gulliver.

⁵⁶ Phiddian, p. 605.

⁵⁷ Swift, p. 248.

⁵⁸ Swift, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Pat Rogers (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 466.

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