Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels*

English novel.

The following entry presents criticism of Swift’s *Gulliver's Travels*. For a discussion of Swift’s complete career, see *LC*, Volume 1.

**INTRODUCTION**

Swift’s greatest satire, *Gulliver's Travels*, is considered one of the most important works in the history of world literature. Published as *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts; by Lemuel Gulliver* in 1726, *Gulliver's Travels* depicts one man’s journeys to several strange and unusual lands. The general theme of *Gulliver's Travels* is a satirical examination of human nature, man’s potential for depravity, and the dangers of the misuse of reason. Throughout the volume Swift attacked the baseness of humankind even as he suggested the greatest virtues of the human race; he also attacked the folly of human learning and political systems even as he implied the proper functions of art, science, and government. *Gulliver's Travels*, some scholars believe, had its origins during Swift’s years as a Tory polemicist, when he was part of a group of prominent Tory writers known as the Scriblerus Club. The group, which also included Alexander Pope, John Gay, and John Arbuthnot, among others, collaborated on several satires, including *The Scriblerus Papers*. They also planned a satire called *The Memoirs of a Martinus Scriblerus*, which was to include several imaginary voyages. An immediate success, *Gulliver's Travels* was inspired by this work. Swift finished *Gulliver's Travels* was published anonymously, but Swift’s authorship was widely suspected. Alternately considered an attack on humanity or a clear-eyed assessment of human strengths and weaknesses, the novel is a complex study of human nature and of the moral, philosophical, and scientific thought of Swift’s time which has resisted any single definition of meaning for nearly three centuries.

**Plot and Major Characters**

Written in the form of a travel journal, *Gulliver's Travels* is the fictional account of four extraordinary voyages made by Lemuel Gulliver, a physician who signs on to serve as a ship’s surgeon when he is unable to provide his family with a sufficient income.
23 Like other conservative writers, Swift thus implicitly mocks the progressive claim that the indulgence of the avaricious passions may help countervail more destructive ones; see above, chap. 6, nn. 25, 53. On the soft and hard schools of interpretation see James L. Clifford, “Gulliver’s Fourth Voyage: Hard and Soft Schools of Interpretation,” in Quick Springs of Sense: Studies in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Larry S. Champion (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 33-49.

24 The amusing silliness of a Houyhnhnm threading a needle, on the other hand, is Swift’s mild self-mockery of the inadequacy of his own efforts (a very minor version of his hero’s failures) to mediate Houyhnhnm to human nature by way of physical resemblance. But note that even here it is Gulliver who creates the incongruity by lending the mare a needle: Travels, IV, ix, 258. With Gulliver’s vain ambition compare the desperate and self-censored aspiration of Mary Carleton to be a different sex (above, chap. 6, nn. 32-34). It is easy to sympathize with her ambition, as it is not in the case of Gulliver’s, because hers amounts to a just desire to obtain the power she merits rather than a vain emulation of a status that is beyond her internal capacities.

25 On the circular patterns of conservative plots see above, chap. 6, nn. 21-22.

J. A. Downie (essay date 1989)


[In the following essay, Downie argues that critics have gone too far in making links between real events and people in British history and the contents of Gulliver’s Travels. He suggests that Swift was writing a more general “parallel history” rather than a decipherable allegorical text intended to serve as an exposé.]

Seventy years have passed since Sir Charles Firth first made use of the title I have chosen for my essay. “Political allusions abound in the Travels,” Firth asserted in his lecture to the British Academy in 1919. In saying this, he was, in one respect, doing little more than endorsing the view which had been taken of Swift’s masterpiece ever since its first publication. But Firth wished to codify such general perceptions. “In Gulliver’s Travels many figures which seem to be imaginary are meant to depict real personages,” he claimed, “or at all events are drawn from them.” Considering that nearly two centuries had passed since publication, Firth’s assurance was breathtaking. It now seems almost incredible that his assertions could have influenced so profoundly the way succeeding generations have approached Swift’s book, for Firth wasn’t even an expert in eighteenth-century history. “To the politics of Walpole’s day he brought only the superficial expertise of a gifted amateur,” J. P. Kenyon has observed, “and the literary critics who followed him could contribute little more.”

But that was not how it seemed to Firth’s immediate successors, and his casual observations were soon being treated as if they had been tablets of stone from Mount Sinai. In 1938, Godfrey Davies claimed that Firth’s essay “proved that Swift often drew upon contemporary events in England for the parts of the book he first wrote,” i.e., Parts I and II. Perhaps it was a similar misplaced confidence in Firth’s perspicacity which led Arthur E. Case to go one stage further and (among other things) put forward a sustained allegorical interpretation of Gulliver’s experiences in Lilliput, centering on British politics between 1708 and 1715 and the fortunes (or misfortunes) of Swift’s ministerial friends, Oxford and Bolingbroke, even though, as Kenyon remarks, “a trained historian . . . can casually make miscalculation of most of Firth’s and Case’s attributions.”

However, Case’s views were accepted by the Swift establishment readily enough. Of Four Essays on “Gulliver’s Travels”, Harold Williams wrote that “the third essay, on ‘Personal and Political Satire’ in the Travels, is the best in the book, displaying discernment and balanced thought.” For thirty years, the conviction that there was a consistent political allegory running through Gulliver’s Travels was a critical commonplace. “Professor Case is ordinarily so authoritative,” Edward Rosenheim, Jr., wrote in 1970, “that we tend to accept his information without question.” It was for that reason that Case’s discussion of personal and political satire was reprinted in various collections.
another civil war and the execution of another king? Something like that. Gulliver is an empiricist without memory or the need of it, a man restored to sanity who does not know that he has been mad. He is as close as possible to being “a man without qualities.”


Examines the presence of both anti-imperialist and misogynist, or anti-woman, sentiment in Gulliver’s Travels.


Contends that Gulliver’s Travels cannot be read as a psychological novel of personal transformation, arguing that the character of Gulliver displays change only when he consciously adopts a role and not because he has undergone personal growth.


Disputes many critical assessments of the meaning of Gulliver’s fourth voyage, suggesting that Swift intended not to confirm but to discount the definition of human beings as rational animals.


Examines the character of Gulliver as a vehicle for satire. Ewald contends that Gulliver is a flawed hero who is nevertheless capable of recognizing and striving for high ideals.


A collection including many seminal essays on the fourth voyage of Gulliver’s Travels.


Analyzes Gulliver’s Travels as Swift’s satiric response to the discourse spurred by Britain’s colonial expansion and participation in the slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.


Argues that while Swift did not accept the Enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of humankind, he has been wrongly assigned the designation of misanthrope. Monk maintains that critics and biographers have mistakenly attributed to Swift the pessimism of his fictional character Gulliver.


Examines the third voyage in Gulliver’s Travels as Swift’s critique of the science and mathematics of his time.


Close study of Swift’s use of rhetorical devices to convey satiric intent.

Additional coverage of Swift’s life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vols. 3, 9, 95, and 101; Literature Criticism from 1400-1800, Vol. 1; and Poetry Criticism, Vol. 9.