

The Houyhnhnms and Rhetoric

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One of the problems of reading Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is the unattractiveness of the Houyhnhnms, and pure Reason, as an ideal. Kathleen Williams is one of many critics who "prefer" the giants in Part II, despite their imperfections:

They are, in fact, very like ourselves, easily swayed by self-love and the desires and passions common to humanity. But it is not only our tendency to brutishness and selfishness that is that is displayed in them; they also possess human warmth, sympathy, and affection; the animal side of man is shown in its capacity for good as well as evil, and the huge size of the giants can impress upon us not only animality but expansive good humor, magnanimity, and a breadth of moral understanding. (161)

She adds, however, that this comprehension of the giants' many virtues is not immediate but comes only "when we have read to the end" (164). In other words, the disenchantment she comes to feel toward the Houyhnhnms forces her to reexamine whatever previous assumptions she had about the Brobdingnagians.

Williams' argument not only demonstrates an affinity for the giants but also an affinity for their method of reasoning. The Brobdingnagians form an appealing contrast, with her empiricism, to the Houyhnhnms, with their rationalism. The immediate apprehension of virtue, knowledge, or truth makes present-day critics uncomfortable, perhaps in part because, as Mark Walhout argues in *College English*, we are the products of a Nuclear Age. Our criticism reflects the ambiguities and uncertainties that surround us. The (im)possibility of the immediate apprehension of truth marks one of the breaks between classical rhetoric and modern rhetoric (see Knoblauch 36), although

most rhetoricians still attracted to the classical model would probably concede the point.

The connection between rhetoric and Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is important for several reasons. Swift's implied attitude is almost Platonic as he uses rhetorical figures as well as rhetorical methods to inform the character of the inquiries into the nature of man. This Platonism reaches its ideal form in Part IV with the Houyhnhnms' stated attitude toward the art of persuasion, which calls for its exclusion. Yet rhetoric does operate within the Houyhnhnms' society — not in a loose sense but in its specific Aristotelian forms. Since the Houyhnhnms' attitude toward language is central to the success of their society, they are undercut by an irony of their own making.

The several rhetorical figures introduced into the *Travels* are Aristotle, Plato, Demosthenes, and Cicero. The latter two are the least interesting, although they represent the clearest sign of Swift's awareness of rhetoric. Demosthenes and Cicero are presented in the context of being *rhetors*, or practitioners of the art — an oversimplification of Cicero, of course, whose rhetorical theory has influenced the discipline as much as any other figure. In describing his attempt to present European man to the King of Brobdingnag, Gulliver says:

Imagine with thy self, courteous Reader, how often I then wished for the Tongue of a *Demosthenes* or *Cicero*, that might have enabled me to celebrate the Praise of my own dear Country in a style equal to its Merits and Felicity. (Pt. II, Ch. 6)

He calls what he produces a "Panegyrick," the technical term for a speech of praise.

Gulliver's view of rhetoric here is a common one. If prostitution is the world's oldest profession, then rhetoric must be the second, and its reputation for promiscuity is well-noted. Socrates reflects this same attitude when he chastises Polus, one of the rhetoricians in the *Gorgias*. "He seems to have had more practice in what is called rhetoric than in the give and take of discussion," Socrates comments (448). Rhetoric in these terms is *persuasion*: "Its entire business is persuasion; the whole

sum and substance of it comes to that" (443). Rhetoric subverts inquiry, Socrates thinks, and "give and take of discussion" that he prefers is certainly more what the King of Brobdingnag has in mind when he asks Gulliver for an account.

Socrates, of course, goes on to say quite a bit more about the nature of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (and later in the *Phaedrus*). How he says it, however, is almost as significant as *what* he says. I want to reproduce, then, a little of the dialogue between him and Gorgias, a rhetorician whose name is so synonymous with the rhetoric Gulliver desires during his "Panegyrick" to the King of Brobdingnag that he could have easily been included with Demosthenes and Cicero on Gulliver's list. Socrates examines the difference between belief and knowledge in his excerpt as a subpoint of his inquiry into rhetoric:

SOCR. Shall we, then, assume two kinds of persuasion, the one producing belief without certainty, the other knowledge?

GORG. Yes, of course.

SOCR. Then which kind of persuasion concerning justice and injustice does rhetoric effect in law courts and other public gatherings, the kind which produces belief without knowledge, or the kind which yields knowledge?

GORG. It would seem quite obvious, Socrates, that it is the kind which produces mere belief.

Any reproduction does an injustice to the fullness of the Socratic method. Yet in this particular instance Socrates forces Gorgias through his skillful questioning, to make an admission about his art that directly contradicts what Gorgias wanted to believe: "[It is concerned w]ith the greatest of human concerns, Socrates, and the best" (451).

The Socratic method illustrated in the *Gorgias* is (ironically) a rhetorical device: our designation of such dialogues as "Platonic" rather than "Socratic" acknowledges the fictions behind them. With this device, Plato constructs the *appearance* of dialectic, "the give and take of discussion" in which Polus (and Gulliver) lack practice. Despite some minor variations, the device is largely formulaic. Typically, Socrates allows the other characters to "instruct" him, using his questions to reveal the fallacies in their arguments. Yet there is the illusion that So-

crates' conclusions are not preconceived, but rather worked out in the course of the dialogue — hence, giving the dialogues the appearance of the methodology they employ (rhetoric).

Swift uses this same rhetorical device in the *Travels*, Gulliver and the King becoming Platonic figures that are analogous to Gorgias and Plato. For example, the motive behind the two inquiries is much the same. Socrates requests, "Please, therefore, do not stop the lessons you have begun to give me, but show me clearly what I ought to pursue, and how I may come to pursue it" (488); Gulliver says, "[The King said] 'he should be glad to hear of any thing that might deserve imitation.'" The character of the inquirer, then, is a man open to instruction. Both are treated to a broad panegyric that is consequently deflated by the skilled questioner.

Of course, Swift does not necessarily use the *Gorgias* as a model for the Socratic method; it is useful for my purposes because it concentrates on rhetoric, but most of Plato's early dialogues use the same method and characterization. It suffices that the model exists in *Gulliver's Travels* and that we recognize it. But this is not the only instance of rhetoric in *Gulliver's Travels*: Gulliver, and so Swift, introduces it again in Part IV. After describing the relationship between Reason and Virtue, Gulliver goes on to say:

Neither is *Reason* among them [the Houyhnhnms] a Point as problematical as with us, where Men can argue with Plausibility on both Sides of a Question; but strikes you with immediate Conviction, as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by Passion and Interest. I remember it was with extreme Difficulty that I could bring my Master to understand the Meaning of the word *Opinion*, or how a Point could be disputable; because Reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain; and beyond our Knowledge we cannot do either. (Ch. 8)

Remembering what Socrates forces Gorgias to admit, that rhetoric "produces belief without knowledge," we can reasonably assume the Houyhnhnms disdain or reject rhetoric.

That is, they exclude rhetoric *in principle*. What *in fact* goes on in Houyhnhnmland — in other words, the gap between theory and praxis — generates most of the critical controversy

that surrounds Part IV. Even a "hard" critic like George Sherburn — that is, one who sees the Houyhnhnms as Swift's ideal — admits that the "Houyhnhnms represent Swift's clearly imperfect concept. . . . He did perhaps as well as could be expected" (264). I give Swift more credit than that — he *invites* the reader to laugh at the Houyhnhnms on occasion, as in the examination of man's physical liabilities (here man is not perfect because man is not a *horse*), a hallmark of the conspiracy between author and reader that is inherent in irony. Be that as it may, rhetoric does exist in their society. Gulliver's resumption of his earlier role as a rhetorician "defending" his country elicits their participation as audience. Yet the Houyhnhnms are practitioners as well.

Gulliver is again a rhetorician when he answers his Houyhnhnm Master's questions about his society and his species. In Part II, we witnessed his "panegyrick," which is a subcategory in Aristotle's complete *Rhetoric*; the antithesis is a speech of blame. And Gulliver's discourse on the nature of man in Part IV is certainly such an antithesis. Many critics dislike the discourse in Part IV primarily because of its negative nature without recognizing the *precise* reversal it forms to that in Part II. If we can reject Gulliver's panegyric as "mere" rhetoric, then we can dismiss its opposite for the same reason.

Gulliver is, however, a much more successful rhetorician in Part IV than in Part II. He fully persuades his immediate audience that man is a depraved creature with only pretensions to reason; most of all, he persuades himself. Yet there should be some doubt that he is supposed to be so persuasive within the larger context of audience — that is, readers. Certain passages convincingly reduce human motives, but they also negate what we know about Swift's own views. For example, Gulliver reduces all religion to "whether *Flesh* be *Bread*, or *Bread* be *Flesh*; Whether the Juice of a certain *Berry* be *Blood* or *Wine*; Whether *Whistling* be a Vice or a Virtue; Whether it be better to *kiss* a *Post*, or throw it into the *Fire*" and so on (Ch. 5). Irvin Ehrenpreis explains these as references to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the use of instrumental music in church, and the veneration of the cross — all religion issues on which Swift had "the strongest convictions." Further, "he attacked those who dis-

agreed with him, in *A Tale of a Tub* and in his writing on ecclesiastical issues" (222-23).

Audience is an important role in rhetoric, for the success or failure of a particular discourse depends to a large extent on the audience rather than the discourse itself. Gulliver's speech of praise fails in Part II because the King assumes a certain role, that of the Socratic inquirer. Gulliver's speech of blame succeeds in Part IV because the Houyhnhnms assume a different role. There is no convenient term for this role, but it related to Socrates' notion of audience in the *Gorgias*. Socrates asks Gorgias if an orator is not more persuasive than a doctor on the subject of health, and Gorgias qualifies with "in a crowd." Socrates then interprets:

Then the qualification 'in a crowd' means 'among the ignorant'? For surely the orator will not be more persuasive than the doctor among those who really know. (459)

Gulliver persuades the Houyhnhnms because they do not "really know" what it is to be human. Consequently they do not ask the right questions or insist, as Socrates always does, on answers that address the specific question asked. "[W]ould you be so kind, Gorgias," he asks, "as to continue the manner of our present conversation, asking and answering questions, and lay aside for a subsequent occasion the sort of lengthy exposition which Polus began" (449). This method actually masks a type of control over the inquiry, forestalling lengthy responses that obscure the specific objection.

Gulliver's Master is not a Socratic inquirer. He has difficulty framing the sort of perceptive questions that the King in Part II used, ones that provided the heart of Swift's satire there. For example, Gulliver's Master in Part IV asks him about the costly meats he mentioned, which does not get to the heart of his *real* query as to why all do not have a rightful share in the production of the earth (Ch. 6). Nor does Gulliver lose the opportunity to turn the question, which only requires enumeration, into a further diatribe against humanity's "Begging, Robbing, Stealing, Cheating, Pimping, Forswearing, Flattering, Suborning, Forging, Gaming, Lying, Fawning, Hectoring, Voting, Scrib-

ling, Stargazing, Poysoning, Whoring, Canting, Libelling, Free-thinking" occupations.

But Gulliver is not the only rhetorician in Houyhnhnmland. For all their rejection of rhetoric, the Houyhnhnms practice it as well. I want to emphasize the contradiction in that by differentiating the type of rhetoric they choose. By rights, they should be Platonic — like Socrates, they wish to exclude a rhetoric that produces belief and not knowledge. But they fail to use the dialectical form to examine Gulliver's accounts of man, even though dialectic is rhetoric's counterpart in matters of reason (see *Rhetoric* I.i.1-ii.7-8). Instead, they exemplify Aristotelian rhetoric — a rhetoric that ironically finds its justification in what they exclude: that a question may have more than one answer. "The orator should be able to prove opposites," Aristotle explains, "... not that we should do both (for one ought not to persuade people to do that which is wrong), but that the real state of the case may not escape us" (I.i.12). Aristotelian rhetoric, then, is as much a means of inquiry as it is a method of persuasion, the crux of Aristotle's insistence on it as the counterpart to dialectic. Yet Aristotle admits rhetoric does not distinguish moral purpose, as dialectic does (see I.i.14). Ironically, the Houyhnhnms use all three of the specific Aristotelian forms of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic.

Aristotle identifies the first type of discourse as deliberative, characteristic of all assemblies. Each of the three types of rhetoric possesses distinctive means and ends — those for deliberative discourse include a view toward the *expedient* or harmful (I.iii.5, emphasis added). The nature of deliberative is either hortatory or dissuasive, for as Aristotle points out, "he who *exhorts* recommends a course of action as better, and he who dissuades advises against it as worse; all other considerations, such as justice and injustice, honour and disgrace, are included as accessory in reference to this" (emphasis added — Aristotle previously uses the words "exhortation" as well).

We do not, perhaps, think of the Houyhnhnms' society as political. Michael Wilding, however, argues that "for all the lack of political vocabulary, the society also has its political institutions" (315). He sees the quaternary Representative Council as nothing but a parliament, of which Gulliver's Master is a

representative. Certainly the Assembly's discourse supports his view. Their eye on the future, they reallocate food and children — with no dissension, it seems, but at least thorough discussion.

There has been at least *one* debate, though, in the history of the Assembly, a recurring one over the problem of the Yahoos. Its statement is even rhetorical: "Whether the *Yahoos* should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth" (Ch. 9). Summarized, the arguments focus on the Yahoos' loathsomeness, their origin, and their inferiority to asses. Then comes the proper rhetorical solution: "[M]y Master proposed an *Expedient* to the Assembly" (emphasis added). But if we doubt the connection, there is the word they substitute for the compulsion of law: the Assembly *exhorts* Gulliver's Master to expel Gulliver (Ch. 10, emphasis added). Theirs is a model of Aristotelian deliberative rhetoric.

The second type of discourse, *forensic*, belongs to courts: it seeks to accuse or defend (*Rhetoric* I.iii.3). Even given the absence of courts in Houyhnhnmland, mankind goes on trial there. Gulliver contradicts the absolute apprehension of truth and knowledge that Reason offers in this society — for example, the Houyhnhnms do not feel the natural antipathy toward Gulliver that represents the usual response toward a Yahoo. They are forced, then, to make judgments based on evidence.

Man stands accused of being a Yahoo — this is in fact the thrust of the entire last book. Evidence against this judgment includes Gulliver's use of language, his preference for cleanliness, his clothes, his aversion for the species, and his measure of reason, no matter how comparatively small that may be. Some evidence argues that Gulliver is actually closer to the Houyhnhnms — the Yahoos' natural antipathy toward him (and his toward them) characterized by the scene in which they discharge excrement all over him, his adaptation of the Houyhnhnms' food (he cooks the oats instead of the asses' flesh) before such adaptation becomes tainted with his admiration for them (like whinnying and trotting), and, again, his small "tincture" of reason. Evidence for the judgment that man is a Yahoo includes his physical shape and his abuse of reason.

The problem with the judgment in Part IV is that prosecu-

tors abound — but no defenders. So the evidence considered includes only the latter — man's physical shape and his abuse of reason. In a survey reminiscent of the three scholars of Brobdingnag, who concluded only that Gulliver was a freak of nature, the Houyhnhnm Master focuses on the length of Gulliver's nails, the hairiness of his hands, the brownness of his palms. Ironically, he finds the differences significant, although later man's inferiority to Yahoos comes into question because of these differences (Ch. 2, Ch. 4). Yet even though the physical evidence does not entirely support the conclusion, Gulliver is deemed a Yahoo because he looks like one. The presentation he then makes of mankind is viewed in light of this *a priori* assumption. For the purposes of this argument, a demonstration of the presence of rhetoric and the forms that it takes, it is not necessary to prove the Houyhnhnms' verdict incorrect.

Finally, there is the third type of rhetoric, *epideictic*, the discourse of praise and blame. We have seen earlier how Gulliver uses this form, both in Part IV and in Part II. He does not, however, represent the only user of epideictic language. The Houyhnhnms' everyday use of language reflects this third type of rhetoric as well. In their etymology for their own name, "Perfection of Nature," they praise. In using "Yahoo" as a synonym for evil, such as "Ynholmhnmrhlnw Yahoo" for an ill-contrived house, they blame. The Houyhnhnms refuse to name Gulliver — at the end, he is still only "gentle Yahoo" — so they are bound by their rhetoric to convict Gulliver, and so humanity, of being Yahoos. In turn, Gulliver's use of the word "Yahoo" to refer to mankind and to himself becomes a confession. Epideictic discourse is the most persuasive of all in Houyhnhnmland.

The contradiction between the Houyhnhnms' stated attitude toward the art of persuasion and its implicit presence there calls into question other expressed attitudes toward language and its use. One other suspect notion is their insistence "That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts" (Ch. 4). As we have seen, even the Houyhnhnms' limited use of language accomplishes more than that — it exhorts and dissuades, it accuses and defends, it praises and blames.

The discrepancy, however, may be inherent in language itself, at least from the perspective of classical rhetoric. For Aristotle, Cy Knoblauch explains:

arguments themselves have . . . an independent integrity, a reality apart from discourse, discernible to the rational mind though inaccessible to weaker intellects, which require verbal representation to remember and appreciate them. (32)

Language, then, is thought dressed, and that dressing, no matter how consciously plain, can never completely efface itself. If Swift subscribed to this classical notion of the relationship between language and thought, or even if it is merely reasonably correct, then the Houyhnhnms are undone not by the irony inherent in their universe, but that inherent in language itself.

Yet we must not forget that the Houyhnhnms go further and try to deliberately regulate the truth-value in language. It is supposedly impossible to express a lie, although they accuse Gulliver often enough. They must have a different notion of what constitutes a lie, for they themselves fall short of the ideal "whole truth and nothing but the truth" (emphasis added). They deceive Gulliver, for example, about the outcome of the Assembly: Gulliver reveals that "My Master . . . was pleased to conceal one Particular, which related personally to myself" (Ch. 9).

I would argue that their whole system collapses because of the burden they place on language, revealing them as liars and rhetoricians and otherwise participating in human defects. Whether Swift "intended" this effect is another question, of course, and is as always impossible to determine. I will only point out that nowhere does Swift dissociate himself more firmly from his mouthpiece and invite the reader to laugh *at* Gulliver than in the final chapter. Poor Gulliver supports the offering of his tale for mankind's amendment with Sinon's words from the *Aeneid*: "Though Fortune has made Sinon wretched, she has not made him untrue and a liar" (Pt. IV, Ch. 12) — words used in context to beguile the Trojans into accepting the instrument of their destruction (*a horse*). If we accept the analogy, Sinon proves a much better rhetorician, I think, than Gulliver. ♪

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