

## Children's versions of *Gulliver's Travels* and the question of horizons of expectation: from biting satire to exciting adventure story

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For a biting satire on humanity, *Gulliver's Travels* has met a rather incongruous literary fate. Described by Jonathan Swift as resting upon a "great foundation of misanthropy" (Woolley, 607), the text is now first discovered by many readers in the form of an entertaining, abridged children's book. From a work in which the travel format is principally a pretext for irony and satire, charting the narrator's alienation from his fellow countrymen, it is transformed into an adventure story recounting the breathtaking experiences of a good-natured and courageous hero. While Swift claimed his work was written "to vex the world rather than divert it" (Woolley, 606), the *Gulliver's Travels* presented to children is in fact highly diverting and far from vexatious. It is also an impoverished and disempowered shadow of the original, adapted for children according to editorial decisions which inevitably alter the reception of the text and in turn impinge upon the relationship between *Gulliver's Travels* and travel literature.

Jauss, defining the horizon of expectation against which readers view texts, states that

[a] literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its "beginning" arouses expectations for the "middle and end", which can then be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text. (Jauss, 12)

Adapting *Gulliver's Travels* for a new audience modifies the way it is viewed in relation to travel literature. In order to grasp the various changes incurred, it is useful first to consider the horizon of expectation against which the work was initially likely to be read, before looking at its parodic relationship with travel writing and then examining some modern children's versions of the text.

In 1726, when it was published, *Gulliver's Travels* fitted into a specific literary context, that of the rise of the novel, to borrow Ian Watt's expression. Travel writing, where the individual's first-person, eye-witness account gives sedentary readers a window onto the unknown and the exotic, thereby expanding their knowledge of the world and, ultimately, of themselves and of human nature, was amongst the forms of writing which contributed to the emergence of the novel. Colonial expansion saw the number of real journeys rise significantly, as more and more travellers put their adventures into writing, encouraged by the Royal Society's instructions on how best to present their experiences, as well as by the enthusiasm of a public grown weary of formulaic romances. As a result, the eighteenth century witnessed a phenomenal "proliferation not only of actual journeys nor even of their published accounts, but of an entire spectrum of printed, first-person narratives, some recognizably "true," some apparently or obviously fabricated" (McKeon, 101), and many a mixture of the two.

The presentation of Swift's text plays upon this vogue, as well as upon the uncertain nature of travel writing and the poor reputation of travellers, who have always been accused of lying or at least embellishing the truth<sup>1</sup>. The "overt and covert signals," to quote Jauss, sent by Swift's original title – *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships* – tend to suggest that the reader might well be in the presence of an actual travel account. So, too, do the opening pages of the narrative, which present a number of factual biographical details relating to the traveller. It could thus be postulated that some readers opening *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726 might have thought it possible that the work was an authentic travel account, although that idea would be dispelled more or less rapidly – according to the credulity of the individual reader – on progressing through the text.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the horizon of expectation against which certain readers set Swift's work was that of actual travel accounts, however reliable or otherwise they might have deemed them to be. This certainly appears to be the horizon of expectation which Swift ascribes to his characterised reader, whom he addresses regularly throughout his text: that of a reader who, although suspecting that certain details of the text may be exaggerated or fabricated, might nonetheless accept the premise that an individual named Lemuel Gulliver could have existed and undertaken several sea voyages to remote lands. How long this particular approach to the text would have lasted remains uncertain, given the increasingly improbable nature of the societies visited by Gulliver and the increasingly obvious satirical content of the work. However, although these factors would lead to a modification of the initial horizon of expectation, as the reader gradually realised that his original generic interpretation was unfounded, they nonetheless do not preclude its existence.

On the other hand, the paratext posits the existence of another, less credulous, implied reader, to whom the author addresses a series of wry hints as to the fictitious nature of the text. The paratextual documents vary according to the different editions of the text, but their overall effect is always to create uncertainty as to what, in *Gulliver's Travels*, is true and what is not. They include portraits of Gulliver with age references which tally not with the date given in the narrative for his birth, but with the actual age of Jonathan Swift, and textual documents which combine to sow seeds of considerable doubt in the reader's mind as to the veracity of the work which is to follow. The letter "from Capt. Gulliver, to his cousin Sympson" indicates that the text has been substantially reworked and even denatured, prior to publication, a fact that is confirmed by the preface addressed from "The Publisher to the Reader," while a series of indications links Gulliver to travellers such as William Dampier and William Symson, whose own accounts of their voyages were not renowned for their scrupulous honesty. If these "textual strategies" – to quote Jauss once again – succeed, immediate recognition of the fictitious nature of the work would lead to a different level of reading, one where the sly, satirical and subversive character of Gulliver's putative travel account would straight away prohibit its reception as the relation of an actual journey.

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Strabo: "Everybody who tells the story of his own travels is a braggart" (1:2.23).

It is clearly impossible to establish one horizon of expectation for a text as polymorphous and ambiguous as *Gulliver's Travels*, and indeed Swift exploits the various levels of readership and their attendant expectations. Arbuthnot's description of an old gentleman who borrowed his copy of *Gulliver's Travels* and "went immediately to his Map, to search for Lilly putt," (Woolley, III: 44) hints at an in-joke amongst Swift's circle surrounding the idea of any reader being taken in by this imaginary geography. Such credulity, even anecdotal, is, of course, unthinkable in the modern context, where knowledge of the globe excludes any credence being given to Lilliput or Brobdingnag, where *Gulliver's Travels* is often read by adults already familiar with children's versions of the work, and where the reputation of the text is such that its fictional nature is commonly known. The horizon of expectation against which *Gulliver's Travels* was and is read has necessarily changed over time.

For many readers in 1726, it would have been evident that one target of Swift's satire was travel literature itself. Swift parodies such writing, debunking its arrogant claim to provide comprehensive descriptions of other lands, its ambivalent relationship with truth and fiction, and its propensity to hoodwink gullible readers. *Gulliver's Travels* is thus bound up in a complex parodic and satirical relationship with travel accounts. In keeping with a theme which recurs in travel writing throughout the ages, the narrator refers repeatedly to the trope of travel liars, unconvincingly proclaiming that he is the exception that proves the rule, being the only scrupulously honest travel writer. Swift also pokes fun at the documentary pretensions of travel narratives, giving exaggeratedly thorough accounts of Gulliver's experiences in distant lands, including the Lilliputian wheelbarrows required to remove the mountains of excrement he produces in his giant form. For many contemporary readers of *Gulliver's Travels*, these characteristics would have formed part of the horizon of expectation of travel writing, and so the target of Swift's mockery would no doubt have been identifiable. However, travel literature has evolved considerably since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and the figure of the unscrupulous, lying traveller is no longer the literary stereotype it was in 1726. Consequently, while Swift's general satire on humanity is easily appreciable by modern readers, that which ridicules travel writing may well be less perceptible, a factor which also modifies modern reception of the text.

Although *Gulliver's Travels* appeared in abridged form as early as 1727, with the last two journeys often excised from the text, Swift's imaginary voyage was not specifically adapted for children, who would probably have read it in chapbook form (Shavit, 116). It is reasonable to suppose that the irony and satire underlying its presentation were less likely to strike younger readers, and that their reception of the text might have been more akin to that of Swift's credulous characterised reader than that of the more aware implied one. If we look at modern, adapted children's editions of *Gulliver's Travels*, it is also apparent that their horizon of expectation is different to that of the text as read by adult readers, whether modern or 18<sup>th</sup>-century. This is all the more striking as the often drastic changes carried out to the text change that horizon, and in so doing fundamentally modify its interaction with travel literature.

It is clearly foolhardy to try and establish a horizon of expectation for children, whose notions of generic categories are necessarily vague, and whose grasp of the distinctions between reality and fiction, while varying according to their age and individual perceptions, is looser than that of adults. But the way in which Swift's work

is adapted for children reveals the quite definite opinions which adults hold as to what children can and should read. Most analyses of *Gulliver's Travels* as children's literature, such as that carried out by M. Sarah Smedman, highlight the steps taken to sanitise the text. Several key passages are generally excised to protect the sensibilities of the young reader, including Gulliver extinguishing a fire in the Lilliputian palace with his copious flow of urine, other allusions to his bladder and bowel movements, as well as his descriptions of a Brobdingnagian nipple, frolics with giant maids of honour, jumping over outsize cowpats and the Yahoos' revolting physical appearance and habits. As is also often noted, many children's versions of *Gulliver's Travels* are limited to just the first two journeys, the last two being deemed less appropriate, accessible or pleasing to a juvenile public.

As Jackie Stallcup recently underlined, the changes made to *Gulliver's Travels* are motivated by a set of more general assumptions on the part of adults, amongst which the notion "that children are innocent, naïve, uncritical and unable to comprehend satire" (91). The modifications aim in fact to eliminate the satirical aspects of Swift's text, because adults feel that they are not for children:

[S]atire, particularly satire as savage and sometimes virulent as Swift's, is embedded in a worldview that is antithetical to our modern conceptions of children as [...] in need of protection from the very elements that the satirist seeks to foreground and criticize (Stallcup, 100).

As has also been suggested, one underlying reason adults are keen to shield children from the increased awareness that satire may bring is to safeguard not the young readers, but adults themselves. After all, it is their "faults and foibles that are so often revealed in embarrassing clarity" (Stallcup, 101). The passages commonly cut in children's versions of *Gulliver's Travels* are removed not only because they are rude, but because they are unflattering to humankind, in that they stress our basest functions and most unappealing physical features, as well as our moral and spiritual failings. Toning down or eliminating satire in children's editions of *Gulliver's Travels* is thus a self-protective move. As such, it seems to confirm Swift's presentation of the human race as so proud that we voluntarily resort to a form of blindness rather than face the disagreeable truth about our faults. His definition of satire as "a sort of *Glass*, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own" (Swift, 375) takes on new resonance when one considers the ways in which adults prevent children from glimpsing the discomfiting image of humanity reflected in Swift's work.

For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to seven quite recent children's editions of *Gulliver's Travels*, aimed at a variety of age ranges, which reveal how contemporary editors tailor the work to young audiences. While this is a very limited sample, given the phenomenal quantity available, it nonetheless offers insights into the way the work is typically adapted for a juvenile readership, and into the way the text's relationship to travel literature is affected in that process.

Of the seven editions studied, all have the modernised title, *Gulliver's Travels*. Four acknowledge Swift on the book's cover, one proclaiming in rather cinematic style "retold from the Jonathan Swift original," while three entirely omit to mention his authorship of *Gulliver's Travels*. One contains only the voyage to Lilliput, two include the voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag, another omits only the third voyage, and the last three retain Swift's four-part structure. But all cut the text to differing degrees.

The edition published in the Usborne Young Reading collection, containing only the journey to Lilliput, is explicitly intended for young children learning to read, with deliberately simplified language and reduced content. The Ladybird Classics edition clearly targets a readership only slightly older: the language and length are pared down to suit non-advanced readers. Two other editions, one comprising the first two voyages and one relating all four, are graphic novels, with Gulliver's adventures retold quite briefly in dramatic comic strip format. Perhaps the most remarkable edition, published by Channel 4, is clearly aimed at secondary school pupils, and includes a vast amount of additional material and notes explaining numerous aspects of the text. The language used in it is more or less that found in Swift's text, but several passages have been eliminated, a fact which is acknowledged in the margin. In the voyage to Brobdingnag, for instance, the reader is given only the title of the fourth chapter, "The country described," and the first sentence: "I now intend to give the reader a short description of this country." In the margin is the frank explanation, "Cut! We've saved you the trouble of reading this chapter. Short, isn't it!" (Broadbent, 44).

While the seven editions studied here vary considerably in length, language and format, they nonetheless share a number of common features. Many of the emblematic passages, which refer to bodily functions or sexual activities or are unflattering to humankind, have been either cut or modified. The exemplary episode of the fire in the Lilliputian palace is excised from all but two of the seven texts, and while it is maintained in the edition published by Steck-Vaughn, the turn of phrase is so allusive that a child might well not realise what is being described: "I had not yet that morning emptied my waters. This I now did in such a quantity, and in the proper places, that in three minutes the fire was entirely put out" (Thompson, 19). In the second instance, one of the graphic novels, Gulliver is shown urinating on the palace, but he is drawn from behind and from the waist up and no explicit mention is made of his actions. Nor are they actually visible, although they are clear from the redolently onomatopoeic "zzzzzzzip" accompanying them, the shock expressed by a watching boy, interrupted before he can actually say what Gulliver is doing, and his mother's swift call for him to cover his eyes.

With the exception of the edition of the text published by Channel 4, which I will return to in a moment, none of the texts contains any other references, open or allusive, to Gulliver urinating or defecating in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, to his playing astride the nipple of a giant nursemaid, to the Yahoos' disgusting appearance and habits, or to the female Yahoo's sudden feelings of desire upon spotting Gulliver bathing naked in a river. Besides such episodes, considered inappropriate for young readers, substantial sections of the text are also cut, either to shorten it to a length deemed readable, or because they apparently seem too dry or abstruse for younger readers.

It is also noteworthy that, besides the passages considered offensive, the other pages most often removed include those where Gulliver presents his own nation and customs, and engages in discussion with his hosts about their society and his. In Swift's text, these passages play a key part in the dialectic discourse between the real world and the imaginary one, highlighting either differences or similarities between the two, usually to the detriment of our world. More than is perhaps initially obvious, their removal therefore weakens – and in some cases demolishes – the

satirical strength of Swift's text. Without the recurrent links and comparisons between real and imaginary societies, without the outraged or amused reactions of strangers discovering familiar elements of our everyday life, without the shock caused by seeing our failings embodied in others, *Gulliver's Travels* is deprived of much of its power to re-examine and criticise human excesses and weaknesses. A few passages, which initially participated fully in Swift's satiric project, such as the description of the Lilliputians performing acrobatics in order to win high office, or the references to the Big-Endians and Little-Endians, whose battle lines are drawn over which end of an egg to crack, remain. But they are left stranded, bereft of the context which originally gave them their full significance, and are consequently reduced to amusing, anecdotal incidents, with the result that their critical, satirical intent may well be entirely lost on the child reader.

The exception to this is the edition published by Channel Four, where several satirical passages are in fact pointed out to the reader. This strategy, while worthy, is perhaps not entirely successful, as is often the case when jokes are explained for the audience's benefit. Analysis of the way in which satire is approached in this specific edition is particularly interesting. In Chapter 2 of the first voyage, for instance, Gulliver recalls that, having been bound with Lilliputian ropes for several hours and being "extremely pressed by the necessities of nature," he crept into his house "and discharged [his] body of that uneasy load." A marginal note indicates to the young reader: "**Rude Bits.** Gulliver ironically describes going to the toilet in exactly the same way as he describes anything else, which is why it's funny. A lot of satire is quite rude" (Broadbent, 8). This commentary neither explains clearly what is ironic about a matter-of-fact description of going to the toilet, nor indicates how or why the passage is satirical, other than because it is rude. Rather than elucidating the text's satirical workings, the commentary stifles and confuses them, influencing the reader's attitude to the text without providing clear explanations.

In the following chapter, when the Lilliputian courtiers are described dancing on tightropes and creeping and crawling under a stick in order to gain "great employments and high favours at court," comments are again provided in the margin: "**Circus imagery.** Your teacher or your boss might make you 'jump through hoops' or 'put you through your paces'" (Broadbent, 13). This explanation, while drawing a parallel with modern practises, does not actually explain the satirical aspect of Swift's imagery, since while jumping through hoops can be considered pejorative, putting someone through their paces is far less so. The comment at the bottom of the page is also unsatisfactory: "**Leaping & Creeping today.** Every year the Queen 'rewards' selected individuals with titles such as the O.B.E. or a Knighthood." Although the use of inverted commas is apparently intended to suggest that the notion of rewarding people is somehow to be viewed with mistrust, this explanation also fails to establish a clear parallel between the ridiculous nature of the Lilliputians' antics and the contortions which candidates for modern-day Royal honours might undertake in order to be selected. The comments, which aim to clarify Swift's text for young readers, are too allusive for the purpose; instead of establishing explicit, comprehensible parallels between the reader's world and that presented in the text, they ultimately blur the meaning, thereby weakening the humour and satirical charge of the work.

This form of commentary is nonetheless revealing, offering as it does an insight into the way in which the editors assess their readers' ability to perceive and

comprehend the satirical passages in the text. The quantity and tone of the notes in the Channel 4 edition suggest that Swift's satire is judged to be unidentifiable by, and inaccessible to, the target audience. While it is certainly not untrue to suggest that certain satirical passages which require knowledge of historical events or individuals are inevitably less recognisable to young readers, one might also argue that the author's satire is unlikely to be made more visible by the editorial cuts which, even in this longer edition of the text, prevent a sufficiently thorough depiction of the satirical relationship between the imaginary world and the real one.

The editorial alterations carried out in the seven editions under study also affect the parodic relationship between *Gulliver's Travels* and travel literature. Whereas Swift's work mimics key traits of such writing, with the intent to mock them, the modifications tend to create the opposite effect. Firstly, the paratextual documents have been excised from all seven editions studied here. Excised also are therefore the references to Dampier and Sympson, the allegations of textual alterations and inaccuracies, and all the introductory play which blurs the distinction between truth and fiction. A significant link between Gulliver's account and the travel literature tradition is thus omitted, considerably modifying the horizon of expectation against which the young reader, even one unfamiliar with that tradition, will approach the text.

The manner in which the factual information relating to Gulliver's journeys is presented to the reader offers another example of the way the text is made to interact differently with travel literature. In Swift's text, the details of each voyage are always carefully noted, with dates, names of ships and their captains, locations and latitudinal references. The second voyage contains a description of the ship's manoeuvres in a storm, copied almost *verbatim* from the *Mariner's Magazine*, which is so technical as to be almost incomprehensible. These elements purport to authenticate the account, by setting it within an apparently genuine empirical and therefore verifiable context. But for the implied, wary reader, they are difficult to take seriously when located within a text which, from the outset, plays upon travel literature's perfidious reputation. Rather than providing the travel narrative with any semblance of credibility, they often undermine its authority, by introducing reminders of its status as a travel account and therefore as inherently unreliable.

It is striking that in even the most abridged children's versions of *Gulliver's Travels*, the factual data about Gulliver's journeys is by and large retained, whereas almost all other similar elements, such as the measurements of scale in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, have been removed. While all the travel data is not consistently present in each text, either the ship's name, the captain's name, the destination or the date of departure and/or arrival is mentioned at the start of every one, with five of the seven editions specifying the exact date on which Gulliver sets out on his first journey (4<sup>th</sup> May, 1699), and several editions providing more than one such item of information. In these texts, where the other original content has been conspicuously cut, the result is to underline, far more than in the initial text, the importance of the actual journeys carried out by Gulliver, rather than the significance of his discoveries and experiences in unknown lands. In one of the graphic novels, for instance, one-seventh of the book (9 out of a total of 63 pages) is devoted to Gulliver's sea voyages. Furthermore, all the works are illustrated, with a considerable proportion of

the images being given over to sailing ships, crashing waves and other nautical scenes.

While this focus on Gulliver's maritime experiences might not appear particularly significant, when placed alongside the other changes made by the editors of children's editions of *Gulliver's Travels*, it can be seen as participating in a process whereby the text is shifted from one category of writing into another. Gone are the key passages which express criticisms of human nature; gone, too, the dialogues which create dialectic oppositions between the imaginary world and the real one. In their place, far greater emphasis is placed upon Gulliver's status not as an observer of other worlds and intermediary between here and there, but as a sailor braving perils at sea and abroad. Instead of mimicking travel accounts so as to mock them, the resulting texts replicate travel accounts so as to resemble them. Rather than Swift's satirical *Travels Into Several Remote Nations*, children are presented with an exciting travel adventure story entitled *Gulliver's Travels*, and so they can really only read the text against that horizon of expectation. Abandoning Swift's critical stance, the editors make his text into something that ultimately resembles the targets of his satire: a dramatic, first-person travel account, presenting a hero the reader is encouraged to identify with, and whose exploits are primarily intended to divert and amuse. While erasing the irony which characterises Swift's writing, they entangle *Gulliver's Travels* in a profoundly ironic process whereby the work is transformed into precisely that which it initially derided.

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Studying for Gulliver's Travels? We have tons of study questions for you here, all completely free. The third part of Gulliver's Travels is the only one that deals with more than one island: Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudrib, and Japan all make their appearances. Does the broader focus change the tone of this part, compared to the other three? Do you find the third part as effective as the others in communicating a central satire? It is the place of satire to expose human weakness, not necessarily to propose ways of fixing it. But the islands of Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnm Land both seem to suggest models of better living. How can we tell the positive models of one island from the ridiculous satire of another? Gulliver's Travels was the work of a writer who had been using satire as his medium for over a quarter of a century. His life was one of continual disappointment, and satire was his complaint and his defense "against his enemies and against humankind. People, he believed, were generally ridiculous and petty, greedy and proud; they were blind to the "ideal of the mean." To be so gullible amounted to non-reason in Swift's thinking. He therefore offered up the impractical scientists of Laputa and the impersonal, but absolutely reasonable, Houyhnhnms as embodiments of science and reason carried to ridiculous limits. Swift, in fact, created the whole of Gulliver's Travels in order to give the public a new moral lens. How have Gulliver's conversations with the dead in Gulliver's Travels, Part 3, Chapters 7 and 8 influenced his approach to the struldbrugs in Chapter 10? During his stay in Glubbudrib, Gulliver spent days gaining firsthand accounts of history and the wisdom of the ages directly from their sources. Gulliver learns that written accounts of history are unreliable and corrupt. So when Gulliver learns of the immortals born in Luggnagg, the struldbrugs, he lauds their potential as advisers. These immortals, Gulliver believes, would be able to advise the king and court with firsthand wisdom