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The Political Implications of *Gulliver’s Travels*

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Abstract

This scholarly note reviews the political implications of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* by analyzing the use of satire to show the need for reason during the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The subject was reviewed during Survey of British Literature I, taught by Dr. David Lanoue, which focused on British literature ranging from the medieval periods to the eighteenth century. The scholarly note brings to attention the political interactions occurring in England during a time under the reign of King George II. Jonathon Swift uses satire and humor to show the unnecessary stances England took in politics.

Key Terms:

- Satire
- King George II
- Humor
- England

Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* during the eighteenth century Enlightenment, but he was writing about an earlier period time known as the English Reformation. The English Reformation was a troublesome time in the sixteenth century when the Church of England broke away from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. The story reflects some of the political ideas of that earlier time period, as well as those of Swift's own century. These ideas include the unjust ways the royal upper-class took advantage of their position in court to further their own ends and are shown throughout *Gulliver's Travels*, even reflecting some of the ideas of modern day society. Through his unique use of satire Swift exposes the ridiculousness of the religious and political situations of sixteenth to eighteenth century Europe displaying the prejudice of Catholic believers. Jonathan Swift was able to make people view their choices in actual situations as something that should be decided with reason.

Gulliver's Travels is an adventure story during which Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon, begins a series of trips leading him to a number of unknown islands. During his voyages he meets many people of different sizes, beliefs, and behaviors. While traveling aboard a ship that is destroyed by a storm, Gulliver ends up on the island of Lilliput where he awakes to find himself captured. After talking to the king of the Lilliputians, he helps them solve many problems, but he falls out of favor when he does not destroy an island called Blefuscu. Gulliver flees to Blefuscu, where he takes a war ship as his own and sets sail from Blefuscu. After sailing alone he is eventually rescued by an English merchant and returns to his home in England.

There are many forms of satire in the book, and one of them is political. This is exhibited when Gulliver meets the first culture during his voyage. The Lilliputians exemplify English people

during the eighteenth century time period because of their demanding nature. Robert Phiddian believes that Jonathon Swift used the Lilliputians as a representation of England to show that the British really thought too highly of themselves (53). Lilliputians are very small individuals who control Gulliver by threatening him: "... when in an instant I felt above a hundred arrows discharged into my left hand, which pricked me like so many needles; and besides they shot another flight into the air, as we do bombs in Europe" (Swift 1684). Here Gulliver describes being held captive after being found by the Lilliputians. This exemplifies England's political system because England was a small country that had the colonies, such as those in America, under its control along with many other countries. Phiddian observes that Swift has a unique way of adding meaning to his writing: "The most persistently fascinating thing about Swift's prose is its capacity to adopt and shift into multiple rhetorical modes that express various (often contradictory) cultural loyalties" (1). Here Phiddian shows how unique the idea of a man traveling is to show political happenings. Swift uses the example of a man traveling to a country that he has never been to and meeting people completely different from himself to show what was happening in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During that time period, England was facing political and religious strife primarily because it believed that other countries should follow its beliefs.

Throughout *Gulliver's Travels* Swift is able to demonstrate the hypocrisy of politics in England through the visitation of Gulliver to the Lilliputians. An example of that hypocrisy is when Swift begins the novel and describes the traditions and politics of the Lilliputians. The tallest man, the leader, is only a nail's length taller than everyone else. This is a way of saying that the King of England was not as big as he thought he was. Another political example that Swift offers is

the way a Lilliputian gains a position of power. There is rope dancing: people have to dance and jump on a rope to earn a position of power. This is showing that the most powerful men of England were like acrobats and monkeys, just jumping for the king. Henry Walpole was an example of this because as a leader of Parliament, regardless if the case would actually benefit the people, he would agree with whatever law the King of England proposed.

William Laparde recognizes the lengths Walpole would go through to please the King and secure his position in government. In his book *Public Opinion and Politics in the Eighteenth Century* Laparde states, "He knew better than most men what his success had cost and the arts that would be necessary to keep the place he had" (252). He was the head of the government and was not smart or a good man; he was only able to stay in favor because he performed the best tricks for the king. A position in court, especially one that is considered honorable, should be gained through true accomplishments. For someone to be able to bribe and joke their way to becoming one of the leaders of government shows how corrupt the time was under the rule of King George II.

After satirizing how the politics were run in England, Gulliver then looks at the army of the Emperor of the Lilliputians. When describing the Emperor's army Gulliver reports that the king has twenty-four troops of Calvary. The men had to participate in military exercises and mock skirmishes. Unlike the duty of protecting ones country and serving with honor, the king treats his army like toy soldiers. This is a jab at King George because Swift is pointing out how the army of England did more for the pleasure and gain of the King than for the country of England. The army was at the dispense of King George to do what he wished for it, and instead of striving to protect the country, King George had his army for his personal use only. Adam Potkay wrote "Hume's 'Supplement to Gulliver,'" in which he comments about the power that King George had

over his army: "King George would summon troops who were preparing for battle to escort him to parties and dinners. Not because there was any danger in him traveling, but simply because he liked to make an entrance wherever he would go" (46).

Difference in the way of thinking causes controversy in the Lilliputian government as well. In *Gulliver's Travels* there are two types of groups that seem to lead politics for the Lilliputians. The Tramescksan and the Slamecksan. The Tramescksan have high heels while the Slamecksan have low heels. Swift makes a point to talk about opinions:

Difference in Opinions hath cost many Million of Lives: For Instance, whether Flesh be Bread, or Bread be Flesh: Whether the Juice of a certain Berry be Blood or Wine: Whether Whistling be a Vice or a Virtue: Whether it be better to kiss a Post, or throw it into the Fire: What is the best Colour for a Coat, whether Black, White, Red or Grey; and whether it should be long or short, narrow or wide, dirty or clean; with many more. Neither are any Wars so furious and bloody, or of so long Continuance, as those occasioned by Difference of Opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent. (Swift 1726)

Here Swift is showing how these minor arguments caused by men of power end up causing the loss of many lives over trivial matters.

The Tramescksan and Slamecksan are two groups that are similar to the Tories and Whigs in England during the sixteenth century. The Tories corresponded to the high heels and were traditionalists and republicans. The Whigs corresponded to the low heels and were more liberal. They both worked for the king. Swift is showing that the difference between both groups is miniscule in the way he makes fun of the internal politics as well as the trivial arguments

that changes people's lives. The Tories and Whigs would get into heated arguments about every situation involving politics simply because they did not like each other as individuals. Swift uses humor in *Gulliver's Travels* to show that not liking someone over something as small as having a different height in heels is ludicrous (Potkay 36).

Opinions were not the only controversial topic in England during the eighteenth century; religion was as well. A large part of politics for the Lilliputians is the dispute between the big Endians and the little Endians. The big Endians, the people of Blefuscu, are traditional and represent the Catholic France. The little Endians, the Lilliputians, represent the Protestant England and King Henry VIII. The dispute between the two groups in *Gulliver's Travels* derives from the fact that everyone in the country has to crack their eggs in a certain way. The side that was supposed to be cracked was the small side and whoever did not crack their eggs this way was breaking the law. This law was decided when an official in the Lilliputian government cut himself while trying to open an egg on the large side. William Laparde notes that the French Wars of Religion (1562–98) is the name given to a period of civil infighting and military operations, primarily fought between French Catholics and Protestants (Huguenots). The conflict involved the factional disputes between the aristocratic houses of France, such as the House of Bourbon and House of Guise (Lorraine), and both sides received assistance from foreign sources (Laparde 3).

Swift uses this example to represent England and France through religious satire and to emphasize that wars were actually happening because of religious disputes. Swift saw religion as being too miniscule to start a war over. Potkay is a scholar who writes about the political discourse in *Gulliver's Travels*. Citing philosopher David Hume, he makes note of the satire that Swift used for the religious leaders of England during this time period.

Hume not only casts key prelates as hypocrites and villains—Dunstan, Anselm, Thomas a Becket, and every pope he touches upon—but consistently reduces the controversies in which they engage—including the Tonsure Controversy and the Investiture Controversy—to Lilliputian levels of absurdity. (In *Gulliver's Travels*, the religious wars within and between Lilliput [England] and Blefuscu [France] involve a heated dispute over the proper manner of eating boiled eggs). (Potkay 2)

Hume writes to a friend in 1751 complaining of the popes during that time, and the trivial matters that they were arguing about. Potkay makes a point to show that these popes were arguing and fussing about religion, but were never the ones who had to fight the wars sparked by their arguments. Thousands of men have fought and lost their lives over these religious disagreements.

The actions after Gulliver captures a Blefuscu ship are another example Swift uses to show the actions of the upper class. When Gulliver captures a fleet the Emperor of Lilliput wants him to enslave Blefuscu. Gulliver refuses to do this because he thinks that this is wrong. This situation is used as a satire to show how England tried to enforce its religion upon France. The satire shows a king without compassion and forgiveness. It also shows the corrupt nature of the king. Gulliver, on the other hand, is not only compassionate but level-headed enough to do the right thing and not capture Blefuscu. Enslavement of another race, or people who do not have the same beliefs as the captor, always ends in trouble for the country who does the enslaving. No race can tolerate slavery too long, and there is always a rebellion that could lead to lives being lost. Gulliver prevents this from happening by not enslaving the Blefuscu.

Shortly after the capture of the ship, Gulliver saves the Empress's life. When the Empress' palace catches on fire, people all over

try and help put the fire out, but their tools are too small to extinguish a fire of that magnitude. Gulliver completely extinguishes the fire with his urine, saving the Empress' life quickly. One would think that the Empress would thank Gulliver, but instead she becomes his enemy. Swift uses this irony to show that royalty does not have gratitude, even if it is well deserved by someone who has helped them. Another subject that Swift satirizes is the superstitions held by people. The Lilliputians buried people upside down because they believed the world is flat and when the world ends, the world will flip over and the deceased's head would be in Heaven. Swift is making fun of the customs that look ridiculous to others.

Swift's satire can still be applied to day. Even in today's society different opinions about matters can lead to heated arguments, and what was so unique about the arguments in the eighteenth century is that they led to men and women losing their lives or living in fear because of what they believed. Recently the 2012 United States presidential campaign occurred, and writers all over the country were using satire to show who they favored and who was leading the Republican pack. In a *New Yorker* article, Hertzberg says, "After ten months of overlapping has the Republican 'base'- and the excitable overlapping of Fox News friends, Tea Party animals, war whoopers, and nativists - finally found its John Connor, a lone hero equipped to terminate the Party's establishment's officially designated cyborg?" (2). Here Hertzberg is showing his dislike of the Republican Party without ever saying, "I do not like any Republican running." Through his satire, Swift was able to make people view their choices in actual situations as something that should be decided with reason, not just based on someone's arbitrary idea. This should still be followed today. People need to realize that not everyone will have the same view, and that it is okay to disagree. Violence should never be the outcome of trivial disagreements. Laparde uses John Dewey to explain how Swift's

connection in *Gulliver's Travels* could be applied today: "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving" (346). This shows Swift connection to what was occurring in the eighteenth century to today because what a person believes is still being expressed in a very public manner. The political parties can be compared to the British because they are adamant about pointing out the differences of beliefs between the Democrats and the Republicans. Both parties engage in the satirical comments and views directed towards one another.

In conclusion, Jonathan Swift uses Gulliver and his journey to the Lilliputians as a representation of what was occurring politically and religiously in Europe during the eighteenth century under King George II. Swift shows how awards are given to the best acrobat, or pleaser of the King, instead of being based on merit and achievement. He also portrays the religious arguments as trivial and points out that they are causing the loss of thousands of lives. Through satire, Swift is not only able to give readers an accurate picture of the political situation in England, but also explain the situations through understandable examples. This type of literary analysis is important because it shows the political and historical background that the novel *Gulliver's Travels* covers. *Gulliver's Travels* is not just a novel that shows a man's voyages to unknown islands, but covers political and religious issues that occurred during the eighteenth century in England. Satire is a way of writing that not only brings laughter to the reader, but is also able to convey a historical meaning in literature as well. Swift is relevant today because he was not afraid to see corruption and write about it. Whether he used satire or humor, Swift exemplifies the political troubles England was facing because of decisions made by King George II.

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