

Satire of Science and Reason in Gulliver's Travels

Satire of Science and Reason in Gulliver's Travels Gulliver's Travels has set a standard for satirical writing for a long time, and Swift's imaginative ability and talent can explain a lot of the text's continued popularity. People can approach Gulliver's Travels like a children's book, and not search for deeper meaning. They read the story as a fantasy, and seek only to be entertained. Gulliver's Travels is valuable and enjoyable for its plot and surface elements alone, but a deeper level of meaning and significance can be achieved if we take note of the satirical elements in the novel. Although to gain a full appreciation of the satire, the reader needs to be somewhat familiar with the events of Swift's time.

Taking the historical period in which Swift was writing into consideration, one of the major changes that was occurring was the shift to a more scientific, empirically-informed worldview (being advanced by the Royal Society of England and Francis Bacon). However, Swift and others were concerned that if this new scientific outlook could lead to disaster if it continued unchecked. Swift and other "nonconformists" argued that science without context could have widespread harmful consequences, and this position profoundly reveals itself in his satirical treatment of science and knowledge in Gulliver's Travels. This paper will discuss Swift's satirical treatment of these subjects in the novel.

Several critics have pointed out that evidence exists that suggests that Swift was not uniformly opposed to all science (Phiddian 52). Therefore, it would seem unfair to read Swift's satirical approach to science in Gulliver's Travels as a full rejection of the science of his day—it would be overly simplistic and reductive. Swift was not an anti-Luddite. In fact, Swift was a proponent of science in some ways, but he reacted strongly against what he perceived as its abuse or exploitation. The satirical treatment of science in Gulliver's Travels is more complex than an all-or-nothing rejection of the scientific mindset that was becoming increasingly popular in Swift's time.

Instead of objecting to the use of science in general, Swift seems to have had problems with a particular form of scientific research, and it is with this type of science/scientist that Swift is primarily concerned in Gulliver's Travels. The type of science that Swift attacks is inapplicable science, or "pure theory," that type of research that has no apparent practical application. Even in a historical context, the origins of the current theory/practice dichotomy were already present (Fitzgerald 219). This distinction is an important part of science today, where those researchers who pursue problems of application are viewed as inherently less valuable than those scientists who deal in questions of pure theory. Swift's satire in Gulliver's Travels is directed solely at those in the "pure science" category, who think of the practical as something they don't need to be concerned about.

Swift skewers the impractical scientists of Laputa in his description of why the flying island has never been landed on a town as a disciplinary measure:

if the Town intended to be destroyed should have in it any tall Rocks. [. . .] Or if it abound in high Spheres of Pillars of Stone, a sudden Fall might endanger the Bottom of under Surface of the Island. (144)

Without explicitly saying it, the description forces the reader to recognize the absurdity of the fact that the Laputans have been able to achieve this technical marvel of gaining flight with an island, but they have not mastered the technology necessary to successfully land it.

This contradiction is also a symbolic representation of the "head in the clouds" character of the Laputan scientists, so concerned with their thoughts and observations that they have to be roused with slaps from the inflated bladders on sticks devised specifically for this purpose (Patey 820).

As an extension of this protest against impractical scientific experimentation, Swift also seems to protest the rapidly expanding scientific method that was being used in his day. Specifically, Swift seems to be calling into question the usefulness of scientific experimentation and research that has no logical conclusion. When working with pure theory, there are no logical beginning and ending points, as there are when practical application is being studied. Instead, these investigations are infinite and cyclical, with one question leading to others in a never-ending spiral. Swift criticizes the uselessness of these types of scientific attempts through Lemuel Gulliver's descriptions of the incompleteness of the projects: "none of these Projects are yet brought to Perfection; and in the mean time, the whole Country lies miserably waste, the Houses in Ruins, and People without Food or Cloaths" (151).

Another element of science without context that Swift criticizes is touched upon further during Gulliver's journey to the town of Balnibarbi. Observing the filth and misery of the townspeople, who are continuously developing new ways of life, Gulliver notes that the townspeople have abandoned their reverence for the received knowledge that comprises the foundation for tradition, ritual and heritage.

By dismissing their tradition, the people of Balnibarbi have failed to put their new learning into proper historical context. They have failed to critically analyze the potential value of their new ideas, as opposed to the ways they have always lived in the past. As a result of this failure of critical analysis, the townspeople cannot distinguish the potential value of "new" versus "old." Instead, they automatically accepted new as synonymous with superior value. In this way, Swift shows his own concern with the possibility that people will become so caught up with the overreaching promise of the new Baconian empiricism that all of the old traditions of European culture will be abandoned without proper reflection.

In Gulliver's voyage on Laputa, and his visits to Legado and Balnibarbi, Swift presents another satirical view of the encroaching pervasiveness of the scientific worldview that was becoming more widespread during his lifetime. Swift himself was not opposed to all scientific endeavors, but Gulliver's Travels provided a platform for him to explore the potential negative effects/affects of the "new science," engaging in the exaggeration and absurdity that are essential to satire. Although Swift's characterization of the Laputan scientists is distorted, it does successfully call into question the ultimate goal of science. Should scientific research be pursued because society has achieved the technology to perform them? My opinion is that Swift, through Gulliver's Travels, argued that it should not automatically and necessarily be pursued.