

Travels as a satire of
the absurd travel
guide and the more
absurd culture from
W...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In an essay first printed in “The Examiner,” Jonathan Swift writes: “In describing the virtues and vices of mankind, it is convenient, upon every article, to have some eminent person in our eye, from whence we copy our description” (Firth 1). One can only guess, however, after reading Gulliver’s Travels, that Swift was unable to find an eminent person of virtue; instead, he found an empire of vice. Gulliver’s four voyages satirize not only the fictitious and fantastic travel guides of the time, but also the proud, immoral society that fostered such filth. The travel literature of Swift’s time consisted chiefly of “fantastic and monstrous” races thought up by writers who had never traveled beyond the limits of their own cities. Other countries, they wrote, were ruled, not by civilized Europeans, but by “doglike men who bark rather than speak, men with eyes in their shoulders, and cyclopean, hermaphroditic or pygmy races” (Hawes 190). The idea is comical until one considers that these stories existed partially to justify the violent outreaches of European colonialism, and were fueled by the real-life exhibitions of caged midgets and foreign captives (Hawes 192). Swifts satirical tales of giants, miniature men, and talking horses are funny on the surface, but the political and social wrongdoings they symbolize are deplorable and embarrassing examples of the vices of mankind. Gulliver’s first two voyages depict dangerous combinations of pride and power. Scale, in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, becomes a metaphor for military might, with the larger and more powerful figures consequently in position to decide, as the hegemon, what is wrong and what is right. In addition to the concurrent changes in Gulliver’s pride and size, Swift adds a more concrete correlation between might and right in the exchanges between Gulliver and these respective races. When Gulliver fires his pistol as a giant he is both feared and admired

<https://assignbuster.com/travels-as-a-satire-of-the-absurd-travel-guide-and-the-more-absurd-culture-from-whence-it-came/>

by his miniature audience, but later, when he merely describes the use of guns to the King of Brobdingnag, the giant ruler responds in disgust. Gulliver's pride and reputation are directly related to his physical might; he is a colossus worthy to march under in Lilliput, but a detestable little pet in Brobdingnag though his mentality is the same in both kingdoms. Gulliver is, as Hawes writes, " a product [...] of the expansionist colonial mentality" (198), a mentality the King of Brobdingnag has concluded – along with Swift – belongs to " the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth" (108). Gulliver's fourth voyage, however, offers the strongest and most outright criticism of the European view of foreign natives and colonization. As Hawes writes, " the depiction of the flat-nosed and droopy-breasted Yahoos [...] is indebted precisely to the racist voyage literature" (203), for even the writings of biologists, who had actually crossed the seas, were filled with racism and objectification: " Hottentot women have long flabby breasts [...] they can suckle their children upon their backs, by throwing the breast over their shoulders" (Qtd. In Hawes 193). Physical attributes, however, are the least troubling subject of the travel guides. Authors credited natives of foreign lands with little, if any intelligence – a mindset that led to and supported slavery: " Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head, containing such a quantity of brain...?" (Qtd. in Hawes 193). This mentality is mirrored perfectly by the Houyhnhnms' enslavement and brutal treatment of the Yahoos. The Yahoos, because of their drooped breasts and differing physical attributes are treated as natural resources; their skin no holds no more reverence to the Hoyhnhyms than does the bark of a tree – the same attitude held of foreign natives by the expanding European

<https://assignbuster.com/travels-as-a-satire-of-the-absurd-travel-guide-and-the-more-absurd-culture-from-whence-it-came/>

colonialists. The Yahoos, like all creatures, deserve better than enslavement, but they are far from an ideal race. They are greedy, brutal, illogical, and void of trust – typical humans. This blow to the entire species of Man is the summation of Swift's satire. In the first three voyages he introduces readers to races filled with hypocrisy, hubris, and low intellect. In the fourth voyage, however, Swift introduces readers to the most deplorable race of all, and it is this race which he calls human: "That in my last Voyage, I was Commander of the Ship and had about fifty Yahoos under me" (210). In a letter on defending the books of "Mr. Gulliver," Swift writes: "His book will last as long as our language, for it derives its merit not from certain modes or manners of thinking, but from a series of observation on the imperfections, the follies, and the vices of man" (Qtd. in Bywaters 738). Jonathan Swift is a "splendide mendax," a liar for the public good (Rodino 1056), he created the Yahoos, the Lilliputians, and the Brobdingnags in order to shame his fellow countrymen. This shame, however, was not designed simply to spite them, but to inspire positive change; Swift hopes to instill in his countrymen the same self-contempt Gulliver describes after leaving Brobdingnag: "For, indeed, while I was in that Prince's Country, I could never endure to look in a Glass after my Eyes had been accustomed to such prodigious Objects; because the Comparison gave me so despicable a Conceit of my self" (122) – the only difference is that Swift hopes this shame will dwell much longer in the hearts of his readers than it did in Gulliver's. Works Cited Bywaters, David. "Gulliver's Travels and the Mode of Political Parallel During Walpole's Administration". ELH 54. 3 (1987): 717-40. Firth, C. H. The Political Significance of Gulliver's Travels. Philadelphia: R. West, 1977. Hawes, Clement. "Three Times Round the Globe: Gulliver and Colonial Discourse". <https://assignbuster.com/travels-as-a-satire-of-the-absurd-travel-guide-and-the-more-absurd-culture-from-whence-it-came/>

Cultural Critique 18 (1991): 187-214. Rodino, Richard H. "' Splendid Mendax': Authors, Characters, and Readers in Gulliver's Travels." PMLA 106 (1991): 1054-70. Swift, Jonathan. Gulliver's Travels. New York: Norton, 1961.