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News *from* the University of Chicago Divinity School

THE GREATEST SATIRE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, JONATHAN SWIFT'S *GULLIVER'S Travels*, famously concludes with a final voyage in which Lemuel Gulliver travels to "the land of the Houyhnhnms," a community consisting of two classes: an oligarchy of horses who rule, and a rebellious servant class of small, ape-like beings the horses have designated as "yahoos." Swift twists the voyage ironically at two moments. First, Gulliver becomes utterly loyal to and admiring of the Houyhnhnms

and their rationally ordered lives and society, but then is banished by them because they conclude that he is a yahoo with a brain, and thus could lead a rebellion and overturn their social order. The distraught Gulliver complies and eventually returns home to England, but once there he literally becomes a "neigh sayer," shunning what we would call civil society for the company of horses in a barn, with whom he passes as much time as he can in rational conversation.

How are we to understand Gulliver's experience with the Houyhnhnms, and his continued allegiance, and eventual self-ostracization, despite their rejection of him? Any answer is of course complex. It does seem clear that Swift wants his reader to reckon with the fact that neither the hyper-rational horses nor the brutally instinctive yahoos represent fully realized humanity. It is also clear that Gulliver, who might represent a combination of them, emphatically allies himself, and not incidentally his self-understanding, with the former. Swift does give Gulliver one moment of equipoise—one time when he is able to marry reason and emotion, head and heart. In it, Gulliver appeals the decision to banish him by suggesting that true justice requires mercy. Swift here renders Gulliver both incisive and eloquent. Yet the moment is both fleeting and ineffectual.

Swift's tale is rarely invoked in discussions of religion, but it should be. With regard to the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver behaves like a member of what we would call a cult. He deploys the rituals from those horses when he returns to England. Swift thus demonstrates for us the dangers in uncritical adoption of a tradition. Yet in highlighting Gulliver's appeal, be it noted in a moment of extreme duress, that justice be tempered with mercy, Swift also illustrates for the reader what Abraham Lincoln would later term "the better angels of our nature."

The difficulty for all readers of Swift, particularly for divines who study religion, is that Swift leaves us to draw the conclusions.

Letter from the Dean



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This is an index of his art: it compels us to think harder than we might otherwise about both whether, and if so how, religions can

achieve Gulliver's momentary insight and eloquence, and sustain it over time. The ready-to-hand answer is that religions in their theories and their practices are purposeful, even supervisory. Creed and code combine to encourage focus on what is true and good and beautiful. The aim is thus to establish conditions in which the appeal of a Lincoln—and the recourse to justice tempered with mercy—is at least regularly recalled and honored. The danger is to become like the Houyhnhnms, whose justice knows no mercy and thus is not justice.

This danger—which we might term the danger of ideology, the danger of so emphasizing one aspect of the truth that its remainder is forgotten and the whole thus perverted—is brilliantly addressed by Swift in his depiction of the yahoos. Here criticism and irony become crucial counterpoints to purpose and supervision. Swift reveals through Gulliver the close connection between devotion and contempt, even the way in which one feeds upon the other. To avoid Gulliver's fate we need to avoid this particular, if all too human, equation. Swift helps us by underscoring empirically the connections Gulliver denies: the yahoo females uninhibitedly express their sexual attraction to Gulliver, and Gulliver himself continually if unwittingly notes their shared physiognomy.

To fully grasp what Swift shows in *Gulliver* we might here again take recourse, but this time contrastively, to Lincoln: Gulliver's resolute stigmatization of the yahoos is the opposite of Lincoln's steadfast refusal to demonize the Confederacy during the Civil War. Here Swift's counsel about religion would appear to suggest that creed and code must always be modulated by scrupulous attention to any effort to demonize the "other." In this sense, civil society and religion can and must be complementary. Given the rarity of Lincolns—and of Swifts—in our midst, it behooves us to recall their examples as we make the way forward. □

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