

*Pushing European Boundaries towards East and West:
Gulliver in Japan and America*¹

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Abstract

Worldwide, in the East as well as in the West, one character has become a part of everybody's childhood, regardless of ethnicity, national or cultural belongings, age and status. The fame of Lemuel Gulliver has survived from the early eighteenth century until today, outlasting many other fictitious protagonists in world literature, making Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* a real classic. At the mention of Gulliver's name, it is immediately and inseparably associated in everyone's mind with his travels to Lilliput, an imaginary land. However, two out of four of his journeys are destined for landscapes that are not at all imagined or imaginary, but are nonetheless inhabited by 'the Others'. It is the purpose of this paper to shed light, by using the theoretical framework of (post)colonial studies and the prism of cultural studies, on Otherness in environments at the opposite ends of the world from Europe – Japan in the farthest East and America in the farthest West – in order to prove that this absolute openness to the Other has greatly contributed to Swift's supreme value that persists to this very day.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Lemuel Gulliver, Japan, America, Otherness

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Introduction

Initially seen as a children's book, due to strange characters and phenomena, such as very small people, giants, talking animals, nonsense languages and weird customs, Jonathan Swift's book *Gulliver's Travels* has since been acknowledged as one of the greatest satires ever, both in its form – ridiculing the then popular genre of travelogue, and in its content – attacking human nature and its deficiencies, on the universal level, and various contemporary England's socio-cultural elements, on the national level. These include, but are not limited to: the political scene, most of all the current Whig government; many statesmen and other important people, among whom the most prominent object of Swift's satire is Robert Walpole, the first British Prime Minister (and, of course, a Whig); bureaucracy and all its deformities; or Royal Society and the developments in scientific circles of the epoch. But, *Gulliver's Travels* is also, and above all, “certainly one of the strongest and most cynical fictional responses to the philosophy of utopia, embodied first and foremost in Thomas More's famous book” (Čudić, 2014, p. 106).

The most famous part of *Gulliver's Travels* is his voyage to the imaginary land of Lilliput, but in the course of his journeys he also visits two countries that are not imagined and still really exist: Japan and America. This is a lesser known fact, just like certain details concerning the life of Gulliver's creator – Swift, in particular that, though of English origin, he was born in Dublin, and even ordained in the Church of Ireland. This factor is very significant, since being the Other in his own life certainly helped Swift supply such extreme examples of the Other in his celebrated work. The meaning of Otherness in *Gulliver's Travels* does not refer only to the size of the people he encounters, but also to the fact that they belong to other races and ethnicities. In this paper, the theoretical framework of (post)colonial studies will be used in order to analyse the elements of Otherness in *Gulliver's Travels* and prove that the enormous and everlasting popularity of this book is at least partially due to Swift's cultural openness to the Other, both in his personal life and in his masterpiece.

It is, therefore, of utmost importance to start by supplying some additional details about the life of this intriguing author, from the perspective of cultural and (post)colonial studies. In this context, it should be stressed that, according to many theoreticians in the field, the word ‘postcolonial’ does not refer only to the period immediately after the colonies gained independence, owing to the tremendous impact of the colonial era on their future development, and this term “as it has been employed in most recent accounts has been primarily concerned to examine the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism *from the sixteenth century* up to and including the neo-colonialism of the present day.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2007, p. 169, our italics). Consequently, ‘postcolonialism’ also encompasses the period in which Jonathan Swift lived and created, since it has been defined “not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba, 1998, p. 12), and as such is deemed to be the suitable framework for the analysis carried out in this paper.

Jonathan Swift as the Other

Jonathan Swift, who was born in 1667 and died in 1745, lived during a rather turbulent age of frequent political changes in Britain. His life spanned the reign of as many as six monarchs: Charles II, James II, William III, Queen Anne, George I, and George II; marked by continual confrontation between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, on the one hand, as well as the two rising political parties – the Tories and the Whigs, on the other; and even the Glorious Revolution that took place in 1688. One event he did not personally experience – the English Civil War – nonetheless also greatly influenced his life, since it had forced his father to leave England and move to Dublin, where he died just several months before his son was born. That is why Jonathan Swift is labelled as an ‘Anglo-Irish author’ (cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), and indeed, he spent his entire life moving between England and Ireland, London and Dublin, or – as colonial studies scholars phrase it another way – between *the centre* and *the periphery*.

However, this is not the only binary opposition that frames Swift’s life, nor is it the only inconsistency between his wishes and the reality that helps us understand his worldview, as well as its reflection in the creation of distorted indigenous Others in his most famous work, *Gulliver’s Travels*. Namely, the very reason why Swift vacillated between his country of origin – England, and his country of birth – Ireland, was his craving to find a job that he felt suited his extraordinary capacities: he had a B.A. from Dublin University, an M.A. from Oxford, and finally, the degree Doctor of Divinity at his alma mater. Having first worked in England for Sir William Temple as his personal secretary and assistant, Swift left that position and was ordained as a priest in the Church of Ireland. But since he was given a parish *at the periphery* – both in the sense of colonial studies and in the literal sense – he went back to his former employer, only to leave England once again upon Temple’s death, after all hopes were lost that his Tory affiliation would secure him a position in that country, and not in its colony – Ireland, on the margins and at the periphery. The final blow was the return of the Whigs to power, which forever sealed his fate, and he served as the Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin from 1713 to his death, thus being marginalised and far away from the centre, as the postcolonial theorists would put it.

It should be mentioned here as well that, though the Church of Ireland is Anglican, it contains components of several creeds: starting from St. Patrick’s Celtic Church in its source, via pre-Reformation Catholic practices, and lastly including the English Reformation elements. In that sense, it is a clear example of *hybridity* understood in the colonial discourse as a mixture of elements from different cultures ensuing from their encounters and interaction. Furthermore, though it is part of the Anglican Communion, it is still its ‘autonomous *province*²’, which – translated to the jargon of the colonial studies – again signifies *periphery*. And last but not least, when Bhabha defines cultural hybridity as an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (Bhabha, 2003, p. 4), he actually refers not only to ethnicity and culture on the level of nations or states, but also to the individual level. Thus, his phrase “in-between the designations of identity” (Bhabha, 2003, p. 4) is fully appropriate as regards the fact that Jonathan Swift simultaneously had a career as a man of letters – writing about the

² The term ‘province’ is even used at the official site of the Anglican Communion for its Member Churches: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/structures/member-churches.aspx>.

English society of the time, and another one as a man of the church – that of Ireland, this being the final proof of his own personal cultural hybridity.

Lemuel Gulliver as the Other

While he was the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, in 1726, Jonathan Swift published, under a pseudonym, his masterpiece *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World (In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships)*. It is more than evident that the protagonist of the book, Lemuel Gulliver, though a fictional character, is at the same time the proponent of his creator's opinions. Nevertheless, at first he was thought to be a real person, since in the first edition he is named as the author of the book, and his portrait is even there on the covers. So, it can be said that he is concurrently imaginary and genuine – given the fact that he not only wrote a book about his own travels, but also exists as a man of certain looks, as witnessed in his portrait. However, this is not – as it was also the case with Swift's life – the only binary opposition and inconsistency regarding Gulliver and verisimilitude. Namely, in all four parts of the book, first serving as a ship's surgeon and later becoming a sea captain, Gulliver travels to strange lands (strange in more than one sense) and in each of them represents the Other (also in several senses). But, conversely, he can also be seen as the representative of the greatest Empire in the world, and in this case the countries in which he arrives can be interpreted as colonies, and the natives as the Others. And yet, in many of these countries he is confined in one way or another for the simple reason that he is different from the norms of the relevant society, therefore again becoming the Other in comparison to the natives, because he is forced to the role of a subaltern – subordinate and inferior, by the process of *Othering* (cf. Spivak, 1985, p. 254-256).

Another binary opposition in *Gulliver's Travels* is the one between what is considered proper and what is deemed improper in various cultures: his motherland, on one side, and the lands to which he travels, on the other. This discrepancy reaches its culmination in the fourth part of the book, but is constantly present since the first one, in which Gulliver pushes the corporeal to the utmost in two instances: the detailed scene of 'unburdening' and the episode of 'passing water' in order to extinguish the fire that caught the palace. Last but not least, Gulliver's Otherness changes its character from one voyage to the next: being a giant in the first country inhabited by very small men (Lilliputians), he becomes that very small man in the second country, inhabited by giants (Brobdingnagians). It is obvious that Swift purposefully plays with the size of the *Other*, but also of Gulliver him*Self*, since after having been in the shoes of a giant in Lilliput he must have felt much smaller versus the giants in Brobdingnag than he really was – and such relativity is quite typical for (post)colonial studies. Moreover, this change of perspective and status certainly reflects Gulliver's innate power versus his weakness in relation to his hosts, which can again be interpreted as a mirror of Swift's varying position in England and Ireland, as well as during the reign of the Tories and then the Whigs, respectively.

Fictional vs. Real Lands in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

As it has already been mentioned, the book has four parts on different voyages of the protagonist, whereas the fact that the plot consists of a series of stories on his roamings through strange countries which are rather loosely connected "is completely

in harmony with the requirements of the picaresque matrix that had been so influential over many centuries” (Čudić, 2014, p. 112). In the first part of the book – A Voyage to Lilliput, Gulliver is stranded on this island populated by tiny people, whom he helps fight against their enemy, the Blefuscudians, who live just across them, on the island of Blefuscu. The second part is A Voyage to Brobdingnag – a kingdom in which live people and animals so huge that a nine-year-old girl, Glumdalclitch, keeps Gulliver in a box, and eventually an eagle grabs him and throws him into the sea. In the third part, named A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudrib and Japan, Gulliver visits Laputa, the Flying Island; the island of Balnibarbi which is located below Laputa; then the islands of Glubbudrib, and Luggnagg, inhabited by immortals; to arrive finally in Japan, from where he sets for England. The last, fourth part of the book – A Voyage to the Land of the Houyhnhnms, has become famous mostly thanks to the strange inhabitants of this island whom Swift named Yahoos, and whose uncivilised and brutish behaviour is contrasted by that of noble and intelligent horses called Houyhnhnms.

All the four titles already unambiguously tell the reader that Gulliver has mainly travelled to imaginary lands. In spite of this, there are several real places, mentioned either in the titles or in the text itself. For instance, the Leeward Islands and Barbados, which Gulliver refers to at the very beginning of Chapter I in Part IV, really exist: “I had several men who died in my ship of calentures, so that I was forced to get recruits out of Barbadoes and the Leeward Islands, where I touched, by the direction of the merchants who employed me” (Swift, 1986, p. 235). Despite that fact, first of all, he does not stay there at all, and secondly, this is the only time that Swift mentions them in the entire book. Another example is Brobdingnag, which is – by Gulliver’s reckoning – a peninsula located somewhere on the northwest coast of North America, but Swift does not speak of it as of America, and confers to it a fictitious name, surely in order to be able to populate it with equally fictitious inhabitants. Even so, America itself and California appear under their own names many times in the book, especially in its second part, when Gulliver describes where Brobdingnag and Luggnagg are situated (Swift, 1986, p. 115 and p. 205, respectively), and in the fourth part he even mentions “the savage Indians of America” (Swift, 1986, p. 242) and “the naked Americans” (Swift, 1986, p. 314).

Therefore, the only existing country figuring under its own and still existing name in the ocean of these nonexistent places is Japan, through which Gulliver passes on his way back home from Luggnagg. But even before he sets sail for Japan in Part III of the book, *the Land of the Rising Sun* is mentioned several times: for the first time, as early as in the last chapter of Part I, when the protagonist boards “an English merchant-man [vessel], returning from Japan by the North and South Seas” (Swift, 1986, p. 79). Then again, in Part II, Chapter IV, Gulliver asserts that “our geographers of Europe are in a great error, by supposing nothing but sea between Japan and California” (Swift, 1986, p. 115). The reader finds more about this non-fictitious country later on, already in Part III, but still a long time before the final Chapter XI which is devoted to Japan. Namely, in Chapter VII Swift gives a detailed account of the position of Luggnagg, but also informs the reader about its diplomatic ties with Japan:

The continent of which this kingdom is a part, extends itself, as I have reason to believe, eastward to that unknown tract of America, westward of California,

and north to the Pacifick Ocean, which is not above an [sic!] hundred and fifty miles from Lagado; where there is a good port, and much commerce with the great island of Luggnagg, situated to the north-west about 29 degrees north latitude, and 140 longitude. This island of Luggnagg stands south eastwards of Japan, about an [sic!] hundred leagues distant. There is a strict alliance between the Japanese emperor, and the King of Luggnagg, which affords frequent opportunities of sailing from one island to the other. (Swift, 1986, pp. 205-206).

After that, in Chapter IX, Gulliver reveals his plan to go back home via Japan self-proclaimed as a Dutch sailor:

I thought it necessary to disguise my country, and call my self an [sic!] Hollander; because my intentions were for Japan, and I knew the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to enter into that kingdom. I therefore told the officer, that having been shipwrecked on the coast of Balnibarbi, and cast on a rock, I was received up into Laputa, or the flying island (of which he had often heard) and was now endeavouring to get to Japan, from whence I might find a convenience of returning to my own country. (Swift, 1986, p. 217).

Finally, in Chapter X, Japan is mentioned only in fleeting comparison with other countries: „this breed of Struldbruggs was peculiar to their country, for there were no such people either in Balnibarbi or Japan, where he had the honour to be ambassador from his Majesty” (Swift, 1986, p. 224). But, nevertheless, immediately after that a rather interesting and important piece of information is supplied by the narrator about Japan in this context:

in the two kingdoms above-mentioned [Balnibarbi and Japan], where during his residence he had conversed very much, he observed long life to be the universal desire and wish of mankind. That, whoever had one foot in the grave, was sure to hold back the other as strongly as he could. That, the oldest had still hopes of living one day longer, and looked on death as the greatest evil, from which nature always prompted him to retreat [...] For, although few men will avow their desires of being immortal upon such hard conditions, yet in the two kingdoms beforementioned of Balnibarbi and Japan, he observed that every man desired to put off death for some time longer, let it approach ever so late; and he rarely heard of any man who died willingly, except [sic!] he were excited by the extremity of grief or torture. (Swift, 1986, pp. 224-225).

And truly, the Japanese are well-known worldwide for their longevity, and Japan still has the oldest life expectancy in the world (cf. OECD, 2016, p. 87), so this is one of the rare details that were not made up by the author. The analysis of several more true facts about Japan that Swift included in Gulliver’s Travels will help us resolve the dilemma of why the author opted for Japan, and not some other far-away country, as the only existing place in his book.

WHY Japan?

This decision can, first of all and above all, be justified by a detail from cultural history of early eighteenth-century England: at the mere mention of Japan, the readers certainly conjured the image of a phantasmagoric landscape³, since they were not at all familiar with that country, not only because it is geographically distant, but also because, after the seventeenth-century Tokugawa shogunate, Japanese borders were closed for all wayfarers from Europe, apart from Dutch traders (cf. Da Costa Kaufmann, 2004, p. 308). Even their movements were restricted to the area around the present-day city of Nagasaki, which Swift calls ‘Nangasac’ (Swift, 1986, p. 230 and p. 231), and lets his protagonist duly emphasise this piece of information by saying: “I knew the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to enter into that kingdom” (Swift, 1986, p. 217). This exclusiveness of Japan helped Swift turn that real country into a landscape that seems even more fictional than the imagined countries in *Gulliver’s Travels*:

Shut off from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries by the self-imposed isolation known as *sakoku* from all but a few contacts with Europeans, and these almost exclusively with the Dutch, Japan may well have seemed as fantastic to most of Swift’s European contemporaries as were islands which floated in the air, or places whose inhabitants were immortal. (Da Costa Kaufmann, 2004, p. 304, italics in the original).

However, as if all that Otherness of Oriental Japan in the eyes of his European readers was not enough, Swift throws in a couple of oddities which, strangely enough, represent historical facts in the midst of all the fake details supplied lavishly for other places that Gulliver visits and tells us about. First of all, there are the Japanese pirates – *Wakō*, who in the real world presented a force to be reckoned with, starting from the Middle Ages⁴ and reaching the peak of their might in the late sixteenth century, though this is not a piece of information that was or is widely known. Japanese piracy is mentioned several times in *Gulliver’s Travels*, for instance when the protagonist engages in a skirmish with pirates and discovers their nationality only after they capture him: “The largest of the two pirate ships was commanded by a Japanese captain” (Swift, 1986, p. 165).

Then, there is the fact that Gulliver, who was fluent in many foreign languages that were real, as he himself avows: “I spoke to them in as many languages as I had the least smattering of, which were High and Low Dutch, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and Lingua Franca, but all to no purpose” (Swift, 1986, p. 26), and kept learning other, imagined languages of imaginary countries he came to, to the extent that he could claim, for instance, that he “spoke very well” the Balnibarbian language (Swift, 1986, p. 221), was not at all conversant in the Japanese language. It is true that Gulliver himself draws the reader’s attention to the main reason for this deficiency by confessing that: “my stay in Japan was *so short*, and I was so entirely *a stranger to the language*, that I was not qualified to make any inquiries [about the Struldbrugs]”

³ Which is one of the characteristic tropes of Orientalism, best explained by Edward Said: “The Orient was [...] a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1979, p. 1).

⁴ The most ancient monument which corroborates this fact, the so-called “Stele of Gwanggaeto the Great” dates from 404 AD (see more about that in: Sansom, 1961, p. 265).

(Swift, 1986, p. 229, our italics), but still the readers would have expected such a polyglot to know at least the basics, were it not for the fact that the Japanese language must have been all Greek to them – and literally so, as well. Nonetheless, disregarding the truth that the Japanese script is so different from that of European languages, the readers could see previously that the Balnibarbian language which Gulliver “spoke very well” was not at all a piece of cake, by simply looking carefully at the picture of “the writing machine from the Academy of Lagado, Balnibarbi”, supplied in the 1726 first edition of the book, and many subsequent ones, too (cf. Swift, 1986, p. 195). One would say that, if he could cope with such a difficult language – and a fictitious one, besides, Gulliver should certainly have managed to learn a couple of Japanese words and greetings, instead of remaining “a stranger to the language” – that is, *the linguistic Other*.

And last but not least, the custom “of *trampling upon the crucifix*” (Swift, 1986, p. 231, italics in the original), as Swift calls it, is certainly proof of Japanese idiosyncrasy. This tradition, though it may seem weirder than the invented mores in other nonexistent places in *Gulliver’s Travels*, is in fact an authentic ritual from Japanese history⁵ called *fumi-e* or *e-fumi*, and practiced from the late 1620s to the second half of the nineteenth century. Briefly put, it was introduced in order to persecute the Japanese who converted to Christianity, but later on it was implemented on all Christians, local and foreign alike, since that was “a belief whose expression was at the time forbidden in Japan” (Da Costa Kaufmann, 2004, p. 303). On the basis of several authentic Japanese historical documents, Da Costa Kaufmann explains at length how “the process of forcing Europeans as well as Japanese to trample on Christian images seems to have been introduced” (Da Costa Kaufmann, 2004, p. 303), to be stopped in Nagasaki in 1858 and in some other areas in 1871, according to the reliable Japanese sources (cf. Da Costa Kaufmann, 2004, p. 312). It consisted in forcing the alleged Christian to trample on the plaquette of Jesus or Virgin Mary made on paper, wood or copper, with the aim of demonstrating publicly the absence of the Christian faith, by desecrating instead of venerating these sacred images, and that test was a kind of inquisition. And although Da Costa Kaufmann claims that “*Fumi-e* can hardly be considered examples of hybridity, [...] since they represent rejection, not assimilation” (Da Costa Kaufmann, 2004, p. 339), it is undeniable that this phenomenon contains elements from both cultures: Occidental – Christian, that is, European, and Oriental – Japanese, and can thus be seen as a peculiar form of culturally hybrid occurrences.

Conclusion

In the list of all the countries that Gulliver visited during his voyages, among the plethora of fictitious names, which certainly have both their denotations and connotations, stands out a single toponym that was not invented, the name of a real country which still exists – Japan. Not only did Swift invent names of places, and also of persons, but he did so with lots of imagination and sometimes came up with real “linguistic gargoyles”, like for instance “Quinbus Flestrin the Lilliputian name for Gulliver, Glumdalclitch Gulliver's Brobdingnagian nurse, and spacknuck, a six-foot-

⁵ See more about that in Chapter X of Da Costa Kaufmann’s *Toward a Geography of Art* (pp. 303-340), which is entirely devoted to this issue.

long animal among the Brobdingnagians (II, 2)” (Anderson, 1998, p. 234, bold in the original).

That is why it strikes the reader as very strange that Swift included in *Gulliver's Travels* a genuine country inhabited by a genuine people, and we consider that the reason for his choice is the fact that he interpreted Otherness in the colonial sense, regarding racial and ethnic differences and not only the size and form⁶ of people his protagonist encounters, as it may seem at first glance. “The great Empire of Japan” (Swift, 1986, p. 229) was an excellent solution to be included among the other – at the same time fictitious and fantastic countries, for several reasons: it is situated in the far East – away from the usual sea routes; so very little was known about this country at the time (the early eighteenth century); it was – and still is, a rather closed society and an exclusive destination, which renders it pretty mysterious to foreigners; and its culture largely differs from European standards, so Swift did not have to invent strange customs and habits because they already existed – such as that of walking over the cross, for instance. This is probably the reason why, although Gulliver stayed in Brobdingnag for two years, Swift quite on the contrary lets him stay only briefly in Japan, as even such a brief stay was more than enough for such a strange country, for Gulliver to experience and for Swift to illustrate its Otherness.

This conclusion is further confirmed by the fact that at the end of the third voyage Gulliver becomes the ‘mimic man’⁷ when he pretends to be “a Dutch merchant, shipwrecked in a very remote country” (Swift, 1986, p. 230), in order to be allowed to enter Japan, as well as to avoid the *fumi-e*, which the Dutch were excused from – being Calvinists, since that creed at the time involved the beliefs of aniconism and iconoclasm. This mimicry – in its sense of camouflage and imitation of *the Other* – was facilitated by Gulliver’s linguistic and cultural hybridity, as before his voyages he studied medicine in Holland, which means that not only did he speak the language fluently, but he was also culturally adapted. In doing so, he had to bottle up his own, English *cultural Self* – and this is precisely what his creator, Jonathan Swift, had to do in his own culturally hybrid life.

⁶ Hereby we denote Houyhnhnms described in the fourth part of the book who, although they are apparently a race of horses, obviously represent a human society consisting of *the Others*.

⁷ See more about the concept of mimicry in Homi Bhabha’s essay *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, in *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 2003, pp. 85-92).

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