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#### Recommended Citation

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18th CENTURY POLITICAL SATIRE AS EXEMPLIFIED  
BY JONATHAN SWIFT THROUGH GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

by

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English Special Studies

for

Dr. Gilbert Morris

December 14, 1970

18th Century Political Satire As Exemplified  
By Jonathan Swift Through Gulliver's Travels

During the seventy-eight years of Jonathan Swift's life, from 1667 to 1745, English satire was in its heyday. The stinging bite of the pen became recognized as one of the strongest political weapons, and those who possessed the natural gift of creating this weapon were sought high and low by those who desired to sway public opinion. There are really three main reasons why this period, in particular, was an age of satire. "First, it was a time of radically changing values, when intensely held convictions were in conflict with each other, and a new world order was emerging. Second, a new style of writing developed that made a most effective satiric instrument. It was the style advocated by the new science which required a simple, plain, clear, expository vehicle to describe the experiments of the newly formed Royal Society, which ironically enough, was the target of some of Swift's most biting satire. As Dryden once said, "With its neat clean strokes, satire could cut off a man's head without knocking it from his shoulders." And Third, politicians became aware for the first time that the writer, especially the satirist, could be a powerful weapon against the opposition." Political parties courted him. He acquired new dignity and status within the close-knit coffee house society of London. Yes, the satirist's influence was considerable, and Jonathan Swift was one of the most influential satirists of this period.

England in the 1680's found herself in a political and religious uproar. A party system of government was ushered in by the two opposing factions of Whigs and Tories, each party with its own pamphleteers, and each causing as much trouble as possible for the other party. Also there arose a great conflict between the Church of England, usually associated with the Tories, and a proliferation of Protestant sects who were associated with the Whigs.

As is typical of most young men who are coming to their own at the approximate age of twenty, Swift, with all his solutions to the problems of the world, jumped feet first into the first issue that came his way. In his first political conflict, he discovered that the pen truly is mightier than the sword, and that he possessed a pen with enough satirical ink to catch the eyes of many a political-minded English gent.

Jonathan Swift spent most of his life fighting the inevitable trend of history, pointing his satire at the secular, mechanical tendencies of the new order "because he felt that spirituality was dwindling as the world grew older." He was born in Ireland, but moved to England with the Whig statesman Sir William Temple, who he served as secretary. In England he entered holy orders and grew to be a deeply religious man, entirely devoted to the Church. He moved back to Ireland and began writing on political and religious issues, and gained some influence with the Whig Party leaders. However, when the Whigs failed to support him in a mission representation of the Irish Church, he became disenchanted with their cause, and joined forces with the leaders of the Tory faction who came to power around 1710, and who recognized Swift's political value as a writer. From 1710, until

the Tory government fell in 1714, Swift, by the sheer force of his personality, his wit, and his incisive prose, became one of the most powerful men in England. Swift was in his prime during this period when his motto was "vive la bagatelle". He was a leading spirit of the delightful group called the Scriblerus Club, whose purpose was "to attack the pretensions of the world, particularly its art and science." When the Tory government collapsed, Swift returned to Ireland to remain for the next thirty years in "exile" as he called it. He became involved in the cause of Ireland, and was very active in trying to improve her "wretched Condition." During this period, he wrote a number of tracts, and other outstanding works in which he condemned the oppressive measures of English government. Through this he made himself revered throughout Ireland as a hero, and remains so, even today. As he grew older, he became more and more bitter and pessimistic, until in 1742, he was declared of unsound mind and several years later died in this sad condition. However, Swift can not be passed off as a psychotic mad man, nor can his writings be regarded as mere irrationalities from one insane mind. Although Swift was not the most popular man in town, he was of sound mind during most of his lifetime, and his writings are as rational and lucid as most any other writer in our literary history. However, his life was "a mass of contradictions, and all these contradictions made life a heart-breaking adventure for him." Any "madness" on his part, was merely the action of a poor lonely man who suffered a great deal, and who could only vent out his sufferings in the form of biting words pointed accusingly at the society which had so much abused and rejected him.

To Swift, satire was a method of "mending the World as far as he was able," even though his satire never did a great deal to reform the world as is evidenced in the fact that the Royal Society has had a long and flourishing life, despite Gulliver's Travels. As Gulliver wrote to his Cousin Sympson: ". . . behold, after above six months warning, I cannot learn that my book hath produced one single effect according to my intentions. Swift's most effective and climactic satiric image was the yahoo who so ruefully represents the nature of man which he feels is basically evil. This as well as other satiric devices employed in Gulliver's Travels, will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Lemuel Gulliver is Swift's noble traveller who in the course of the entire book wanders upon four strange and uncharted countries. Each of these countries is vividly described by Gulliver, our narrator, in a separate book, of which all four descriptions make up one whole book.

In book one, Gulliver awakens in a land where the inhabitants are no more than six inches tall, and who have made this towering giant their prisoner. After living with these tiny beings awhile in Lilliput, he begins to view with alarm their decadent society. This corruption seems to stem from the basic moral defect of the Lilliputians, their pride. Their monarch possesses absolute power, and any personal advancements on the part of his subjects come from their agility to please him, not from any considerations of real merit. They are rewarded for their ability to dance on ropes, crawl under sticks, and other methods of losing their dignity in order to win the approval of the king, whose pride has blinded him to his own limitations. The monarch only seeks more

proof of his absolute power as is shown when he insists on Gulliver's assistance in subjugating his Blefusudian foes. Swift takes a swipe at all monarchs and "great men", George I. in particular, whose positions of authority have blinded them to the fact that they are still men. Through the smallness of these little people who possess so much pride, Swift points out how ludicrous we all are if we take ourselves and our pretensions too seriously, because what are we in relation to the universe? The rope dancing scene is a reflection on the corruption of the political life of the Whig party in which the performers can only have political reward by performing tricks. It is generally accepted that the proficient rope dancer represents the Whig Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, "who was detested by Swift, and who is notorious for basing his political strategy upon bribery and favoritism."

The political feuding between the High Heels and the Low Heels is another representation of the decadent English society which had been divided by the Whig and Tory parties. Ultimately, Swift seems to be saying in book I, that pride breeds corruption, corruption is bred into Society, and a corrupt society breeds corrupt men.

Swift turns the tables on Gulliver, and in Book II, we find him in a nation of giants. Throughout Book I the reader could share a condescending view of the Lilliputians with Gulliver, because in reading, we tend to identify with Gulliver who is the epitome of mankind compared to the tiny barbarians found in Book I. However, in Book II, Gulliver is dwarfed by the Brobdingnags, and the reader finds that he, along with Gulliver,

is to the Brobdingnags what the Lilliputians were to Gulliver. To these giants, Gulliver is a cute toy, and he is continually trying to assert himself enough to prove his worth. In this new land, Gulliver's very life is threatened by a rat, he is rendered helpless by the playful pranks of a pet monkey, and he is continually humiliated by a dwarf in the king's court. Actually, Gulliver is repulsed by the skin and other physical aspects of the Brobdingnags, who strangely enough, are not repulsed by each other. This seems to indicate that we humans only view things according to what we are accustomed, and it is only pride that convinces of our unsurpassed beauty. The King of Brobdingnag views Gulliver's reports of fights between Whigs and Tories, Englishmen and Frenchmen, Protestants and Catholics with more than disgust when Gulliver tries to impress him with facts about his "civilized homeland". Time and time again, Gulliver closes his mind to the wisdom and achievement of the Brobdingnags when they are in conflict with his British Background. His foolish pride is only another example of human vanity. In contrast, the King's virtue is his lack of pride, and his awareness of the limitations of mankind. Therefore, he is horrified when Gulliver describes gunpowder to him, for he understands that such a dangerous weapon could be catastrophic in the hands of so imperfect a creature as man. He will not accept such a dangerous gift, even though it means the control over his people could give him increased power. This is quite an ironic contrast to the King of Lilliput. Here, Swift is saying that only when a monarch possesses absolute and arbitrary power, do we find such outrages as rope dancing, and crawling



under sticks as a means to political advancement. Swift also takes a blaring swipe at British government, as Gulliver makes a desperate attempt to preserve his dignity by describing his government as it would be ideally, rather than how it actually was. This, plus the just practicality of the Brobdingagian government, are brilliant examples of how Swift would ideally have his society be.

Gulliver wanders upon the floating island of Laputa in Book III. As he climbs up on it, he is amazed to find the island inhabited by strange people, absurdly dressed in long robes, studded with figures of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. These people are terribly absent minded, and must be prodded to speak by special servants called "flappers". They are a race of mathematicians, astronomers, and musicians. Their very existence is so preoccupied with facts, that they are terribly impractical bores, and even their wives cannot tolerate them. Gulliver is let down from this island to visit the land of Balnibarbi, where the people lead a wretched life as a result of the despotic rule of the Laputans. There he meets Count Munodi who is a social outcast because of his rational way of doing things. From Munodi, Gulliver learns of the Projectors who devote their lives to devising foolish schemes such as; attempting to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, convert human excrement back into food, and develop a breed of naked sheep. Leaving Balnibarbi, Gulliver visits the island of Glubbdubbdrub where he meets a magician who summons spirits of the classical past, and those of modern Europe. Here, Gulliver is struck by the inferiority of the modern world as compared to the world of the ancients, and he is horrified at the cruelty and crime

of human history. Next, Gulliver visits the island of Luggnagg where he meets the Struldbruggs, a race of immortals. At first he is enraptured at the thought of immortality, but when he sees these people, he leaves disgusted because, although they live on forever, they continue to age. Here he becomes aware that eternal life is a foolish dream, for it is worth nothing without eternal youth.

Although there is very little political satire in Book III, Swift does use a great deal of strong social satire. He is largely concerned with investigating human pride as it manifests itself in man's scientific pursuits. In it he lashes out at the Royal Society which had its beginning during Swift's lifetime. He tries to show that science is not a moral pursuit, "that it alienates one from the real values of life, and ultimately leads to moral madness." Through the constant preoccupation of the scientists, the reader is made aware that by keeping one's eyes on the heavens, he cannot see to live his life here on earth. In reference to the relationship between Balnibarbi and Laputa, Swift gets in a bit of political satire, as he refers to the contemporary relations between England and Ireland at that time. During his life, Swift was particularly concerned about England's power to reduce Ireland to virtual slavery.

Through Book III, Swift applauds traditional wisdom, because he realizes that man's intellect alone is not enough to deal with all of man's problems, while he spurns man's search for unnecessary knowledge, and his tendency to overlook the limitations of his intellect through science.

In Book IV, Gulliver wanders upon the "Land of the Houyhnhnms." Here Swift introduces his two most striking satirical devices in metaphorizing man: the Houyhnhnms and the yahoos. In this land, Swift quickly learns that a strangely wondrous type of horses rule the land. They are reasonable creatures of supreme rationality, and Gulliver is tremendously dismayed when the Houyhnhnms consider him to be a "yahoo", which is the name for the ugly, uncivilized creatures who run wild in this land. However, Gulliver learns to communicate with the horses, and he decides to spend the rest of his life with the Houyhnhnms after growing more and more disgusted with the sight of the despicable yahoos, and consequently, losing faith in the entire human race. When Gulliver is informed that he must leave the land of the Houyhnhnms, because they are afraid that his basic yahoo tendencies will corrupt the other yahoos, he goes into a faint. His mind becomes so deranged that when he returns home to England, he cannot tolerate the presence of any human, even the members of his own family.

Swift's bitter satire is rampant in Book IV. Perhaps it is so biting because he stays away from commenting on the beliefs and behavior of man as he had done in the first three books, while he concentrates all his efforts on human nature itself. In this book particularly, Swift attempts to find a definition of man. He therefore places Gulliver in the middle of two extremes: the impossible perfection of the Houyhnhnms, and the impossible degradation of the yahoos. Gulliver sees the yahoos as a grotesque replica of man without reason,

the Houyhnhnms as glorified saints, and he fails to realize that man, in actuality falls somewhere in between the two. Swift tries to point out that man is not perfect, nor can he achieve perfection, but neither is he such a degenerate that he cannot live a decent life. Swift teaches that man can live the kind of good life attainable by humanity, if he only realizes his limitations and overcomes his basic sin of pride. The impractical Gulliver loses his mind because he cannot accept his inability to obtain absolute perfection. Ironically, he is guilty of the same sin of pride which he so detested in the Lilliputians, and his pride in striving for perfection only proves how imperfect man really is.

In many ways, Gulliver's Travels is a difficult book to read. Volumes have been written about what Swift really meant when he used certain satirical images, but I am sure that some meanings, no matter how expounded upon by so many pseudo-intellectuals, are only realized by Swift himself. Another difficulty found in reading this book, is that some of his ideas which are most obvious, contradict many of the basic assumptions of our lives. Many of the things to which we are accustomed and even enjoy, are viciously attacked by Swift in this work. His analysis of such things as science, politics, economics, etc., is very different from what ours would be today. Perhaps this is what makes Gulliver's Travels such an important book for us. It was written when our modern world was just being born, and Swift was not happy with what he saw coming, so he attacked it in every way literarily possible to him. The result was a book " which helps us measure our achievements, our failures, and our predicaments against those of another age and another set of values."