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Rationality and Community: Swift's Criticism of the Houyhnhnms

MARY P. NICHOLS

G*ulliver's Travels* is Jonathan Swift's answer to the political proposals that Socrates made in Plato's *Republic*. In the city Socrates describes, philosophers enforce both communism of property and communism of women and children. Reason rules the passions, and individuality is suppressed. By presenting the land of the Houyhnhnms as a caricature of the *Republic's* best city, Swift shows the harsh, tyrannic elements in the rule of reason or philosophy.¹

Lemuel Gulliver, the narrator of *Gulliver's Travels*, however, approves of the Houyhnhnms. He tries to imitate their way of life. He publishes his travels in order to reform men so that they act as rationally as the Houyhnhnms (IV,10).² Traditional interpretations of *Gulliver's Travels* assume that Swift shares Gulliver's love of the Houyhnhnms and his hatred of mankind for its failure to achieve the Houyhnhnms' rationality.³ I argue, in contrast, that Swift is

¹ It may be that Plato also saw the harshness of the city in the *Republic*, and that he did not intend the rule of philosophers and communism as serious political proposals. For arguments concerning the "comic" character of the *Republic*, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1964) and Allan Bloom's interpretative essay in *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968).

² References to *Gulliver's Travels* will indicate voyage and chapter.

³ See Milton P. Foster's introduction to *A Casebook on Gulliver Among the Houyhnhnms* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961), xii. For examples of critics who tend to share the Houyhnhnms' understanding of themselves as "the perfection of nature," see John B. Moore, "The Role of Gulliver," *Modern Philology* XXV

critical of both the Houyhnhnms and his hero Gulliver. In his love of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver accepts an idea of perfection which makes it impossible for him either to understand or to participate in human life. To substantiate this interpretation, I consider, first, the land of the Houyhnhnms and, then, Gulliver, who wants to make this land his home.

THE LAND OF THE HOUYHNNHMS

The grand maxim of the Houyhnhnms is "to cultivate reason, and to be wholly governed by it." Reason for the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver claims, is not "a point problematical" as it is with human beings, in whom it is "mingled, obscured, or discoloured by passion and interest" (IV, 8). The Houyhnhnms consequently have no vices. Just as they are free from envy and malice, so are they free from sexual passions. Marriages are determined by parents and friends who "choose such colours as will not make any disagreeable mixture in the breed." The Houyhnhnms value strength in the male and comeliness in the female, "not upon account of love, but to preserve the race from degenerating." A Houyhnhnm looks upon his marriage "as one of the necessary actions of a reasonable being." So, too, do the Houyhnhnms educate their children "entirely from the dictates of reason," for "they have no fondness for their colts or foals" (IV, 8). To prevent overpopulation, couples cease to have intercourse after they have produced a foal of each sex. If couples past childbearing age lose one of their offspring, childbearing couples donate one of their own and have another one to replace it. If a couple has two males, an exchange is made with a couple which has two females. The Houyhnhnms thus seem to have nothing of their own to which they are attached. When one of their Yahoo

(May 1928), 469-480; George Sherburn, "Errors Concerning the Houyhnhnms," *Modern Philology* LVI (November 1958), 92-97; Allan Bloom, "An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*," in *Ancients and Moderns*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964); and Charles Peake, "Swift and Passions," *Modern Language Review* LV (April 1960), 169-180. John F. Ross, "The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver," *Studies in the Comic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941); Kathleen M. Williams, "Gulliver's Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," *Journal of English Literary History* XVIII (December 1951), 275-286; and Irving Ehrenpreis, *The Personality of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958) do express reservations about Swift's approval of the Houyhnhnms, but their analyses do not deal with the fundamental issues of political philosophy, which, I believe, Swift addresses.

slaves hides a colored stone, they think he is moved by an “unnatural appetite” (IV, 7). Presumably, they understand neither the value of something that has no practical use nor the pleasure that comes from having something of one’s own.

The Houyhnhnms would be ideal citizens of Plato’s *Republic*, where the private is eliminated in favor of the public or the common (e.g., *Rep.*, 462a ff.). In the city described there, men say “‘my own’ and ‘not my own’ about the same thing, and in the same way” (462c). Not only is there communism of property (416d-417b), but communism of women and children as well. No woman in the *Republic*’s city “is to live privately with any man” (457d). The citizens are “married” for a limited time by rulers in order to produce the kind and number of human beings needed by the city (458e ff.). By pairing the best men with the best women and rearing only their offspring, the rulers maintain “the most eminent quality in the citizenry” (459d-e). The rulers also control the number of marriages so that the city will maintain its optimum size, becoming “neither big nor little” (460a). Like the marriages of the Houyhnhnms, the marriages in the *Republic* occur for the sake of public utility. The citizens must have no passions that interfere with these reasonable arrangements. They are to show no personal preferences for mates, nor desire to prolong a marriage beyond the designated time. Moreover, their passions are not to be aroused when they exercise naked in the gymnasium with members of the opposite sex (451b ff.). They are as sexless as the Houyhnhnms.

Gulliver claims that the Houyhnhnms possess the virtues of friendship and benevolence (IV, 8). But just as the Houyhnhnms love the children of other couples as much as they love their own, their friendship and benevolence are “not confined to particular objects, but universal to the whole race.” A stranger is “equally treated with the nearest neighbour” (IV, 8).⁴ The Houyhnhnms do not have particular friends any more than a married Houyhnhnm has particular affection for his spouse: mates “pass their lives with the same friendship and mutual benevolence that they bear to all others of the same species who come in their way” (IV, 8).

The Houyhnhnms thus treat the members of their species in the

⁴ Ehrenpreis quotes from one of Swift’s letters to Bolingbroke: “Your notions of friendship are new to me,” Swift wrote; “I believe that every man is born with his *quantum*, and he cannot give to one without robbing another.” *The Personality of Jonathan Swift*, 105.

way that the citizens of the *Republic* treat one another under the communistic arrangements. Those citizens are “friends” in that they hold “all things in common” (424a), but they do not single out particular citizens as the objects of their affection.⁵ Their “love” is a love of the whole city. They are gladdened and pained by the same things. They have no private joys or griefs (462b). Their model is the man who does not grieve at the deaths of his relatives or friends: for him “it is least terrible to be deprived of a son, or a brother, or money, or anything else of that sort” (387e).

That the Houyhnhnms love one another equally is consistent with the fact that they have no individual identities. There is a class of servants among the Houyhnhnms: “the white, the sorrel, and the irongray,” who are “not so exactly shaped . . . nor born with equal talents of mind” (IV, 6). But, with the exception of a sorrel nag who is distinguished by her affection for Gulliver (IV, 11), there are no marks of distinction within the classes. Consequently, the Houyhnhnms have no personal names. If all are alike, would any be preferred in love? The love of the Houyhnhnms for one another amounts to love of reason abstracted from the particular in which we always see it manifested. Rather than being directly linked to each other through particular love, the Houyhnhnms have only indirect ties through their universal love of reason. Not surprisingly, then, Houyhnhnms do not mourn the death of their mates; friends and relatives express “neither joy nor grief” at a Houyhnhnm’s death (IV, 9).

The Houyhnhnms have little to do since they themselves are perfect. Their major activity seems to be their rule of the Yahoos. It is in their treatment of the Yahoos that we see the harshness that underlies their rational rule. The Yahoos represent man’s passionate side—the side missing from both the Houyhnhnms and the *Republic*, where Socrates says little about the lowest class, the “desiring” part of the city.⁶ Swift’s presentation of the Yahoos shows the problems inherent in reconciling rational and passionate elements. The Houyhnhnms’ treatment of the Yahoos suggests that only the harshest measures can control passions.

⁵ See Glaucon’s misunderstanding of this point (468c) followed by Socrates’ presentation to him of a view of love appropriate for the city he is founding (47c ff.).

⁶ The lowest class shares in the virtue of moderation in that its members agree that the rulers, the “better” men, should rule in the city. Moderation is the rule of the worse by the better (430e-432a). The desiring part of the city, sharing in moderation, therefore accepts the city’s austerity.

Swift's portrayal of the Yahoos indicates why one might want to control the passions. The Yahoos resemble men in form, but they are savage and have no capacity to reason. Their passions run wild. They are filthy, gluttonous, lewd, insolent, and violent. They are also possessive. For example, they are "violently fond" of colored stones, spending days digging them out of the earth and hiding them in their kennels "for fear their comrades should find out their treasure" (IV, 7). They fight Yahoos of other neighborhoods "without any visible cause" as well as their own neighbors if enemies are wanting (IV, 7). But although they are competitive and pugnacious, they are quick to defend their own kind. When Gulliver gives one of them "a good blow," a herd of at least forty came from a nearby field, "howling and making odious faces" (IV, 1). And when Gulliver catches a three-year old Yahoo, "a whole troop of old ones came . . . at the noise," but found that the "cub was safe" for it had run away (IV, 8). In general, Gulliver finds them "cunning, malicious, treacherous, and revengeful" (IV, 8). They are restrained by the Houyhnhnms who rule them by force.

Only in regard to the Yahoos do the Houyhnhnms disagree among themselves. But all of the suggestions that they make for dealing with the Yahoos have the character of tyranny, since their proposals culminate at best in simple suppression and eventual elimination of the Yahoos. Their recurrent debate is whether the Yahoos "should be exterminated from the face of the earth" (IV, 9). The less harsh expedient proposed by Gulliver's master is gradual extinction by castration, an expedient recommended not because it is more gentle but because it is more useful—the castrated Yahoos will be "tractable and fitter for use" (IV, 9). When the Houyhnhnms act toward the Yahoos, they do not act toward beings whose otherness or distinctness modifies or restrains their own actions. They act only for the sake of maintaining the homogeneity of their own community.

Another of Swift's satirical works, the "Modest Proposal," sheds light on his disapproval of the Houyhnhnms' "rationality." That work proposes to relieve the poor in Ireland by having them sell their children to be used as food and clothing. Swift counts on his readers' attachment to their own to make the modest proposal abhorrent to them. Because the Houyhnhnms lack such attachment, they would consider "rationally" the merits of such a plan. The modest proposer assumes, for example, that the poor in Ireland will not suffer when their children die. The Houyhnhnms do not

suffer when their offspring die, since they do not love their own progeny more than the progeny of others. And they immediately have another colt or receive a replacement. When the modest proposer assumes that men will not hesitate to give up their children for public or private benefit, he is assuming that they are like the Houyhnhnms who do this very thing. Throughout his proposal, he assumes that the family is based on rational calculation to the exclusion of love or affection. For example, he argues that mothers will care more for their children if they expect to sell them when they are a year old.⁷ Once it becomes reasonable (because profitable) to take care of children, mothers will do so.

While addressees of the modest proposal are assumed to be both rational and dispassionate, the proposal itself requires treating men as if they were brutes. A small percentage of Ireland's children must be kept from market and reserved for breed, of which only one fourth need be males. Mating should take place in accordance with the size of the population that the country can maintain. Indeed, one of the intentions of the modest proposal is said to be the reduction in size of an excessive population.⁸ The reasonable population that the proposal tries to effect is maintained by the Houyhnhnms as a matter of course. Lacking the passions that lead to overpopulation, they marry and have children simply for the sake of preserving the country's population.

The "Modest Proposal" thus reveals the error in applying the Houyhnhnms' harsh "rationality" to human beings. We see this error in *Gulliver's Travels* in the Houyhnhnms' treatment of Gulliver, which manifests none of the benevolence that Gulliver attributes to them. Even Gulliver's master regards him as a curiosity: he accedes to Gulliver's request that he not be called a Yahoo so that Gulliver will be put "into a good humour" and become "more diverting" (IV, 3). The Houyhnhnms do not force Gulliver to join the Yahoos of whom he lives in mortal fear, only because they do not want him to lead the Yahoos against their cattle (IV, 10). Treating Gulliver simply as a Yahoo, they finally cast him out. They cannot comprehend a being who is both like and unlike themselves—toward whom they must act and yet who limits their action. If the

⁷ Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick," *Irish Tracts 1728-1733*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

Houyhnhnms recognized that Gulliver was different from themselves but yet deserved consideration because he was in part like themselves, they would have to modify their actions toward him in order to take his “otherness” into account. But the Houyhnhnms are aware of no such limitations. They know only other Houyhnhnms who are indistinguishable from themselves, and Yahoos who are so different from themselves that the Houyhnhnms seem justified in ruling them despotically.

Homogeneity is the key to both the *Republic* and the land of the Houyhnhnms—a homogeneity that is essentially tyrannical because it suppresses the diversity present in any human community. Simplicity replaces diversity; stability replaces change. Socrates replaces the diverse pantheon of Homeric gods with a divine simplicity (380d-383c). The city attempts to be static; the primary political action of the philosophers, arranging the marriage lots, aims at preservation of the status quo. The Houyhnhnms’ general assembly, which meets only every four years, also aims at preserving the status quo. There, the districts deficient in hay, oats, cows, or Yahoos are supplied from districts in which they are plentiful, and colts are assigned to deficient couples (IV, 8). Just as the Houyhnhnms cannot accommodate novelty (they must expel Gulliver), the *Republic’s* philosophers cannot incorporate change into the city—time brings the city’s collapse (546a).

The order and efficiency of the Houyhnhnm’s rule of the Yahoos also characterize the *Republic’s* city. In the *Republic*, both the philosophers who rule and the military class which they command provide the control that maintains the city’s unity and stability. The military class corresponds to the spirited part of the soul, just as the rulers represent reason, and the lowest class the desires. Swift indicates the intimate connection between reason and spiritedness in such a situation by collapsing the *Republic’s* two upper classes into one, the Houyhnhnms. Spiritedness provides the force in reason’s tyranny over the passions. Perhaps because the horse is an animal often characterized by spiritedness,⁹ Swift portrayed his rational rulers as horses.¹⁰

⁹ E.g., Xenophon, *Art of Horsemanship*, IX.

¹⁰ According to D. Nichol Smith, however, Swift chose the horse to represent the perfection of nature because the horse is “the animal which we agree in calling noblest.” “Jonathan Swift: Some Observations,” *Essays by Divers Hands, Being the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), XIV, 28-48, 43.

By the end of his fourth voyage, Gulliver strives to follow the Houyhnhnms' way of life. Indeed, his purpose in writing *Gulliver's Travels* is to bring his beloved horses as examples to men. He illustrates his complete truthfulness by quoting Sinon: ". . . if wicked fortune made Sinon miserable, it did not also make him a false man and a liar" (IV, 12).¹¹ Sinon, however, asserted his truthfulness to the Trojans when he brought them the wooden horse. Gulliver apparently fails to see the similarity between the Trojan horse and the in some ways wooden horses he is bringing to men. Sinon's horse was instrumental in destroying those who accepted it, the Trojans who fought to defend the passion of Paris. The parallel between the Trojan horse and the Houyhnhnms suggests that it is wise to reject the Houyhnhnms. Why, then, does Gulliver accept them?

GULLIVER'S SEARCH FOR PERFECTION

From early youth, Gulliver has a desire to travel. While he studies medicine, he also studies "navigation and other parts of mathematics useful for those who intend to travel" (I, 1). He goes on several voyages. He finally marries, but his marriage does not indicate that he desires the personal attachments and stability of domestic life. "Advised to alter his condition," he marries a woman who brings him four hundred pounds (I, 1). He nevertheless has financial difficulties and returns to sea for a six-year voyage. Aboard ship, he reads "the best authors, ancient and modern"; on shore, he observes "the manners and dispositions of the people" (I, 1). He then does spend three years at home, but his medical practice proves insufficient to support his wife and children. He now undertakes the first of the four voyages that constitute *Gulliver's Travels*.

Gulliver admits that he "ha[s] been condemned by nature and fortune to an active and restless life" (II, 1). He does not seem to know what he is looking for, or what would make him happy. Time after time he leaves his wife and children in order to travel.¹² He claims to have a thirst for "seeing the world," but no country he visits, until he comes to the land of the Houyhnhnms, satisfies him. In his desire to know different ways of life and in his constant search for a good one, Gulliver is Swift's presentation of a philosopher.

Gulliver even brings Socrates to mind—a man who investigated

¹¹ The quotation is from Virgil, *The Aeneid*, II. 110-111.

¹² When he takes his fourth voyage, he leaves his wife "big with child" (IV, 1).

different opinions and ways of life in order to free himself from the partial truths embodied in the laws and customs of a particular time and place. Socrates also resembles Gulliver in lacking a strong attachment to his family, and in his poverty. Socrates admits that his philosophic activity caused him to neglect “domestic business” and “making money” (*Apol.*, 36b; cf. 36d and 38b). The pursuit of truth appears to lead men away from particular or concrete existence, ties to their families, and an interest in providing for the necessities of life.

Gulliver's Travels represents Gulliver's mental wanderings among alternative ways of life in the guise of voyages to different lands. He has moved away from real voyages to imaginary ones, from concrete existence to fantasy. In these fantasies, Gulliver's imagination is fueled by the ancient and modern books which he reads. Lilliput is based on Lockian commercial principles, Brobdingnag is premodern and technologically undeveloped, the lands of the third voyage caricature a Cartesian paradise, and the land of the Houyhnhnms is modelled on Plato's *Republic*.¹³

In his portrayal of Lilliput, Gulliver reveals his displeasure with his own society and its way of life. The religious wars in which Lilliput engages, the ambitions of its monarch, and the intrigues of its court are petty and dehumanizing. The laws of Lilliput encourage the calculation of gain and manipulate men by their desire for pleasure.¹⁴ Lilliput is technologically advanced: the people “are most excellent mathematicians, and arrived to a perfection in mechanics” (I, 1). Their medicine is both efficacious and painless. After the Lilliputians wound Gulliver, they give him an “ointment very pleasant to the smell, which in a few minutes removed all the smart of their arrows” (I,1). But in spite of Lilliput's achievements in science and medicine, which Gulliver's background prepares him

¹³ According to Bloom, Swift organized *Gulliver's Travels* on the basis of the distinction between ancients and moderns. Lilliput portrays modern practice and Brobdingnag ancient practice, while the third and fourth voyages deal with modern and ancient theory respectively. “An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*,” 241.

¹⁴ Lilliputians picture justice “with a bag of gold open in her right hand, and a sword sheathed in her left, to show that she is more disposed to reward than to punish” (I, 6). Laws move men less by their desire to avoid pain than by their desire for pleasure. Lawabidingness is rewarded by money (I, 6). Hence, greed appears to be encouraged, along with the restraint that comes from calculation of gain. Moreover, Lilliput's criminal code supports commerce. For example, fraud is punished more harshly than theft, because if fraud were widespread men would not be willing to buy and sell on credit (I, 6). See Bloom, “An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*,” 246.

to appreciate, Gulliver finds the Lilliputians "little" people with whom he is too "big" to live. Gulliver's dissatisfaction with Lilliput is a reflection of his dissatisfaction with his own society. He is eager to leave. Although he claims he wants to return home, his "insatiable desire of seeing foreign countries" allows him only two months' rest there (I, 8).

Brobdingnag is a premodern society, isolated from the rest of the world by its lack of seaports and commerce. Gulliver's reading about ancient societies as well as his disgust with modern Lilliput has led him to imagine that a premodern society is peopled by giants. The king of Brobdingnag is wise and virtuous. The people there are proud of their humanity and reject the opinion that mankind has degenerated (II, 7). They are content without the complexities of modern science. The king is repelled by Gulliver's offer to teach him how to make gunpowder (II, 7). Brobdingnagians govern by "common sense and reason," not having "reduced politics to a science, as the more acute wits of Europe have done" (II, 7).¹⁵ Among these people, Gulliver sees himself as a "little" man who has all the prejudices of his time (II, 6 and 7). He is small enough to fit into the hand of a Brobdingnagian.

In spite of Brobdingnag's virtues, Gulliver is not entirely happy there. The people are so much larger than Gulliver that he can see in great detail the coarseness and irregularity of their skin (II,1). "No object ever disgusted [him] so much as the sight of a mother's breast as she feeds her child" (II, 1; cf. II, 3 and 4). He is horrified when the Maids of Honor fondle him. He finds their smell "very offensive." When they dress in front of him, their naked bodies fill him with "horror and disgust" (II, 5).¹⁶ We see now that Gulliver is repelled not only by the pettiness of commercial life but also by the merely physical, or bodily, whose ugliness he imagines. It is man's corporeal existence that makes it necessary for him to provide for the material conditions of life. Gulliver's repulsion from both the pettiness of Lilliput and the ugliness of bodies in Brobdingnag

¹⁵ David Hume entitled one of his political essays "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," *Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1968), 295-306.

¹⁶ That bigness does not necessarily repel, however, is seen in the episode of the Lilliputian lady who was said to have "taken a violent affection for [Gulliver's] person" (I, 6). Bloom intimates that Gulliver has gratified the lady, "An Outline of *Gulliver's Travels*," 238. At any rate, by the time he writes *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver is eager to cover up the episode. (I, 6).

demonstrates his desire to escape from the physical constraints which men face. It is appropriate that while in Brobdingnag he tries to “leap over” some cow dung that lies in his path (II, 5). His failure in this endeavor comically foreshadows his failure to escape from physical nature through his travels. To Gulliver’s chagrin, his mishap amuses the Brobdingnagian court for some time. In contrast to Gulliver, the Brobdingnagians are not repelled by man’s physical existence.

A desire for freedom from the impositions of the body is one of the impulses behind modern science. By becoming a doctor and studying the “useful sciences” (I, 1), Gulliver shares in the modern enterprise of conquering nature through an understanding of its laws. But a nature that should be conquered is hostile, or at least indifferent, to man. Modernity views nature as ugly.¹⁷ In Brobdingnag, Gulliver wishes that he had the appropriate instruments to dissect a louse, although he finds the sight of it “so nauseous, that it perfectly turned [his] stomach.” It is so big that he can see its limbs with his naked eye, “much better than those of a European louse through a microscope” (II, 4). The instruments of science show men nature’s minute details and reveal their ugliness. Gulliver rejects not only modern life but nature itself. He is uncomfortable even in a premodern society, for it accepts the natural constraints of body.

Gulliver hopes to leave Brobdingnag, for he desires his “liberty” (II, 8). He resents needing constant protection. He longs to be among a people with whom he can converse “on equal terms.” He even remembers “those domestic pledges” he left behind in England. Yet, when he returns, he is still repelled by bodies—this time the smallness of them. With the vision of the giant Brobdingnagians in his mind, he thinks that the sailors who bring him home are “the most contemptible creatures [he] ever beheld” (II, 8). He “look[s] down” on his family members “as if they had been pygmies” (II, 8).

¹⁷ For example, consider Descartes’s view of the defectiveness of nature in his Fifth Meditation as well as his assertion of his own existence in his First Meditation in the face of a possibly hostile natural world. Descartes concludes his *Discourse on Method* by looking forward to a “practical” philosophy, “by which, knowing the nature and behavior of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us,” we can “make ourselves masters and possessors of nature.” Descartes singles out medicine as the science which might most benefit men. *Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976), 40. Consider also Hobbes’s description of the state of nature and the fact that Hobbes’s knowledge of the passions allows him to recommend a commonwealth as an alternative to the state of nature. *The Leviathan*, I, 13-14; II, 17.

Although he claims that "in a little time" he came "to a right understanding" with his family and friends, within ten days of his arrival at home he is visited by a captain with whom he returns to sea (III, 1).

While in Brobdingnag, Gulliver found "[t]he learning of this people to be very defective," and the king subject to "narrow principles and short views" (II,7). Although Gulliver is ready to reject modern commercial life, he is still enamored of modern learning. He is a man of science; he has studied medicine and physics (I, 2). In his next voyage, however, he comes to question the utility of scientific learning. The people of Lagado have "schemes of putting all arts, sciences, languages, and mechanics upon a new foot" (III, 4). Gulliver's imagination of this land is influenced obviously by his reading of Descartes and Bacon.

Gulliver now imagines the relief of man's estate as both futile and disgusting. He visits academies that are meant to issue in discoveries and inventions, but none of them appear to work. Professors contrive "new instruments and tools . . . whereby, as they undertake, one man shall do the work of ten" (III, 4). Gulliver implies the futility of such projects when he notes that none of them are yet perfected and the country lies in waste. Other projects are repellent as well as ineffective. The "most ancient student of the Academy," whose "hands and clothes [are] daubed over with filth," is engaged in "reducing human excrement to its original food" (III, 5).

Gulliver's disenchantment with modern science is completed when he encounters medicine in Lagado and pictures the horrors of his own profession. A great physician demonstrates his method of extracting disease by drawing air in and out of the body with a pair of bellows. The dog on whom he operates dies on the spot. When Gulliver departs, the doctor is trying to revive the dog by the same method (III, 5). This doctor comes to typify the profession of medicine for Gulliver, for when he describes medicine to the Houyhnhnms he presents it as identical with medicine in Lagado (IV, 6).

After looking at the distortions of science in the academies of Lagado, Gulliver visits a magician, who calls forth ancient and modern shades for him to see. He sees images of antiquity that are great and magnificent, but he is "disgusted with modern history," since it is acted out by cowards, fools, flatterers, traitors, atheists, sodomites, and informers (III, 8). Gulliver now believes in the

degeneration of mankind, an opinion which he, along with the proud Brobdingnagians, earlier rejected (II, 7). His belief in the decline of mankind finds expression in his description of the Yahoos in his last voyage.

Gulliver ends his third voyage with a visit to the *struldrugs*, human beings who never die. Before meeting the immortals, Gulliver imagines all he would accomplish were he privileged with eternal life on earth. He would mingle with the immortal brotherhood “a few of the most valuable among you mortals, whom length of time would harden me to lose with little or no reluctance, and treat your posterity after the same manner; just as a man diverts himself with the annual succession of pinks and tulips in his garden, without regretting the loss of those which withered the preceding year” (III, 10). Although Gulliver delights in thinking of himself as detached from all particular human beings, he also contemplates his benevolence toward all: with the experience and study that his many years would gain for him, Gulliver would become “a living treasury of knowledge and wisdom” and “the oracle of the nation” (III, 10). Gulliver is well prepared for praising the *Republic's* city, where men are detached from particular human beings but “love” equally all the members of the city as their brothers.

Gulliver is surprised to find that the *struldrugs* are disgusting creatures who suffer the worst aspects of senescence. They are “the most mortifying sight” he ever beheld. His “keen appetite for perpetuity of life was much abated” (III, 10). He is now ready to acquiesce in death, as do the Houyhnhnms whom he idealizes in his last voyage.

At the same time that Gulliver accepts his own mortality, he gives up his medical practice. On his last voyage he goes as the ship's captain rather than as its physician, having “grown weary of a surgeon's employment at sea” (IV, 1). His reflections on medicine in his third voyage do not simply make him aware of the limitations of medicine but lead him to reject medicine completely. Through an event aboard ship, however, Swift indicates that a complete rejection of medicine may be as undesirable as a wholehearted acceptance of it. Several men aboard ship die of the fever. This makes us wonder whether Gulliver should not have been more attentive to the body's weaknesses and possible remedies. The deaths of these men lead to difficulties for Gulliver. He can find only rogues as replacements, who persuade the rest of the crew to mutiny and to abandon Gulliver on shore. Not only does Gulliver fail to use his medical

skill to cure sickness but he does not control the passions of the men under his command. In neither case does he deal with defective or ugly nature for the good of the ship. Gulliver's neglect of the unruly passions of his men introduces the theme of the fourth voyage—man's passions. The shore on which Gulliver is abandoned is the land of the Houyhnhnms, where he meets beings who have neither physical diseases in need of medicine nor passions in need of rule. Gulliver has given up his inept attempt to deal with particulars—whether through the cure of bodies or the rule of men—in order to praise the universal, the reason of the Houyhnhnms. His attempt to escape from human nature is now broadened from a disgust with the body to a repulsion from the passions.

In imagining the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver separates reason from the passions, embodying the former in the Houyhnhnms and the latter in the Yahoos. He accepts the Houyhnhnms' designation of themselves as "the perfection of nature" (IV, 3). When Gulliver first sees the Houyhnhnms, he thinks that their actions and bearing are "not unlike those of a philosopher" (IV, 1). He is content to spend the rest of his life among the Houyhnhnms, imitating their virtues. Their virtues, he claims, are friendship and benevolence (IV, 8). His attributing friendship to the Houyhnhnms and his satisfaction with his life among them indicate what has been suggested from the beginning—Gulliver can neither understand the true meaning of friendship nor accept its demands. Once Gulliver was visited by an acquaintance whom he thought came to see him "only out of friendship." The man actually came on business (III, 1). At the beginning of his book, Gulliver admitted that he had "few friends" (I, 1).

Gulliver's love for the Houyhnhnms is matched by his hatred for the Yahoos. "I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal, nor one against whom I naturally conceived so strong an antipathy," he writes (IV, 1). This antipathy finds a comic expression in Gulliver's reaction to the amorous embrace of a female Yahoo (IV, 8). His reaction to the Yahoos applies to himself as well. "When I happened to behold the reflection of my own form in a lake or fountain," he says, "I turned away my face in horror and detestation of myself, and could better endure the sight of a common Yahoo, than of my own person" (IV, 10; see also II, 3). Because he will not look at himself, he forgets what he should know and what the Houyhnhnms deny—the possibility of a complex being, both ra-

tional and passionate. Gulliver comes to accept the Houyhnhnms' identification of Yahoos and human beings.¹⁸

When the Houyhnhnms force Gulliver to sea, he is picked up by a Portuguese ship captain, Don Pedro.¹⁹ Don Pedro is the successful captain that Gulliver failed to be. But Gulliver's view of human beings as Yahoos colors his appreciation of Don Pedro, an intelligent man who tries to befriend Gulliver. Gulliver does admit that Don Pedro's "whole deportment was so obliging, added to the very good *human* understanding, that I really began to tolerate his company" (IV, 11). Gulliver, of course, prefers the nonhuman understanding of the Houyhnhnms. Don Pedro offers Gulliver arguments for returning to his wife and children, arguments which Gulliver finds too "tedious to repeat" (IV, 11). He does say that Don Pedro "put it upon me as a matter of honor and conscience that I ought to return to my native country, and live at home with my wife and children" (IV, 11). Don Pedro evidently recognizes that man is not an abstract being but one with connections to particular places and people, one's country and family. He notes the impossibility of the "solitary island" Gulliver seeks. It is fitting that Gulliver meets Don Pedro after leaving the land of the Houyhnhnms, for Don Pedro illustrates the error of viewing man as split between passions that deserve to be exterminated and abstract reason. Moreover, his friendship and benevolence contrast greatly with the treatment that Gulliver has received from the Houyhnhnms.²⁰ Don Pedro cares for Gulliver, whereas the Houyhnhnms cast Gulliver out, to live or die as he may.

When Don Pedro embraces Gulliver at their parting, Gulliver endures the embrace "as well as [he] could," for he cannot bear the touch or the smell of human beings (IV, 11). He reacts to all men as

¹⁸ See, for example, Gulliver's letter to his publisher, Sympson. The letter prefaces *Gulliver's Travels*.

¹⁹ When Gulliver is rescued, he is wearing rather odd clothing, which he made from the skins of various animals. He found that the Yahoos' skin, dried in the sun, could serve as a substitute for shoe leather (IV, 10). He earlier planned to supply himself clothes and shoes "by some contrivance from the hides of Yahoos and other brutes" (IV, 3). He has carried out the less offensive part of the modest proposal: the carcass of the child sold for food, according to the modest proposer, could be flayed; "the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen." Swift, "A Modest Proposal," 112.

²⁰ Ross points out that Swift gives us Don Pedro, a kindly generous man, as a foil to Gulliver's misanthropy. "Chapter xi," he writes, "is almost wholly a demonstration that Gulliver is absurd in his blind refusal to abandon his misanthropic convictions," "The Final Comedy," 44. See also Williams, "Gulliver's Voyage," 283.

he earlier reacted to one of the projectors in the Academy in Lagado, who is covered with excrement. This projector gave Gulliver “a close embrace” — “a compliment [Gulliver] could well have excused” (III, 5).

Gulliver’s life back in England appears ludicrous. In trying to imitate the Houyhnhnms’ virtues he has come also “to imitate their gait and gesture” (IV, 10). He not only “trot[s] like a horse,” but his English “resemble[s] the neighing of a horse” (IV, 11). Even after he is back in England for five years, the smell of the Yahoos continues to be so offensive that he “always keep[s] [his] nose stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves” (IV, 12). Not surprisingly, Gulliver cannot bear the touch of his wife and children (IV, 11 and 12). He buys two horses which he claims “live in great amity with me and friendship to each other” (IV, 11). His greatest pleasure lies in talking to them. The man so adept at learning the languages of men (I, 2; III, 1, 2, and 11) now spends his time neighing with horses. When his cousin and publisher, Sympson, tells the reader that Gulliver “lives retired, yet in good esteem among his neighbors,” Sympson is kinder to Gulliver than Gulliver is to the human race. Gulliver’s neighbors surely think that he has lost his mind.

CONCLUSION: SWIFT’S DEFENSE OF COMMUNITY

In satirizing Gulliver’s love of the Houyhnhnms, Swift indicates his criticism of philosophy to the extent that it leads to a denial of the body and the passions in the name of an abstract universality. Gulliver’s tendency in this direction appears to be strengthened by his reading of the *Republic*, which influences his imagination of the Houyhnhnms. In admiring the city of the *Republic*, however, Gulliver may be misinterpreting Plato’s work. Socrates, unlike Gulliver, cannot simply approve of the *Republic*’s city and its philosophic rulers. This city has no place in it for Socrates, who pursues his quest for self-knowledge in what the philosopher-kings regard only as a cave to be escaped. It is not the mature Socrates but the young one who must be warned against concentrating on beings which seem to be unconnected to the particular things in the world.²¹ And it is the young Socrates whom Gulliver resembles.

²¹ *Parmenides*, 131a-135d. It is ironic that this warning comes from Parmenides who asserted that the whole is one.

Socrates's famous turn from natural science to political philosophy suggests that he overcame to some extent the dangerous propensity of philosophy that Swift criticizes—the inclination to turn away from humanity in search for perfection (*Phaedo*, 97-100). Gulliver seems less attached to his own than Socrates. Whereas Gulliver wanders around the world, Socrates is famous for never leaving Athens (*Crito*, 52a-c). And he claims to place his duties to his fellow Athenians above his duties to strangers (*Apol.*, 30a). The “restless life” of Gulliver (II, 1) is modelled rather on the life of Descartes who travels throughout Europe, “seeing courts and armies, living with people of diverse types and stations of life, [and] acquiring varied experiences.”²² Descartes presents himself as if he has no connection with anyone or anything particularly his own. It is the peculiar “modern” bent of Gulliver that influences his reading of Plato. To a man trying to conquer nature, the *Republic's* rational city is especially appealing, since that city attempts to conquer particularity—the body, the passions, and, in general, the nonrational limits of human nature. Plato indicates the tyranny of this project.

Like the philosophers of the *Republic's* city, Gulliver must be “compelled” to return to human society. These philosophers, Socrates says, will be laughed at when they have trouble adjusting to the dim light of the cave (*Rep.*, 517a). We suspect that Socrates himself, a dweller in the cave, might also laugh at them. Swift, at any rate, laughs at Gulliver when Gulliver has trouble adjusting to human society. Throughout his voyages, Gulliver hates being laughed at (II, 5; III, 8; IV, 8). His pride, which makes him a fitting character in a comedy, isolates him from others and renders him unfit to be part of a community. Swift seeks to arouse those passions which bind men to one another. In his modest proposal, he does so by abstracting from them and consequently calling them forth. And in *Gulliver's Travels* he shows the folly of a man who tries to stamp out those passions under the influence of a mistaken notion of virtue and reason.

²² Descartes, *Discourses on Method*, 6.