

# Different educational traditions in gulliver's travels



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Educational practices have evolved in a multitude of ways throughout human history. In *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, each land that Gulliver visits has its own idea of what education should be like for the citizens there. The first land Gulliver visits, Lilliput, which seems most similar to Gulliver's home of England in its social structure, is also most similar in terms of educational practices. However, each subsequent land he visits is increasingly different from the schooling that Gulliver is used to. As a whole, the educational practices that Gulliver encounters in the various lands are different from the educational practices in England at the time of the book's writing in 1726. Swift uses these differing practices to make a commentary on the state of education in early eighteenth-century England. Swift uses *Gulliver's Travels* to expose the limits in the English educational system in the early eighteenth century through his depiction of schools in the novel's various foreign lands.

In describing Lilliput, Swift reveals how the educational system is set up similarly to other historical governments in every aspect of life. In the Nurseries for Males of Noble or Eminent Birth, Gulliver reports how the children are "never suffered to converse with Servants" and are only allowed to see their parents twice a year, with the visits not lasting more than an hour (Swift 49). Additionally, Gulliver notes that the children are constantly under the watch of teachers so as to "avoid those early bad Impressions of Folly and Vice to which our children are subject" (49). Swift is addressing the elevated level of amusement and fun that is allowed in the English educational system compared to the Lilliputian system; professors surveil them constantly to prevent any merrymaking, which is not the case in England where the trend of formal education has not yet caught on and

children are allowed to run and play freely. Moreover, in the Nurseries for Males of Noble and Eminent Birth's female counterparts, the treatment of the children stays about the same, but with the inclusion of the small detail that the girls' nurses would be severely punished and henceforth banished if they were found to "entertain the Girls with frightful or foolish stories, or the common Follies practised by Chamber-Maids among us" (Swift 50). Once again, Swift criticizes how the Lilliputians valued the gravity of their children's raisings much more than the English did; the Lilliputians aimed to raise their children to be solemn leaders who knew nothing of the Follies of normal life. Unlike the Lilliputians, though, the non-noble children were not educated in England in the early eighteenth century. Education was a privilege that only the nobles were entitled to. The "Nurseries for Children of ordinary Gentlemen, Merchants, Traders, and Handicrafts" were ordered similarly to the nurseries for the noble children, with the exception of those going into trades, who went into apprenticeships instead (Swift 50).

While Lilliput had an orderly, structured system for schooling their youth, Gulliver found that the educational practices in Brobdingnag did not appease his standards for the proper education of children based on his raising in England. According to Gulliver, "the Learning of this People is very defective; consisting only in Morality, History, Poetry, and Mathematicks; wherein they must be allowed to excel" (Swift 125). This stance corresponds with the distaste Gulliver has for Brobdingnag's lack of politics; in this land, the truth is valued more than the punishment for a crime, and the laws are stated so simply that loopholes are not a concern. Swift is indicating that human nature means having an inherent desire for complexity. The

educational practices in Brobdingnag are considered defective by Gulliver because of their oversimplified nature: As a man learned in medicine, several different languages, navigation, and multiple sciences, Gulliver is appalled at the small range of subjects studied by the Lilliputians. In England, those fortunate enough to receive an education were taught a variety of subjects, so the Brobdingnagians' simple manner seems inferior to Gulliver.

Despite his mild discontent with the Brobdingnagians' educational system in comparison to the English system, Gulliver has a much stronger conviction against the Houyhnhnm system of education. For the most part, these sentiments are due to the fact that the Houyhnhnms only study four subjects: Temperance, Industry, Exercise, and Cleanliness. One facet of the Houyhnhnm educational system that sticks out to Gulliver is the fact that both sexes learn the same subjects. When Gulliver shares his educational experiences, he says his Master "thought it monstrous in us to give the Females a different kind of Education from the Males, except in some articles of Domestick Management" (Swift 261). The Master is appalled at the thought of males and females being separated for their schooling; The Master observes "one Half of our Natives were good for nothing but bringing Children into the World," which Gulliver agrees with. Swift opposes sexism through the words of the Houyhnhnms; the idea of equal education for women was virtually unheard of in the early eighteenth century, yet here is an argument that women should not be limited in their educational pursuits solely because they can bear children. It also is worth noting that the Houyhnhnms, a non-human species, study subjects such as Temperance and Cleanliness: these traits are taught to human children through years of

formal education and parenting, yet they are the main focus of the Houyhnhnms' studies. The Houyhnhnms think very highly of themselves and act as if they are born already knowing everything there is to know, so they must study only their limited range of subjects. These educational practices are the most different from the educational practices in Swift's England.

In yet another different direction from the first three lands, Laputa brings about a new design for an educational system that contradicts the English system. The Laputians are too focused on studying music and math to do anything other than music and math. Gulliver tours the Academy of Projectors in Lagado and understands why the whole city is in disarray; the Projectors work on projects that are in no way practical, such as trying to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, recycling food from human excrement to eat again, distinguishing paint by scent, or plowing the ground with hogs. The Laputians are so wrapped up in their own projects that they forget to listen or respond to other people. There is no way a system of education could be implemented so long as the focus of the Laputians is so narrow—the people cannot even collect their thoughts long enough to produce houses with correct angles or properly sewn clothes. This is a stark contrast to the Lilliputians' rigorous system of nurseries and apprenticeships, or even the Brobdingnagians' limited range of studies. In the Explanatory Notes, the Academy is compared to a real institution called the Royal Society (Swift 327nn152-157). The Royal Society was renowned for constantly working on fantastical experiments, just as the Laputians in the Academy. Swift did not see the Royal Society as particularly useful, so he drew parallels between the Society and the fictional Academy of Projectors to criticize the Society

indirectly. In a way, this makes the Academy most similar to educational practices in Swift's England, although the Royal Society was far less inclusive than the Academy. Education in England at the time of Gulliver's Travels' initial publishing was not nearly as impressive as the Lilliputians' orderly system, but it was clearly more productive than Laputa's tragic Academy.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the education system in England lacked order and agreement amongst government officials. According to Clyde Chitty in his book Education Policy in Britain, "Eighteenth-century proponents of liberal political economy objected to all forms of education for the poor—and particularly Charity Schools—as dangerous and misconceived types of benevolence" (4). "They took seriously the view that too much education or school would simply make the working poor discontented with their lot" (4). In the wake of the Middle Ages, education for all citizens was not yet a right due to political figures being scared of what the lower classes would be capable of if they learned to read. The thought was that the translated Bible would be used as "a handbook for the radical transformation of England" (Chitty 3). The notion of keeping poor people, servants, and slaves in the dark is not a new concept, and this practice continued in England up until the early nineteenth century. In Gulliver's Travels, Gulliver is a fortunate man in his town that he is able to study as an apprentice under a surgeon. Despite his constant commentary on the educational practices in the many lands he visits, Gulliver's only mention of school back home in England is right after he leaves for one of his many voyages, stating how he left his family, "My son Johnny, named so after his uncle, was at the grammar-school, and a towardly

child” (Swift 68). Grammar schools were common, but higher education was less expected of all people like it is today. This lonesome acknowledgment of formal schooling furthers the argument that the educational system in England in the early eighteenth century was just getting its feet off the ground.

In each new land, there is a contrast between the style of education Gulliver learns about and the education he experienced back home. For example, England has nurseries, but not in quite the way Lilliput does. Lilliput has their children separated and sorted and kept under lock and key until they are old enough to work, rule, or be married. In England, this happens in some cases, but in many cases the children are kept at home to do housework or learn a trade without being sent away. While Gulliver doesn't give details about the structure of Brobdingnag's schools, he does bring to light which subjects the Brobdingnagians study. Gulliver makes their studies seem like a minimal amount, especially in contrast to what Gulliver himself was taught in England before taking to voyaging. On a different note, the Houyhnhnms only deal in absolute fact, so the need for abstract topics such as poetry and morality (like the Brobdingnagians are taught) is nonexistent. Instead, the Houyhnhnms—male and female—learn subjects of no opinion, such as Cleanliness and Exercise. Subjects such as these are seen as supplementary in England as opposed to the entire basis of one's schooling. The most different of all the foreign lands' educational systems is the Laputians', though. The Academy is an unorganized, impractical house of experiments with no sense of direction: this is a direct contrast to the Lilliputians' strict rules or the Houyhnhnms' required Cleanliness courses. Yet the Academy

might be the most similar to the mad scientist experimentations that occurred in England during the early eighteenth century. Regardless of content, the educational structure of Lilliput resembles the educational structure of England most closely due to the prioritization of those of noble birth, the use of professors and maids, and the holistic sense of early childhood formation.

On the whole, Swift uses *Gulliver's Travels* to expose the limits in the English educational system in the early eighteenth century through his depiction of schools in the novel's various foreign lands. For the most part, the foreign practices aren't implausible, but they all have distinctive qualities from the English education system. One glaring difference between the English practice and one of the foreign land's practice (the Houyhnhnms) was the expectation in educating women: the latter expected equality while the former was shocked to hear the idea. This is a blatant attack on the sexism in the education system in England that limited girls from learning like the boys were permitted to. Overall, Swift recognizes the flaw in the premature English educational system of the early eighteenth century as over-prioritization of nobles and unequal opportunities for girls and boys.

## **Works Cited**

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Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Oxford University Press, 1998.