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English 3334E

18 November 2016

Race and Gender as Anti-Colonialist Stepping Stones in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Swift's personal views of oppression are complex, and often seem to contradict each other. Although racism and misogyny are apparent in *Gulliver's Travels*; the work is also anti-colonialist, which seems contradictory because colonialism objectifies and abuses racialized bodies, particularly racialized female bodies. Laura Brown addresses this contradiction in *Reading Race and Gender: Jonathan Swift* where she provides a way to read and reconcile these contrasting themes through a political criticism framework. Brown recognizes that Swift's misogyny and racism have a negative political utility that directly contradicts the positive political utility that his anti-colonialism provides. She claims that Swift, although problematic, shows us the importance of uniting these contrasting hermeneutics, as: "a basis for oppression can arise out of the interdependence of different forms of oppression: the unpromising materials of misogyny enable us to perceive the critique of racism" (Brown 443). Many critics that try to reconcile the anti-colonialist themes with the racist and/or misogynist themes in *Gulliver's Travels* tend to take a similar route; most critics argue that these power structures seem to contradict each other, but are necessary to make the anti-colonialist claim accessible to an eighteenth century audience. I, on the other hand, argue that the racist and misogynist tones do not simply legitimize and justify the anti-colonialist theme in the *Travels*, but the anti-colonialism is actually a product of that misogyny and racism. Colonialism introduced eighteenth

century Europe to new races that questioned the “innate” nature of white superiority. Further, colonialism introduced new forms of female sexuality found in different cultures, which questioned patriarchal power structures and female domesticity. Nicholas Hudson’s “The ‘Hottentot Venus,’ Sexuality, and the Changing Aesthetics of Race, 1650-1850” discusses the changing conceptions of race, beauty, and sexuality in the eighteenth century. Hudson claims that these notions did not emerge in isolation, but are connected in a much wider transformation of Western culture:

In obvious ways, aesthetic standards informed racial scientists who deployed judgments of beauty as proof that whites stood atop a hierarchy of deepening darkness and deformity...racial science was deeply sexualized, absorbed by the contours of breasts and pudenda, committed to upholding the superiority of Caucasian norms of patriarchy and domesticity (Hudson 19)

Thus, colonialism in the eighteenth century challenged white male privilege, and the anti-colonialist theme in *Gulliver’s Travels* is a response to that threat; the anti-colonialism resists the introduction of new races and alternative forms of female beauty, and thus the anti-colonialist theme is, in itself, racist and misogynist.

Due to the limitations of this paper, I will be focusing on Book 2 of the *Travels*, because there are several clear examples of both the female and the racial grotesque, which seem to challenge the anti-colonialist theme. It is important to acknowledge that this essay is simply a fragment of a much more elaborate issue that is about the complexity of Swift’s personal views and values of oppression. Although there will not be the opportunity to highlight different critiques of colonialism in conjunction with racism and misogyny in Books 1, 3, and 4, focusing on Book 2 will hopefully provide a framework for how one may read oppression in the entire

satire. Book 2 is particularly significant because Gulliver simultaneously uses terminology that echoes colonialist descriptions of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ when describing the forms of Brobdingnagian femininity that he encounters, and he plays the role of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ by being put on display and forced to perform for the people of Brobdingnag. The ‘Hottentot Venus’ was “a dark-skinned young woman christened Saartje Baartman...brought from her south African homeland to London, where she was displayed almost naked before crowds...as the ‘Hottentot Venus’...for the depiction of her famously enlarged buttocks” (Hudson 20). Uniting Gulliver’s misogynist critiques of Brobdingnagian femininity with the theme of racism through the figure of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ shows that misogyny and racism are connected in Book 2 of the *Travels*. Gulliver, as a white male figure, is put in the position of a racialized female body when he is put on display and forced to perform like Baartman. From a humanist perspective, this could be a claim that colonialism is dangerous because all humans should be treated equally, as an eighteenth century reader would understand the Brobdingnagian cruelty, and thus cruelty toward other races, because as a white male, Gulliver was accessible to eighteenth century Europe. I agree that Gulliver is clearly put in the position of a racialized female body as an anti-colonialist statement, however, I argue that this does not make Gulliver a symbol of equality, but rather, a warning for what could happen to white male power as a result of colonialism.

MISOGYNY

According to Hudson, increased contact with non-European people in the eighteenth century challenged ideas of femininity because Europeans began encountering women of different races and comparing them to the women at home: “Modern forms of domesticity, in turn, relied on a more formal discrimination between the differing natures of the two sexes:

women in particular were assigned the property of fleshy dangerous beauty that needed to be mastered by male reason” (Hudson 20). These new methods of expressing femininity challenged domesticity and white masculinity, which resulted in a drastic imposition of order on the categories of race, beauty, and gender, reinforcing several pillars of oppression. Throughout Book 2, Gulliver uses misogynist rhetoric to describe Brobdingnagian femininity in the same way colonialists would describe non-European forms of female aesthetics. The rhetoric paints an image of what racialized women might look like, and does so in a very stereotypical way. In fact, we can draw many parallels between descriptions of racialized women and of Brobdingnagian women. Consider Robert Jacob Gordon’s painting (*Hottentot*)vrouw met een kind en de start van een jakhals, naar rechts Hottentots Wif (titel op object), which is an eighteenth century painting of a typical European portrait of “Hottentot” femininity. With a small head and grotesquely enlarged body parts, and particularly enlarged breasts, this seemingly outlandish figure arises out of the descriptions of people of colour in the eighteenth century. This image of the grotesque and the monstrous also occurs in the first chapter of Book 2 of the *Travels* where Gulliver describes the farmer’s wife nursing their child: “I must confess no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast...It stood prominent six foot, and could not be less than sixteen in circumference. The nipple was about half the bigness of my head...so verified with spots, pimples, and freckles that nothing could appear more nauseous” (Swift 2537). Gulliver is shocked and disgusted by the sheer size and complexion of the Brobdingnagian woman’s breast. Brown discusses this quote and states that “Brobdingnagian gigantism is intimately linked to misogyny...the nauseous scent, the disease and corruption, and the hideous corporeality that we have seen elsewhere in Swift’s texts to be so powerfully and specifically associated with the female figure pervade the second book of his *Travels*” (433-434). By focusing on an innately

sexual and domestic body part, Gulliver uses blazon to sexualize and objectify alternative forms of femininity. The rhetoric he uses here echoes the rhetoric of eighteenth century explorers who encounter women of colour for the first time. Early British colonists would use blazon to deconstruct non-European forms of femininity and turn women of colour into sexual objects; the rhetoric would primarily revolve around an enlarged sexual body part. For example, Hudson discusses preliminary encounters with the Khoi people, who were referred to as “The Hottentots” and were known for notions of beauty that were radically different than anything previously known in Europe. Saartje Baartman was brought from South Africa to London, where she was displayed essentially naked before crowds as the “Hottentot Venus.” Although this event occurred after *Gulliver’s Travels* was first published, it is simply the most famous of many similar instances that occurred in eighteenth century Europe. Here, Venus was put on display because of her famously enlarged buttocks. The Europeans’ focus on the enlargement of a traditionally sexualized body part stripped Venus of her agency and turned her into a commodity for white male Europeans. As a result, Venus was frequently described through the language of the grotesque in the same way that Gulliver describes the Brobdingnagian woman’s breast. Swift’s diction equates the Brobdingnagian woman’s breast to the colossal (“monstrous,” “six foot,” “bigness of my head”) and the hideous (“spots,” “pimples”) to the point where Gulliver feels “disgusted,” “nauseous,” and perhaps even offended. Thus, Gulliver’s misogynist rhetoric also strips the Brobdingnagian woman of her agency in this moment, and relates her to colonialist responses to women of colour that threatened white male privilege. The fact that Gulliver echoes this tone is a misogynist push back against colonialism that stems from Swift’s fear of a loss of systemic white male power. Through rhetoric that describes the grotesque and the decay of the female body, Gulliver reinforces stereotypical ideals of domesticity and female

beauty by objectifying and relating the Brobdingnagian women to imperfections and disgust. By othering non-European forms of femininity that called domesticity and European female beauty into question, Gulliver projects patriarchal values on the Brobdingnagian women.

Although the giant female Brobdingnagian bodies revolt Gulliver, he is also anxious and unsettled throughout Book 2 because the “monstrous” women objectify and diminish him:

That which gave me most uneasiness among these Maids of Honour, when my nurse carried me to visit them, was to see them use me without any manner of ceremony, like a creature who had no sort of consequence. For they would strip themselves to the skin, and put on their smocks in my presence, while I was placed on their toilet directly before their naked bodies; which, I am sure, to me was very far from being a tempting sight, or from giving me any other emotions than those of horror and disgust. . . a pleasant frolicsome girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her nipples, with many other tricks, wherein the reader will excuse me for not being over particular. (Swift 2553-4)

The Queen’s servants do not see Gulliver as a man, they see him as more of a pet or animal; they use the bathroom and undress in front of him, dehumanizing, objectifying, and reducing Gulliver to an animal. When one of the servants places him on her monstrous nipples and makes him do tricks, he is completely sexualized and objectified. Gulliver is literally diminished by the monstrous women of Brobdingnag; his interactions with them strip him of his agency and deny him of his human and sexual will. In the eighteenth century, most non-Europeans were dehumanized, objectified, and likened to animals: “perhaps one of the most commonplace anecdotes of eighteenth-century racial fantasy was that of the sexual connection between Negroes and apes or orang-outangs” (Brown 440). This links the misogynist rhetoric to

the racist rhetoric, as both reduce Gulliver to an animal and objectify and sexualize him. Upon exploring the racist rhetoric further in the next section, it will be clear that both the misogynist and racist themes in Book 2 of *Gulliver's Travels* are connected symptoms of white male privilege.

RACISM

One can read Book 2 through the lens of the “Hottentot Venus” in a different way that reinforces the connection between racism and misogyny in the satire. In fact, Gulliver, through his captivity and performances, is likened to the “Hottentot Venus,” and in this sense the colonizer becomes the colonized. Saartje Baartman, or the “Hottentot Venus,” plays a crucial role in a reading of race in Book 2 of *Gulliver's Travels*, because, like Gulliver, she is a spectacle for the natives of the places she visited. In chapter two, another farmer comes to see Gulliver and puts on his glasses, and Gulliver laughs at his eyes; as a result, the farmer suggests that Gulliver's master should put him on display. From then on, Gulliver was a spectacle for public scrutiny, or, as the Queen's scholars in Book 2 classify him, a “*lusus naturae*” (Swift 2544) or a freak of nature. In Hudson's article, he discusses the “Hottentot Venus” as a spectacle that: “provided an outlet for public scrutiny of female sexuality sanctioned by the fact that this female was black, not white, and could therefore be treated as either a freak-show or scientific specimen” (Hudson 23). Here, Hudson equates Saartje Baartman with a “freak-show,” or in other words, a *lusus naturae*. When Saartje Baartman was brought to Europe, an animal keeper in Paris bought her, where she was put in a cage to parade in front of crowds because of her famously enlarged buttocks. Similarly, when Gulliver is put on display, the Brobdingnagians transport Gulliver in a cage-like box which was: “closed on every side, with a little door for me to go in and out, and a few gimlet holes to let in air” (Swift 2540). Like Baartman, Gulliver was

put on display, forced to do tricks, and circulated and bought as though he were a commodity. In fact, when the farmer sees that the performances have made Gulliver very thin and ill in chapter five, the farmer sells Gulliver to the Queen for a thousand pieces of gold, much like Baartman was sold to the Parisian animal keeper: “(The Queen) then asked my master whether he were willing to sell me at a good price. He, who apprehended I could not live a month, was ready enough to part with me, and demanded a thousand pieces of gold, which were ordered him on the spot” (Swift 2543). Gulliver is turned into a commodity to be bought and sold, much like Baartman. The dehumanization and commodification of Gulliver relates him to racialized bodies, particularly women of colour, in eighteenth century England. Dehumanizing and equating Gulliver and Baartman to objectified animals is racist, yet it reinforces a critique of colonialism. This parallel places Gulliver, as a white male, in the place of a female of colour. From a humanist approach, one might argue that this is anti-colonialist because it changes perspective to show that all humans should be treated equally. I, however, argue that Gulliver, as a white male, is put in the place of a woman of colour as a warning for what could happen to white male privilege if Europe proceeded with the colonialist project. This parallel suggests that colonialism threatened the innate nature of white, and specifically white male superiority, so the anti-colonialist theme emerges from Gulliver’s racist and misogynist tones.

In an eighteenth century article by George Colman in the periodical *The Connoisseur*, a married couple of “Hottentots”, Prince Tquassouw and Knonmquaiha, first encounter Dutch colonists and are disgusted by their appearance:

Upon his skin the sun darted his scorching rays in vain, and the colour of it was pale and wan as the watry beams of the moon. His hair, which he could put on and take off at pleasure, was white as the blossoms of the Almond Tree, and bushy as the fleece of the

Ram. His lips and cheeks resembled the Red Oker, and his nose was sharpened like the beak of an Eagle. His language, which was rough and inarticulate, was as the language of beasts (Colman 124)

The tone of Tquassouw and Knonmquaiha is very similar to early European colonists when first encountering non-Europeans, as they express a clear disgust of non-Hottentot aesthetic ideals, even later referring to the colonist as a “savage”. Further, it mirrors Gulliver’s grotesque, absurd rhetoric, which imitates colonialist descriptions of Baartman. Although this seems to be a piece addressing cultural aesthetic relativity, it later becomes a cautionary tale about infidelity caused by interracial sexual attraction, as Knomquaiha gives birth to the child of the colonist, and is punished to death. So, although it introduces the idea of cultural relativity, this article refutes alternative forms of femininity and sexuality, as it results in infidelity and even death. Gulliver’s captivity and performance at the beginning of Book 2 does something similar. Placing a white male in the role of a woman of colour might appear to be a form of cultural relativity, but as discussed earlier, it is actually a push back against the threat to white male superiority. We can draw parallels between the way racial roles are reversed in the periodical above and in Book 2 of Gulliver’s Travels. As Hudson states, “empiricism and exploration threatened a Copernican revolution that would displace Europe from its privileged place at the centre of the world in all fields, including aesthetics” (28). Thus, alternative forms female sexuality seemed to be an attack on white male privilege, which is why Gulliver is satirized as a “Hottentot”-like spectacle, and clearly does not belong in Brobdingnag. So, the racist tone in Book 2 is connected with the misogynist tone, and ultimately serves as another anti-colonialist tool in *Gulliver’s Travels*, leveraging and legitimizing the claim to an eighteenth century audience. Further, placing Gulliver in the role of a racialized female body is a pushback against the colonialist threat against

white male superiority. In that sense, the anti-colonialist theme of Book 2 actually arises from the themes of misogyny and racism.

CONCLUSIONS

Consider Danielle Spratt's "Gulliver's Economized Body: Colonial Projects and the *Lusus Naturae* in the *Travels*," which is a reading of *Gulliver's Travels* and colonialism through a literary-historical framework. In this article, Spratt reads Gulliver as a projector who, at different times in the book, represents the colonizer and the colonized, emulating the problematic aspects of each group. In the first portion of her article, Spratt claims that Swift inscribes a colonial-economic logic on Gulliver's body because Gulliver's account focuses on the circulation of commodities between colonized and colonizing people by either populating or depopulating an area to control it. As a result, Spratt classifies Gulliver as an "economized body," which she defines as: "a body that, through both his and others' use of colonial and economic theory, becomes objectified, animalized, and ultimately ostracized, making him neither human nor animal but rather what the scientific projectors in Book 2 call *lusus naturae*: a 'freak of nature'" (Spratt 139) This turns Gulliver into a feminized and economized body. By unpacking the definition of an economized body, we can see that the Gulliver is "objectified." An example of this is when Gulliver is effeminized by the Maids of Honour to the point where the handsomest Maid of Honour would place him on one of her nipples and make him do tricks (Swift 2554). The moment equates objectification with feminization, which echoes the misogynist rhetoric mentioned earlier. Next, Gulliver's economized body animalizes, and ultimately ostracizes him, which was a frequent tactic used to other racialized bodies like the "Hottentot Venus," as colonialism uses economic schemes to equate humans with controllable

tactics. Thus, objectifying, animalizing, and ostracizing Gulliver was racist and misogynist, which made it serve as a tool for anti-colonialism.

Book 2 of *Gulliver's Travels* shows us the importance of uniting contrasting hermeneutics as the interdependence of different forms of oppression. The racist and misogynist themes leverage and legitimize important social claims about the damage that can come from colonialism that was immediately accessible to white eighteenth century audience. However, the anti-colonialist claims are, in fact, rooted in racism and misogyny as colonialism threatened white male power. I suggest that the structures of oppression in Book 2 of *Gulliver's Travels* are not, in fact, contradictory at all. Rather, the different structures of oppression build on each other; thus, the theme of anti-colonialism in the *Travels* is actually built on a foundation of racism and misogyny.

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