Separation of Women and State: Gulliver's Ideas of Women as a Part of Society but not Part of Society

Gulliver's Travels shifts through a series of opposing theories and cultures. Each setting that Gulliver encounters, has an entirely different view of how that culture sees the world and thinks that it does, or should work. There is however, a rather interesting perspective that Gulliver continually takes on women. "Gender relations shift throughout the four parts of Gulliver's travels as Gulliver defines the meanings of sexes in the countries he visits" (Naussbaum 322). He has the tendency to entirely view women in their gender roles as compared to English women. He leads no thought that women can in fact be more or less than what English women are. Gulliver seems to characterize all women into either being more or less like English women—showing an idea that English women are the most superior of all women. Naussbaum states that, "Cultural materialistic feminism, with its emphasis on the catalytic power if the contradictions that emanate from opposing concepts entities, and ways of knowing, continues to strive toward recognizing differences among women in theory and practice" (329). The idea is to draw out the instances that can readily be portrayed as sexist treatment, which are not necessarily such because of the circumstance of those involved. As one reviews the story, we see that Gulliver is very culturally centered in the ideals that were commonly shared about women during the 1700's. The portrayals of women throughout the narrative seem to effectively alienate them as an entirely separate part of society. The idea that women belong to society, but in turn are not actually a central part of it, is more of a secondary mechanism of sort.

The general idea of feminism it that though man is considered as a whole, it is very often, through opinion, separated into male and female gender roles. Men in their roles lead society while women seem to stay in the background. Feminist critique reprimands this while showing

the two sexes as equal in value as well as action. Men can be less than men and women can be more than women. This means that at any given time, a man can be stripped of his manhood and a woman can surpass a man in ability. This seems to be a motivator as to Gulliver's negative outlook on women. Naussbaum talks about how Gulliver throughout the text continually compares the females he encounters with English women and how different they are. There is a continual idea of how his sexuality is in question as he is confronted by members of the opposite sex as well as his attraction to members of different species. The ideas are presented as they compare the presentation of each feminine character that Gulliver meets. His reactions to the situations and their general consideration in common society today are somewhat normal, yet Naussbaum doesn't really try to define what is normal per say. Though she does go into common customs and such as they were presented and considered. "Clearly Gulliver depicts women as beings who like the Laputan women are palpable of reason but are not reasonable creatures" (Naussbaum 330). The idea is that Gulliver sees women by the social roles that they play and not by individual analysis. Each person is more than they appear to be. To assume that what we see is fact, is entirely unfair and one-sided when making any sort of critical analysis. This shows the common misconceptions that people generally had when the narrative was written. However, that is not to say that sometimes people fill the roles that are laid out for them.

There is a certain unfairness to the criticisms that are lain upon the character Gulliver. Though there are many points that can be made to parallel Gulliver to a feminist view and emasculate him, many of these instances are not considered to be actual cases of demasculinization. Murfin states, "It might seem that such a text (such as Naussbaum,) would readily lend itself to a feminist reading in general, and feminist critique in particular. Such is not the case," (310)

When you get down to it you can draw parallels about anything. The contrast is such that Naussbaum seems to attack Gulliver as a misogynistic character, rather than study him as one.

The apparent ideas, that Gulliver does not see women as more than a social, not political, part of society contributes to the feminist ideals. His time in Laputa proves that he does not show much respect for most women. He finds himself consorting mostly with women, who are the most intelligible of anyone on the floating island, and though he understands them, he does not think that they are truly capable of reason. This he illustrates with the story of the wife of the Prime Minister of Laputa, who had escaped from the island and was living in rags with a deformed footman who mistreated and beat her (160). The presented idea being that living above on the miraculous island where she had in riches and comfort was the more sensible thought than when she decided to leave it all for a crippled miscreant. Most, if not all, could easily be lost on determining the cause of such irrational behavior. But in turn, this illustrates his disapproval of the female position. Men for this reason are considered more rational. This is possibly why Gulliver never seemed to wonder where the women of consequence are.

The Queen of Brobdingnag again appears to be a perfect example of a woman of power and no consequence. Though she is utterly entertained by the sight of such a tiny man in her court, this seems to be as far as it goes. She cares little about government and only passes her time being entertained by Gulliver, whereas the King, on the other hand, seeks to learn about the rest of his culture and civilization. This is a simple portrayal of social gender roles within a given society. The very depiction of such roles can be thought of as sexist, and a target for feminist criticism, but in truth one does not really understand the circumstance in its entirety. We easily see the role that has been placed on these characters such as the Laputan women and the Brobdingnag queen, but one cannot so easily see whether the decisions of the women were included. Perhaps, it could

be that they willingly or unknowingly play these roles because of their own personalities. It could very well be that they follow these roles only because they are supposed to.

Women seem to fulfill a purpose apart, as they are constantly scrutinized throughout the course of the text. Gulliver goes to great lengths to describe the women in comparison to the men and to English women in each of his discovered cultures. All of which seem to be in a very negative contrast to their counterparts. Their usefulness is questioned through Gulliver's attitude. This is including Gulliver's own wife, who has thought him dead several times over yet has never taken a second husband, remaining faithful to him. His seeming contempt for her, especially upon his return from his living with the Houyhnhnms, shows his disdain for the female as a degenerating part of culture. He sees her now as one of the filthy *Yahoos*, degenerating her as a human and making her out to be lesser than even that of the yahoos. This displacement of character is how Gulliver maintains his idea that women are merely a factor to society and not a central mechanism.

The misrepresentation by Gulliver throughout his travels is a terrible and common ideal of the 1700's sexist culture. Gulliver depicts that which has held back so much of Human progress through history. There was always that consideration of the untapped potential of women as advanced thinkers only because they were thought to be incapable of such. The misogynistic nature of Gulliver is a reflection upon that which could benefit society as a whole. However we cannot assume that there are not those who would reject this accepting of women to a centralized role of society and simply continue in the well structured gender roles.

## **Works Cited**

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