

## Perceptions of Satire in Gulliver's Travels=

In 1726, Jonathan Swift published a book for English readers. On the surface, this book appears to be a travel log, made to chronicle the adventures of a man, Lemuel Gulliver, on the four most incredible voyages imaginable. Primarily, however, Gulliver's Travels is a work of satire. "Gulliver is neither a fully developed character nor even an altogether distinguishable persona; rather, he is a satiric device enabling Swift to score satirical points" (Rodino 124). Indeed, whereas the work begins with more specific satire, attacking perhaps one political machine or aimed at one particular custom in each instance, it finishes with "the most savage onslaught on humanity ever written," satirizing the whole of the human condition. (Murry 3). In order to convey this satire, Gulliver is taken on four adventures, driven by fate, a restless spirit, and the pen of Swift. Gulliver's first journey takes him to the Land of Lilliput, where he finds himself a giant among six inch tall beings. His next journey brings him to Brobdingnag, where his situation is reversed: now he is the midget in a land of giants. His third journey leads him to Laputa, the floating island, inhabited by strange (although similarly sized) beings who derive their whole culture from music and mathematics. Gulliver's fourth and final journey places him in the land of the Houyhnhnm, a society of intelligent, reasoning horses. As Swift leads Gulliver on these four fantastical journeys, Gulliver's perceptions of himself and the people and things around him change, giving Swift ample opportunity to inject into the story both irony and satire of the England of his day and of the human condition.

Swift ties his satire closely with Gulliver's perceptions and adventures. In Gulliver's first adventure, he begins on a ship that runs aground on a submerged rock. He swims to land, and when he awakens, he finds himself tied down to the ground, and surrounded by tiny people, the Lilliputians. "Irony is present from the start in the simultaneous recreation of Gulliver as giant and prisoner" (Reilly 167). Gulliver is surprised "at the intrepidity of these diminutive mortals, who dare venture to mount and walk upon my body" (I.i.16), but he admires this quality in them. Gulliver eventually learns their language, and arranges a contract with them for his freedom. However, he is bound by this agreement to protect Lilliput from invasion by the people of Blefuscu. The Lilliputians relate to him the following story: In Lilliput, years ago, people once broke eggs on the big end. However, the present king's grandfather once cut himself breaking the egg in this manner, so the King at the time, the father of the present king's grandfather, issued an edict that all were to break the eggs on the small end. Some of the people resisted, and they found refuge in Blefuscu, and "for six and thirty moons past" the two sides have been at war (I.iv.48). Of course, to Gulliver, such an argument would be completely ridiculous, for he could hardly distinguish the difference in the ends of their eggs. For Swift, Lilliput is analogous to England, and Blefuscu to France. With this event of the story Swift satirizes the needless bickering and fighting between the two nations.

Also vehicles of Swift's satire were the peculiar customs of the nation of Lilliput. The methods of selecting people for public office in Lilliput are very different from that of any other nation, or rather, would appear to be so at first. In order to be chosen, a man must "rope dance" to the best of his abilities; the best rope dancer receives the higher office. While no nation of Europe in Swift's time followed such an absurd practice, they did not choose public officers on skill, but rather on how well the candidate could line the right pockets with money. Gulliver also tells of their custom of burying "their dead with their heads

directly downwards...The learned among them confess the absurdity of this doctrine, but the practice still continues" (I.vi.60). At this point in the story, Gulliver has not yet realized that by seeing the absurdity of the Lilliputians' traditions, that he might see the absurdity in European ones. With this Swift satirizes the conditions of Europe.

As Swift's story of Gulliver unfolds, the satire begins to take a much more general focus: humanity as a whole. Gulliver manages to escape the land of miniature, and after a brief stay in England, returns to the sea. Again, he finds himself in a strange land, but this time, he is the small one, with everything around him many times the normal size. Unlike the Lilliputians, however, he is alone in this world. When he encounters the first natives, he fears for his life, "for as human creatures are observed to be more savage in proportion to their bulk" (II.i.96). This is but one of the many attacks on humanity that Swift's satire will perform. While in Lilliput Gulliver had been treated with respect, largely due to his size; here in this land of giants, Brobdingnag, he is treated as a curiosity, forced to perform shows for public amusement, until the royalty of this nation learn of his presence. During the time Gulliver spends at this court, he relates much of the situation of Europe to the king, who listens with much eagerness. Gulliver tells us:

I would hide the frailties and deformities of my political mother, and place her virtues and beauties in the most advantageous light. This was my sincere endeavor in those many discourses I had with that mighty monarch, although it unfortunately failed of success (II.vii.156).

However well he tried to speak of England, he did not manage to tell only "her virtues." Instead, much of what he so faithfully speaks to the King is actually the vice and immorality to be found in England. This is what the King of Brobdingnag learns from Gulliver's stories: My little friend Gridrig, you have made a most admirable panegyric upon your country; you have clearly proved that ignorance, idleness vice may sometimes be the only ingredients for qualifying a legislator; that laws are best explained, interpreted, and applied by those whose interests and abilities lie in perverting them ... I am dwell disposed to hope you may hitherto have escaped many vices of your country. But by what I have gathered from your own relation ... I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth (II.vi.153-154).

Gulliver excuses the King for these remarks, believing that "great allowances should be given to a king who lives wholly secluded from the rest of the world" (II.vii.156). Although the reader may find the king to be correct, Gulliver does not, even though he should "admit that the workings of the parliamentary government is vitiated by the method of selecting peers ... so that ... the original idea of the institution is 'blurred and blotted by corruptions" (Firth 10), and so Swift must take him on another voyage to shed light upon the matter for him.

Before embarking on his third voyage, Gulliver returns home. However, he is "confounded at the sight of so many pygmies, for such I took them to be," speaking of the men who rescued him, having for so long been accustomed to viewing people many times his own size

(II.viii.170). They return him home; however, Gulliver's restless spirit will not allow him to remain long. Again he left home, and this time he ended up in the realm of Laputa, the floating island. His first impression of the people is not very good; for although they are highly skilled in mathematics, Gulliver has "not seen a more clumsy, awkward, and unhandy people, nor so slow and perplexed in their conception of other subjects" (III.ii.191). By this point in the story, Swift's own views of humanity begin to show through Gulliver, as Gulliver relates, "But rather I take this quality to spring from a very common infirmity of human nature" (III.ii.192). Gulliver doesn't remain long on the island of Laputa. He instead goes down to the surface, and in time makes his way to Glubbudubdrib, the Island of Sorcerers. The Governor of this island allows Gulliver to listen to numerous people from history, both the distant and near past. In this place, Gulliver comes face-to-face with the negative aspects of human nature. Up to this point, he began to see these qualities; now, he is directly confronted with them as he listens to the great men of the past. "I was chiefly disgusted with modern history," Gulliver tells, and "How low an opinion I had of human wisdom and integrity, when I was truly informed" (III.viii.236). Swift, by "drawing our attention repeatedly to this idea of steady human degeneration and the natural depravity of human nature, Swift seems to suggest broadly that man must realize that he is degenerate in order to strive for moral regeneration" (Lee 119). At this point in the story, Gulliver, as well as the reader, are plainly aware of Swift's understanding of human nature and his negative view of it.

It is during Gulliver's fourth journey that Swift's satire reaches its pinnacle, where "Swift put his most biting, hard lines, that speak against not only the government, but human nature itself" (Glicksman). In this journey, Gulliver comes to the land of the Houyhnhnms, which are creatures that look like horses but have the ability to reason. Also in this land are the Yahoos, of which Gulliver could only say that "Upon the whole, I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal, nor one against which I naturally conceived so strong an antipathy" (IV.i.263). With great irony, Swift brings Gulliver into contact with a Yahoo once again. "My horror and astonishment are not to be described, when I observed in this abdominal animal a perfect human figure" (IV.ii.269-270). Indeed, Gulliver finds that the only difference between himself and the Yahoo to be the Yahoo's lack of cleanliness and clothes; otherwise, a Yahoo would be indistinguishably human. With this line, Swift's satire achieves its goal, and shows that the flaws of humanity are overwhelming, and let to continue, result in a total degradation of the human.

Taken on four voyages, Gulliver's ultimate travels are to a greater understanding of human nature and its flaws. Matthew Levy argues that as the "visited society" has an effect on Gulliver, "he no longer can be said to function as a constant or impartial measure" (Levy 2); however, this is the point: that Gulliver's perceptions change, and so do his narrations, as a result, and through this Swift can convey his satire and social commentary. After the first voyage, his image of humanity is little changed, likewise for the 2nd, although after this point, Gulliver's image steadily declines until the fourth voyage, when he meets the Yahoos. In this way, Swift presents his commentary on the human condition through Gulliver's Travels.