



Gulliver in the Space Age

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James Riordan on updating a children's classic.

It must be a doddle to rewrite the classics for modern children. Money for old rope. What next? Shakespeare's Bedtime Stories? Chaucer's The Spaceman's Tale? Henry Miller's Tropical Adventures?<!--break-->

Well, maybe. Have you never felt you could improve on the classics? Like the syrupy-sentimental ending to Andersen's **Little Match Girl** or Wilde's **Selfish Giant**, or the snobbery of Grahame's **Wind in the Willows**, or the awful families in Barrie, Milne or Blyton? How much easier it is to write for today's children *today!*

Yet the classics are classics because they endure: in the case of **Gulliver's Travels** and **Robinson Crusoe**, for nigh on three centuries. Neither was written for children, but both have become children's classics. Even so, the original stories are largely indigestible for today's youngsters owing to their archaic vocabulary and arcane message.

This is where the 'moderniser' comes in: to transpose the archaic into modern idiom and to unravel (or `edit out') the arcane. The finished product has to retain the philosophy, humour, satire, adventure and uniqueness of the original, and at the same time meet commercial requirements - i.e. sell as many copies as possible in competition with Postman Pat and other W H Smith offerings. That is the moderniser's job and dilemma.

Where to start?

1. Read the original **Gulliver**, all four books - for our hero travels all over the place, not just to Lilliput and Brobdingnag: to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbdubdrip, Houyhnhnms, even Japan, meeting hairy Yahoos and Struldbrug superior beings, as well as persons, little and large. (I actually did most of my Gulliver writing in an Olympic village apartment during the Seoul 1988 Olympic Games - but not for creative atmosphere or exotic location.)
2. Examine as many books on Swift as possible.
3. Study other updated versions, even translations (e.g. into French), to be aware of possible pitfalls, misinterpretations and differing styles - also notions and devices worth borrowing.

Only then does the full complexity of the task begin to dawn: the pervasive political and religious satire, Swift's wonderful achievement as storyteller, the hilarious, sometimes ribald, humour, the ubiquitous censorship (including, alas, my own) - designed to protect tender eyes from `lewdness' or anti-establishment thoughts.

Let's start with the man. Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin of English parents in 1667. A profound, though unconventional, religious man, he was ordained at 27 and became Dean of St Patrick's in Dublin at 46, writing profusely on Church affairs. He was also a politician, starting out, like Churchill, as a Whig and crossing over to the Tories. His pen espoused his causes: defence of Ireland, anti-Whiggery, peace, aid for the poor and infirm (he helped found St Patrick's Hospital for Imbeciles). Dean Swift wrote much in poetry and prose, almost always anonymously and

gratuitously, and was hated and loved as few men have ever been.

Macaulay, Thackeray and Dr Johnson disliked his irreverence and coarseness, branding him a man who degraded humanity. Pope, Voltaire and Henry Fielding compared him to Cervantes and Rabelais; for Fielding he was 'the greatest master of humour that ever wrote'. Centuries later, George Orwell included **Gulliver** in his top six all-time greats.

Swift's writings were not solely works of art, amusement or education; they were seen by friend and foe as primarily political and partisan. He was writing, after all, in the incredibly intense eighteenth-century world of fanatical Whigs and Tories. As Kathleen Williams wrote, 'never was there a reading public more politically minded, and of course Swift himself contributed to this hectic atmosphere by the wholeheartedness of his own commitment to political causes'.

So Swift was a rebel, a pacifist, a defender of Ireland, an 'atheist priest' as his detractors called him, an enemy of cant, privilege and hypocrisy. Like all good writers, he was 'of unsound mind and memory' as his doctor attested. In other words, he was a sort of latter-day mutant of Oscar Wilde, the Bishop of Durham and Salman Rushdie.

Gulliver's Travels

Swift was 54 when he began what he called his 'merry work'. He had no cause to be merry. He had just been turned down by the Church for a bishopric in England; his Tory government had fallen; he was suffering agonies from boils and piles, and had fallen victim to a chronic disease that made him deaf and giddy. He faced these nuisances with his usual cheery outlook: 'When you are melancholy, read amusing books; that's my recipe.' He wrote one instead.

Like all his writing it was a political satire on the events of the day. Gulliver (a name suggesting 'gullibility') ends the war with Blefuscu (France) by a naval victory (Dunkirk). The evil Flimnap is Walpole, attacked by Swift for oppressing Ireland and impeaching his friends Oxford and Bolingbroke. Big-Endians are the Catholics, Small-Endians the Anglicans; the Emperor who cut his finger on an egg (symbolising Easter) was Henry VIII (over his break with Rome). The search of Gulliver's pockets ridicules the investigation by the Whig Committee of Secrecy. King George I favoured the Whigs, so he is the treacherous Emperor of Lilliput, and so on. Gulliver is Everyman, Pilgrim, Cyrano de Bergerac, Pantagruel (but not Swift himself who, unlike his hero, preached toleration and optimism).

Understandably, the book was used by Swift's enemies as a stick with which to beat their political and religious foe; it provided proof of his wickedness as a political turncoat and atheist priest. Thackeray described the book as 'filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging and obscene'.

The original publisher was the first of many to alter the text, cutting out or toning down the satire. All the same, the book was an astonishing bestseller, selling several thousand copies in a week, over ten thousand in three weeks, and being translated into French, German and Dutch.

Apart from the satire, much of the book's attraction is Swift's use of the sci-fi technique of describing fantastic events and people with such circumstantial detail that they seem perfectly credible. So the reader becomes intimately involved in the hero's adventures (just as with those of Robinson Crusoe written seven years earlier). It is a mock traveller's tale and a rattling good story, full of puzzles and riddles and laced with delicious humour.

Some of the humour was too near the knuckle for 'educated society'. As recently as 1915 the Clarendon Press felt it necessary to omit passages from the original (adult) version. Oxford is a prudish place. But OUP permits me to retain Gulliver attending to his (torrential and wheelbarrow-ful) needs of nature in Lilliput, and describing the naked flesh of giant ladies in Brobdingnag (not a pretty sight). It is I, however, who omit the tiny Gulliver riding on the nipple of a 16-year-old maid of honour, for fear of offending adult taste (children would enjoy it).

Linguistically, apart from a word shrinkage by over two-thirds, it is easy to update Summerset to somersault, sideling to sideways, four Double to four deep, towardly to promising, concert to concerts, and suchlike. Nor is it unconscionable to make Plantations colonies, Fopperies - silly tricks, Mechanics - workers, Foot-cloths - carpets, even The Pox (well, no, let's leave that be). But what do you do with maritime lore so popular when Brits ruled the waves? For example:

'Finding it was like to overblow, we took in our Sprit-sail, and stood by to hand the Fore-sail; but making foul, we looked the Guns were all fast, and handed the Missen. The ship lay very broad off, so we thought it better spooning before the Sea, than trying or hulling. We reefed the Fore-sail and set him, we hawled aft the Fore-sheet; the Helm was hard a Weather.'

And so on for three pages. Riordan, a Pompey lad, says: *'.. we ran into a violent storm which blew us off course - spare my blushes.*

Then we have imperial measures - for those giant Maids of Honour *'discharged what they had drunk to the Quantity of at least two Hogsheads in a Vessel that held above three Tuns'*. Somehow 0.46 and 5.73 litres do not fit the bill. Hogsheads are so much more expressive.

Perhaps the most difficult interpretation is that of Swift's philosophy which is so worth conveying and yet is hardly expressed in the language of school morning assembly. Thus, when the king of Brobdingnag takes Gulliver to task for his country's politics, he says:

'You have made a most admirable Pengyrick upon your Country. You have clearly proved that Ignorance, Idleness, and Vice are the proper ingredients for qualifying a Legislator. That Laws are best explained, interpreted, and applied by those whose Interest and Abilities lie in perverting, confounding, and eluding them ... It doth not appear how any one Perfection is required towards the Procurement of any one Station among you; much less that Men are ennobled on Account of their Virtue, that Priests are advanced for their Piety or Learning, Soldiers for their Conduct or Valour, Judges for their Integrity, Senators for the Love of their Country. I cannot but conclude that the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.'

To omit it as many transcribers have done would be to traduce Swift, and to insult children's intelligence. So it stays in with a minimum of editing:

'You have given an admirable account of your country. And you have clearly proved that ignorance, idleness and vice are the proper qualifications for governing it. Your laws are applied by people who are interested only in breaking and avoiding them. It does not appear that a man has to have any one virtue to obtain a high post in England, much less that men become nobles through virtue, priests are promoted through their learning, soldiers for their valour, judges for their honesty, Members of Parliament for love of their country ... I conclude that Englishmen are the nastiest race of odious little vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.'

The greatest attraction to me of **Gulliver's Travels** is constantly to see everyday life from an unusual angle, through both ends of the telescope, and to have 'natural' values and ethics stood on their head. In Lilliput government ministers are chosen for their balancing acts: the ones who show the greatest tightrope skill take top posts (John Major would appreciate that, with his circus background). Again, in Lilliput, boys and girls are brought up in public nurseries (parents are the last to be trusted with education of their own children), with schooling the same for both sexes, so that girls learn wisdom and courage and eschew all personal ornaments. And the old and sick are supported free by public hospitals; begging is unknown.

Much of the story, humour and satire therefore has as much relevance today as 300 years ago. What is remarkable, however, is the book's appeal to those for whom it was not meant. The poet Richard Payne Knight, writing in 1805, hits the nail on the head:

'We have a work in which the most extravagant and improbable fictions are rendered, by the same means (improbability of detail) sufficiently plausible to interest, in a high degree, those readers who do not perceive the moral or meaning of the stories ... I have known ignorant and very young persons who read (the Travels) without even suspecting the satire, more readily entertained and delighted than any learned or scientific readers, who perceived the intent from the beginning, have ever been.'

Now, there's a starting point for a moderniser ...

James Riordan is a Professor in Russian Studies at the University of Surrey. His many books for children include **The Woman in the Moon** (ill. Angela Barrett), 0 09 174078 9, £4.99; **The Snowmaiden** (ill. Stephen Lambert), 0 09 173861 X, £6.95; and **Thumbelina** (ill. Wayne Anderson), 0 09 174329 X, £6.95. All are published by Hutchinson.

His version of **Gulliver's Travels**, with illustrations by Victor Ambrus, will be published by Oxford in June 1992 priced at £9.95.

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