

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2023

Volume 49 Issue 2

Essays in Honor of Christopher Kelly

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Interpretation

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The Case Against (and For) Gulliver: An Introduction to *Gulliver's Travels*

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Gulliver's Travels was published as the work of the bluff Captain Lemuel Gulliver, whose portrait was included in the original (1726) frontispiece.¹ A basic puzzle of the book is this: Is Captain Gulliver as simple as he seems? In other words, is he an honest but ridiculous gull? Or is he the guller?²

Gulliver comes on stage, in a prefatory letter to his publisher Sympson, as a humorless reformer—someone who thinks that humankind can be radically improved, given the proper education, but who has been appalled to discover that in seven long months since the publication of his work, a “full stop” has not been put to “abuses and corruptions” (255–56).³ He also complains that he is routinely accused of dishonesty: many of his fellow Yahoos “are so bold as to think my book of travels a mere fiction out of mine own brain” (256). To be sure, he says, most Yahoos are inveterate dissemblers; but he has managed to remove “that infernal habit of lying, shuffling, deceiving,

Christopher Kelly has made the comparison of ancient and modern thought a theme of both his teaching and his scholarship and has been an ardent proponent of Swift’s “Discourse to Prove the Antiquity of the English Tongue.” In his characteristically balanced style, he has also written essays laying out Rousseau’s cases “for and against” the arts, censorship, heroes, and cosmopolitan humanitarianism. I offer this essay as a tribute to him.

¹ See Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Albert J. Rivero, Norton Critical Editions (New York: Norton, 2002), 2. I have cited page numbers in that edition and updated capitalization, spelling, italics, and punctuation.

² According to the *OED*, though the word “gull” means “a dupe, simpleton, fool,” it can also mean “a trickster, cheat, impostor.” But the word “guller” denotes simply “one who dupes or befools.”

³ And yet, he also says, he had “often” remarked “that the Yahoos were a species of animals utterly incapable of amendment by precepts or examples” (254). It is hard to see how both could be true.

and equivocating” (257). And this is backed up by Sympson himself. “There is,” the publisher insists, “an air of truth apparent through the whole”; and besides, the author “was so distinguished for his veracity that it became a sort of proverb among his neighbors at Redriff, when anyone affirmed a thing, to say it was as true as if Mr. Gulliver had spoke it” (5). Against this, however, are the following facts: Gulliver claims to have visited a land of six-inch humans, a land of sixty-foot humans, a land of ghosts, and a land of talking horses; by his own account the people who meet him not infrequently regard him as insane (65, 123, 241); and he is apparently given to trotting and whinnying (235).

Before sifting the evidence for and against the captain further, let me review the preliminaries. Gulliver is a booklover—someone who spends much of his free time “reading the best authors ancient and modern.” But having been forced to quit his studies at Cambridge, for lack of funds, and then having served as an apprentice surgeon under a Master James Bates, he learns navigation and mathematics. He then studies medicine in Leiden (the city of Descartes and Spinoza). Afterwards, he spends several years as surgeon on a ship called the *Swallow*, on which he makes “a voyage or two into the Levant” under the captaincy of a man named Abraham, before getting married and moving to the Old Jewry district of London. Then, having done six more years at sea, he removes from Old Jewry to Fetter Lane (the old home of Hobbes), and then to Wapping, before he is forced to go to sea yet again, on what turns out to be the voyage to Lilliput (15–16).

LILLIPUT

No great perspicacity is required to see that the tiny Lilliputians look a lot like Englishmen. They have a certain mathematical and scientific genius. They have a monarchical government, filled with sycophantic courtiers, and underpinned by a doctrine of divine right.⁴ They have an unbelievably petty factional divide that evokes the divide between Tories and Whigs. And they have a long-standing but equally petty theological dispute with a country just across the channel, Blefuscu, that evokes the rivalry between Protestant England and Catholic France. They also hold certain beliefs about bodily resurrection that Gulliver presents as absurd (48).

⁴ Gulliver reports that, according to the original laws of Lilliput, “the disbelief of a divine providence renders a man incapable of holding any public station; for since kings avow themselves to be the deputies of providence, the Lilliputians think nothing can be more absurd than for a prince to employ such men as disown the authority under which he acts” (49–50). It is not entirely clear that Gulliver himself believes in God; he often refers to the effects of “fortune,” “chance,” and “luck” in his travels, but never to the effects of providence.

The physical smallness of the Lilliputians obviously reflects a certain smallness of soul, at least relative to Gulliver. Accordingly, whereas the revered emperor-king of Lilliput is unabashedly tyrannical, Gulliver seems to be a morally decent man—declining for reasons of “conscience” to “imitate the bad practice” of his contemporaries in the medical profession (16), showing great clemency toward the hostile Lilliputians (26), absolutely refusing to help enslave the Blefuscutians (44), and declining to resort to violence even in self-defense, out of respect for his “past obligations” (61).

Notwithstanding their smallness, however, the Lilliputians are in some ways superior to Gulliver’s English contemporaries. After all, the Lilliputian monarch’s “prudent” and “generous” decision not to try to kill the sleeping Gulliver with spears and arrows “would not be imitated by any prince in Europe on the like occasion” (21). Moreover, the traditional laws and customs of Lilliput seem to be superior to those of England. Thus, for example, the Lilliputians understand that because of parents’ natural “tenderness toward their young,” they are “the last of all others to be trusted with the education of their own children” (50).

To be sure, Gulliver claims that he would be “tempted to say a little” in justification of Lilliput’s traditional laws and customs only *if* they were not “so directly contrary to those of my own dear country”; that is, he presents himself as someone so fervently patriotic as not even to be able to consider the advantages of foreign ways. But, if that were true, presumably he would not even be tempted to say something in their justification. Besides, there are in fact some Lilliputian laws that he does incontestably regard as superior, such as their treating fraud as a greater crime than theft (48–49).

There are two other indications in part 1 that Gulliver is not as simple as he seems. First, although he allows himself to be searched by two Lilliputian officers, in obeisance to the laws of the kingdom, he does not tell them about a “secret pocket” (28). And second, having been accused of carrying on an affair with a great lady in Lilliput, he indignantly denies the accusation, defying any of his accusers (and he names names) “to prove that any person ever came to me incognito.” Yet in the very next chapter he recounts the story of an incognito visitor who did come to his house in Lilliput, totally undetected (54–55). As Allan Bloom says, “We can only suppose the worst.”⁵

⁵ Allan Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs: An Outline of *Gulliver’s Travels*,” in *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 35.

BROBDINGNAG

If the Lilliputians' physical smallness reflects their pettiness of soul, relative to Gulliver, it seems safe to assume the Brobdingnagians' physical immensity reflects their greatness. Accordingly, whereas Gulliver's sense of shame dwindles rapidly in Lilliput, he feels it acutely and persistently in Brobdingnag, where he cannot even bear to look at himself in the mirror (123).⁶

The king of Brobdingnag—mild, educated, generous—is clearly superior to that of Lilliput. His reaction to Gulliver's offer to teach him the secrets of modern weaponry is illustrative:

The king was struck with horror at the description I had given of those terrible engines, and the proposal I had made. He was amazed how so impotent and groveling an insect as I (these were his expressions) could entertain such inhuman ideas, and in so familiar a manner as to appear wholly unmoved by all the scenes of blood and desolation, which I had painted as the common effects of those destructive machines, whereof he said, some evil genius, enemy to mankind, must have been the first contriver. As for himself, he protested, that although few things delighted him so much as new discoveries in art or in nature, yet he would rather lose half his kingdom than be privy to such a secret, which he commanded me, as I valued my life, never to mention anymore. (112–13)

As Gulliver goes on to note, professing himself scandalized by the Brobdingnagian king's "narrow principles and short views," in Europe a ruler would never "let slip an opportunity put into his hands that would have made him absolute master of the lives, the liberties, and the fortunes of his people" (113).

Unlike the emperor of Lilliput, moreover, the king of Brobdingnag turns out to be curious about the government of England. And so Gulliver gives him a series of lectures in which he tries (he assures us) to present his native country in the best possible light. The king listens attentively, taking detailed notes, and then proceeds to lay out a thoroughgoing critique of the whole regime, culminating in the judgment that the English must be "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (111).

To be sure, Brobdingnag itself is far from perfect. A number of Brobdingnagians seem fairly nasty (80, 82, 90). The country has serious crimes (99).

⁶ Compare Gulliver's "bashfulness" in Brobdingnag with his "most signal service" in Lilliput (78, 46). Bloom, "Giants and Dwarfs," 39: "In Brobdingnag, where they could not care less, he is full of shame."

It has a history of civil wars (116). And, unlike even Lilliput, it has beggars, whose diseased bodies Gulliver describes in lurid detail (93–94; cf. 52). Still, the difference in size does mean that, from the Brobdingnagian perspective, Gulliver’s world is contemptible, at best.

Gulliver is constantly being laughed at in Brobdingnag (75, 89, 90, 102, 103, 109), and the more he insists on his dignity the more ridiculous he becomes (102–3). He is, after all, picked up in the mouth of a small white spaniel (97); ensnared in a mole-hill (97); bullied by a linnet (98); exposed to a test of strength with a frog (101); abducted by a monkey (101–2); almost killed by a hazelnut tossed at his head by a schoolboy (82), and later by apples shaken from a dwarf tree (by a dwarf: 96); almost physically shattered by a day’s labor (82); almost knocked out by hailstones (96–97); almost drowned in a bowl of cream (90); and subjected to a mortifying discussion among Brobdingnagian scholars about whether he is really an abortive birth (86–87).

Is there a point to all this humiliation, other than our entertainment? A clue is provided by a book Gulliver happens to read during his stay, one that is “in little esteem except among the women and the vulgar,”⁷ and whose substance is strikingly familiar:

This writer went through all the usual topics of European moralists, showing how diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an animal was man in his own nature; how unable to defend himself from the inclemencies of the air, or the fury of wild beasts. How much he was excelled by one creature in strength, by another in speed, by a third in foresight, by a fourth in industry. He added that nature was degenerated in these latter declining ages of the world, and could now produce only small abortive births in comparison of those in ancient times. He said it was very reasonable to think not only that the species of men were originally much larger, but also that there must have been giants in former ages, which, as it is asserted by history and tradition, so it hath been confirmed by huge bones and skulls casually dug up in several parts of the kingdom, far exceeding the common dwindled race of man in our days. He argued that the very laws of nature absolutely required we should have been made in the beginning of a size more large and robust, not so liable to destruction from every little accident of a tile falling from an house, or a stone cast from the hand of a boy, or of being drowned in a little brook. From this way of reasoning the

⁷ Women seem to be the primary readers (other than Gulliver) in *Gulliver’s Travels*: a fire in the Lilliputian queen’s apartment is “caused by the carelessness of a maid of honour, who fell asleep while she was reading a romance” (46; see also 83–84).

author drew several moral applications useful in the conduct of life, but needless here to repeat. (114–15)

In Brobdingnag, Gulliver is one of those “small abortive births” transported somehow to antiquity, where he is comically out of his depth.⁸

Although Brobdingnag does not seem to be a stand-in for any one ancient community, it is “a sort of cross between Sparta and republican Rome.”⁹ It has no foreign commerce (92). It is a religious community, but the religion is polytheistic rather than monotheistic (95). Its education is focused above all on morality (113). Its laws are models of brevity and simplicity (113–14). Its government is republican or quasi-republican, with a citizens’ militia and a balance of power between the nobility, the people, and the monarch (115–16). And the presence of so many ailing beggars may reflect the fact that all the ancient republics depended on slavery, slavery that was especially brutal in Sparta.¹⁰

That Gulliver should feel repugnance at the sight of these beggars, with their open wounds, is understandable (93–94). But that he feels repugnance in the presence of healthy Brobdingnagians is more surprising, especially because (as he admits) they are “a comely race of people” (77). Whereas the Lilliputians seemed to have flawless complexions, Gulliver sees all the Brobdingnagians’ blemishes with extreme sharpness, precisely because they are so much greater than he is (76–77, 98–99). Perhaps he even takes a certain satisfaction in detailing their flaws, given his humiliating situation.

In any case, Gulliver claims to be outraged by the Brobdingnagian king’s disparagement of England, his “noble and most beloved country.” And yet, although he insists upon his own “extreme love of truth,” he gives us hardly any reason to think that he seriously regards the king’s contemptuous view of England as misguided (111). On the contrary, he says it would not be “prudent or convenient” for him to repeat all the king’s inquiries about English politics (108), and he boasts that he “artfully eluded many of his questions, and gave to every point a more favourable turn by many degrees than the strictness of truth would allow for” (111).

⁸ On moral applications that might be drawn from *Gulliver’s Travels*, see Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Swift Sailing,” in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Stéphane Douard and Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 145–59.

⁹ Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs,” 47.

¹⁰ In part 3, on the magic-infused island of Glubbudbrib, Gulliver meets “a helot of Agesilaus” who “made us a dish of Spartan broth”; “but,” Gulliver says, “I was not able to get down a second spoonful” (162). He vomits in Brobdingnag too, when a monkey kidnaps him and stuffs his mouth with food (102). And so there may be a particularly close connection between Brobdingnag and Sparta.

In fact, as in the voyage to Lilliput, there are clear indications of Gulliver's duplicity in the voyage to Brobdingnag. He admits, for example, that he misled his overprotective guardian, the nine-year-old girl Glumdalclitch, after having fallen into the mole-hill: "I...coined some lie not worth remembering to excuse myself for spoiling my clothes" (97). And later, he recalls, "I had gotten a small cold, but the poor girl was so ill as to be confined to her chamber. I longed to see the ocean, which must be the only scene of my escape, if ever it should happen. I pretended to be worse than I really was, and I desired leave to take the fresh air of the sea" (117).

LAPUTA, BALNIBARBI, GLUBBDUBDRIB, LUGGNAGG

Impelled by his thirst for "seeing the world" (129), Gulliver's next trip takes him to the flying island of Laputa, where modern scientists—men versed in "modern philosophy and astronomy" (140)—rule over the hapless rabble on Balnibarbi, the continent below. Like the king of Lilliput, and unlike the king of Brobdingnag, the king of Laputa has no interest in the "laws, government, history, religion, or manners" of Europe (140).

Like the king of Lilliput, and unlike the king of Brobdingnag, moreover, he turns out to be a tyrant. He has two main methods of subjugation: keeping the island floating directly above rebellious towns, depriving them of sun and rain; or simply crushing them from above. Thus he would be "the most absolute prince in the universe" if his ministers would consent to enslave Balnibarbi (144–45). And the ministers refuse to consent not because of any moral scruples but because they have their own houses on the continent and cannot be sure of always remaining in the king's good graces. Indeed, there seems to be something tyrannical in the very psyches of these subordinate scientists, who believe that their mathematical knowledge gives them some special insight into broader political questions. Despite being "very bad reasoners," they cannot bear opposition (137–38).

Inasmuch as they are "wholly strangers" to "imagination, fancy, and invention" (138), the Laputan rulers are Gulliver's opposites. Accordingly, almost all of them regard him as a great fool. And the one exception—a lord who has "performed many eminent services for the Crown," who has "great natural and acquired parts, adorned with integrity and honour," but who lacks all mathematical ability—is "universally reckoned the most ignorant and stupid person among them" (146–47).

Repelled, Gulliver goes down to the city of Lagado on the continent below. But this turns out to be a miserable place: the houses are crumbling; the people seem desperate; no crops are being grown. When Gulliver gives “free censure of the country and its inhabitants,” his generous host, the lord Munodi, makes “no further answer than by telling me that I had not been long enough among them to form a judgment, and that the *different nations of the world had different customs*, with other common topics to the same purpose” (148, italics added). Gulliver himself had retreated behind the same feeble relativism in Lilliput, when the emperor had censured the English practice of punishing theft more heavily than fraud: “and truly I had little to say in return, farther than the common answer that *different nations had different customs*; for, I confess, I was heartily ashamed” (49, italics added).

Apparently the lord cannot speak freely in the city. It is only after he has ventured out to the countryside that he explains to Gulliver how Lagado’s troubles began forty years ago, when

certain persons went up to Laputa either upon business or diversion, and after five months’ continuance came back with a very little smattering in mathematics, but full of volatile spirits acquired in that airy region; that these persons upon their return began to dislike the management of everything below, and fell into schemes of putting all arts, sciences, languages, and mechanics upon a new foot. To this end they procured a royal patent for erecting an Academy of Projectors in Lagado; and the humour prevailed so strongly among the people that there is not a town of any consequence in the kingdom without such an academy.... The only inconvenience is that none of these projects are yet brought to perfection, and in the meantime the whole country lies miserably waste, the houses in ruins, and the people without food or clothes. By all which, instead of being discouraged, they are fifty times more violently bent upon prosecuting their schemes, driven equally on by hope and despair. (149–50).

Munodi is a kind of conservative, doggedly attached to the “ancient” ways, surrounded by reformers who regard him as a perverse enemy of science. “He told me with a very melancholy air,” says Gulliver, “that he doubted [i.e., feared] he must throw down his houses in town and country, to rebuild them after the present mode, destroy all his plantations, and cast others in such a form as modern usage required, and give the same directions to all

his tenants, unless he would submit to incur the censure of pride, singularity, affectation, ignorance, caprice” (149).

Given his reputation as a reactionary, Munodi himself is not welcome at the Academy of Projectors. But he gladly introduces Gulliver there, under the guise of a “great admirer of projects” (151).¹¹ And so Gulliver is able to give us a sketch of the academy, one that is not entirely flattering to the projectors. Not only do all of them beg for money, but their projects are uniformly wasteful. Many of them are simply useless (learning how to build houses from the roof down, for instance). Others are well intentioned but hopeless (extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers in order to warm the air on cool days). At least some of them are both cruel and dangerous (a proposed method of curing colic ends up torturing and then killing a dog). And the political projects (among which is a scheme for solving the problem of partisanship by splicing together the brains of rival party leaders) are the most extravagant of all.

Next Gulliver goes to the island of Glubbudubdrib, the land of ghosts, where he is given the chance to call up the dead. He first convenes a number of great political figures, including Alexander and Hannibal, asking them questions that test the reliability of the histories given by Plutarch and Livy. Then he calls up a Roman Senate alongside a modern house of representatives, observing that whereas the latter seems little more than a “a knot of peddlers, pick-pockets, highway men, and bullies,” the Senate appears to be “an assembly of heroes and demi-gods” (166). Of all the political figures he meets, however, he is most impressed by Brutus, the slayer of Caesar, and by Brutus’s coterie in the afterlife: “his ancestor Junius, Socrates, Epaminondas, Cato the Younger, Sir Thomas More, and himself [Marcus Brutus],” a group Gulliver calls “a sextumvirate to which all the ages of the world cannot add a seventh.”¹²

In addition, Gulliver sets aside a day for seeing “those ancients who were most renowned for wit and learning.” He begins by summoning Homer and Aristotle. They appear at the head of their innumerable commentators, with whom they are “perfect strangers” (167). Apparently the commentators choose to keep their distance in the afterlife, “through a consciousness of

¹¹ Gulliver claims that this description “was not without truth,” since “I had myself been a sort of a projector in my younger days” (151). This is a bit like saying that to introduce Henry VIII as a loyal Catholic would be “not without truth.”

¹² Only one Christian is included in this sextumvirate, and he is identified as a knight (“Sir”) rather than a religious figure. Gulliver reports that he called up many other “illustrious persons,” especially “the destroyers of tyrants and usurpers, and the restorers of liberty to oppressed and injured nations” (167).

shame and guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the meaning of those authors to posterity” (168).

Then Gulliver calls up two modern philosophers, Descartes and Gassendi, who explain their systems to Aristotle. The latter “freely” acknowledges the mistakes he has made in his books of natural philosophy, mistakes which he says were owing to his having “proceeded in many things upon conjecture, as all men must do.” But Aristotle also suggests that modern philosophers are overconfident, observing that the systems of Descartes and Gassendi are “equally exploded,” and predicting that Newton’s system will meet the same end, despite its present popularity among the learned. In fact, Gulliver’s Aristotle maintains that all comprehensive “systems of nature” are misguided: they are “but new fashions” (168).

Gulliver says that he was “chiefly disgusted with modern history” (169). And he was especially dismayed to discover that those who had done the greatest deeds of public service had been either forgotten entirely or “represented as the vilest rogues and traitors.” To be sure, the story he uses to illustrate this point is one from Roman history; but the injustice he describes takes place under Augustus, not under the republic (171–72), and the cause of Rome’s corruption, he notes, was the spread of luxury, “which made me less wonder at many parallel cases in other countries, where vices of all kinds have reigned so much longer.” He adds:

As every person called up made exactly the same appearance he had done in the world, it gave me melancholy reflections to observe how much the race of humankind was degenerate among us, within these hundred years past. How the pox under all its consequences and denominations had altered every lineament of an English countenance, shortened the size of bodies, unbraced the nerves, relaxed the sinews and muscles, introduced a sallow complexion, and rendered the flesh loose and rancid. (172)

Compared with our ancestors, Gulliver suggests again, we moderns are midgets.

Eventually, though, he leaves Glubbudubdrib to visit the island of Luggnagg, home of the immortal Struldbruggs. On hearing about this race of immortals, Gulliver is “struck with inexpressible delight.” He is initially delighted by the idea that one might learn from them, as “so many examples of ancient virtue” filled with “the wisdom of all former ages”; in fact he thinks that he would like to “pass my life here in the conversation of those superior beings the Struldbruggs, if they would please to admit me.” But he is delighted also by the idea of the immortals in themselves, since they are free from *the*

great obstacle to happiness, our anticipation of death, “that universal calamity of human nature” (176).

In this context Gulliver offers an account of how he would live if he were immortal. And, as with his selections among the ghosts of Glubbdubdrib, his account is quite impressive. He would begin, he says, by getting rich—surely the correct decision for someone whose time is limitless. But he would then devote himself to learning (including science), to the education of others (especially moral education), and to friendship, using his riches to provide “convenient lodges round my own estate” for friends who “wanted fortunes” (178).

But Gulliver has made a mistake. He has assumed that the immortality of the Struldbruggs goes together with perpetual health and vigor. In fact the Struldbruggs never die, but they do keep getting weaker and more decrepit. No one who has actually seen the Struldbruggs would envy them. Thus, once again, we are encouraged to laugh at Gulliver, as the mortal Luggnagians do. But of course Gulliver has not yet seen a Struldbrugg. And so, as his Luggnagian interpreter suggests, he should be excused for falling into error through “the common imbecility of human nature.” Indeed, the interpreter says, he has “observed long life to be the *universal* desire and wish of mankind”; even “the oldest,” evidently, “had still hopes of living one day longer, and looked on death as the greatest evil, from which nature always prompted him to retreat.” In Luggnagg alone is the appetite for living “not so eager,” given “the continual example of the Struldbruggs” (179). What humans want most of all, on this account, is not necessarily immortality but “long life,” or the ability to put off death indefinitely. But perhaps even that wish is misguided; death may not be “the greatest evil” to which we are ordinarily exposed.

Gulliver’s description of the Struldbruggs thus corrects an impression that might have been left by his description of the Academy of Projectors—the impression that he has simply failed to anticipate the greatest philanthropic success of modern natural science, namely modern medicine.¹³ Our medicine is assuredly very good at keeping people alive (though perhaps not as good as Swift anticipated); it is not so good at keeping people healthy and vigorous. And the better we get at warding off death, Gulliver’s account suggests, the more we consign ourselves to the fate of the Struldbruggs:

¹³ Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs,” 49: “Here Gulliver’s critique, although funny, impresses us less than it does elsewhere. He seems to have seriously underestimated the possible success of the projects.” That Gulliver anticipates the success of modern physics is (as Bloom stresses) shown by his description of Laputa.

At ninety they lose their teeth and hair; they have at that age no distinction of taste but eat and drink whatever they can get, without relish or appetite. The diseases they were subject to still continue without increasing or diminishing. In talking they forget the common appellation of things, and the names of persons, even of those who are their nearest friends and relations. For the same reason they never can amuse themselves with reading, because their memory will not serve to carry them from the beginning of a sentence to the end; and by this defect they are deprived of the only entertainment whereof they might otherwise be capable. (180)

Gulliver's appraisal of the modern scientific project concludes on an extremely sensitive point. In Laputa he saw the tyrannical potential of modern science. In Lagado and the Academy of Projectors he saw its wasteful, cruel, and ridiculous aspects. Now in Luggnagg he sees the morbid side of its greatest triumph.¹⁴ The fact that Gulliver began this part of his travels on a ship called the *Hope-well*—a ship that ended up being hijacked by pirates—is grimly fitting.

HOUYHNHM-LAND

The voyage to Houyhnhnm-land, the land of talking horses, is the peak of Gulliver's travels. It is the country where, he says, he wanted to spend his life and "never return to humankind" (218). While he was there, he enjoyed "perfect health of body and tranquility of mind" (233). In a word, what Gulliver experienced among the Houyhnhnms was "happiness," albeit a short-lived happiness (235).¹⁵

Part of what Gulliver likes about Houyhnhnm-land is the absence of all the worst features of English society:

I did not find the treachery or inconstancy of a friend, nor the injuries of a secret or open enemy. I had no occasion of bribing, flattering, or pimping, to procure the favour of any great man, or of his minion. I wanted no fence against fraud or oppression. Here was neither physician to destroy my body, nor lawyer to ruin my fortune; no informer to watch my words and actions, or forge accusations against me for hire. Here were no gibbers, censors, backbiters, pickpockets, highwaymen, housebreakers, attorneys, bawds, buffoons, gamblers, politicians,

¹⁴ Cf. Bloom, "Giants and Dwarfs," 50: "One might suggest that [in the description of the Struldbruggs] he was reflecting on the only example in our world of an institution that claims immortality, namely, the Church."

¹⁵ The paragraph in which Gulliver speaks of his "happiness" in Houyhnhnm-land also begins the story of his exile from it (235).

wits, splenetics, tedious talkers, controvertists, ravishers, murderers, robbers, virtuosos; no leaders or followers of party and faction; no encouragers to vice, by seducement or examples; no dungeon, axes, gibbets, whipping-posts, or pillories; no cheating shopkeepers or mechanics; no pride, vanity, or affectation; no fops, bullies, drunkards, strolling whores, or poxes; no ranting, lewd, expensive wives; no stupid, proud pedants; no importunate, overbearing, quarrelsome, noisy, roaring, empty, conceited, swearing companions; no scoundrels, raised from the dust for the sake of their vices, or nobility thrown into it on account of their virtues; no lords, fiddlers, judges, or dancing-masters. (233)

But the chief benefit of life among the Houyhnhnms is the opportunity to listen to their conversation, which is valuable both for its utility and for its intrinsic pleasures (233–34).

The Houyhnhnms are beings “wholly governed by reason” (230). This does not mean that they lack all emotions.¹⁶ Their “wants and passions” may be “fewer than among us,” but they do have wants and passions (204). Indeed, Gulliver says that their language conveys the passions “very well” and that they “excel all other mortals” in poetry (192, 230). They certainly exhibit fear (200, 235), indignation (203–4, 206), amazement (206), friendship and benevolence (226–27), hatred (229), and love (238). They laugh, albeit not as much as the Brobdingnagians (226). And there are indications that they experience grief, although they refrain from venting it publicly. Dying Houyhnhnms are “much visited by their friends” and then “return those visits” in order to “take a solemn leave of their friends, as if they were going to some remote part of the country, where they designed to pass the rest of their lives” (231–32). They have a “strongly expressive” euphemism for death (231). And they “are buried in the obscurest places that can be found, their friends and relations *expressing* neither joy nor grief at their departure; nor does the dying person *discover* [i.e., disclose] the least regret that he is leaving the world” (231, italics added; see also the account of the Houyhnhnm who “died about three months after” her husband, at 231).

But their emotions never overcome their reason. Hence, for example, the Houyhnhnms with the naturally weakest minds willingly defer to those with the naturally strongest minds; they do not pretend to be more capable than they really are out of a sense of wounded pride. Among the Houyhnhnms, then, there exists a perfect correspondence between the inequality of their

¹⁶ Cf. George Orwell, “Politics vs. Literature,” in *Discussions of Jonathan Swift*, ed. John Traugott (Boston: Heath, 1962), 88; Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs,” 51.

natures and the inequality of their social arrangements. This extends, of course, to their relations with the irrational Yahoos, whose function in Houyhnhnm-land is merely to carry heavy loads, like donkeys (229).¹⁷ For their part, the Yahoos of Houyhnhnm-land obey the most deformed and mischievous among them. It is not just that these Yahoos are less reasonable than Houyhnhnms, then; they are also less reasonable than other animals. As Gulliver points out, even dogs obey “the ablest dog in the pack, without being ever mistaken” (222).

And yet the “savage” Yahoos of Houyhnhnm-land are not the worst of the worst. On the very lowest rung are modern civilized Yahoos, including Gulliver’s fellow Englishmen, as well as the Lilliputians, the Laputans, and so on. These Yahoos are the softest and frailest (204, 219), the most destructive (209), the most covetous (218–19), and the most vicious (234, 257). Several rungs up are the “savage” Yahoos. And at the top of the ladder are the Brobdingnagians, the “least corrupted” of Yahoos, but Yahoos nonetheless (246).¹⁸

In fact there are a number of similarities between Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnm-land. Both countries are cut off from commerce with the rest of the world (92, 230). Gulliver’s inferiority in relation to the Houyhnhnms is comparable to his inferiority in relation to the Brobdingnagians (89, 201). The conversations he has with his master in Houyhnhnm-land echo those he has with the king of Brobdingnag (105–13, 203–23). And in both countries he feels a keen sense of shame or “mortification” (72, 90, 97, 194, 225); in neither one can he bear to look at his reflection (123, 234–35).¹⁹

But even more salient are the differences between the two countries. Whereas there are vices in Brobdingnag, the Houyhnhnms are free from all vice (80, 206). Whereas there is money in Brobdingnag, the Houyhnhnms have no money (84–85, 212). Whereas there are criminals in Brobdingnag, there are none among the Houyhnhnms (99, 206). Whereas Brobdingnag has a history of civil wars, the Houyhnhnms lack even the concept (116, 207–9). Whereas there are terrible diseases in Brobdingnag, the Houyhnhnms die

¹⁷ So there is a connection between Yahoos and donkeys. Gulliver is by his own admission a donkey-like Yahoo (194, 257), but there are also signs that he is halfway between a Yahoo and a Houyhnhnm. The Brobdingnagians, who are certainly humans/Yahoos (80, 89, 112, 114–15, 246), have considerable difficulty classifying him, concluding lamely that he is *lusus naturæ*, a freak of nature (86–87). Moreover, whereas Yahoos are observed by the rational horses “to be the most unteachable of all brutes” (199), Gulliver does seem to be teachable to some extent. Hence his first name, *Lemuel*.

¹⁸ Cf. Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs,” 52: “the Yahoos... [are] peculiarly modern man.”

¹⁹ See also Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs,” 38–39.

only of physical injuries or old age (93–94, 231). Whereas there are ordinary luxuries in Brobdingnag, the Houyhnhnms have neither salt nor liquor (75, 89, 197, 213). Whereas there is iron (hence also agriculture and a relatively advanced division of labor) in Brobdingnag, the Houyhnhnms have none (72–73, 94, 230). Whereas there are natural philosophers in Brobdingnag, the Houyhnhnms have no systems of natural philosophy (86–87, 226).²⁰ Whereas there are “statues of gods” in Brobdingnag, Gulliver says nothing about the religious beliefs of the Houyhnhnms, even when he discusses the subjects of their poetry (95, 230).

So while the Brobdingnagians and the Houyhnhnms are linked, they are nonetheless very different. Brobdingnag could be a real community; Houyhnhnm-land is a utopia in the strict sense—in this case, a land populated by (metamorphosed) ancient philosophers. Indeed, Gulliver explicitly compares his master among the Houyhnhnms to Plato’s version of Socrates, “the prince of philosophers” (226).²¹

But, to repeat, Houyhnhnm-land is a utopia. Unlike Socrates, the Houyhnhnms have no knowledge of crime, vice, war, government, law, or punishment (206, 233). They have no concept of lying—they do not deliberately say “the thing which is not” (209).²² They are never deceived by “passion and interest” (225). And they have no experience with opinionated disputes: “because reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain; and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either” (225).²³ Thus Houyhnhnm-land represents a world of purified (i.e., superhuman) philosophers as they might be if they were surrounded by other purified philosophers, and free from the necessities of political life.

Or almost free: every four years the Houyhnhnms have “a representative council of the whole nation” (227).²⁴ Generally there are no debates at

²⁰ They do, however, have enough astronomy to understand the motion of the sun and the moon, and the nature of eclipses (230). They are not superstitious (compare 138: the Laputans “have great faith in judicial astrology, although they are ashamed to own it publicly”). And, although they have no doctors, they do have “excellent medicines” to treat injuries (230).

²¹ When Gulliver first comes across Houyhnhnms, he says that they make gestures “not unlike those of a philosopher” (191). Later he says that the “grand maxim” of the Houyhnhnms is to “cultivate reason, and to be wholly governed by it” (225).

²² This is not to say that they never err (see, e.g., 198, 199, 200, 219).

²³ Gulliver says that doubting is “little known in this country,” but not totally unknown (202). Hence, for example, one of the Houyhnhnms says that “there seemed to be much truth” in a certain “tradition” about the origins of the Yahoos in Houyhnhnm-land; that is, he goes no further than calling it plausible (229).

²⁴ This is not exactly a government, since it does not compel obedience through force (236).

these assemblies. But there is one great debate that comes up: “whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the face of the earth” (228). They are, after all, an invasive species, and they pose a grave threat to the indigenous Houyhnhnms’ food supply (228–29).²⁵ Unfortunately for Gulliver, because of this threat, he is eventually ordered to leave Houyhnhnm-land, the Houyhnhnms being fearful that he might lead the other Yahoos to attack their cattle. And he himself admits that he “could not blame” the council. In fact he says that he resolved, if he ever returned to England, to propose the virtues of the Houyhnhnms “to the imitation of mankind” (236).

But so impressed is Gulliver with the Houyhnhnms that he can no longer stomach daily life among his fellow Yahoos. Like many other readers, he has developed “an antipathy to humankind” (242). And this antipathy extends to himself—as was the case after his trip to Brobdingnag, he finds it hard to look in the mirror (249). To be sure, there are indications that he has not completely written off humanity. Thus, for example, he mentions that he has “friends” who speak “in a blunt way” to him (235); he describes a certain Portuguese ship captain, Pedro de Mendez, as “courteous,” “generous,” and even “wise” (241–42); and he suggests that he is gradually reconciling himself to his family, to his neighbors, and to the sight of himself (249).

Still, rather disconcertingly, what he most loves to do is to talk with two stallions he has purchased: “My horses understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four hours every day. They are strangers to bridle or saddle, they live in great amity with me, and friendship to each other” (244). And so we are brought back to the question raised by the prefatory letter to *Sympson*: Is Gulliver as simple (not to say moronic) as he sometimes seems?

CONCLUSION

If Gulliver does spend his time talking earnestly to stallions, then the case is closed. But by this stage we have seen him lie repeatedly about himself throughout the book—in Lilliput (28, 54–55), in Brobdingnag (97, 117), in Balnibarbi (151), in Luggnagg (173), and in Houyhnhnm-land itself (200–201, 219).²⁶ Indeed, he says that on the last leg of his journey back from

²⁵ Many commentators argue that the Houyhnhnms’ attitude toward the Yahoos indicates a moral failure, akin to the failure of eighteenth-century Englishmen to respect the humanity of Swift’s fellow Irishmen. But whereas the Yahoos pose a serious threat to Houyhnhnm-land, the Irish posed none to England—and were of course indigenous to Ireland, and members of the same species, unlike the Yahoos.

²⁶ To this list might perhaps be added Gulliver’s appeal to a Dutch pirate for lenience “in consideration of our being Christians and Protestants” (130). Gulliver’s subsequent behavior in Japan, which

Houyhnhnm-land, “I had no commerce with the master or any of his men, but *pretending I was sick* kept close in my cabin” (244; compare 117: “I pretended to be worse than I really was”).²⁷

To be sure, in insisting on his own truthfulness throughout his *Travels*, Gulliver waxes poetic:

*Nec si miserum Fortuna Sinonem
Finxit, vanum etiam, mendacemque improba finget.*

The quote, “Although cruel Fortune has made Sinon miserable, she will not make him false and a liar,” is taken from the *Aeneid*. As the editor of the Norton Critical Edition writes, “In Aeneas’s heart-rending account of the last days of Troy, the Greek Sinon offers this impassioned defense of his veracity while attempting to persuade the Trojans to accept his gift of a giant wooden horse.” Thus, the editor concludes, the simpleton Gulliver “unwittingly identifies himself with the teller of one of the tallest horse stories ever told” (246n1).

But perhaps the invocation of Sinon is meant to indicate a more self-aware Gulliver than this editor allows. After all, as Bloom points out, Gulliver’s own book is another vessel “filled with Greeks.”²⁸ In accordance with this interpretation, the 1735 edition frontispiece portrait of the author is adorned with the words “Splendide Mendax [Magnificent Liar]. Hor.” Implicitly, then, Gulliver is likened to the magnificently deceitful Hypermnestra depicted by Horace.²⁹ And shortly after appropriating Sinon’s words, Gulliver reminds us again of his “small reading” of “modern as well as ancient authors” (248).

he visits on his return from Luggnagg, does at least allow it to be “suspected,” as he says, that he “must be a Christian” (183). But in Japan he was, by his own admission, misrepresenting himself (184).

²⁷ “Lord Bolingbroke who knew him [Swift] well, in two words summed up his character in this respect, by saying that Swift was a *hypocrite reversed*,” someone who tried to appear worse than he really was (Thomas Sheridan, introduction to *The Life of Jonathan Swift*, 2nd ed. [London: Rivington, 1787], n.p.).

²⁸ Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs,” 36. According to Gulliver, the Houyhnhnms “have not the least idea of books or literature” (199). As he says later, then, they are strangers to “missive weapons.” But he adds, “I could never give my advice for invading them.... I rather wish they were in a capacity or disposition to send a sufficient number of their inhabitants for civilizing Europe” (247). In Swift’s *Battle of the Books*, where ink is called “the great missive weapon in all battles of the learned,” the final outcome of the moderns’ assault on the ancients is left unclear.

²⁹ See Howard D. Weinbrot, “Swift, Horace, and Virgil: Brave Lies, Dangerous Horses, and Truth,” in *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. Rivero, 501–3. Also note the surname of the “wise” Pedro de Mendez.

I conclude that the case against Gulliver is also the case for him. He lies repeatedly; his travels, like his stallions, are “a mere fiction” (256).³⁰ But he lies not for the sake of his own power or prestige. On the contrary, he makes himself seem much worse—narrower, sicker, more ridiculous—than he really is. He lies in order to spare the pride of his readers, who can comfortably laugh at him as an entertaining gull, and who tolerate or even welcome his book for that very reason.

Pride, Gulliver stresses, is the besetting Yahoo vice (249–50). And here his insight outstrips even that of the Houyhnhnms, who “have no name for this vice in their language, which hath no terms to express anything that is evil, except those whereby they describe the detestable qualities of their Yahoos, among which they were not able to distinguish this of pride, for want of thoroughly understanding human nature” (250).³¹ In Houyhnhnm-land, then, speech is regarded simply as a tool “to make us understand one another, and to receive information or facts” (202). Among perfectly reasonable beings, to lie would indeed be to frustrate wantonly the ends of learning and mutual comprehension. Among unreasonable beings who are both powerful and proud, however, this sort of unwavering candor would be self-defeating. By presenting himself as a humorless fool (and thus yet again saying the thing which is not), Gulliver proves himself both funny and wise.

³⁰ Having claimed that his horses understand him “tolerably well,” Gulliver refers to “the brutality”—that is, the mere animality—of “the Houyhnhnms in my own country” (244, 249). His claim about the four daily hours he spends conversing with his stallions, I would suggest, is a more self-effacing version of Machiavelli’s claim that he converses directly with “ancient men” each night: “for the space of four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every pain, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me” (letter to Vettori, in *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 109–10; Mansfield notes that Machiavelli’s letter “has been called the most celebrated in all of Italian literature” [ibid, 107]). Compare Gulliver’s description of Houyhnhnm-land as the place in which he enjoyed “perfect health of body and tranquility of mind” (233).

³¹ For evidence that Swift shared Gulliver’s misanthropic tendencies, see his letters to Sheridan (September 11, 1725) and Pope (September 29 and November 26, 1725) in the Norton critical edition (261–63); and the letter to Ford (January 19, 1724) quoted in Leo Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 378.

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