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Undoubtedly, philosophers are in the right when they tell us that nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison.
– Jonathan Swift, Voyage to Brobdingnag

Swift’s famous words from Part II of Gulliver’s Travels (p.1726), Voyage to Brobdingnag find expression also in the first part, Voyage to Lilliput, as he cleverly and crisply and satirize the political milieu of Eighteenth-Century England and mocks the self-aggrandizement of the British.

It is the view of many critics that Swift began writing Gulliver’s Travels in the first decade of the Eighteenth Century, somewhere around the time when Swift, Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot formed the Scriblerus Club. The book was published anonymously on 28th October 1726 after Swift secretly delivered the manuscript to the doorstep of publisher Benjamin Motte. Motte recognized Gulliver’s Travels as a potential bestseller, but fearing prosecution made several alterations to the text before publishing it so as to avoid controversy and charges of blasphemy.

The reader is given a glimpse into Eighteenth Century politics as early as the first chapter when Swift’s narrator and protagonist Lemuel Gulliver recounts his early years. Gulliver explains that his father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire and that he was the third of five sons. Hailing from a humble background, he frequently faces financial hardship. When his business begins to fail after the death of the eminent surgeon Mr. Bates, to whom he was bound apprentice, he decides to go out to sea. As is evident, Gulliver belongs to the bourgeois class and is primarily interested in money, acquisitions, and achievement. As the third son he can expect to inherit nothing more than a negligible sum from his father’s “small estate”. For if he were the elder son, he would’ve inherited his father’s estate and would not have had to struggle for income. It is thus that he embarks on his voyages to seek his own fortune. Gulliver’s description of his early years is reminiscent of the poverty-stricken conditions Swift himself had to endure in his childhood. His father, an attorney, died two months before he was born, and his mother, without a steady income, struggled to provide for her newborn. Swift’s description of the life of the poor is also found in his essay A Modest Proposal (1729) where he describes his hometown, Dublin, as “crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms.”

Swift is also able to satirise political events because of his close associations with the parliament. He was a member of the Whig party in England in his early years. However, the Whig party’s association with the Dissenters later drove him to align his interest with the Tories. When Queen Anne died, however, and the [**Tory**](http://www.victorianweb.org/history/Tory.html) Government fell, he lost forever the chance of religious preferment in England which he had coveted for so long. In this landscape of political turmoil, he wrote Gulliver’s Travels in order ‘”to vex the world, not to divert it,” as mentioned in his letter to Pope. As critic Phillip Harth claims in his essay The Problem of Political Allegory in Gulliver’s Travels (1976), “the relationship among the Lilliputians as well as the events in which they are involved provide us with a political history of England between 1708 and the early 1720s.” Unequivocally, the ridiculousness of politics depicted in Voyage to Lilliput is a “fine stroke”, as John Dryden would put it, attacking and scarring British supremacy.

When Gulliver is first washed ashore on the island of Lilliput, he is bound and tied down by the Lilliputians who are a mere six inches tall. As critic Michael Wilding remarks in his essay The Politics of Gulliver’s Travels (1970), “the immediate notification of Gulliver’s arrival to the King, the summoning of a council, stress the fact that Lilliput is from our first encounter with it to be envisaged as a political world.  Subjected to hostility and suspicion, he is kept a prisoner and treated like an object of awe. It is made clear that the Lilliputians and their Emperor wish to assert their dominance over the gigantic Gulliver. In Chapter 3, The Emperor commands Gulliver to stand like a colossus, with his wide legs apart so that the entire army could pass under him in review and Gulliver confesses that his breeches were in “so ill a condition, that they afforded some opportunities for laughter and admiration.” The episode illustrates the immense pride that Lilliputians harbor. They are tiny people with massive egos, and while Gulliver continues to maintain innocent and goodwill towards his captors and also attempts to please them at the cost of his own dignity, the Lilliputians take advantage of his innocence and naiveté. Here, Swift satirizes the Whig’s corruption in England at that time. The Lilliputians’ immense pride is comparable to the vanity and self-conceit of the English. Even though Gulliver is large enough to crush a large number of Lilliputians under his heel, the Lilliputians themselves seem to turn a blind eye to the fact that they can be overthrown and annihilated easily. Swift also goes on to ridicule the Whigs and Tories, and the Catholic-Protestant division through the rival parties, Tramecksan and Slamecksan, competing for power in the Lilliputian government and the dispute between the Big and Little Endian. The Lilliputians had divisions in religion based on a controversy on a doctrine of their prophet, which stated: “that all True Believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end.” Here, Swift satirizes the wars and debates that take place in Europe due to religious differences. Swift seems to maintain the idea that the choice of religion is a personal matter and that people align themselves with the religious doctrine that suits their interest best, just as people break eggs from the side which serves as convenient. As Romana Rouf Chowdhury mentions in her essay Swift’s Use of Satire in Gulliver’s Travels (2014), “The history of Swift’s time showed suspicion and prejudice between religious factions resulted in volumes of passionate words, countless exiles and many deaths. It was made laughable by Swift when he applied them to the rebellious and stubborn Big and Little Endians, who preferred to die rather than change their egg breaking habits.” The Tramecksans or High Heels and Slamecksans or Low Heels symbolize the Tories and Whigs. Swift attempts to satirise the way political divisions are made, with differences as insignificant as the size of one’s heels. It is clear that Swift is referring to the dispute between the Whigs and Tories when in Chapter 5 he describes the bitterness between the High Heels and Low Heels: “The animosity of these two factions runs so high that they will neither eat, nor drink, nor speak to each other.” The king was a low heel in politics, but the heir-apparent a high heel.” In order to further illustrate the moral corruption prevalent in England, Swift contrasts the unfair way people were elected to the parliament with the absurd way people in Lilliput win their political positions, that is through rope dancing and leaping over sticks. The candidates for the ministerial positions are trained to dance on straight ropes from an early age and only those who are able to dance on ropes with dexterity become misters. Flimnap, the treasurer of Lilliput, is said to be the best “rope dancer” and regarded highly by the Emperor. Here, Swift laments the favouritism and nepotism that exists in English institutions of politics. Positions won by fair means or merit are unheard of in English society. This point is also illustrated by Samuel Johnson in his renowned poem London (w.1738). The lines “Since unrewarded Science toils in Vain”, “The cheated Nation’s happy Fav’rites, see!” and “Slow rises Worth by Poverty Deepest” convey that meritorious individuals and people with a genuine thirst for knowledge aren’t able to make a name for themselves in society. To be successful, one must be corrupt.

The wars between France and England are referred to when Gulliver describes the Blefuscudian invasion. During the Blefuscudian invasion, Gulliver manages to cut the anchor cables and pulls fifty ships after him in order to bring them back to Lilliput. Pleased with his allegiance to Lilliput, the Emperor awards Gulliver with a “nardac”, the highest title of honour that he creats on the spot. However, when Gulliver is ordered to seize the rest of the Blefuscudian fleets to help the Emperor become the “Sole Monarch of the Whole World”, he refuses. Enraged, the Emperor and his ministers plot against him. The Emperor here bears an uncanny resemblance to the first de facto prime minister of Britain, Robert Walpole. Swift attempts to mock the sense of pride in Walpole through this incident. The Lilliputian council of ministers debates over whether to poison, starve or blind Gulliver after his disobedience. The cruelty of Lilliputians in power is a clear reference to the absurd way in which the Walpole government repressed individuals to assert its own dominance. J.H. Plumb, in the second volume of his biography of Robert Walpole (1960), wrote that Gulliver’s Travels was “one of the most remarkable and virulent satires ever to be written against Walpole.”

Although the Lilliputians think they are being merciful by simply blinding and starving Gulliver and not killing him on a single stroke, we know that it is really an act of horrifying cruelty. This episode of the debate over Gulliver’s punishment may also allude to “George I’s Whig court in 1723 where the court was split over whether to impose the death penalty on the Jacobite Sir Francis Atterbury, who was suspected of trying to make peace with the French, and on the capital punishment of suspected Jacobite Tories in the 1720s,” as posited by Elmar Freyr Kristþórsson in his essay Jonathan Swift and the Politics of Gulliver’s Travels (2012).

Many other political allegories arise in a close reading of the text. For instance, the “ancient Temple, esteemed to be the largest in the whole Kingdom” that Gulliver is housed in can be closely associated to the Tower of London where the Earl of Oxford spent two years as a prisoner. The “unnatural murder” which had “polluted” the Temple “some years before” can also be seen as referring to the presumed deaths of the two young princes – Edward V and his brother Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York. Gulliver’s flight to Blefuscu to escape the rumored punishment about to break upon him may also be explained as an allusion to Bolingbroke’s premature departure for France and the court of James III at St Germain soon after the accession of George I.

Swift also uses the island of Lilliput to portray what he idealizes in England. He describes many laws and customs that benefit the citizens of Lilliput and protects their interests, and as Romana Rauf Chowdhury claims, he “uses this to his advantage by pointing out the shortcomings of European society by contrasting them to the customs of the Lilliputians.” For instance, fraud is considered a more heinous crime in Lilliput than theft, and therefore if a man previously charged guilty is found innocent, his accuser is punished and put to death. Swift uses this to point out how the falsely accused are often punished in England and become victims of corruption by the aristocrats who exploit them. In his opinion, fraud is as serious a crime as theft. He envisions a society free of social evils such as these. Also, the children of Lilliput are not raised by their parents and are raised by the state as a whole. Swift therefore believes that individuals must, right from the start, learn to be patriots and servers of the nation so that personal greed and avarice take a backseat.

We may thus conclude that the Voyage to Lilliput is filled with allegory which, in the words of critic David Case, tells “a story which began in the reign of Anne and ended in that of George I.”

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