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A Few Remarks on "Gulliver's Travels"

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A Few Remarks on *Gulliver's Travels*
Christopher Hammond
From the Pi Mu Epsilon Installation Ceremony – May 16, 2005

It is my hope the title of this talk strikes you as being at least moderately intriguing, in that it seems somewhat incongruous with this particular occasion. Let me say, however, that this is not the first time I have spoken on this topic at a ceremony of this nature. In fact, the text I am about to deliver is a distillation of an address I gave two years ago at the induction ceremony for the Virginia Theta Chapter of Pi Mu Epsilon, at Washington and Lee University.

It may come as something of a surprise that mathematics plays a critical part in Jonathan Swift's whimsical tale of a hapless English explorer. I submit, in fact, that mathematics provides the key to understanding Gulliver's dementia, and hence the entire purpose of the book. Let me briefly remind the audience of the particulars of this novel. Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was an ordained Anglican priest, although his writings certainly do not reflect the sort of dignity normally associated with a man of the cloth. In fact, the most recognizable feature of Swift's literary output is his habitual use of scatological imagery, or – to put it more bluntly – "juvenile bathroom humor." [At this point, let me apologize in advance in case I offend anyone's sensibilities with the following examples.] Swift, for example, is commonly credited with having written a treatise with the elegant title "The benefit of farting explain'd: or, the fundament-all cause of the distempers incident to the fair-sex, enquired into. Proving à posteriori most of the dis-ordures in-tail'd upon them, are owning to flatulencies not seasonably vented. Written in Spanish by Don Fartinando Puff-indorst, professor of bombast in the University of Crackow ..." *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726, was no

exception to this rule. For example, the opening paragraph of the novel (if read correctly) is essentially a set-up for a dirty joke, which – in the interest of good taste – I will refrain from telling. *Gulliver's Travels* is essentially a sequence of gross-out stories, more in the spirit of South Park than Shakespeare. To call the humor sophomoric would be degrading to sophomeres. [At this point, let me make a personal plea. Please – be aware of the fact that *Gulliver's Travels* is not a children's book. For various reasons, it is often marketed as such, but never, never give it to a minor under your care.] As many of you know, Gulliver's travels consist of four distinct voyages. The first, and the most familiar to general audiences, is his trip to Lilliput, a land inhabited by tiny people. His next journey is to Brobdingnag, a land of giants. His third journey takes him to a number of fantastic Pacific islands, one of which we will discuss shortly. His fourth journey takes him to the land of the Houyhnhnms, a race of hyper-intelligent, ultra-rational talking horses. When Gulliver finally returns to England, and to his long-suffering wife, he is so demented that can no longer tolerate human company, and goes to live among the horses in the stable.

Let me speak briefly about Gulliver's third voyage, for this is the one that pertains most directly to our assembly this evening. After a series of misadventures, he winds up on the flying island of Laputa (which I realize is quite an impolite name), which is populated by a civilization entirely dominated by mathematicians. Swift uses this episode to compose a viciously funny satire of the mathematical personality. Gulliver, in his usual matter-of-fact tone, observes that on the island there are

> many in the Habit of Servants, with a blown Bladder fastned like a Flail to the End of a short Stick, which they carried in their Hands. In each Bladder was a small Quantity of dried Pease, or little Pebbles, (as I was afterwards informed.) With these Bladders they now and then flapped the Mouths and Ears of those who stood near them, of which Practice I could not then conceive the Meaning. It seems the Minds of these People are so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the Discourses of others, without being rouzed by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing; for which Reason those Persons who are able to afford it always keep a *Flapper* ... in their Family, as one of their Domesticks; nor ever walk abroad or make Visits without him. *(Part III, Chap. II)*

In other words, these mathematicians are so oblivious to the outside world that they need to be swatted with a bean-bag in order to make human contact.

A few lines later, Gulliver describes a sumptuous banquet set forth by his mathematical hosts:

> We had two Courses, of three Dishes each. In the first Course, there was a Shoulder of Mutton, cut into an Æquilateral Triangle; a Piece of Beef into a Rhomboides; and a Pudding into a Cycloid. ... The Servants cut our Bread into Cones, Cylinders, Parallelograms, and several other Mathematical Figures. *(Part III, Chap. II)*

Another amusing situation arises when he attempts to acquire a new suit of clothes:

> Those to whom the King [of Laputa] had entrusted me, observing how ill I was clad, ordered a Taylor to come next Morning, and take my Measure for a Suit of Cloths. This Operator did his Office after a different Manner from those of his Trade in *Europe*. He first took my Altitude by a Quadrant, and then with Rule and Compasses, described the Dimensions and Out-Lines of my whole Body; all which he entered upon Paper, and in six Days brought my Cloths very ill made, and quite out of Shape, by happening to mistake a Figure in the Calculation. But my Comfort was, that I observed such Accidents very frequent, and little regarded. *(Section III, Chap. II)*

This anecdote is so amusing precisely because it does conform to our own experiences and expectations regarding impractical mathematicians.

While the Laputans provide a source of amusement, it is important to recognize that there is a mathematician in this novel whose dementia is far more pathological, namely Gulliver himself. Throughout his travels, Gulliver demonstrates himself to be oblivious to any significant aspect of the human condition: love, hate, fear, sorrow, wonder. All he knows how to do is to quantify. This the great irony of the little people in Lilliput and the big people in Brobdingnag. Gulliver is only capable of noting size, quantity, and dimension, and is completely oblivious to the humane aspects of life. The narrative of his travels is, if one takes Gulliver's point of view, nothing but a list of facts, figures, and data. Gulliver's dementia does not begin when he goes to live in the stables; it starts the very moment he commences his narration.

We must be mindful of the fact that *we*, gathered here today, do not share in Gulliver's great miscalculation. We do not use mathematics to strip the world of beauty, wonder, or emotion; on the contrary, mathematics provides us with a vehicle for discovering a deeper truth, a deeper beauty, a deeper sense of harmony in the universe. The non-mathematical world will often mock us gently, likening us to the inhabitants of the floating island. If this is the price we must pay for access to that beauty, then it is certainly the bargain of a lifetime. We are comforted by the fact that we are not alone in solitary exploration, but that we have thousands of kindred souls around the world, who share in the wonder and excitement of mathematical discovery. We are particularly aware of this fellowship tonight, as we gather here to install the newest chapter of this national organization of mathematical fellowship.