

Name

Senior Honors Research Proposal

Joyless Adaptations: *Gulliver's Travels* and the Limits of Editions for Children

Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift's enduring satire on early eighteenth century European culture and thought, is arguably even more popular today than when it was originally published in 1726. The story has been adapted for children for nearly 300 years; however, Swift's intensely satirical approach to the *Travels* makes it an unusual candidate for children's editions. To understand the story's persistent ability to secure a place at the forefront of international literary conversation and on children's bookshelves around the world, it is necessary first to get to know the brain behind the voyages. Knowing as much as we do about Swift and his scathing intentions, it is nearly impossible to read *Gulliver's Travels* in any way other than as satire—sometimes vicious satire, at that.

Swift's outsider status led to his jaded, cynical outlook on British and Irish society and humanity as a whole; these became the key themes in his many satirical works, including *Gulliver's Travels*. Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin in 1667 and educated at Trinity College. His family was part of the ruling class of English minority in Ireland, contributing to his self-identity as an outsider. Fed up with his work as a cleric in the Church of England in a predominantly Catholic Ireland, Swift entered the world of politics in England, but returned to Ireland after a failed career in 1714. As Christopher Maclachlan notes, the political landscape was changing, and after a century of civil wars and strife due to political and religious differences, "eighteenth-century Britain showed the beginnings of representative government and party politics" (106). In terms of parties, Tories and Whigs emerged as the dominant political

factions, though not as structured as political parties today (Maclachlan 106). Perhaps in large part because of his own frustrations in trying to work within the party system, Swift grew hostile toward with the very idea of political parties, viewing them as the cause of unnecessary debate in the political process.

Swift quickly became the strongest voice of satirical challenge to eighteenth-century thinking, and his contempt for what he saw as inherent human foolishness is perhaps most evident in *Gulliver's Travels*. As Maclachlan writes, "The underlying themes of *Gulliver's Travels* are the flaws of European civilization (mostly shown in the distorting mirror of the lands Gulliver visits) and the empty confidence in reason as a means to improve things" (108). Swift's writing is accessible enough that most of his contemporaries reading the *Travels* at the time it was published could grasp the satire (though more than a few did not). *Gulliver's Travels* is written as a frame tale, or a story within a story. Swift presents the narrator, Lemuel Gulliver, writing about his travels in the past from his home in the present. As Karen Bloom asserts, this span of years, even decades, between the time in which the events occurred and when Gulliver records them, "allows readers to see Gulliver as unreliable, a man whose opinions must be questioned" (35). This is a key part of the success of Swift's satire. By treating Gulliver's accounts of some events with a certain amount of skepticism, readers in turn learn to question their own perceptions of their world.

On one hand, *Gulliver's Travels* seems to be a "natural" fit for children's literature in terms of its fantastical characters and settings, and thus it has been frequently adapted for children. The talking horses and tiny people Gulliver encounters seem to lend themselves to children's fantasy stories. The adventures in Lilliput serve to make this point. The fantastical setting appeals to a child's sense of whimsy, imagination, and adventure. The dramatic

difference in size between Gulliver and the Lilliputians allows children to experience what it would be like not to live in a world ruled by adults; while the Lilliputians are still adults and have a government and army, the child-like Gulliver essentially holds all the power because he is twelve times larger than the six-inch-high Lilliputians. The adventures in Lilliput and indeed throughout the *Travels* seem ideal to be adapted for children, but the satire and political commentary seems problematic for adapters. The very elements that make *Gulliver's Travels* great—the reasons that make it an enduring work of literature—are the same elements that make it difficult to adapt properly for children.

The many children's adaptations of the first voyage explore this land of whimsy but tend to ignore the darker elements of political and social satire. As *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century* states in the preface to *Gulliver's Travels* of the first voyage, "As we read we grow disenchanted with the inhabitants of this fanciful kingdom, and then gradually we begin to recognize our likeness to them, especially in the disproportion between our natural pettiness and our boundless and destructive passions" (2488). Despite the ring of truth in Swift's satire nearly 300 years later, abstract concepts such as these are frequently stripped away in children's adaptations of *Gulliver's Travels*, leaving behind the barest elements of characters and plot. In doing so, I will argue, adapters are "adapting" the wrong things and thus preventing children from experiencing the joy that comes from experiencing *Gulliver's Travels* in its purest satirical form.

Swift's satire in *Gulliver's Travels* is perhaps some of the most brilliant, vicious, thought-provoking satire in English literature. The most harshly satirical final chapter of the *Travels* is the one that is most frequently removed from children's editions of the *Travels*. Swift's—or is it Gulliver's?—misanthropic views are perhaps most evident in this last voyage, in which Gulliver

visits Houyhnhnmland. Swift pushes his satire and social critique through his characterization of the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos; the juxtapositions between the sets of characters serve to emphasize Swift's views. The Houyhnhnms are a race of intelligent, reasonable, passive horses that live with dominion over Yahoos, humanoid savages. Swift makes his point that humans are flawed beings that are only capable of reason and not strictly reasonable beings by the juxtaposition of rational animals and beastly humanoids. Houyhnhnms exemplify that which humans aspire to be, while the Yahoos reveal humans' worst inherent qualities. Gulliver's visit to Houyhnhnmland is the culmination of Swift's satire and political and social critique throughout the *Travels*; humans are inherently flawed and not the ultimate race of rational beings we try to believe we are. Swift highlights enduring, dark truths about humanity and society. How, then, should writers approach creating adaptations of this 'adult' tale for a younger audience?

Many children's versions of tales within *Gulliver's Travels* are what I am labeling joyless adaptations; by adapting the story to make it cute and sanitized for children, adapters remove the bite and punch that makes the original great. Adapters sometimes fail to properly adapt the satire of the travels for children and often remove it entirely, effectively bowdlerizing it and creating joyless adaptations. For example, Margaret Hodges' version of the first voyage, *Gulliver in Lilliput*, is fairly accurate in terms of characters and plot to the original story. Some lines are even taken directly from the original, such as the following: "When I awakened, it was just daylight. I tried to rise, but was not able to because my arms and legs were strongly fastened to the ground" (Hodges 6). This version retains some satire, but it is not specifically adapted with the readers' abilities in mind. For example, Hodges leaves in the satirical debate of the High and Low Heels, in which Swift satirizes the divide between Whigs and Tories, and the language is

not adapted for children. Satire referring to a political debate from nearly three centuries ago goes over a child's head and adds no real redeeming value to this edition. A ten-year-old child does not read like a twenty-five-year-old, and successfully adapting the difficult language, concepts, and satire of the *Gulliver's Travels* requires adapters to be unflinchingly honest in what the reader can be expected to understand. There is a crucial difference between parroting the original and engaging with the text to successfully adapt it in terms for a young audience; therefore, this edition fails to truly produce a joyful adaptation.

Frank Murphy's book *Gulliver in Lilliput* is an even more simplified account of the first voyage. Murphy keeps the basic plot and characters the same, but gives none of Gulliver's background, nor does he follow the story to Gulliver's return home. No elements of satire are even mentioned, including the Lilliputian's two 'warring' factions; the story essentially is reduced to a man who is washed ashore on an island of tiny people, wins the war with their rivals for them, and then steals a ship and flees once they grow tired of him. It is the voyage to Lilliput, but only a ghost of the original. The satire and complexity of the original *Gulliver's Travels* is what makes it so much more than this diluted tale. Children may enjoy reading about Gulliver's brief interlude in Lilliput, but adapters are purposely depriving them of the true joy that comes from delving into Swift's satire; this results in a joyless adaptation.

The satire is what people remember, enjoy, and keep coming back for after nearly 300 years of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift did not write the *Travels* to play it safe, and children's adaptations of his work should not fall in the vein of typical conventions either. So what is it that makes *Gulliver's Travels* the *Travels* we know and love? Is it simply a series of characters and plot points, or is it something more? If it were merely technical elements such as the characters, settings, plot points, and general resolution, then all adaptations of *Gulliver's Travels* would

successfully pay homage to the original. I propose, however, that something essentially Swiftian is missing from most children's adaptations of the *Travels*: the brilliance of the satire.

There must be a way to create a fantastical children's edition of the *Travels* while retaining the essence of Swift's satire; I will attempt to do so by creating my own adaptation of Gulliver's experiences in Houyhnhnmland. This edition will seek to prove that successful, joyful adaptations of *Gulliver's Travels* can exist in the world of children's literature by adapting and retaining satire in the most traditionally difficult chapter specifically for eight to twelve-year olds. As an English major with minors in Children's Literature and Art, I will use my skills to rework this chapter and create illustrations that enhance this version of the story for young readers. This adaptation will seek to grant legitimate access to the intensely satirical voyage to Houyhnhnmland by respecting the audience and being sensitive to the realities of the audience's abilities.

In terms of a proposed schedule for the research and completion of this research project, I will have all of my primary and secondary sources compiled and research completed by mid-fall of 2018. I should have a rough outline of my project completed by the end of the fall semester and will be prewriting during the winter break. The bulk of the writing will take place during the first half of the spring semester of 2019; a rough draft is expected to be completed by early March. Revisions and final stages editing will occur during the rest of the term with the defense being scheduled in late April. The paper will be organized in four chapters: introduction, examination of Swift's main satirical writing strategies, a comparative reading of different adaptations, and my own adaptation of Gulliver's experiences in Houyhnhnmland. My defense committee will consist of Dr. Chene Heady, Dr. Jennifer Miskec, an outside professor who is yet to be determined, and Dr. Derek Taylor, who also serves as my director.

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