



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

**Jonathan Swift**

**and the Politics of *Gulliver's Travels***

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

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**Jonathan Swift**  
**and the Politics of *Gulliver's Travels***

**B.A. Essay**

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## Summary

This essay takes a look at the politics involved in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and compares events in the story to events in contemporary British history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It discusses why the story of Gulliver's travels has been enjoyed by generations of readers and if it has relevance to today's society. In the first chapter Swift's background is discussed and how he came to work in the church. In the following chapter a brief synopsis is given of the stories in question. The third chapter focuses on Swift's own political views and what it is that he is writing about and criticizing. The fourth chapter discusses his technique of writing a satire and how he applies it to *Gulliver's Travels*. Some events and their significance are inspected in the fifth chapter as well as some of Swift's peculiar inclusions in the book and its appeal. The last chapter takes a look at the political significance of the book and how it reflected actual events in British politics at the time.

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## Introduction

This essay discusses the books *Gulliver in Lilliput* and *Gulliver in Brobdingnag*, the first two parts of the four-part story *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of several Ships*. It emphasizes the political context in which the books are written and how the story reflects on events in contemporary British politics as well as Jonathan Swift's view of those events. The whole story combined in the four books is about the morality and fallibility of man, but the morality of man in politics is mostly looked at in the first two books, which is why the essay is concentrated on these two books. As well as criticizing the political institutions, the books address the reader, trying to make him an active part of the story. The main part of the essay is about the politics in the stories, however, and to understand the points that Swift is making and criticizing it is important to take a look at Jonathan Swift himself, his life and experiences, as well as the background of the stories. It is also necessary to look at Swift's political views even though they are not quite clear. This has sparked much debate between scholars who have written a great deal on the subject. Why has a story about his contemporary politics been so successful even for modern readers and viewers? Is the story of *Gulliver's Travels* still relevant today, and do the politics reflect on the politics of today's society?

## Swift's Background

Jonathan Swift was born a Protestant in Dublin on November 30<sup>th</sup> 1667. His father, whose name was also Jonathan, was a trained lawyer and moved to Ireland seeking better fortunes as his father had lost almost everything in the Civil War. In 1664 Jonathan the elder married Abigail Erick and while she was carrying their son, he passed away. Jonathan Swift and his mother moved in with his uncle Godwin Swift after the death of his father.<sup>1</sup> His nurse grew so very fond of him that she stole him away from his mother and did not return him until 3 years later, much to his mother's joy. Swift never knew the security of a real home and he blamed his insecurity for all the misfortune he had to deal with in his life.<sup>2</sup> When Jonathan was six years old, he was sent to Kilkenny College and his mother returned to England so she would not be a burden on Godwin Swift. Provided for by his uncle, he studied there until the age of fourteen, and was then sent to Trinity College in 1682, where his uncle barely provided for him and later Swift declared that his uncle "gave me the education of a dog".<sup>3</sup> He failed two of his three subjects on his way to a bachelor degree, but the shock of this stimulated him to study harder than ever, so he studied for eight hours a day for seven years afterwards. He stayed at Trinity, for his master's degree, often getting into trouble with school authorities and being punished regularly. In 1689 when King James entered Ireland after being dethroned in England, the college authorities gave all members of Trinity permission to withdraw from school on grounds of security. Swift then moved to England, first to his mother and then later he took office with Sir William Temple at his house in Moor Park.<sup>4</sup> At Moor Park he met a young girl named Hester Johnson, who he called Stella. Swift helped her with her studies, but this girl would influence and inspire Swift in his writing for most of her life. Some have speculated that they secretly got married later, as she moved to Ireland to be closer to him.

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<sup>1</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Jonathan Swift. A Critical Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Glendinning, *Jonathan Swift. A Portrait* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Murry, 15

<sup>4</sup> Murry, 15-16.

Swift spent three periods at the Temple's household between 1689 and 1699, and between his second and third stay at Moor Park, he was ordained as a priest. When Sir William died in 1699 he was appointed vicar of Laracor and so his days in the church began. When King William III died in 1702, Swift took the degree of Doctor of Divinity and was from then on known as Dr. Swift. He was on an official mission from the Church of Ireland to Queen Anne between 1704 and 1709, but his first known writing, *A Tale of a Tub*, was published in 1704 which brought him some fame and respect from accomplished writers and government officials. In 1710 he became employed by the government of Queen Anne as a publicist and propagandist. Swift never met the Queen, though, as she and her advisors disliked his writing and did not trust a priest who seemed sceptical of the existence of God.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Brief Synopsis**

*Gulliver in Lilliput* starts as a normal travel narrative with Gulliver describing himself and his life so far to the reader. He tells us of his intension of travelling and how he got a position as a surgeon on board ship. He sailed for a while before settling in London, marrying and starting a business that ultimately failed. The failure of his business prompts him to return to the sea where the adventure and real story begins. His ship sailed into a rock and sank while he got away and finds himself shipwrecked on an island. Weary with battling the elements, Gulliver falls asleep on the ground at the island only to awake to find himself tied up. He then sees small figures all around him and realizes that his captors are small humanlike creatures. Gulliver surrenders himself to them and the Emperor of the island has him moved to the capital, where he is bound to an ancient temple which is only just big enough to house him. The Emperor appointed teachers for Gulliver to learn the language which he slowly does. Gulliver gets in the Emperor's favour because of his manners and receives permission to

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<sup>5</sup> Glendinning, 11-13.



travel freely with some restrictions though, such as not to enter the city. He has multiple conversations with the Emperor and the nobility and describes everything he sees with much detail, comparing the differences with his native England. Gulliver goes on to describe his stay on the island and what he does while he is there, how he prevents an invasion and a fire by his sheer physicality, and is given the highest honour for this by the Emperor. He then describes how he fell from favour with the Emperor and was impeached, so he makes his escape to the neighbouring island of Blefuscu where he is celebrated. However, Gulliver has growing doubts about these small people and wishes to get home. He gets lucky as a small boat washes ashore and he makes his way from the Kingdom of Blefuscu. He had with him some provisions and a few of the miniature cattle and is rescued at sea by a passing ship which in turn returns him to his native England. He then tells us that he made some money by displaying his small animals from his previous journey and that he only stayed in England for two months. He sells his cattle and heads out for another adventure. On his second journey, the ship is carried off the intended course by a great storm. At last they see a land and Gulliver is one of the people who go ashore for provisions. However, he is left behind when a giant scares the others, who flee on the boat. Gulliver is captured and brought to a farmer who takes him in. He gives descriptions of all the large things around him and his troubles with it as well as battling with rats. The farmer's daughter becomes fond of Gulliver and teaches him the language and takes care of him. The farmer finds a way to make a profit of displaying Gulliver to his fellow countrymen and brings him on the road to small towns and to the capital. The Queen of this land, Brobdingnag, learns of this peculiar being and has Gulliver bought from the farmer. Gulliver is brought to the King and has conversations with him, giving him great descriptions of his native England and Europe in hopes that the King can utilize some of the knowledge from Gulliver's society. Swift describes to the reader all the things Gulliver witnesses in the country and the country's political system compared to

England's. He has several adventures, which he describes, most stemming from his littleness. These adventures, such as quarrelling with the Queen's dwarf, almost being squashed by an apple, playing with boats and houses specially built for him and being carried off by a monkey, are all described in detail. He also tells the reader how his relative size makes him see the ugliness of many things from this perspective of being much smaller than usual and of the many defects he can find with the Brobdingnagians. He grows homesick and as luck would have it, he is carried away by a bird and dropped into the sea, where he is saved by a passing ship. He returns to England and tells of his difficulty to adjust to normal sized society again, shouting everything he says and finding everything very small, before telling us that he is heading out for a third voyage.<sup>6</sup>

### Swift's Politics

“But I confess that after I had been a little too copious in talking of my own beloved country, of our trade and wars by sea and land, of our schisms in religion and parties in the state, the prejudices of his education prevailed so far that he could not forbear taking me up in his right hand, and stroking me gently with the other, after an hearty fit of laughing, asked me whether I were a Whig or a Tory.”<sup>7</sup>

Swift did not answer that question in the story and maybe that is a shining example of Swift himself. Modern scholars have pondered that question and he has been presented as both. To further complicate the subject some have argued with great credibility that Swift switched party allegiance and was a Whig at the time Queen Anne took office but was a Tory

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<sup>6</sup> A brief summary of the first two parts of *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Swift, “Part 2. A Voyage to Brobdingnag” in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, gen. ed. M.H. Abrams (New York and London: Norton & Company, 2001), 1027.

when she died. These scholars tend to disagree on the subject and find evidence to support their own theories. The three most accepted theories are that he was either a post-Revolutionary Tory who, at a brief point, due to circumstances, was associated with the Whigs; that he was a political figure who included elements of both parties and it is not possible to identify him with either party; or that he was a Whig in state politics, though he was inclined towards the Tory administration of 1710-1714. He himself professed at one point that he was a “Whig in politics” but a “High-churchman” in religion.<sup>8</sup> When Gulliver has his conversation with the King of Brobdingnag, he reports proudly of his government and their doings, Swift cleverly putting the right words in the mouth of the King when he asks Gulliver the hard questions and reports through them the corruption in the government. This satiric report seems to categorize Swift as an ideological Whig who feels that the government has been corrupted after the Revolution by men like Sir Robert Walpole.<sup>9</sup>

When Swift was accused of having switched party allegiance from Whig to Tory, he claimed he was an idiosyncratic figure and that there was no real difference between the essential principles of the Whigs and the Tories. He claimed he was a bipartisan and only by circumstances had he been more associated with one party than the other.<sup>10</sup> Swift did, however, accept the fact that a man had to take sides. He had to wipe out his preconceived notions of the parties and choose the best principles of the policy to work with, without entirely dismissing the other.<sup>11</sup> He became a Tory propagandist between 1710 and 1714, started to show some Jacobite tendencies and associated with a number of people suspected of being Jacobites. During the reign of the Whigs in the Hanoverian period Swift was critical of the Whigs’ principles especially towards the church and towards Ireland. Still his view was that the subjects of the Monarch owed him a passive allegiance and that the post-

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Higgins, *Swift's Politics. A Study in Disaffection* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 1-3.

<sup>9</sup> Higgins, 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Higgins, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Williams, *Jonathan Swift and the Age of Compromise* (London: University of Kansas Press, 1959), 100.

Revolutionary government was in their right and that it was not lawful to resist the monarch unless in extreme cases.<sup>12</sup> He stood by these convictions, though he was opposed to a Roman Catholic monarch succeeding King James II. This does not mean that he was a Jacobite, but rather shows his radical political writing, even after he had become a man of the church and taken oaths to the post Revolution monarchs and declared himself “a loyal Whig”.<sup>13</sup> It would be reckless to take this as a holy truth, as contemporary writers often needed to be cautious and adapt to circumstances in order not to be taken as traitors to the government. Swift knew it would be dangerous to doubt the monarch’s right to the throne or be associated with the Jacobites.<sup>14</sup> Swift did not want to leave England but had to flee to Ireland after the death of Queen Anne in 1714. His friends within the government got him the Deanery of St. Patrick’s in Dublin. It was not the big office he wanted but the best he could get.<sup>15</sup> He burnt many of his letters from years before as he knew that the new government suspected him of being a Jacobite Tory. He then sent letters to his friends and told them not to write to him about affairs of state. He also said that he was not a political man and that the post office did open mail in attempts to find dissenters. Indeed he felt that the Hanoverian Whig regime was a tyranny and subtly carried on criticizing the government through his writing; all the while, Swift never called himself a Tory.<sup>16</sup> He wrote and got *Gulliver’s Travels*, a satire of England’s state of politics, published in 1726 and his final visits to England came in that year and the year after. Even though he saw himself as an exile in Ireland, he battled for the rights of Ireland as evident in two of his other major works, *The Drapier’s Letters* and *A Modest Proposal*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Higgins, 7-9.

<sup>13</sup> Higgins, 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Higgins, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Glendinning, 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Higgins, 16-18.

<sup>17</sup> Glendinning, 13.

Swift put his faith more in the individual than the political party. He believed that politics were just a matter of a few principles and the individual in power needed to have enough good sense and morality to be trusted.<sup>18</sup>

### **Style of Writing**

It had been speculated that *Gulliver's Travels* had been written somewhere between 1715-1720, but when the letters from Swift to Charles Ford were discovered, the book was finally revealed to have been written between 1721 and 1726. Ford seems to be Swift's only confidant about his writing of the books and he wrote him regularly about his progress. He started writing a contribution of his friend's memoirs (Martin Scriblerus), some years before. He took it up again in 1721 as the first sketch of *Gulliver's Travels*, perhaps influenced by Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, which first appeared in 1719.<sup>19</sup> As Swift discloses in the letter, he started writing the books in 1721, the early Hanoverian period. In the time he wrote this letter he also showed his loyalty to the Tory party and what anti-government writers could get away with writing. He still defied the government by his writing at the time, even though the Whig party were actively prosecuting writers for treason.<sup>20</sup> He knew, however, that what he was writing was controversial enough to warrant punishment, so he therefore published under a pseudonym and got the publisher to "plea the case of ignorance" about its author.<sup>21</sup> This shows that he had good reason to write under a pseudonym, and even though he might have enjoyed that secrecy and mystery, he would have been very concerned about the reception of this political satire. He was a man of the church and was not supposed to object to and defy the government in this way. He knew that some of his friends had been made to suffer for their writings and publishing, both in England and his native Ireland. In spite of this, he

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, 100-101.

<sup>19</sup> Murry, 329-30.

<sup>20</sup> Higgins, 144-46.

<sup>21</sup> Higgins, 153.

complained about omissions in the original publishing of *Gulliver's Travels* by writing the “pre-story” letter *A letter from Capt. Gulliver, to his Cousin Sympson*. This clearly shows the conditions at the time that *Gulliver's Travels* was written and published.<sup>22</sup>

Swift's style of writing a satire is of assuming a personality that differs slightly from his own. He escapes from his role as a man of the church and it gives him the opportunity to write more freely what he wants to stress to the public. He uses his main character and narrator, Gulliver in this instance, as a puppet for him to manipulate and express the points he wants to make, even though one aspect of his irony is indirection. One feels more in touch with his main character as such because of how convincing and ingrained he is in the story. The value of using his character this way is not just to make Swift hide his real self, but rather to reveal better and without prejudice, his opinions. The disguise of character enables him to exaggerate, or put his emphasis on his own opinions with more ease and this therefore suits his intentions perfectly. The thought that is expressed within Gulliver from the writing is a conscious one of the struggles of the “nature of experience”. Swift's writing is of much intellectual thought towards the nature of man, but it does not produce any simple and concrete answers to the problems he addresses.<sup>23</sup>

Swift writes in such a manner that the reader becomes aware of an intertwining joyfulness and severity where it is often hard to recognize the difference between the opinions of the narrator and Swift himself. The narration is very self-conscious and gives the reader a feeling of closeness with the author. The narrator's existence is strongly felt by his speech directly towards the reader from which the real author makes his strong presence known from behind the fictional narrator.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Higgins, 158-59.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, 10-12.

<sup>24</sup> C.J. Rawson, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader, Studies in Swift and our Time* (London and Boston; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 2-3.

Swift's method of drawing in the reader is not to get his sympathy or friendship, but to alienate and cause a feeling of uneasiness which makes his writing different from most other parody writers. This aggressiveness is a constant in Swift's satires so the tone of the stories is always felt and it makes them Swiftian so to speak. One example of this is how long the accounts are of bodily functions and the discharge of excrement in *Gulliver's Travels*, for Swift has been accused of filthiness in his writing which did not seem proper for a priest. Some say it was to stir up feelings in the reader, to promote cleanliness, or simply to mock the enlisting of details of travel writers. *Gulliver's Travels* is more than a parody of travel writing and goes beyond that to satirise human pride and the politics of man, and that's where the main focus of the book lies.<sup>25</sup>

"True Satire", Mr Middleton Murry has said, "implies the condemnation of Society by reference to an Ideal"<sup>26</sup> However, Swift does not use this kind of satire in *Gulliver's Travels*. He uses what seems to be a flawed society to a same extent as ours, but an exaggerated version of it to show the reader what is so horribly wrong with our society. Swift's method of satire in the story is to take familiar conditions and put them forth as strange to the reader (or Gulliver in this context) as if he was seeing it for the first time. By making the reader see these familiar conditions, he jumps right in with his judgment only to see the likeness to his own system.

Swift uses the satiric device of size and the difference thereof, as his basis for the first two books. This proved to be very successful in the eighteenth century at the time of the telescope and microscope. Everything can be seen with more detachment, and be looked at in a closer more interesting range if it is magnified or shrunk. This "Relative size" concept, which Swift played with, is really appropriate at the time where man is discovering all those tiny things around him. Man was no longer sure of his place in the world or as the centre of

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<sup>25</sup> Rawson, 5-7.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, 101-104.

the universe and Swift plays masterfully with this insecurity of man, representing it in the size difference of Gulliver and his captors and the subtle comparison of humans and insects. Swift went even further in the second book where the King, after he had heard Gulliver's account of his people, remarks that most of them sound like horrible harmful vermin.<sup>27</sup> The difference in size also makes it easier to emphasize man's mental and intellectual qualities and to contrast those between people to see that they are dependent on their relative size and situation. Gulliver reports that the Lilliputians have adapted to their situation, being "neat, efficient ... in their narrow, insect-like way", and their mind being "precise, but petty and limited, just as their vision is".<sup>28</sup> These first two books are much more smooth and fluent than the two that follow. The books start as an ordinary traveller's tale but the reader is then drawn through a fictional sub-textual political allegory and a utopian satire with layers of meanings. Gulliver begins the story as a gullible and naive traveller who has his idealist ground torn from underneath him in his journeys to those fictional worlds that are satirically made to reflect our actual world. Gulliver is the embodiment of the ordinary and average, easily-identifiable Englishman but Swift created him with all the right characteristics he needed to stress his points. They all serve the purpose of satire and are at one point or another, focal points in Swifts descriptions. His Relative Size in the journeys change his outlook, they reinforce his belief in European superiority in the land of the small people while in the land of the giants, he feels limited and is intimidated. Still, he himself stays the same size throughout the journeys although the world around him changes.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, 155-56.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, 157-58.

<sup>29</sup> Clive T. Probyn, *Jonathan Swift. Gulliver's Travels*, (London: Penguin Group, 1980), 34-35.



## Humour and Seriousness

The story *Gulliver's Travels* is well known all around the world. Swift wrote it partly as a satire of England's political institutions and situation. However throughout the years it has evolved and is now, especially the first two parts, considered more of a children's story or a light story as is the case with many books that have become popular classics.<sup>30</sup> The creative and picturesque nature of the story has made it popular among children throughout the years, even though it has had to go through expurgation to be considered acceptable for children. Children are fascinated by the difference in norms in the story from what is considered to be the norm in the real world. Different sizes are something they can relate to, often looking up to adults or being miniaturized by them in speech. The descriptions of bodily functions of the giant Gulliver is fun and an easily imagined thought for them. They also find the ridiculous place-names and language in the story extremely likeable and humorous. However, Swift still intended the book for adults and it has a deeper meaning when read thoroughly between the lines.<sup>31</sup>

The first part is the most humorous and is a more comfortable read than the parts to follow. However strange the reader might find it that Gulliver is a prisoner of the six-inch high Lilliputians it is also very comic at times. Gulliver has troubles adapting to the miniature life on the island because of his size and physicality. His need for food is calculated by the mathematically adept people to be much greater than the average Lilliputian, or over 1700 times more. His bodily functions also burden him, and in one comic account he describes where he is chained up like a dog in the only house that is big enough for him, having to relieve himself of his excrement inside of the house for not wanting to be improper.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Murry, 330.

<sup>31</sup> Glendinning, 179-81.

<sup>32</sup> Probyn, 36-37.

Now it must be stressed that Swift had an unusual compulsion for cleanliness, and his friends thought he was at the very least eccentric. This subject appears several times in *Gulliver's Travels*, where he goes out of his way to describe the conditions of his bodily functions. In Brobdingnag there seems to be a running joke that Gulliver is metaphorically a phallus, being put into all kinds of holes and other metaphoric places. For some reason the Queen's maids of honour would also rub him against their chests and their "disgusting" breasts, as Gulliver describes in a long account.<sup>33</sup>

Even though the story touches on serious matters from time to time, it has been described as a merry book by some, and Swift enjoyed playing with merriment as masterfully as he did with the serious matters he was criticizing and parodying. At times in the story there are witty and comic accounts from Gulliver, most notably shocking and inappropriate behaviour, thoughts and descriptions. Other instances are just merry in themselves as when the Lilliputians are inspecting Gulliver's possessions and wondering about the purpose of his watch and the joke about the bad handwriting of English ladies. In Brobdingnag most of the witty and humorous events that happen are in connection with the dangerous situations that Gulliver finds himself in. One of those instances is when the monkey snatches him away and takes him for his baby. He even tells us that it would have been funny had it happened to someone else instead of him, and he could not fault the Brobdingnagians for laughing. He also tells us quite wittily about his battles with the Queen's dwarf, how Gulliver once almost drowned in a bowl full of cream after the dwarf pushed him in, but that Gulliver bested him with his wits in the end. One theory is though that these merry events serve the purpose of breaking up the seriousness of the story as if Swift needed to get away from his own intense misanthropic feelings.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Glendinning, 245-46.

<sup>34</sup> Rawlins, 12-13.

## The Politics of Gulliver's Travels

Swift intended *Gulliver's Travels* to be “a polemical act against the Whig Government and a satire on contemporary European civilization and perennial imperfections, follies and vices of humanity”.<sup>35</sup> It is said to combine topical and general satiric meanings, written in a general way so the reader can apply the topical meanings intended. *Gulliver's Travels* is a masterfully disguised satire so it was hard for the Whig government to convict the author for treason or libel. Swift's words and opinions come from the mouth of fictional characters in a vague or an ironic manner. His meanings are hid well enough in the text that the government could not convict him and the readers could read the aesthetics of the book with their own interpretations.<sup>36</sup> According to the law at the time, an author could not be prosecuted if he used uncertain innuendos and fictional characters in attacking people, institutions or government, if the victim was not specifically named or identified by unambiguous evidence from the text, even though it might be obvious to readers, who was being satirized.<sup>37</sup>

Even though *Gulliver's Travels* is ironic and a satire, Swift often lets Gulliver report what he sees and not cast a judgement. The Lilliputians are thus described by many of their good qualities. He lists many of the Lilliputian laws and customs that have good points, even though they are often contrary to those of England. Swift uses this to his advantage by pointing out the shortcomings of European society by contrasting them to the customs of the Lilliputians. In Lilliput, for example, Gulliver describes that fraud is a more heinous crime than theft, and therefore if a man is found innocent, his accuser is put to death. Here Swift is most likely pointing out ironically that England in his time really lacks punishment for those who falsely accuse others. In his opinion fraud should be considered a serious crime or as a form of theft, although he is not really suggesting that false accusers should be put to death.

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<sup>35</sup> Higgins, 154.

<sup>36</sup> Higgins, 154-55.

<sup>37</sup> Higgins, 160.

Gulliver also reports that public officials in Lilliput are chosen by their morals and not by their ability. In this instance Swift is not saying that people with good ability suited for the job should not be considered, but rather pointing out that people with bad morals too often gain public office. In the same chapter he points out that parents are not allowed to raise their own children in Lilliput, but by making this point Swift might be saying that parents in England do not treat their children rationally rather than it would solve any problems to move the upbringing from the parents. Gulliver also describes the Emperor of Lilliput as an impressive leader and a successful, astounding man. The irony here is pointed at George I, King of England, who seems to lack the qualities seen in the six-inch tall Emperor. Despite these contrasting values, the Lilliputians have the same faults in other instances. This is evident when the Emperor holds a speech about his great leniency and tenderness when he is about to do something cruel, like invading the kingdom of Blefuscu, and in the instance when he orders Gulliver's eyes to be taken from him. The Brobdingnagians are described as being the least corrupted of the nations that Gulliver visits. However they both have their good qualities and their faults, their good qualities mostly stemming from their relatively simple nature. They do not over complicate their governmental system and the King is most concerned about common sense and reason. For example, none of their laws are written in more than twenty-two words in order to be clear and precise. They seem to be simple people who like things mostly the way they are, and dislike things like mysteries and secrets, which surely accounts for how few books they have and how small their libraries are. They do, though, have books on morality but their topic mostly consists of how weak man is. Still they have quarrels and wars like any other nation and there have been power struggles in their history, especially among the nobles as there are always power-thirst people.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ewald, *The Masks of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 149-151.

When Gulliver refused to enslave the Blefuscans, the Emperor became enraged and he and his court discussed whether to punish Gulliver's disobedience with death. The court was split over the decision, as some ministers were adamant that the Emperor should punish him to the full extent while the Emperor himself and one of Gulliver's closest friends in Lilliput the Secretary Reldresal, thought that they could show Gulliver mercy. However Gulliver could not see this "mercy" by the Emperor as his decision was to blind and slowly starve Gulliver instead of punishing him straight away by a swift death. This account mostly alludes to George I's Whig court in 1723 where the court was split over whether to impose the death penalty on the Jacobite Sir Francis Atterbury, who was suspected of trying to make peace with the French, and on the capital punishment of suspected Jacobite Tories in the 1720s. Readers may feel when they read the story that Swift is making the Lilliputians look like barbarians using exotic customs but in reality this kind of "leniency" is closer to home than one might think and reflects on the monarchs in Europe.<sup>39</sup>

Swift satirizes and criticizes the royal courts, most notably the court of George I, but Queen Anne does not get away without her share of criticism from Swift, even though he had friends within her government and liked it better than George I's. According to Swift all courts had what he called "sameness" in them, as all employments went to friends of the people who were in charge and had helped those people rise to power. Swift has a dig at Queen Anne as a "royal prude" with the incident when Gulliver saves the little Emperor's palace from burning down:

"The heat I had contracted by coming very near to the flames, and by my laboring to quench them, made the wine begin to operate by urine; which I voided in such a quantity, and applied so well to the proper places, that in three minutes the fire was wholly extinguished."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Higgins, 175-76.

<sup>40</sup> Swift, 997

Queen Anne was supposed to be squeamish about Swift's story *A Tale of a Tub* and he lists that as the event that made him fall from her favour. The little Empress was not thankful for Gulliver saving the palace this way and thought it was disgusting. This political allusion may be lost to the modern reader but the incident in the story still has a charm and validity to it.<sup>41</sup>

One of Swift's methods of satirizing the British government is through Gulliver's speech to the Brobdingnagian King. Swift makes Gulliver out to be overly patriotic to the point that when he describes his beloved country to the King, his descriptions are mockingly heroic. He wishes for the tongue of some great men like Demosthenes or Cicero to do his country the justice it deserves. Gulliver however fails to convince the King of the goodness of their customs and the King reveals faults in the system with his questions.<sup>42</sup> Swift uses the King in this account to show the reader that Gulliver is not a moral hero in the story and an omniscient narrator with all the answers. He reacts simply by thinking to himself that the King is narrow minded and filled with prejudice.<sup>43</sup>

Gulliver's account of how people get into employment in the court is probably the best example of the story being a political satire:

“When a great office is vacant either by death or disgrace (which often happens) five or six of those candidates petition the Emperor to entertain his Majesty and the court with a dance on the rope; and whoever jumps the highest without falling, succeeds in the office.”<sup>44</sup>

The candidates for these positions are trained from a young age in dancing on a straight rope and the ministers are supposed to be very able in the act. Flimnap, the treasurer of Lilliput, is said to be the best “rope dancer” and regarded highly by the Emperor. Gulliver tells the reader that he found out that Flimnap had fallen a year or two before his arrival and if it had not been

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<sup>41</sup> Murry, 336.

<sup>42</sup> Ewald, 142-44.

<sup>43</sup> Probyn, 40-41.

<sup>44</sup> Swift, 986

for one of the Emperor's cushions he would surely have broken his neck. This ridiculous way to choose people for high office is a way for Swift to satirize the current political environment in Britain. People were more often chosen for those offices based on corruption in the government rather than actual talent or good morals. This criticism is not pointed directly and only at Flimnap but the whole court and ministers, as they have all accepted and even congratulated this kind of practice of acquiring great employment. Even the Emperor himself encouraged this practice and corruption. Swift does not incriminate himself here by writing obvious allegory which makes this episode open to some speculation but it is not hard to see the likeness to the court of England. The topical allegory represents Flimnap as Sir Robert Walpole, who held the highest public office at the time, and is credited by many as the first prime minister of Britain, even though that title was yet to come into existence at the time. His skill in "rope-dancing" alludes to his "political acrobatics" or how well he could divert the court of King George with his great ability in speech. The cushion is interpreted by some as being the Mistress of the King, the Duchess of Kendal, who had admired Walpole, and for others the cushion may represent the French ceremony of the King to by-pass the parliament.<sup>45</sup>

To show the ridiculous differences of political matters between the two political parties in Lilliput, Swift substitutes the matters at hand for an everyday object. In the story the original cause of argument between the parties is which shoes to wear and thus one party was called High-Heels while the other were called Low-Heels. These parties are a correspondence for the Whigs and the Tories. Similarly the argument between the two countries, Lilliput and Blefusco, here meant to represent England and France, was of a small difference. The war between them had been going on for years costing many thousands of people their lives and this was all over how a person was to crack open a boiled egg. The Lilliputians opened it at

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<sup>45</sup> Higgins, 172-74.

the smaller end and were called Little-Endians (representing the Anglicans), while the Blefuscans opened it at the big end and were called Big-Endians (representing the Catholics). Big-Endians were barred from holding office in the government, similar to that of Catholics being denied office after the revolution in England.<sup>46</sup> This account represents Swift's view that religious or political tribalism is utterly senseless as every man should choose his own beliefs.<sup>47</sup>

Gulliver respects the Lilliputians and follows their rules which the Emperor uses in his favour to show how good a ruler he is. The Emperor is however enraged when Gulliver refuses to use his size and strength to enslave his enemies the Blefuscans, and so orders his soldiers to poke out Gulliver's eyes and starve him as a punishment. This is one of the events that make Gulliver take the decision to go back home. He sees that even though the Lilliputians have their good values, they seem to be flawed to the same extent as his own society, and in this instance Gulliver is the moral superior to the inhabitants.<sup>48</sup> We witness these qualities within the Lilliputians after the arrival of Gulliver, as with the ingratitude of the Emperor. Gulliver had already obeyed him and neutralised their threat by literally taking away their naval fleet. All the while, Gulliver is humble and grateful to the Lilliputians despite of his obvious superior physical strength and size. At Brobdingnag it is the other way around as they see Gulliver as a dangerous little animal. Gulliver quickly realises that the Lilliputians are in fact human but the Brobdingnagians at first see him more as an animal or a pet. The Emperor of Lilliput shows a lack of morality towards Gulliver and is mostly concerned with gaining more money and power. The King of Brobdingnag, however, is consistent in showing the same manner in dealing with both personal and public matters. He therefore shows an understanding and humanity beyond that of Gulliver on his voyage.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Glendinning, 181-82.

<sup>47</sup> Probyn, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Murry, 336-37.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, 157-59.



## Conclusion

Even though this essay concentrates mostly on the stories *Gulliver in Lilliput* and *Gulliver in Brobdingnag*, it must be pointed out that they are only the first two parts of a complete set of the four-part *Gulliver's Travels* and that they are very relevant to the story-line as a unit. The stories are, however, also complete stories on their own, with a beginning, middle and an end and therefore they stand easily by themselves. Another part that makes this relevant is that even though the four stories stand together, the inconsistencies of both Gulliver the character and the varying morals between the four books is striking, but necessary to make the point that Swift is making.

One of the attractions about the first two stories is that even though they are highly political, as has been shown by numerous examples, the countries of Lilliput and Blefusco are complete societies with the same kind of subjects and flaws (although not identical) as in contemporary British society. Swift has masterfully put together and described those societies through the eyes of Gulliver and we see them for what they are. Brobdingnag seems to be less corrupt than the nations of the miniature people, as Swift shows us satirically how much simpler things could be if people were not so greedy, although as becomes evident, Brobdingnag is far from being perfect.

Swift was certainly an interesting and in some ways peculiar man. He was somewhat of an opportunist, and he wrote of what he felt was needed. He criticized and satirized what he felt was wrong in society and especially in politics. Swift had his own opinions and did not blindly follow any party or social constitution. His views seem to have mellowed over the years and not be as radical, arguably the reason being that the government was always looking for dissenters and enemies to investigate or prosecute. Swift did not see members of other political parties as enemies but only those who truly were corrupt and not fit to be in charge. He does not offer concrete answers to the things he is criticizing in his writing but rather

points out what is wrong and what can be done better. He was an idealist, even though he sometimes seems misanthropic towards the human condition and about people in general. He felt that man is in his nature corrupt and those who get to power are often the ones who are the most corrupt. However, he seemed to hope to open people's eyes and make them realise this with his writing. It is admirable to see that Swift stood up for what he believed in and tried to raise people's awareness. He masterfully defied the government in such a way that they could not impeach him since he was not breaking any laws or making direct accusations or comparisons.

Swift intended *Gulliver's Travels* to be a satire of eighteenth-century society in Europe, but much of what he wrote is still relevant today. Of course his criticism of the Hanoverian regime is aimed at British eighteenth century society, but the larger picture of being critical of the government is still a real point of truth and relevance. Even though contemporary scholars who analyse the book are mostly interested in the politics of the time, the book is a timeless classic in many other aspects. Pointing out the government's shortcomings and corruption of values is a leading aspect of critical thinking regardless of the reader's nationality or culture. The morality of man is another element that we are constantly looking at and judging and has a real relevance in today's society.

Much of the books' satire is, though, just reports of what Lemuel Gulliver sees and they would doubtless have been a success even though it had only been accounts and reports of the picturesque kingdoms which Gulliver came across during his travels. In fact countless children's versions of it have been made without saying anything on the moral or political context. Much of its attractiveness was to come up with the story between the large people and the small people but the books as they stand still owe most of their brilliance to their satire and hidden messages. Swift achieves this by incorporating Gulliver in the story and not making him a mere observer.

Much of what we see in *Gulliver's Travels* is a child of its time, but still it is a timeless classic in the sense that the real condition of man [*'la condition humaine'*] is unchanging and man is always struggling with the same elements or same kind of problems. Gulliver's travels to Lilliput and Brobdingnag are as much an account of the morality of man as well as his politics, and these are, of course, intertwined in the morality of men in politics.

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