

Foreword

G*ulliver's Travels* is one of the best jokes ever written. In one sense, the very success of the book has done it harm. People think they know the story and so don't bother reading it. Because it features talking animals, giants, tiny people and jokes about boobs and poo it is assumed to be a book for children. Because it is nearly three hundred years old, it is accused of irrelevance.

Discard all these notions. George Orwell thought it one of the six indispensable books in world literature. The one-time Labour leader, Michael Foot once said that anyone who wanted to stand for political office ought to face a compulsory examination on *Gulliver's Travels*.

Of course, it's a joke we cannot fully appreciate, precisely because we *know* it's a joke. But at the time of its original publication it appeared (complete with a picture of the 'author', Captain Lemuel Gulliver, biographical notes and, in later editions, an irritated note from Gulliver to his cousin, complaining about how badly the book had been originally published) to be merely another travel book. One old sea dog was so taken in that he claimed to know Gulliver, and pompously "corrected" the publisher's biographical notes about the author. Gulliver, he said, didn't live at Rotherhithe: he was a Wapping man. A particularly booby-ish Irish bishop boasted that he'd not been taken in at all, and 'he hardly believed a word of it,' which must have had Swift laughing till his gaiters burst.

Hoodwinking a bishop was a great deal easier in the eighteenth century than it might be today, if only because explorers seem to have been constantly returning to Europe with tales of the fantastic lands and unexpected peoples they have discovered. Maps in the book locate Lilliput off Australia and Brobdingnag off North America.

How Swift must have enjoyed writing it! There is such

exuberant energy in his descriptions, such transparent joy in simply playing with ideas of scale. In Lilliput, Gulliver is asked to pee, for use as a fire hydrant. Among the giants of Brobdingnag, a maid of honour snatches him up and perches him on her nipple.

Lemeul Gulliver is the most unfortunate seafarer who ever lived, being constantly shipwrecked or dumped ashore by a mutinous crew, which forces him to give himself up to the first group of “savages” he encounters. How easy it is to laugh at the first of these remote communities with its political parties divided on issues such as whether to wear high or low heels, and wars fought over whether boiled eggs should be cracked open at the big or little end.

But then Gulliver attempts to explain how our much more “sophisticated” society works. When he tries to describe how we choose our leaders, and the usefulness of gunpowder or standing armies, bafflement is the only sensible reaction. By the time he goes on to explain our customs of going to war on such weighty matters as “whether flesh be bread, or bread be flesh”, or “whether whistling be a vice or a virtue”, how the legal system has become the preserve of corrupt incompetents and the business of politics that of lying hypocrites, the joke is on us.

For what we learn through his travels to exotic lands is really about ourselves. With the exception of the hairy, stinking yahoos – who so closely resemble us – the people who suffer from the disadvantages of not being English are generally more sophisticated than we are. Why on earth should the Lilliputians’ idea that ingratitude is a crime be so utterly inappropriate in our own culture? Why do *we* organise our lives in this bizarre fashion?

It is all tremendously subversive. How can man be made in God’s image, if the horse-like Houyhnhnm – a name apparently meaning “the perfection of nature” – is evidently so much more dignified, rational and kind? For it is in their world, in which

there are simply no words for war, or government, evil or lying, that Gulliver is happiest. You can see why. Read, for example, the chief Houyhnhnm's account of the yahoos' obsession with gold, silver and jewels (part IV, chapter 7) if you want to realise how absurd is our preoccupation with money and jewels.

Time after time, you're forced to reassess your beliefs about how life should be lived. Why do wars happen? Are parents fit to bring up their own children? Is there any point in scientific research?

When he reflects on what is absent in these strange lands, this (with one or two modernised spelling) is the list he comes up with: "Here was neither Physician to destroy my Body, nor Lawyer to ruin my Fortune; No Informer to watch my Words, and Actions or forge Accusations against me for hire: Here were no Gibbers, Censurers, Backbiters, Pick-pockets, Highwaymen, Housebreakers, Attorneys, Bawds, Buffoons, Gamesters, Politicians, Wits, Splenetics, tedious Talkers, Controvertists, Ravishers, Murderers, Robbers, Virtuoso; no Leaders or Followers of Party and Faction: No encouragers to Vice, by Seducement or Examples: No Dungeon, Axes, Gibbets, Whipping-posts, or Pillories: No cheating Shop-keepers or Mechanics: No Pride, Vanity: or affectation; No Fops, Bullies, Drunkards, strolling Whores, or Poxes: No ranting, lewd, expensive Wives: No stupid, proud pedants: No importunate, overbearing, quarrelsome, noisy, roaring, empty, conceited, swearing Companions: No scoundrels, raised from the Dust for the Sake of their Vices, or Nobility thrown into it on account of their Virtues: No Lords, Fiddlers, Judges, or Dancing-Masters." It is gallimaufry to gladden the heart of any misanthrope.

But, actually, I don't think Swift was a misanthrope at all. He certainly had a jaundiced eye and a sharp tongue. In the flesh, I'm not sure I would have liked him. But he believed too passionately in the proper treatment of human beings to be called truly anti-social. Specifically, he identified with Irish

outrage at British exploitation. Also included here is Swift's *Modest Proposal*, which is, for my money, the most effective satirical manifesto ever produced. His formula for solving the Irish population problem proceeds from such an apparently compassionate premise, is laid out so calmly, is so apparently reasoned, is supported by so many statistics, that it might have been produced by a Downing Street policy unit. Then, 800 words in, we get to his solution.

“I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasse or a ragout.”

The argument is so persuasively made that you almost feel “that’s it! Of course. Why didn’t I think of it myself?” It’s brilliant.

Jeremy Paxman

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