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Chasing Liberty: Gulliver's Search for Freedom

In 1726, Jonathan Swift completed one of the most complicated and multifaceted satires in literature: *Gulliver's Travels*. Raging with religious and political turmoil, Eighteenth century England provided Swift with numerous opportunities for social commentary. The seventeenth century concept of liberty became a dominant social discourse in Swift's England. First enunciated by Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), and reiterated by John Locke (a contemporary of Swift) in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), they both define liberty as the natural state of man. Using selected works from Hobbes and Locke, I will examine *Gulliver's Travels* as an individual's journey towards the ideal state of liberty. In each of the four worlds, Gulliver encounters a major roadblock to obtaining a natural state of liberty. The four worlds—Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and Houyhnhnm—illustrate and dissect the complex social dynamics of liberty, respectively, into four separate segments: social, natural, scientific, and philosophic. Gulliver asks the question: *is there an ideal, natural liberty?*

Before Gulliver's travels even begin, his financial trouble suspends his natural freedom. Locke states that "natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth" (Locke 127). Gulliver, with a failing business and a wife to support, is at the mercy of society. With few options before him, he sets sail to overcome his financial constraints; however, in Lilliput, Gulliver encounters a second form of social constraint. The Lilliputians capture Gulliver with "several slender ligatures," confining him to his place (Swift 5). Gulliver soon realizes how these several and slender constraints obstruct his pursuit of liberty. Consequently, he makes "a sign with [his] hand...to signify [he] desired [his] liberty" to the Emperor of the nation (8). Even without understanding the Lilliputian language, Gulliver declares his want of liberty. His being

understood, suggests—to Gulliver and by extension, the reader—that liberty is a universal idea, a concept that is naturally developed, as is indicated by Locke stating that the law of Nature “teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions” (Locke 119). During Gulliver’s stay at Lilliput, all four violations occur. In order for Gulliver to break the physical bonds of enslavement, the Lilliputians force him to swear to a series of “Articles and Conditions” meant to “restore [his] liberty” (25). These articles, however, are no more liberating than his previous physical constraints. Invisible ropes still restrict his movement and unseen arrows still haunt him as a symbol of his pledge to attack the opposing force. Under oath, Gulliver agrees to these social restrictions. In the eighteenth century, essentially all Englishmen sign a similar contract at birth. That is, being born a citizen means adhering to the laws in place, which means that the government had the authority to deny many personal liberties. Locke reconciles this sacrifice of individual liberty by stating that “society is made by a voluntary compact,” like that made between man and woman (Locke 155). Society is a marriage of individuals into a collective whole. Thus, like a marriage, society ought to have “mutual support and assistance, and a communion of interests too” (155). A mutually supportive relationship in society ensures an open path of communication between the parts. Man and society, together, strive to achieve a high standard of living, which is, according to Locke, is “comfortable, safe, and peaceable” (164). Ideally, these goals sufficiently justify man’s inclination towards living within society; however the union between man and society rarely achieves such success.

Society often undermines personal liberty. In Locke’s *Treatises*, his doubt quickly becomes apparent, signifying that “whenever any number of men. . .enter into society to make one people one body politic under one supreme government. . .this puts men out of a state of

Nature” (160). Once a society splits into a ruling and a subordinate class, the comfort, safety, and peaceable living of the latter depends entirely upon the laws and regulations of the former.

Paralleling the British Parliament and its laws, Lilliputian laws intended primarily for the comfort and safety of the population, neither preserve nor please the people. Instead, many laws quickly become weapons in a war for control between two rival parties. The Principle Secretary of Lilliput tells Gulliver of the “two struggling Parties in [that] Empire” (30). Each party believes that a specific height of heel is more “agreeable to [their] ancient Constitution” (30). Each side fights to get their representatives elected to office and thus Lilliputian party politics is born. The low- and high-heeled governments of Lilliput parallel the warring Whig and Tory political forces in Swift’s England. Swift suggests that the Englishmen argue over politics as trivially as Lilliputians bicker over shoes. In this state of political warfare, the true end of government, liberty, is lost.

Analogous to the religious disputes of eighteenth century England, Lilliputians also create disorder in debating over which side of an egg is proper to break. A previous Emperor of Lilliput, according to Gulliver, “published an Edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs” (Swift 31). Similarly, in 1673 the publication of the Test Act demanded that all English citizens conform to the Church of England, under severe punishment. In both cases, however, this breach of liberty causes severe unrest in the population. In Lilliput, “the People so highly resented this [small-end] Law, that [Lilliputian] Histories tell us, there have been six Rebellions raised. . . [and] at several Times suffer Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller end” (Swift 31). When the Government forces the population to conform to one hegemonic belief system, the people often fight back against such oppression. In Swift’s England, a similar pattern occurred. The Church of England

demanded it was more accurate to consider God as the Trinity, whereas Dissenters avowed God was singular. This small difference in counting resulted in harsh Dissenter persecution. The Toleration Act of 1689 stated that Dissenters who “accepted thirty-six of thirty-nine articles. . . could obtain licenses as ministers or schoolmasters, although these had to be registered with a bishop or at the Quarter Sessions, tasks which posed problems for both” (Black 131); however, these articles contained propositions that directly conflicted with the Dissenters’ religious beliefs. Thus, rather than an act of toleration, the law required Dissenters to publically denounce their religion before they were offered social benefits.

The low- and high-heeled, and Small -and Big-Endians dichotomies represent unnecessary restrictions on liberty. These trivial arguments and laws in no way affect the comfort or safety of the population. Swift, through Gulliver, describes this as the present, fallen state of society. A society that bickers over nonessential restrictions fails to achieve Locke’s ideal level of comfort, safety, and peace. Like Reldresal, the Lilliputian Principle Secretary, Swift suggests that personal decisions, such as choice of religion, should be “left to every Man’s Conscience” (Swift 31). Furthermore, Locke states that “the law of Nature be plain and intelligible to all rational creatures, yet men, being biased by their interests, as well as ignorant for want of study of it, are not apt to allow of it as a law binding to them in the application of it to their particular cases” (Locke 180). When “men, being biased by their interests,” influence laws for selfish gain, the liberty of the nation suffers. Swift suggests that human biases and ignorance cause Lilliputian’s distorted and restricting laws. Gulliver departs from Lilliput knowing well the shortcomings of society. In the unnatural state of man ruling over man, liberty is compromised. Excessive restrictions limit individual freedom, and thus, searching for a more natural existence, Gulliver leaves Lilliput.

Dissatisfied with social constraints, Gulliver arrives in Brobdingnag. In this fictive country, Swift severely exaggerates nature in order to illustrate the impossibility of man, the animal, surviving outside of society. Nature itself poses a threat to a man's liberty. In the primordial state of existence, prior to the introduction of society, the Law of Nature, according to Hobbes, states that "man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive to his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same" (Hobbes 72). In this maxim, Hobbes' declares that Nature provides fundamental laws of existence, a law of self-preservation; however, without a society organized to protect and provide, all animals—including humans—exist in "a condition of Warre of every one against every one" (Hobbes 72). Gulliver abruptly discovers this universal condition when two oversized rats attack him. In Brobdingnag, Gulliver must often resort to physical strength and cunning to survive. Wild animals have no restraint and thus, Gulliver confesses "that if I had taken off my belt before I went to sleep, I must have infallibly been torn to Pieces and devoured" (Swift 72). His belt and sword—manufactured goods—represent society and its tools of protection. Without social order, moreover, humans remain ill-equipped to survive. Every day in Brobdingnag Gulliver overcomes near-death experiences with animals: rats, birds, monkeys. These life-threatening interactions with nature illuminate the disadvantages of a world without social constraints. The hunt for food, protection from predators (including other animalistic humans), and warm shelter remain serious concerns so long as the individual lacks basic social guidelines of communal protection.

In nature, necessity governs liberty. One must unavoidably secure survival first, before one may pursue any other activity. At the Brobdingnagian court, by comparison, the Majesty's scholars "all agreed that [Gulliver] could not be produced according to the regular Laws of Nature; because [he] was not framed with a Capacity of preserving [his] Life, either by

Swiftness, or climbing of Trees, or digging holes in the Earth” (82). Here, the Brobdingnagians critique Gulliver and thereby define him as an animal. The scholars all decide that, considering his size and composition, Gulliver lacks necessary survival skills. Similarly, the physical qualities of the human form give our species no distinct advantage in the wilderness; humans’, however, possess psychological and intellectual advantages. Thus, reason and social aptitude provide humans with survival skills; yet, in nature, instinct often mutes or overshadows these attributes. Animals act with natural impulses, which underdetermine the necessity for intellect in the wilderness.

This intellect/instinct dichotomy introduces a philosophical problem in relation to the search for liberty: if the human species falls into a primal, instinct-based existence, does liberty even exist? According to Hobbes “there be in animals, two sorts of *Motions* peculiar to them: One called *Vitall*...the other is *Animall motion* otherwise called *Voluntary motion*” (Hobbes 30). Vital motions are the inner workings of the body: circulation, breathing, etc. Voluntary motions, as labeled, consist of motions performed by choice. For Hobbes, these two forces work in tandem in every animal. But because of the constant state of natural war, voluntary motions never rise out of the basic cycle of life. Stuck in this primordial state of existence, nature prevents any higher mental pursuits. Man without social support would inevitably return to the same recurring cycle and a base existence of: birth, reproduction, and death. In such a state, the liberty to pursue pleasure, desire, and love are all lost. Thus, both Lilliput and Brobdingnag illustrate serious constraints placed on the “natural liberty of man.” So, again, Swift—through Gulliver—sets sail on his search for liberty, whereupon he explores two alternative societies: the scientific culture of Laputa and the philosophic tradition of the Houyhnhnms.

In Laputa, Swift imagines a society in which science becomes the foremost concern of the Government. Here, self-expression is absent. Often, “intense Speculations” distract Laputians, and Gulliver observes “that they neither can speak, or attend to the Discourses of others, without being roused by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing” (Swift 132). Concerned primarily with their own speculations, Laputians lack the ability to communicate effectively with others. Hobbes declares that a primary use of speech is to signify “what [individuals] desire, feare, or have any other passion for” (Hobbes 20). Laputians disregard the fundamental ability of speech, which accounts for their lack of human expression. Furthermore, the concepts of “Imagination, Fancy, and Invention, [Laputians] are wholly Strangers to, nor have any Words in their Language by which those Ideas can be expressed” (Swift 137). Since those ideas of imagination, fancy, and invention are the basis of artistic thought, the Laputian society does not understand how a subjective field such as art could benefit their race. Thus, predisposed to scientific speculation, they even dismiss practical art, like architecture, as Gulliver observes, “their Houses are very ill built” (136). Instead of being practical, Laputians try to merge architectural design with complex intellectual blueprints, which leads to “clumsy, awkward, and unhandy people” (136). Due to the disconnect between conventional life and scientific speculation, Laputians are incapable of carrying out the most basic duties. Ironically, scientific knowledge should be practical. Hobbes defines science as the “knowledge of Consequences, and dependence of one fact upon another” (Hobbes 29). Knowledge of this sort would lead to well-built houses and provide more comfort to the Laputian public; however, they miss this logical end of science. Rather, they pursue illusionary and theoretical knowledge bordering on mysticism. Thus, self-expression and practicality dissolve and, moreover, the population loses all appreciation—or even creation—of art and literature.

Like the machinery they create, Laputians live in a state of stasis, devoid of even the thought of liberty. Although Gulliver admires Laputian industry in science and mathematics, he still indicates that [he] never met with such disagreeable Companions” (Swift 147). Laputa—the society of science—knows no companionship. Disapproving Laputians’ lack of sociability and human connectedness, Gulliver descends from the floating isle.

After three failed attempts to find ideal liberty, Gulliver arrives on the Houyhnhnm shore. Here, he discovers a society governed by an adherence to philosophy. Yet, the Houyhnhnms appear to be completely ignorant of the term *Law* and, as Swift indicates in passing, that Gulliver “had already explained the Meaning of the Word” (Swift 215). This need to explain the meaning of *Law* suggests that the Houyhnhnms lead a less restricted life. It seems as though Houyhnhnms, using reason alone, decipher good from evil. Gulliver’s recollection of Houyhnhnms and falsehood represents this logical ability greatly. He states that “*Doubting* or *not believing*, are so little known in this Country, that the Inhabitants cannot tell how to behave themselves under such Circumstances” (207). In such a country where all persons believe in one collective ideal and it is naturally understood and obeyed, written law becomes redundant. On the contrary, Hobbes’ philosophy implies that an alternative form of law governs the Houyhnhnms. Hobbes declares that there is a fundamental flaw in philosophy because it “extend[s] the power of the Law, which is the Rule of Actions onely, to the very Thoughts, and Consciences of men” (Hobbes 243). By constant philosophical inquiry, Houyhnhnms consistently restrain thought and conscience. Logically, if an ill thought can be prevented, then it necessarily prevents the misdeed it foreshadows as well; however, Hobbes concludes his previous statement by asserting that “to force [a man] to accuse himself of Opinions, when his Actions are not by Law forbidden, is against the Law of Nature” (243). Opinions represent

perhaps the most personal and private affairs of an individual, and the Houyhnhnm philosophy forces members of their society to embrace one, collective ideal. Restricting thought in this way quickly transforms into psychological oppression. During his stay, Gulliver states that his Master “daily convinced [him] of a thousand Faults in [his] self, whereof [he] had not the least Perception before, and which with [Englishmen] would never be numbered even among human Infirmities” (Swift 224). In response to the Houyhnhnms’ constant reiteration of minor faults largely unregarded in England, Gulliver starts to believe that humans engage behaviors as crude as the Yahoos. By degrees, the Houyhnhnms’ philosophy exacerbates Gulliver’s scorn for social corruption. Thus, instead of pursuing liberty further, Gulliver returns to England, stuffed up the nose with rue, and receives his family with “Hatred, Disgust and Contempt” (Gulliver 253). For Gulliver, the search for liberty has failed.

Swift, too, felt Gulliver’s resentment of vain society. During and after the writing of *Gulliver’s Travels*, traces of contempt surface throughout Swift’s *Correspondences*. In his letter dated September 29, 1725, Swift describes the purpose to *Gulliver’s Travels* to Alexander Pope: “the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world rather than divert it” (Swift 264). Swift and Pope, as satirists, were no strangers to vexing the public; however, reading the letter of Sept. 29 alongside a follow up letter of on November 26 of the same year indicates the depth of his contempt. He begins the letter to Pope with: “Drown the World, I am not content with despising it, but I would anger it if I could with safety” (265). Swift appears to deify himself by repeating the biblical punishment that God commands in Genesis. Similarly, the allusion suggests that—once again—“the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Here, it seems as though Swift’s disgust with humankind parallels Gulliver’s contempt at the end

of his *Travels*. These passages have generated multiple misanthropic readings of *Gulliver* and—more generally—all of Swift’s work; however, in the same November letter, Swift writes: “I tell you after all that I do not hate Mankind” (266). These seemingly contradictory statements in Swift’s *Correspondences* complicate his view on humanity. Swift seems to struggle with the same concepts of liberty that Gulliver encountered in his travels. So instead of focusing on the sources of Gulliver’s misanthropy, we might, rather, explore why Swift continued to write in spite of his own contempt.

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