

Society Cannot be Flat: Hierarchy and Power in *Gulliver's Travels*.

By Monica F. Jacobe

In many of his prose works, Jonathan Swift carefully establishes the persona of the narrator and fictional author, who tells whatever tale he has in mind. Swift purposefully endows these men with particular traits and backgrounds, and Lemuel Gulliver, the fictional travelogue writer of *Gulliver's Travels*, is no exception to this rule. In *The Pen is Mightier than the Whore: Imperialism and Cultural Authority in Spenser and Swift*, Lucille G. Appert uses *Gulliver's Travels* to show how Swift uses his writings to reform society; this argument, however, is fundamentally flawed because Swift satirizes Gulliver's own desire for social mobility by tormenting him with the persistence of social hierarchy. Swift controls Gulliver's voice and makes him unreliable and untrustworthy while inserting Gulliver into a variety of social situations with ever-changing conventions. Gulliver proves an excellent translator in every complicated world in which he finds himself, but he continually seeks to improve his position in the hierarchy, to be on equal footing with the characters Swift establishes as his betters. The author wins the power struggle here, denying Gulliver's attempts to change the status quo and thereby reinforcing it.

Right from the start of the text Gulliver is clearly established as a self-conscious narrator, as defined in Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; the text is fronted by notes from the "author" on the construction and publication of these tales. Gulliver's self-conscious narrative position is shown to be somewhat limited, however – he takes seriously this section of the text that the true author, Swift, makes obviously ironic. *Gulliver's Travels* even fits with Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the comic novel: one that incorporates a multiplicity of language and belief systems that are "utilized to refract the author's intentions, are unmasked and destroyed as something false" (311). Swift goes beyond the languages Bakhtin expects – those of class, gender, and ethnicity – by creating different languages and social systems and bringing his author character into them. Bakhtin adds to his explanation of the characteristics of the comic novel by explaining that the languages and belief systems the "the posited author or teller" encounters must be distanced from the true author's belief system and language in order to achieve the comic effect "on the one hand to show the object of representation in a new light (to reveal new sides or dimensions in it) and on the other hand to illuminate in a new way the

“expected” literary horizon, that horizon against which the particularities of the teller’s tale are perceivable” (Bakhtin 312-313). Swift exceeds these criteria with the construction of *Gulliver’s Travels*, as he takes great pains to establish a narrator who is starkly different from himself.

Many scholars and historians have analyzed Swift’s life and writing in an effort to annunciate his beliefs and separate them from those he espoused in his satirical works. Edward Said claims in “Swift as Intellectual” that Swift wrote in support of “the polity; the Church of England, the classics, and the monarch (those three institutions Swift believed were full comprised in the right-minded sentiments of a Church of England man)” (423). Said calls him “a traditional intellectual—a cleric” and describes him as “not well-born” and “an outsider” (431). These descriptive terms help establish Swift as someone who could view the social hierarchy from a narrowly defined position, outside of power but tasked with maintaining its structures. A minister in the Church of Ireland, Swift’s religion served as a basis for his support of the existing social structures, which came with the idea that God had placed each human in the proper position and to change that would be to work against the will of God. In *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, R.F. Foster names Swift among the primary figures of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy of the eighteenth century and makes clear that this movement came with an Anglican class consciousness that gave men like Swift position, in his case a Deanship (167-171). While Foster gives much emphasis to the anti-English feelings of the time, he notes that “Swift affected to believe that the English government always chose holy and godly Englishmen for Irish appointments, but they invariably happened to be murdered by bandits somewhere around Chester, who stole their letters of appointment and proceeded to Ireland in their stead” (174). The contradictory positions represented in this statement help explain Swift’s desire to maintain the status quo—not changing the system despite his obvious recognition of its flaws. This idea falls in line with what Foster explains as “something characteristic of the Ascendancy caste: a certain savagery of mind, amplified by the subconscious recognition of the fundamental insecurity of their political and social position” (176). Swift, therefore, needs the existing social hierarchy with all of its flaws to create the life he has while wanting it to give him more. He cannot get more out of the hierarchy and does not, which Foster and others include in his frustrations. Out of Swift’s conflicted consciousness came Lemuel Gulliver and his odd travels.

In some ways Lemuel Gulliver is like Swift but he differs greatly in his assessment of the possibilities open to him in the social hierarchy. Early on, the text makes plain to the reader that

Gulliver is a man trying to better his position in England through his voyages: “My father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the third of five sons. He sent me to Emanuel College in Cambridge . . . where I resided for three years, and applied myself close to my studies; but the charge of maintaining me (although I had a scanty allowance) was too great for a narrow fortune, I was bound apprentice to Mr. James Bates, an eminent surgeon in London” (Swift 49). In his 1953 essay, *Lemuel Gulliver: Middle-Class Englishman*, Edward A. Block calls this description “the middle-class stamp” because “if [his father] had a large estate, he would have been a member of either the upper class or the upper-middle class; if he had had no estate, he would have been a member of the lower class or the lower-middle class” (474-475). Block continues with a discussion of the context offered by Nottinghamshire as the home region of Gulliver and to analyze the content of his education at Emmanuel College, but the simple fact that Gulliver was educated and could not to continue his education is significant. Eighteenth century England was a place in which education was a key to certain positions in society, the highest positions that a man like Gulliver could achieve and the positions Swift himself both achieved and hoped for. Gulliver admits early on that he wanted a place in society that was closed off to him by lack of money. Gulliver’s continued decisions to leave home for sea voyages that better his finances and his position are related directly to this; Swift needs him to be the kind of character who will venture out for socially encouraged gains. In order to poke fun at the idea of a mobile society, Swift must begin with a character who not only believes this is possible but has reason to seek it, and Gulliver is that man, beginning neither high nor low in the social structure, wanting the hierarchical currency of education, but being prevented from attaining this goal. Instead, he becomes a sailor and a surgeon, both merit-based trades, who learns that survival and recognition can come through skill and personal achievement. In short, he is ripe for Swift’s narrative game against social mobility.

This is the man who arrives in Lilliput and is carried to the king of the tiny race of humans in Part I. Gulliver begins as a prisoner, but because his size is ultimately useful to the king, he is freed. The problem with his entrance into this new society is that while Gulliver claims to want nothing more than to be of use to the king, his actions say otherwise. He begins by learning the Lilliputian language, which is certainly to communicate, but he also pays special attention to their social customs and takes part in as many significant events as he can, even spending several pages denigrating the methods by which men win their titles and official offices

(Swift 65-67). Gulliver himself is given a title by the king, something he is proud of mostly because it means he is better than other men. He makes special note of his being of higher rank than Flimnap the Lilliputian treasurer, the enemy who ultimately gets him sent away (Swift 90). Gulliver alters the structure of the hierarchy, however, when he is ordered by the king to destroy the enemy fleet from Blefuscu. Gulliver refuses, saying he does not believe this action to be right, and finally refuses to “be an instrument of bringing a free and brave people into slavery” (Swift 79). Gulliver frames this occurrence as a fit of conscience, but in approaching this text as one in which the self-conscious narrator is operated by an author with a satiric motive, readers can connect this with the other clues Swift has dropped, including Gulliver’s desire to maintain an unstained reputation by arguing against the unrealistic rumor of his affair with a Lilliputian woman of high rank. That connection reveals Gulliver’s desire not just to “fit” into this oddly sized world but his desire to climb the social ladder and gain a position that puts him above these small people in more than physical stature. Swift’s clues are dropped intentionally, and in this first adventure, he reveals his narrator to be a man intent on bettering himself. Here, however, Gulliver’s attempt is conflated with his own ideas of “policy as well as justice” as soon as he feels comfortable in his social position. Gulliver’s attempt ultimately fails and contributes to his forced departure from Lilliput.

After a short stop over with the “enemy” people of Blefuscu, Gulliver returns to England. This first short interlude between Gulliver’s wanderings is dealt with quickly at both the end of the first book and the beginning of the second. Gulliver is careful to tell that he “was not in any danger of leaving my family upon the parish” as he had left them with a substantial sum of money and a good house, which the reader is to assume was purchased after his return (Swift 101). The reader is also told that Gulliver’s son is at school and his daughter “at her needlework,” which gives a picture of the economic status of Gulliver’s family at this time. They are people of leisure, able to afford comfortable surroundings and education. Gulliver also claims that he only stayed two months with them because of his “insatiable desire of seeing foreign countries,” but he also allows shortly after in the same passage that he went “in hopes of improving my fortunes” (Swift 101). Gulliver does not mean to improve his educational fortunes or enrich his knowledge of other lands, but to return with more money. He believes travel to be one way of finding new opportunities for his family.

Once in Brobdingnag, Gulliver's physical position is reversed from that of his first adventure as he becomes the small among the very large, and Swift uses this altered dynamic to show clearly that Gulliver's actions in Lilliput were not inspired by his physical dominance but are, in fact, a part of his nature. Here, he again learns the language quickly and is able to communicate. Again he seeks to better his position, and the first step is to "belong" to the Queen rather than a common farmer who works him too hard. Gulliver gains leisure from this transaction, in which he is actually purchased, and claims this as his motive. He even seems to congratulate himself on bettering the position of the farmer's daughter, Glumdalclitch, by bringing her to court as his caretaker. These thoughts of Gulliver's reveal his true feelings: position is of supreme importance in a social hierarchy. Why else would he be happy about taking a child away from her family to a strange place where she is a servant? Because she is now a servant in the royal court, and if one cannot be great, one can at least be near greatness. Gulliver certainly maintains that in his time in Brobdingnag and pushes beyond it in some ways, most notably in his reactions to the royal servants who care for him. Gulliver is proud to have workmen to order around and servants to carry him in whatever style he chooses. Unlike his life in Lilliput, Gulliver is powerless in this society of giants except through what power he gains by position, and Swift makes sure the reader takes note of Gulliver's belief in himself as endowed with power through the approval of royalty. This power allows Gulliver to survive, just as it did in Lilliput, but in a very different way. As a giant among the small, Gulliver would have starved without the support of the king who ordered huge meals created for him, but in Brobdingnag, when he is too small for the world around him, Gulliver would have been invisible and likely dead. He ignores the fact that the farmer rescued him once he has climbed to a higher social plane and does not acknowledge that his pride is in being treated as a well-loved pet, but readers are aware of this distinction.

After several years of living as a pampered pet in Brobdingnag, Gulliver returns to England more by accident than by choice. He closes the narration of his second adventure by emphasizing how small he sees all the things around him on his journey home (Swift 157-158). While Gulliver assumes that this problem is a result of his years among a much larger people, this conclusion does not explain his feeling himself larger than he actually is. Gulliver, however, has also come down in the world, back to a small home and family life. His wife has servants, one of whom opens the door for him upon his return, but a single servant is nothing compared to

a carefully tended life he led among the giants (Swift 157). No one carries him or sees to his every need, and no one will build a home or two to suit his needs, as the Queen had ordered done in Brobdingnag. He feels himself larger than his position in his home world because that is what he has become accustomed to. Swift emphasizes this by including Gulliver's observation that "I began to think my self in Lilliput," the place where he felt a giant among men and put himself above his allotted social position as a result (157). This mindset wears off, however, and Gulliver blames it on "the great power of habit and prejudice" (Swift 158). Gulliver's true habits are implied by Swift in these words: he has a habit of seeking higher position and various societies seem prejudiced against such an idea. Such concepts of power are also evident in Gulliver's own family, as when his wife wants him to "never go to sea anymore," and Gulliver announces "she had not power to hinder me" (Swift 158). Despite having encountered two societies that placed him into their hierarchies and allowed little room for movement, Gulliver allows himself to be lured to sea when Captain William Robinson, with whom he has sailed before, offers him "to be surgeon of the ship; that I should have another surgeon under me besides our two mates; that my salary should be double to the usual pay; and that having experienced my knowledge in sea-affairs to be at least equal to his, he would enter into any engagement to follow my advice, as much as if I shared the command" (Swift 160). A social climbing man of Gulliver's cast could never refuse such an offer, as it gives him power, increased position, and more money.

In this third adventure, Swift sets Gulliver down among people of his own size, eliminating the physicality of the power dynamics from the first two parts. Tossed into a world of equal size and footing, Gulliver is armed with his awareness and ability to understand and translate the world around him, demonstrated clearly in his earlier adventures, and need not fear for his physical needs in quite the same ways as in Lilliput and Brobdingnag. His own values and goals have not changed, however, and he approaches each of the societies in this section with a desire to insert himself into the social hierarchy at the highest possible position and move up. However, Laputa is a place where the people place value on the kinds of knowledge he does not possess—"His Majesty discovered not the least curiosity to enquire into the laws, government, history, religion, or manners of the countries where I had been, but confined his questions to the state of mathematics, and received the account I gave him with great contempt and indifference, though often roused by his flapper on each side" (Swift 171). They do not care

that Gulliver can learn other languages quickly, only their own, and they do not care that he survived a pirate attack and a long journey between many islands before coming to them. Gulliver's dissatisfaction with them continues, and he again thinks poorly of the king's ways of governing. This problem can be explained in a number of ways, but it becomes all the more interesting when coupled with the fact that Gulliver converses primarily with people of the lower orders in Laputa, as they are the only inhabitants to converse regularly. In this third adventure, Gulliver cannot climb the social hierarchy because they do not value his way of thinking, his knowledge, or his skills. As such, he leaves the court quickly but spends time in Lagado, the central metropolis of Balnibarbi, trying to understand this society so he can be valued in it. There, he meets Lord Munodi, a former governor of Lagado who has been cast out among his people for thinking differently. Lord Munodi's thinking falls much in line with the things Gulliver knows and values beyond higher-level thinking; he is a man who wants his land to yield crops and his workers to be well fed and productive. He opens the doors of Laputan society to Gulliver, allowing him to see the Grand Academy, where he himself is not welcome for his difference. Gulliver here finally assesses the values of this foreign land and determines he can find no place in it, no hierarchy that allows him any mobility at all.

Before heading home again via Japan, Gulliver visits Glubbdubdrib, an island here where magic and mysticism are valued. He finds great value and entertainment in the powers possessed by the governor there and has him call up great men from Western history, claiming he desires "scenes of pomp and magnificence," but also learning from the men recognized as the greatest thinkers in history (Swift 197). Swift's purpose in including this side trip is to communicate something in Gulliver's character, and it is meaningful that Gulliver chooses Alexander the Great, Caesar, Pompey, Descartes, Agrippa, Antony, and others. Gulliver wants readers to know that he is educated and values history and government, but in context of Gulliver's own history of social climbing these scenes emphasize his desire for greatness and association with greatness. Not possessing these powers himself, however, and already bound for home, Gulliver leaves this island after a short visit to return to a social system that can accommodate him.

After a short stop at the court of Luggnagg, Gulliver does return home, and "continued at home with my wife and children about five months in a very happy condition, if I could have learned the lesson of knowing when I was well" (Swift 217). The conclusion of this last sentence seems less like Gulliver's voice and more like Swift's. Gulliver is again in the

comfortable house in Redriff, his wife becomes pregnant, but he chooses to leave to “accept an advantageous offer . . . to be captain of the *Adventure*” (Swift 217). The Gulliver who has been narrating these tales would certainly make this choice and not regret it, and at no point does he become a man who would say that he should have been happy and never left home again for his fourth voyage. Frederick N. Smith would place the sneaking of this sentence onto the page among the ways Swift “does not permit his narrator to push his characteristically shifting voices off the page,” but makes assessments of the world through Gulliver that he himself would never make (391). This idea is made especially clear when Gulliver’s men on the *Adventure* mutiny and put him out to sea. Are readers to assume that Gulliver was an overbearing captain? Gulliver does not tell us, but he does say of another captain whose ship was lost at sea that “he was an honest man, and a good sailor, but a little too positive in his own opinions, which was the cause of his destruction, as it hath been of several others. For if he had followed my advice, he might at this time have been at home with his family, as well as myself” (Swift 217-218). In the same breath, Gulliver tells readers that overconfidence can bring great trouble and is himself overly confident. The message is clear: Gulliver’s downfall is his certainty about his perceptions of the world. Hence, his men rebel, and he loses all the potential profit from this trip, left only with the uncertainty of adventure.

The fourth and final stage in Gulliver’s adventures finds him in a place where humans are savage creatures with no logic, controlled and owned by rational horses called Houyhnhnms. Gulliver begins his movement in this new country just like all the others, trying to read the social conventions and understand the basics of the language to ask for food and drink. However, Houyhnhnm society is based in family units first but second in a common kindness and acceptance of all individuals, so Gulliver does not have a social structure to climb. It is worth noting that this is the only chapter without a monarchy for Gulliver to serve, but Swift does not remove such social boundaries to write against them. He is forcing Gulliver into a place where position is clearly defined by structures he cannot be a part of, even though those structures, made evident by Gulliver’s ultimate banishment, are neatly veiled in equality. Gulliver is moderately rational, as his Houyhnhnm master tells him several times, and is tolerated as such for most of this piece of the narrative, even though he is a Yahoo or irrational beast. This fact is something Gulliver is shocked by and even seeks to hide from the Houyhnhnms with his clothing, certainly because it would cast him into the lowest position possible in this society.

Ultimately, he confesses to being a rational Yahoo and begins explaining some of the history and politics of Europe to his Houyhnhnm master, hoping for admiration and recognition of the great things of which humans are capable. Instead, these stories are met with shock and confusion, as the Houyhnhnm finds no logic or sense in the government structures and intrigues Gulliver describes: “he said, whoever understood the vile nature of yahoos might easily believe it possible for so vile an animal to be capable of every action I had named, if their strength and cunning equaled their malice” (Swift 239). Through exchanges like this, Gulliver begins to see human society and its structures differently, which alters his thinking about hierarchy at last. This shift in thinking coupled with Gulliver’s growing hatred of the Yahoos result in a deep dislike of humanity and the human condition. He much prefers the society of the Houyhnhnms. Unfortunately, this seemingly equal society does have a governing body and social order, and the ruling Houyhnhnms view Gulliver as a threat. He must leave his master and his re-education to return home, which he does out of feelings of duty and obedience. He accepts the social order and its effect on him. This final stroke is Swift’s victory: Gulliver admires a social system that does not allow mobility and does not let him in. Michael McKeon claims this is “the industrious virtue of the progressive protagonist pushed to its limits, so that it breaks open to reveal an ugly core” (179). Gulliver sees the ugly core of humanity, never attributing such characteristics to the Houyhnhnms, and the conclusion of this narrative finds Gulliver at home, continuing his disgust with human beings and conversing only with horses. As such, he has no more concern for the social order or bettering his position in the hierarchy. Frank Palmeri wrongly considers this a representation Gulliver’s belief that he is a “truth teller caught in a society saturated with lies,” but the simple truth is that Gulliver sees the lies and falseness in society and stops participating in the social climbing to which such a society pushes him (242).

Gulliver’s travels change him from a man who wants nothing more than to advance up the social ladder to a man who wants to talk only with horses. He is not insane, as his family assumes, but he has been driven from his long-held values, which are shared by many in his English homeland. Swift has made Gulliver see the impossibility of social change, the rational need for order, and the essential function of established hierarchy. This shift reinforces the problems of social mobility for both the self-conscious narrator, Gulliver, and the reader. The satire that underwrites this text, and the separation of author and character, make this possible. Swift moves Gulliver from place to place, language to language, and social system to social

system to show the reader how his desire to gain wealth, power, and position gradually increase only to be taken apart when he looks at human nature from the outside. Lucille Appert claims that Swift “sees [his] writing as a means of reforming society,” but here the subject of reform is Gulliver himself (55).

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