

Gulliver's Travels: Travel Literature Reversed

Although inextricably linked to travel literature, *Gulliver's Travels* is something entirely different. This *suigeneris* work merely uses the literary infrastructure of travel literature as a façade to conceal its “true purpose.” One of the most distinguishing features of travel journals is the fact that what is scrutinised by the brave European who happens to write them is always an indigenous component of the land whither he has arrived; however, when Gulliver describes some idiosyncrasy of the civilisation he happens to be stranded in at the time, said idiosyncrasy is always accompanied by subtext which obliges the reader to simultaneously think how it reflects in English culture. At one point in the book the satire stops demanding a keen eye and this “phantasmagorical” presence is shown in the flesh: When describing one specific practice regarding Laputan women, Lemuel actually says “This may perhaps pass with the reader rather for an European or English story, than for one of a country so remote.” (Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*, III, ii) It is, then, unfair to pigeonhole this work into the category of travel literature without radically changing the characteristics specific to the genre. If a relationship is present between *Gulliver's Travels* and travel literature, it is that the former is a complete reconfiguration of the latter, wherein most elements are reversed. Gulliver travels abroad to reflect upon his own society, not on the one present whither he arrives.

In this essay, I will analyse in which specific aspects does *Gulliver's Travels* differ from the commonplace in travel literature. To do that, I will compare *Gulliver's Travels* to three indisputable examples of the aforementioned genre. First of all, however, it is important to establish a division intrinsic in travel literature. We can easily divide it into two wide categories: “utopic, or didactic travels”, the most obvious example of which being Thomas More's

eponymous *Utopia*, whereupon a traveller finds himself in a society which he regards as a moral example of virtue and social efficiency; and what we may call “non-instructive travels ” wherein the traveller arrives at a country where he is superior to the inhabitants, perhaps only because of the fact he is a Christian. Owing to the lack of a didactic nature in the second sub-genre, works that can be encompassed in it are characterised by the description of bizarre, and often ludicrous costumes in a strange country, whose only aim is amusing the reader.

The Foreign Travels of Sir John Mandeville is a pertinent example of the latter: Although published originally in Anglo-Norman in the fourteenth century, it remained incredibly popular during the eighteenth, as can be proved by the number of extant eighteenth century editions, which are available today.¹ As is the case with the older tradition of travel literature², Mandeville’s management of *paradoxography* consists mainly in listing *marabilia*, and *monstrousa*, in enormous numbers, and without in-depth commentary thereon. This is why we can say that the text caters exclusively to a ludic purpose, and not a didactic one. More than anything, *The Foreign Travels of Sir John Mandeville* reads like a gigantic list in prose, whereof no item captivates the author’s attention to merit dedicating more than one page to it. The narrator merely describes something extraordinary and moves on to the next as if nothing had happened. Added to this is the fact that there is minimal interaction between the author and these wonderful phenomena, apart from the fact that he allegedly observes them: “From thence I went through many island in India, where are eels 30 feet in length, and the men who fish there are of different colours, such as green, yellow, and blue, &c. (Mandeville, John. *The Foreign Travels...*, 5)

¹Eight different editions are present on the Eighteenth Century Collections Online database; all from different years.

² Such as *The Marvels of the East*, or *The Book of the Marvels of the World* (Otherwise known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*) to list a few examples.

Upon comparing John Mandeville's travel journal to *Gulliver's Travels* several differences are immediately apparent. First and foremost, the author of the former describes what he sees objectively, and from a position of superiority, without getting involved almost at all. He quite literally takes a tour around the continent, to the point where it might even seem that he is a visitor at a gigantic zoo. Mandeville never comes in contact with any civilization that has anything of moment to teach him, as he is the Englishman, a sir, nothing less, who is *a priori* superior to the savages he encounters. In *The Foreign Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, as indeed in almost all travel literature, it is always the European who scrutinises the culture observed, and who is "on the right" morally speaking, while looking down on barbarians and savages: "[Describing the natives of India] the men's members hang down to their shins; but *those of better breeding*³ conceal them by tying them up. (...) [T]he women are not ashamed to appear naked before the men" (Mandeville, John. *The Foreign Travels...*, 5). It is normal, as well, to portray non-Europeans as monsters. With Mandeville, the habitants of Ethiopia are said to "have one foot, yet so swift as to exceed the deer in running" (Mandeville, John. *The Foreign Travels...*, 4).

Something similar to this happens in *Gulliver's Travels*, however, the roles are completely reversed. What makes this book so revolutionary is that now it is not some naked inhabitant of an "uncivilised" country that is being scrutinised, but an Englishman himself. In book IV, Lemuel arrives at a country where the dominant, rational species is not man, there called "yahoo" but horse, there named "houyhnhnm." After his arrival, Lemuel becomes acquainted with a prominent houyhnhnm, who, during the course of several conversations,

...began to find fault with other parts of my body: "the flatness of my face, the prominence of my nose, mine eyes placed directly in front, so that I could not look on

³ Emphasis added

either side without turning my head: that I was not able to feed myself, without lifting one of my fore-feet to my mouth. (Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*, IV,iv)

Lemuel is objectified, spliced, anatomised, and finally, animalised, just as if he were some curiosity and not a human being, or in this specific case, a “human houyhnhnm.” The fact that Lemuel’s hands are described as “fore-feet” is a key component in making him appear monstrous. He is not a man, but a brute, or, perhaps even worse, a “yahoo.” This effect is created through the superiority that the author ascribes to certain civilisations in *Gulliver's Travels*. While this superiority is obvious in Brobdingnag, the habitants of which are *literally* “great”, perhaps the case of the houyhnhnms is more interesting, as they are reportedly *morally* superior to Europeans. Therefore, by virtue of juxtaposing them and Lemuel, Swift manages to take an Englishman, the alleged embodiment of civilisation and refinement, or “Englishness”, and strip him of his defining characteristic.

When a protagonist in a travel literature account does not interact with a morally superior society, almost invariably the peoples he encounters are savages, bereft of civilisation. This fact is made even more evident if the character happens to compare what he is living to the situation back at Europe. In *A Trip to the Moon Vol. II* by Francis Gentleman, this happens very explicitly: “Is this Usage for a Woman of Rank and Spirit? – O happy ENGLAND, where everything is sanctified by Nobility! No Distinction paid here! – Mon DIEU, what a miserable vulgar World have I got into!” (Gentleman, Francis. *A Trip to the Moon...*, 20)

However, a better indicator of civility in travel literature is much more simple. It consists of how clothed a people are: This is perfectly evidenced in *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, which, although not exactly travel literature in its purest form, serves to illustrate this point more clearly. Amongst the first thing the reader learns about all the natives Robinson encounters is that they are without clothes: Such examples as “The women

were as naked as the men.” (Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*, 20), or “I presently found there were no less than nine naked savages sitting around...” (ibid., 116) abound in the book. On the other hand, Robinson himself tells the reader that “...there was no need of clothes, yet I could not go quite naked ... nor could I abide the thought of it, though I was alone” (ibid., 116) exactly because renouncing to his clothes would be relinquishing his last remaining symbol of civilisation.

When this is done in *Gulliver’s Travels*, however, the formula “clothes equals civilisation” is not invariably right. While his clothes are part of the reason for which some of the *houyhnhnms* argue that Lemuel is not a proper yahoo, the fact that the “people” who cast a judgement on Lemuel’s level of understanding are naked cannot be simply dismissed. The *houyhnhnms* wear no clothes, yet they are unquestionably civilised. Once it is discovered that Lemuel’s clothes are an adventitious part of his body, his master asks him to strip naked in front of him, and in that point, the Englishman is actually metamorphosed into the stereotypical naked savage of whom travel journals are fraught.

My master observed the whole performance with great signs of *curiosity and admiration*.⁴ He took up all my clothes in his pastern, one piece after another, and examined them diligently; he then stroked my body very gently, and looked round me several times; after which, he said, it was plain I must be a perfect Yahoo. (Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver’s Travels*, IV, iii.)

Furthermore, his clothes, the symbol of his human sophistication, are described as a “false covering”, in other words, a façade which hides the real uncouth body of a yahoo, or in the terms of travel literature, a savage. It is important to mention that this is a view that was not entirely unheard of in the philosophy of the time. “In Rousseau’s maudlin picture, “civilised” humanity

⁴Emphasis Added

was all surface and no center. Modern man a shell of his true self.” (McMahon, Darrin. *Happiness: A History*, 29)

An exceedingly common element that appears frequently in travel literature is the presence of guns. These, besides being a sign of civilisation because they are so advanced natives do not possess them, often are the only thing between the protagonist and death. In *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, it’s only by dint of his several fowling pieces that he is able to procure victuals. However, the importance of guns can be even better appreciated in *The Life, Adventures, and Pyracies of the Famous Captain Singleton*. After the protagonist, along with several other shipmates, is marooned in an island after an unsuccessful mutiny, the very first thing on his mind is procuring a weapon: “I begged nothing now, but that he would give me a Gun and a Sword, with a little Powder and Shot... so we should not be devoured or destroy’d immediately” (Defoe, Daniel. *The Life, Adventures, and Pyracies of the Famous Captain Singleton*, 19). A few pages later, it is revealed that the only reason that the company of mutinous sailors was not immediately set upon by savages is that they were “shy and afraid, seeing their Guns; for it was easy to perceive, that the Natives knew what their Guns were, and what Use they were of.” (ibid., 31)

In travel literature, firearms always discombobulate natives, and often they are the decisive factor on their willingness to become the travellers’ thralls. However, when in book II, Lemuel thinks of doing a courtesy to the Brobdingnagian king by showing him the manner of manufacturing and coordinating the construction of firearms and cannons for the use of the realm, instead of asserting the European’s superiority over the indigenous people, the opposite happens:

The king was struck with horror at the description I had given of those terrible engines, and the proposal I had made. He was amazed, how so impotent and grovelling an insect as I” (these were his expressions) could entertain such inhuman ideas ... As for himself, he protested, that although few things delighted him so much as new discoveries in art or in nature, yet he would rather lose half his kingdom, than be privy to such a secret; which he

commanded me, as I valued any life, never to mention any more. (*Gulliver's Travels*, II, vii.)

In *Gulliver's Travels* firearms are not an object that entails civilisation, but the complete opposite; the sovereign of Brobdingnag, who is described in the next paragraph as a “possessor of every quality which procures veneration, love, and esteem; of strong parts, great wisdom, and profound learning, endowed with admirable talents, and almost adored by his subjects” (ibid.) condemns them and whomever it was who invented them as being barbarous.

During the course of this essay I have analysed several motifs that appear in travel literature. However, when these make their appearances in *Gulliver's Travels* it is obvious to see that their extra-textual significations are severely altered, sometimes even completely reversed. In much the same way in which the chivalric hero, the knight errant, is reversed in *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, the European traveller is transformed into his opposite by Jonathan Swift. While book I is somewhat anomalous, every other book shows Gulliver arriving at a country where he is practically helpless and overcome by the native's superiority. The Brobdingnagians are physically superior, the houyhnhnms occupy the moral high ground, and finally, for all their impracticality, the Laputans are a mentally industrious people whose technological advancement is unconceivable. There are several probable reasons for which book I breaks the pattern. The most probable thereof being that the Lilliputian society is the one most strongly connected to European culture. The parody, therefore, resides in the fact that they, as a culture, have delusions of grandeur while being minuscule.

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I made signs, as well as I could, that I had no occasion for such an instrument; which, as I afterwards found, gave his majesty, and the whole court, a very mean opinion of my understanding.