

2007

Swift's shifting satiric strategy in Gulliver's Travels

Josh Mahoney
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2007 Josh Mahoney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swa>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Josh, "Swift's shifting satiric strategy in Gulliver's Travels" (2007). *Student Writing Awards*. 12.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swa/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Writing Awards by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Swift's Shifting Satiric Strategy in *Gulliver's Travels*

By Josh Mahoney

According to Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, eighteenth-century English life contained cultural practices and attitudes that he felt needed to be confronted. In an attempt to call attention to these shortcomings, he uses entertaining and fantastical tales in *Gulliver's Travels* as a medium through which he injects a myriad of satiric techniques filled with subversive discourse that he hopes will vex and disconcert his readers out of their various iniquities and follies. However, Swift's text presents several challenges to its interpretation, as "an analysis of *Gulliver's Travels* can cruelly expose the writer's intelligence and even character" (Brady 346). Throughout the text, Swift alters his satiric strategy, and the reader must adapt to the author's various devices while maintaining a comprehension of the text in its complete form. Indeed, part of Swift's strategy is to use the relative physical abilities of Gulliver throughout his experiences with the Brobdingnagians and the Lilliputians to point out many absurdities of English government and of European life in general. A different strategy occurs in "Part IV: A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," where Swift places Gulliver amongst horses equipped with human cognition, and men are depicted as irrational and abhorrent creatures that are used as servants for the horses. The implication of Swift's decision to create the Houyhnhnms as horses has vexed literary critics since the book's initial release. Consequently, any discussion of *Gulliver's Travels* must include not only an analysis of Swift's satiric strategy throughout his narrator's adventures, but also an examination of Swift's personal motives for constructing such an enigmatic piece of literature.

Swift uses several anecdotes concerning Gulliver in Lilliput that deal with his relatively large human excrement, and how the Lilliputians must deal with this awkward inconvenience.

Here, Swift uses the unpleasantness of Gulliver's feces as a satiric technique to parody the hubris of an ignorant European society and the absurd façade of propriety that he feels them to possess towards situations that merit attention. Lilliputians will go so far as to charge Gulliver with a crime after he saves the Palace from a fire by extinguishing it with his urine; they claim this heroic gesture, though valiant, is punishable by death. While there are several interpretations for the Lilliputians, and specifically the Queen's response to the actions of Gulliver, Swift's satiric technique remains as disparaging as ever. By having Gulliver's defecations become the subject of much debate by the people in Lilliput, Swift alerts the reader that any situation that affects a society, regardless of its indecorous nature, must be discussed and dealt with accordingly. According to Frank Brady, Swift's targets in these types of satiric ridicule are "human ostentatiousness and lack of perception" (365). By caricaturing the physical disparities between Gulliver and the natives of the lands he visits, Swift is able to confront pretentious aspects of European society that he views as unacceptable.

In Brobdingnag, Swift cleverly places the pitifully small Gulliver in several awkward situations, and then Swift uses some form of satiric strategy in each of these scenes to conjure unsettling feelings from his reader. For instance, as Gulliver is forced to perform tricks in front of giant Brobdingnagians, a school-boy fires a hazel nut at him, which "came with so much violence that it would have infallibly knocked out [his] Brains" (Swift 82). Later, Gulliver is sexually violated when attendants to the Queen undress themselves and go to the bathroom in his presence, and another lady even places him "astride upon one of her Nipples" (99). As Gulliver fails to see the indignation associated with being forced to perform tricks and satisfy people, he also fails to realize how vulnerable he really is in the Brobdingnagian society. Swift uses

Gulliver's helplessness as a satiric technique that satirizes the arrogance of Europeans by forcing the reader to consider the general relativity of human capabilities.

While aspects of Swift's satiric strategy in Lilliput and Brobdingnag lend themselves to somewhat decipherable categorization, in "Part IV" Swift uses Gulliver's experiences in Houyhnhnmland as the basis for a much more detailed and complex attack on European society. For example, when Gulliver first arrives at Houyhnhnmland and encounters the Yahoos, he is not even aware that they are human beings. He claims that in all his travels he has never encountered "so disagreeable an Animal, nor one against which [he] naturally conceived so strong of Antipathy" (190). Later, when Gulliver finally realizes that Yahoos are in fact human beings, he is astonished yet indignant, as is the reader, whom Swift has also cleverly vexed with this shocking revelation for dramatic effect. The repugnance of the Yahoos, and Gulliver's immediate abhorrence of them prior to his realization of their humanness represent a shift in Swift's satiric strategy that now directly confronts not only European society but the physical beings who exist in that society as well.

Gulliver's fascination with the Houyhnhnms and his initial denial of their humanness further satirize the human beliefs about rational and irrational beings. Gulliver claims the behavior of the Houyhnhnms "was so orderly and rational, so acute and judicious, [. . .] they must needs be Magicians, who had thus metamorphosed themselves upon some design" (191). Gulliver fails to comprehend the rationality of these horses right away, and instead attributes their conduct and demeanor to the work of human beings acting as magicians. Interestingly, upon his arrival at the lodging of a Houyhnhnm, he realizes that the horses are conducting themselves in a fashion very similar to humans. However, instead of accepting this observation, he rubs his eyes in a vain attempt to awaken himself from a dream. This incredulity on the part of Gulliver

is by no means irrelevant: “what is unusual is that [Gulliver] doubts his senses, since he has never before been surprised by facts” (Brady 363). Indeed, throughout the book Swift has made Gulliver accept virtually all his perceptions and observations about the respective inhabitants of the lands he has visited seemingly without skepticism. Now Swift alters Gulliver’s actions, this time by having Gulliver, a representative of mankind, doubt his observed reality. In “Part IV,” Swift forces the disconcerted reader through a series of Gulliver’s inaccurate and skeptical observations to eventually comprehend that horses with human cognition dominate an irrational species of human beings.

Swift uses the juxtaposition of Gulliver with the rational Houyhnhnm to intensify his satiric strategy in “Part IV.” Since Swift’s ultimate goal is “to confront man, with his claim to be a rational animal, with a literally rational animal” (Brady 362), the reader can discern some of Swift’s intention in the text. Yet while many literary scholars over the years have questioned the appeal of the obtuse Houyhnhnms, these interpretations of “Part IV” have missed Swift’s larger intention altogether. Since Swift clearly views the state of European society as a cesspool of hypocrisy and glib self-satisfaction, he seeks to challenge the status quo that man is an inherently rational animal. He creates a purely rational animal, the Houyhnhnm, and then focuses the reader’s attention on the obvious contradictions that exist between the rationality that Europeans think themselves to have and the clearly reasonable and rational Houyhnhnms. Aside from the “faintly repellent qualities” (Brady 363) that exude from the Houyhnhnms in the descriptions of Gulliver, for the most part Swift has designed the Houyhnhnms to represent desirable concepts of applicable rationality, and Gulliver, through his gratuitous condemnations of all facets of human existence, indirectly exalts these mysterious animals throughout “Part IV.” For instance, when examining the causes of war in Europe, Gulliver readily admits most of the causes to be

contrived from the self-serving and often villainous actions of princes, ministers, or other persons of authority. While these actions are condemnable, they also appear to be completely irrational from Gulliver's perspective, as he explains to the master Houyhnhnm how conflicting viewpoints have "Cost many millions of lives [. . .] Neither are any Wars so furious and bloody, or of so long Continuance, as those occasioned by the Difference in Opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent" (207). By emphasizing the absurdity in which millions have died, Swift has demonstrated quite clearly how Europeans through their actions have become the antithesis of rational thought.

Swift uses the end of Gulliver's stay with the Houyhnhnms to achieve his most potent, albeit cryptic attacks on human nature. Whereas during his stay with the Brobdingnagians, Gulliver always desired to return back to his homeland, after spending enough time with the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver wishes to "to pass the rest of [his] Life among these admirable Houyhnhnms in the Contemplation and Practice of every Virture" (218). However, the inhabitants are suspicious of Gulliver and wish to expel him as they fear he may, among other possibilities, "bring [Yahoos] in Troops by Night to destroy the Houyhnhnms' Cattle" (235). The reader notes Swift's ironically contrived paradox of not only Gulliver's desire to remain with horses, but also the Houyhnhnms' outright refusal of such a request, and their demand for Gulliver to leave immediately. Furthermore, before setting sail for home, aided by the skins of *Yahoos*—abhorrent imagery used for shock value by Swift—Gulliver relates to the reader a comprehensive satiric catalog of all he did not miss back in England, containing but not limited to "Housebreakers, Attorneys, Bawds, Buffoons [. . .]" (233) and the like. Upon his arrival home, the sight of his wife and children fill him "with Hatred, Disgust, and Contempt," and he feels "the utmost Shame, Confusion and Horror" when he realizes that "by copulating with one

of the Yahoo-Species [he] had become a Parent of more” (244). Swift uses these queer thoughts of the misanthropic Gulliver to demonstrate the complete separation that his character feels from the entire human race. This separation allows Swift to illustrate to the reader how mortified and shameful Gulliver has become after spending considerable time with rational horses and irrational humans. Swift’s comprehensive satiric strategy has now come full circle, as he has shifted his attack from European society in earlier parts of *Gulliver’s Travels* to a direct condemnation of Europeans as human beings in “Part IV.”

However, at the same time, the self-righteous hatred of humans that Gulliver has developed for humans at the book’s end “warns the reader how cautiously he, in his turn, must judge the juxtapositions [Gulliver’s misanthropy] presents” (Brady 367). Since Gulliver began his journey as a gullible, simple-minded narrator, the end of the story presents challenges to deconstructing the implications of his attitudes and emotions at the end of “Part IV.” Perhaps Swift implies that he shares Gulliver’s contempt for the human race and regards it as worse even than the race of Yahoos. However, at the same time Gulliver’s final diatribe against human pride reflects the narrator’s callous vanity that would be difficult to attribute solely to Swift’s own personal demeanor. However, Swift’s intention is not merely to alert the reader to his personal opinions; rather, he desires to alter the *opinions of his reader* through his vexations and satiric devices in the text. The final comparison that he forces the reader to draw, between human pride and Gulliver’s pride after arriving back in Europe, is meant to be considered heavily by the reader. Since the underlying motive throughout the entire text has been to confuse and shock his readers out of their various transgressions, Swift has denied the reader an adequate explanation of his own thoughts and beliefs that would help decipher the final part’s enigmatic satirical

structure. Yet, by creating this conundrum, Swift forces the reader to consider that excessive pride, in any form, is undesirable and represents a threat to the society at large.

Throughout *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift uses a strategic satiric arrangement to conjure specific feelings from his readers. He wishes to reveal to his readers the obvious cultural transgressions that are most abundant in English and European life. Specifically, he uses the character Gulliver, a common Englishman with no discernible personal agenda, in a variety of contrived situations with fantastical species and races of human beings. These situations are used by Swift to demonstrate satirically to the reader the follies and transgression of not only European society, but the individual people in that society as well. Sometimes Swift's satiric techniques are straightforward and easily recognizable, as in parts I and II where Swift repeatedly parodies the physical discrepancies between Gulliver and his respective inhabitants to satirize undesirable aspects of European society. Other times, the specific goals that he has when confronting his reader are so obfuscated and impenetrable that there is no consensus as to Swift's satiric aims, such as the duality that he creates at the end of the book between Gulliver's own haughty indignation and Gulliver's simultaneous self-righteous contempt of human pride. However, regardless of the lack of a coherent motive in *Gulliver's Travels*, it may be observed that Swift repeatedly uses his fierce wit and incisive perceptions about the current state of European society to illustrate satirically the various problems in that society. Yet aside from a general statement about Swift's overall satiric aims like the one in the last sentence, there is still much work to be done to unravel the infinitely complex literary conundrums that the author has created from his travels with Gulliver.

Works Cited

- Brady, Frank. "Vexations and Diversions: Three Problems in *Gulliver's Travels*." *Modern Philology*, 75 (May 1978): 346-367.
- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Ed, Albert J. Rivero. London: Norton, 2002.