

The Grotesqueness of the Empire: Reading Bodies in *Gulliver's Travels*

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Abstract

Through this essay, I explore the role of bodies in Part I: “A Voyage to Lilliput” and Part II: “A Voyage to Brobdingnag” of *Gulliver's Travels*. In my reading, I draw connections between the British Empire, Gulliver’s identity, his agency and sexuality, and bodies. This paper also explores how the body is viewed in these parts of the novel under the purview of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism'. Through this study, Gulliver’s relations to the body become extremely complicated; they aid the blurring boundaries between the self and the other, so much so that they begin to assimilate into each other. I argue that the concoction of the grotesque, satire and Gulliver’s experiences results in the development of a multi-dimensional relationship between the Empire and the grotesque body. In *Travels*, the grotesque is used as a trope to invoke a sense of disgust, which facilitates the satirical function of critiquing the English society, and by extension, the Empire.

Keywords: Gulliver’s Travels, grotesque, empire, sexuality, identity

Written by Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* is a four-part prose satire, which first came out in 1726. The role of the body in this text is pivotal to its understanding, especially in Part I: “A Voyage to Lilliput” and Part II: “A Voyage to Brobdingnag”. Questions about the British Empire, Captain Lemuel Gulliver’s identity, his agency and sexuality are all linked to the study of ‘bodies’ in this text. This paper explores how the body is viewed in these parts of the novel, linking it to the overarching theme of ‘the grotesque’. Gulliver’s relations to the body are

extremely complicated; they aid the blurring boundaries between the self and the other, so much so that they begin to assimilate into each other. The concoction of the grotesque, satire and Gulliver's experiences results in the development of a multi-dimensional relationship between the Empire and the grotesque body. In *Travels*, 'the grotesque' is used as a trope to invoke a sense of disgust, which facilitates the function of the satire to critique the English society, and thereby the Empire.

The concept of grotesque realism was addressed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his critical work, *Rabelais and His World*. The main principle of grotesque realism is the degradation of the spiritual, noble, abstract and ideal to bring it down to the earth and materialise it; excessiveness, exaggeration and expressiveness are the key components of this concept (Bakhtin 303). According to Bakhtin, "To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (21). By emphasising pregnancy and birth, Bakhtin relates this concept particularly to the female body. However, grotesque realism represents "all the people" (Bakhtin 19). So, its scope can be extended beyond the female body. The grotesque body is associated with openness; it is primal, unbound, unfinished and protrusive (Bakhtin 26).

In Part I of the text, Gulliver finds himself in the island of Lilliput, whose natives are notably smaller than him in size. He roams around in the island with a complete view of everything, owing to his gigantic body size. This swollen state of Gulliver's body is a "shocking sight" for the inhabitants of the island; there seems to be a direct relationship between largeness and grotesqueness. Fascinated with this enormous creature, the Lilliputians start deriving entertainment from Gulliver's basic actions; his body is almost like an exaggerated version of the Lilliputians' bodies. It enacts the grotesque by celebrating the biological functions of the hyperbolic body, such as urinating and defecating. Gulliver's body, in the view of the

Lilliputians, has expanded beyond normal limits. As he recalls in an episode in Brobdingnag, this magnified version of his body revealed to the natives “great Holes in my disagreeable Skin; that the Stumps of my beard were ten Times stronger than the Bristles of a Boar; and my Complexion made up of several Colours altogether” (Swift 83).

The major concerns of these diminutive beings are related to Gulliver’s bodily needs, namely clothing, feeding, and disposing of his waste. His appetite, the natives fear, could lead to a famine in their island. To resolve this, they come up with a daily allowance for the amount of meat and drink he could consume, which is the same amount sufficient to support 1728 Lilliputian subjects (Swift 38). Next, Gulliver speaks about the “Necessities of Nature”, which amounts to the scatological question of his need to defecate; he calls this bowel-related activity “an unclean action” (Swift 24). By calling this an “Adventure”, Gulliver makes it seem like an endeavour—with performative qualities—into the unknown. His obsession with the scatological is reiterated when he draws attention towards his genital functions in the fire episode. When the Empress’ apartment catches fire, Gulliver employs a tactic; he urinates “to the proper Places, that in three Minute the Fire was wholly extinguished” (Swift 50). His urinating on the palace is an act of degradation; he brings down what is held up, directly linking it to Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque.

The Lilliputians, who are the viewers of his grotesque body, troubled by his treachery and the cost of his maintenance, ultimately devise plans to kill Gulliver. Interestingly, these plans are all directed towards his body; most of them are associated with the reduction of the grotesque aspects of his body. Their contemplations about killing him range from blinding him to incinerating him in his house. One of these plans deals with starving him, “gradually lessening your Establishment; by which, for want of sufficient Food, you would grow weak and faint, and lose your Appetite, and consequently decay” (Swift 64). Since grotesqueness is connected to gigantism, shrinking and degrading Gulliver’s body would reduce its

grotesqueness. They also consider strewing “a poisonous Juice on your Shirts and Sheets, which would make you tear your own Flesh” (Swift 62). There is a clear sense of disgust and malice that is highlighted in the graphicness of these discourses; the size of his body and his physicality, being quite surreal for the Lilliputians, are associated with unpleasantness. Through an exaggerated description of anal and genital actions, Gulliver almost attains the status of a digesting and decaying object of spectacle. Despite his hugeness and strength, he remains fairly passive throughout his stay in Lilliput, being chained, poked with arrows and tied to the ground. This can be ascribed to the excessive visibility of his body because of his relative size, and its resulting grotesqueness.

The grotesque body gets inverted when Gulliver reaches the island of Brobdingnag. Here, Gulliver plays the part of being a minuscule creature, and the natives, in comparison to his body size, are enormous. When amplification and hyperbolism are associated with largeness and thereby the grotesque, Gulliver becomes the spectator of grotesque bodies. With his magnified, microscopic vision, he observes and scorns at what he sees, mainly insects and the bodies of women. While in Brobdingnag, he spends most of his time in the company of women and as a result, observes their bodies. These women also become manipulators of what he sees, by placing and positioning him wherever they wish to; this is quite literal when he says, “*Glumdalclitch* had set me in my Box upon a Window” (Swift 99). Because of his size, Gulliver lacks agency as he cannot choose what he looks at. Using his magnified European gaze, Gulliver goes from embodying the grotesque to being the observer of the grotesque bodies of Brobdingnagian women.

Swift lays emphasis on the parts of human body which are either protruding out or can be entered, adding to the grotesque corporeality. In an episode, Gulliver observes and gives a graphic account of a woman’s breast (a protrusive part of the body), in which he says, “I must confess no Object ever disgusted me so much as the Sight of her monstrous Breast, which I

cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the curious Reader an Idea . . . that nothing could appear more nauseous” (Swift 82–83). While studying this expression of abhorrence in relation to the grotesque, it is important to take into account that he is observing a nurse breastfeeding a baby, a basic biological activity. This adds to the discourse of the grotesque as he magnifies the unfolding of a primal, gendered bodily process. Gulliver shapes the narrative by providing such descriptions, trying to assert his agency as a scientific thinker, and more importantly, as a male member of the English society.

In his descriptions of the grotesque body, Gulliver’s sense of self begins to fluctuate. Despite his attempts at establishing himself as a human, he is often reduced to an object. When he visits the chief temple with Glumdalclitch, he looks at the statues on the sides of the temple. Here, he decides to prove his role as an independent observer (as opposed to a spectacle) when he says, “I measured a little Finger which had fallen down from one of these Statues, and lay unperceived among some Rubbish; and found it exactly four Foot and an Inch in Length” (Swift 103). However, the very fact that wherever he went, he did so in a “Travelling-Closet; which *Glumdalclitch* held in her Lap” (Swift 102), reduces him to an object, just like the little finger in his nurse’s collection. This disembodiment makes the concept of grotesque uncanny; Gulliver is de-familiarised from his own body as he comes to be seen as an object. From his very initial moments in Brobdingnag, his body begins to be commodified. By saying that “My Master’s Design was to shew me in all the Towns by the Way, and to step out of the Road for Fifty or an Hundred Miles, to any Village or Person of Quality’s House where he might expect Custom” (Swift 90), Gulliver clearly indicates that he is now just an article of spectacle for the natives to marvel at. Moreover, he is sold by his Master to the Queen, and for a thousand pieces of gold, Gulliver becomes “her Majesty’s most humble Creature and Vassal” (Swift 92).

The reduction of Gulliver's body to an object of female consumption becomes even more apparent when he describes what happens when he is in the company of the Queen's maids of honour. Swift writes about Gulliver's state of mind:

The Maids of Honour often invited *Glumdalclitch* to their Apartments, and desired she would bring me along with her, on Purpose to have the Pleasure of seeing and touching me. They would often strip me naked from Top to Toe, and lay me at full Length in their Bosoms; wherewith I was much disgusted . . .
(107)

Here, female sexual desire seems to be motivating the objectification and subsequent consumption of Gulliver's body. Gulliver, instead of being treated like a human, is used by them "without any manner of Ceremony, like a Creature who had no sort of Consequence" (Swift 108). His sexuality is not really taken into account by these women, for in addition to stripping him, they undress themselves in front of him, exposing their naked bodies. He is "placed on their Toylet directly before their naked Bodies; which . . . was very far from being a tempting Sight" (Swift 108).

Interestingly, even as he expounds on his treatment as a sexual prop, he reiterates the horrors of the grotesque, which is enabled by the size of the Brobdingnagian women's bodies. The shifting identities of Gulliver from being a man, to an object, to a sexual prop get even more complicated when he gives a further account of his experience with his favourite maid of honour. This is, "a pleasant frolicsome Girl of Sixteen, [who] 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 108). The complication arises as this account gives the reader a sense that as a sexual prop, Gulliver is also phallic in nature, much like a dildo. Even when he is used as a phallic sexual prop, he does not forget to highlight the fact that he is displeased

with such encounters; he asks “*Glumdalclitch* to contrive some excuse for not seeing that young Lady any more” (Swift 108).

Gulliver is an instrument used by these women to attain their sexual liberty. When these maids of honour use Gulliver as a dildo, they strip him of not only his maleness, but also his human identity, reducing him to the status of a “thing”. The introduction of sexual props means the substitution of something natural (the phallus) with something artificial. If we read the arrival of Gulliver in Brobdingnag as the import of sexual props into the kingdom, it also implies women taking control of their own sexuality, inducing anxieties of being objectified among men. In *Travels*, it seems that these women exchange the sex toy that has become of Gulliver, a symbol of male sexuality being passed around.¹

This exchange also implies a sort of inter-changeability at work between Gulliver and the female figures. Even when Gulliver talks about the body odour and skin of these women, he recalls a Lilliputian’s experience of his body. He talks about how an intimate friend of his in Lilliput once complained about a strong smell emanating from Gulliver’s body (Swift 107). He has a fairly complicated relationship with the female other. Through his description of their grotesque bodies, he others them, but the grotesqueness of his own body brings him closer to them. The grotesque female body becomes a mirror in which he recognises his grotesque self.

Gulliver, a representative of the British Empire, travels to multiple foreign lands and marvels at their inhabitants, making the Empire a moving body. Through *Travels*, Swift attempts to satirize the social, political and economic conditions of the Empire’s centre, and provides a critique of the colonial project and modern science. As a result, in his experiences of the lands of Brobdingnag and Lilliput, Gulliver finds snippets of England, for the account on a whole is a critique of the English self. This links the bodies—his own and the ones he

¹ This alludes to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick suggests that such exchanges are practiced among men with the bodies of women.

observes—to the body politic, and the grotesqueness of his body makes the metropolis of the Empire a grotesque body as well. Since the grotesque focuses on parts of a whole, it does not make one see the whole image or the larger picture. Gulliver’s engagement with parts of the body, in this sense, becomes metonymical in its representation of the Empire. One can only detect the grotesqueness of the Empire by zooming in on the parts of its seemingly “fair and smooth” surface, much like what Gulliver does with bodies in Brobdingnag. If we define the Empire’s centre as an ever-expanding ruling body endeavouring to assimilate the world, we can say that just like primal bodily functions, the Empire is unbounded too. This also links the meaning of being human to the Empire. In *Travels*, Gulliver acquires several roles, ranging from a patriarch in his family back in England to a sexual prop at the hands of the Brobdingnagian women. He is constantly dehumanised, but his very manner of narration is satirical, which is at times dehumanising. Consequently, the meaning of the Empire constructed in the midst of Gulliver’s species-identification crisis gets complicated, owing to its close relations with the human body and its primal activities.

As a satire, *Travels* brings to light the disgust-evoking aspects of the Empire. Satire has a strong literary relation with the grotesque, especially the scatological aspects of it; it exhibits the body in all its grotesqueness, dominated by its primary needs, combining the social condition with the corporeal. In grotesque realism, the body is presented “as something universal”; “it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world” (Bakhtin 19). Bakhtin writes that “the grotesque is always satire” as it exaggerates the inappropriate (306). The association of the body and the outside world is embedded in it. As grotesque realism focuses on elements that either protrude out of the body or can be entered, the boundary between the outer and the bodily gets blurred. Satire forms a ground for the utilisation of the body to critique the society. In Parts I and II of the text, Swift focuses on the concept of bodies being observed in a microscopic manner; this enables us to see the repulsion-

inducing grotesque. The Empire is thus the grotesque body, which, when subjected to close scrutiny by means of satire, makes one see its follies.

Works Cited

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