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Laputa and its Satire: From Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* to Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky*

When Jonathan Swift published *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726, it is unlikely that he imagined later children's editions of his work would only contain the first part, devoid of political commentary. Far from only traveling to Lilliput where life unfolds on a microscopic scale, Gulliver voyages to a variety of lands that reveal the societal and political inadequacies threatening British society. Swift's subtle satire has inspired generations to decipher what he was specifically criticizing, a challenge even for his contemporaries. Lord Orrery, Swift's biographer and friend, comments in his footnotes to the 1765 edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, that exposing vice and errors to improve the dominant system of philosophy, he "would fain flatter [himself], [is] the general intent of this hieroglyphic writer" (11). In this essay, I will focus on part three of the novel and delve into the scholarly debate over whether Swift was satirizing political philosophies of absolute sovereignty or the Royal Society's futility. In doing so, I will utilize Royal Society publications from the archives to demonstrate how Swift uses the Royal Society's failings and corruption to reveal the danger of an absolute monarch controlling the use of scientific knowledge. Finally, I will examine how Laputa has been invoked in a contemporary film, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986) by Hayao Miyazaki, to satirize similar contemporary issues.

Satirizing Absolute Sovereignty and The Royal Society in Laputa and Balnibarbi

When Gulliver arrives in Laputa, he is struck not only by the difference in the country's aerial location, but also by the people's culture and government. Unlike Lilliput or Brobdingnag where his familiar human society was either minimized or magnified to reveal its virtues and flaws, the Laputians differ in form and thought. Physically, they appear to be caricatures of the human form as "their heads were all reclined, either to the right, or the left; one of their eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the zenith" (92). It seems that such a positioning suits them. Gulliver describes them as so focused on their internal and intellectual reflections, that they need an attendant to make them attentive to their current surroundings. They are not simply lost in thought but preoccupied solely by music and mathematics: "their ideas are perpetually conversant in lines and figures…I have not seen a more clumsy, awkward, and unhandy people, nor so slow and perplexed in their conceptions upon all other subjects, except those of mathematics and music" (95). As Lord Orrery's commentary makes clear, Swift is satirizing "chymists, mathematicians, mechanics, and projectors of all kinds" (142). Although Orrery claims that Swift had little understanding of scientific knowledge and was prejudiced against it, he acknowledges that "the abuses of this study, the idle, thin, immechanical refinements of it, are just subjects of satire" (142). In this way, Laputa represents the worst part of English intellectual society whose narrow focus makes them neglect how this knowledge could be of use to society.

Swift shows that applying this limited focus on mathematics and science to politics creates a severe issue. Despite their supposed lack of interest in anything other than these two subjects, the Laputians never cease to partake in political discussion and policymaking. Guillver directly compares the Laputians to aspects of English society here, arguing,

> I have indeed observed the same disposition among most of the mathematicians I have known there in Europe, although I could never discover the least analogy between the

> two sciences; unless those people suppose, that because the smallest circle has as many degrees as the largest, therefore the regulation and management of the world require no more abilities than the handling and turning of a globe. (95-96)

The political mathematicians Swift refers to are likely Thomas Hobbes, Sir Robert Filmer, and other contemporaries, as Fitzgerald argues in his article "Science and Politics in Swift's Voyage to Laputa" (1988). Hobbes viewed his mathematical work as integral to his political theory as seen in *Leviathan* (1651). Like Galileo, he believed that one could deal with "a physical problem by resolving it into its essential elements…and then finding a law to join them, [and] so Hobbes hoped to simplify and then solve political and moral problems" (Fitzgerald 219). As Fitzgerald notes, Hobbes used this method to conclude that since men were roughly equal in nature in using violence against each other, they would have to cede this right when entering a society, headed by an absolute sovereign, to ensure order and peace (215). Thus, the sovereign would have absolute power to ensure order and peace, and the subjects would have to obey as part of their social contract. Swift believed Hobbes oversimplified man's nature and distanced the monarch from his human fallibilities and thus preferred Locke's philosophy. Just as a world cannot be managed like a circle, one cannot order a complex human society as one does a pack of dogs. By removing seemingly irrelevant factors and generalizing a simple solution to a complex society, Hobbes fails to recognize the potential dangers of unbridled absolute sovereignty that Swift demonstrates in Laputa and Balnibarbi.

When Gulliver lands in Balnibarbi, he witnesses the destructive effects of such theories in the poor conditions of the land. As Munodi, the great lord who resides in Lagodo, informs him, Balnibarbi had not always been poor. Instead, such poverty only began after a few citizens returned from Laputa: they "began to dislike all management of everything below, and fell into

schemes of putting all arts, sciences, and mechanics upon a new foot" (103). Crucially, it was after they gained a royal patent that they were able to revolutionize all fields in the aim of such lofty pursuits as ensuring "all the fruits of the earth shall come to maturity at whatever season we think fit to choose, and increase a hundred fold than they do at present" (103). However, Gulliver notes that these projects all failed, and as the traditional methods had been neglected, the country laid in waste until they succeeded.

Although I agree with Fitzgerald that through Balnibarbi, Swift moves from satirizing lofty ideas to the real, damaging effects they could have if implemented, I disagree that he only intends to satirize absolute sovereignty. Fitzgerald dismisses other scholars' claims that Swift meant to satirize the Royal Society, claiming "the scientists of the Royal Society, whatever their fame, never had the power to cause economic disruption of the kind attributed to the Academy" (213). In doing so, he neglects to consider the ways in which Charles II used the Royal Society to promote acceptance of the reestablished monarchy, allowing corruption and waste of royal money to spread so long as it fulfilled this first task. Although none of the Royal Society projects induced the poverty described in Balnibarbi, Swift envisions their potential to do so, as citizens could not question the projects under its royal protected status.

Potential Abuse of Absolute Sovereignty: Two Royal Society Case Studies

John Gedde's Bee-House

In 1679, Moses Rusden and John Gedde published *A Further Discovery of Bees*, which comprises Rusden's analysis of the bee's government and John Gedde's bee-house innovation. As made explicit by his essay's title, "Monarchy founded in Nature, and proved, by this History of Bees, &c," Rusden uses the way the bees organized their society with a monarch to justify organizing human society under an absolute monarchy, despite the obvious differences between

bees and human's intelligence. He evokes a Hobbesian view on the absolute necessity of such a system of government, claiming "That Bees must of necessity live under a King is apparent: for without a King they will either die, or yield to their enemies or their robbers" (18). After delving into the details of this miniature monarchy, Rusden transitions to the advertisement for John Gedde's bee-house, which calls for an innovative supered bee-house made of different materials. However, as D.J. Bryden explains in his essay "John Gedde's Bee-House and the Royal Society" (1994), Gedde's invention was hardly that. The bee-house was likely first designed by William Mew and then augmented by Christopher Wren, as recorded by Samuel Hartlib in 1655 (Bryden 194). Gedde read about the design in an article by *Philosophical Transactions,* and then claimed that it was his design to request a monopoly grant (Bryden 197). In granting Gedde's patent and publishing his design in Rusden's book, Hartlib's account was effectively erased. As Bryden suggests, Gedde's royalist leanings and Rusden's support for an absolute sovereignty made the reprinting of the invention more attractive than continuing to reprint the revolutionary Hartlib's record of the invention in his book "The Reformed Commonwealth of Bees" (1655) (195-196).

The granting of monopoly patents without investigation into their originality or use was of particular concern for Swift. Fitzgerald notes that patents to Swift represented the potential damage absolute sovereignty could cause as seen in his *The Drapier's Letters* (1735) (227). In the Letters, Swift argues against granting William Wood a monopoly patent to produce an inferior form of copper coinage in Ireland, which could undermine the value of silver and gold coins there and lead to rapid inflation. Notably, the Irish would have had no control over its circulation and production. Considering that Swift finished this third part of *Gulliver's Travels* at the same time as these letters, it is of no surprise that he funneled his criticisms of absolute sovereignty through reference to such authoritatively imposed patents. As mentioned previously,

Gulliver noted that a royal patent from Laputa allowed the creation and imposition of wasteful or destructive agricultural methods and innovations (103). Thus, many parallels appear between Wood's patent and the fictional Laputan patents. Like these patents, many beekeepers found no value in Gedde's innovation: "contemporaries were in general not enamoured of the design principles of the supered box-hive or the related bee management regime. Even with the advantage of hindsight, it is not clear that Gedde's hive and the apicultural protocols would provide better results than traditional bee husbandry" (Bryden 200). Despite this, Gedde was awarded a substantial amount of land and investment as part of his royal patronage to demonstrate his innovative beekeeping techniques (Bryden 203). To further demonstrate the corruption of the situation, Bryden argues this location actually prevented Gedde from attracting fellow beekeepers and encouraging them to adopt his method (203). Thus, one wonders whether Gedde was compensated for his patent or for the royalist rewriting of history he provided.

Although it cannot be known if Swift followed this beekeeping controversy, which was revived to some degree when Gedde's innovation was republished in 1721, Bryden's work demonstrates the validity of Swift's criticisms. Gedde was able to plagiarize and profit from a heavily criticized bee-house design, likely because of the justification his work provided for absolute sovereignty when paired with Moses Rusden's essay on bees. Whilst not inflicting the sort of damage recorded in Balnibarbi, Gedde's patent demonstrates the corruption and waste the monarch's unbridled power could cause when applied to the scientific and agricultural realm.

Nehemiah Grew's Refrigeration Technique

Unlike John Gedde, Nehemiah Grew is still celebrated today for his discoveries and innovations and is recognized as the father of plant anatomy (Garret). His *The Anatomy of Plants* (1683) examines different plants and their structures in detail, often comparing their uses and

interactions to human and animal systems. Grew's section on the "Nature, Causes, and Power of Mixture" was of particular interest. In it, he describes how a mixture of olive oil, as an imitation of animal fat, and spirit of nitre could be used to "*congeal Water* in the midst of *Summer*…[and] *refrigerate Rooms* herewith *Artificially*" (233). At first glance, this may appear to be a revolutionary idea far preceding such refrigeration techniques discovered and first implemented about a century later. However, Tom Shachtman recounts in his book *Absolute Zero and the Conquest of Cold* (1999) that Cornelius Drebbel had demonstrated this refrigeration technique in 1620 for James I. Although Drebbel left no written record of his technique, Sir Francis Bacon theorized that he had mixed the spirit of nitre with salt (Shachtman). Thus, Grew's proposed experiment may have been seen as reinventing the wheel, due to spirit of nitre's proven qualities in cooling and artificial refrigeration already.

Moreover, today it is known that the method Grew proposed could have had dangerous consequences. When the spirit of nitre, or nitric acid in water, is mixed with glycerol separated from animal fats or olive oil, the nitric acid will nitrate the glycerol. This results in a small amount of nitroglycerin, which is considered a highly unstable explosive sensitive to heat and shock. Alfred Nobel would later discover how to stabilize nitroglycerin in 1867, effectively creating dynamite. Thus, if Grew had produced large amounts of unstable, impure nitroglycerin to refrigerate a palace room as large, and on a summer day as hot, as Drebbel had, his experiment could have had disastrous consequences. In this way, Swift's warning of the physical dangers of Royal Society experiments as theorized in Balnibarbi no longer seem implausible.

Even a scholar as thorough and accomplished as Grew could cause material damage through his experiments. His refrigeration technique, although framed as original, like Gedde's bee-house, ultimately reinvented the wheel. Moreover, it did so in a way that made its

innovations dangerously unstable. As expected, many viewed the time and money spent on these experiments as frivolous, as acknowledged in many Royal Society publications. Thus, Swift succeeds using the exasperation he and others felt in viewing these futile works to call attention to its potential dangers through Laputa's royal academy. Specifically, the experiments and effects he describes makes his apprehensions about science's ability to manipulate and damage nature, causing famine and disease, clear. As mentioned before, Gulliver describes how these projectors focused on developing methods to manipulate the climate to grow fruits at any time, abandoning traditional methods and their reliable produce in the meantime (103). There's a clear connection between such a futuristic view and Grew's proposed refrigeration technique. Thus, through Swift's work, we can better understand the damages he envisioned and his concerns regarding such man-made ecological changes, especially when objections to them could have been silenced by the monarch. Today, Laputa has similarly been evoked to reflect contemporary sustainability concerns, especially when combined with absolute sovereignty, in Hayao Miyazaki's film *Castle in the Sky* (1986).

Laputa Today: Analyzing Hayao Miyazaki's Film *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*

In 1986, Studio Ghibli released the film *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* directed by Hayao Miyazaki. As indicated by the title, Miyazaki integrates Laputa into this film; however, in this world, Laputa has been abandoned and is now sought after by governments and private agents for its famed riches and scientific advancements. When asked why he chose to use Laputa in this film, Miyazaki claims he originally wanted to use a similar concept to *Treasure Island* but thought a floating island would be more novel (qtd. in Denison 10). However, the floating island is not the only resemblance Miyazaki's Laputa has to that of Swift's Laputa. The impractical and dangerously authoritative behavior Gulliver details in describing the Laputians is often alluded to

throughout *Castle in the Sky* as the reason for Laputa's eventual abandonment and ruin. Considering that Miyazaki had read *Gulliver's Travels* and often uses his films as a vehicle for political commentary, it would be remiss to dismiss such parallels. Whether intentional or not, Miyazaki effectively adapts warnings regarding absolute sovereignty's control over scientific innovations to the Cold War era.

In the film, the land below Laputa resembles Balnibarbi in its poverty and struggles to maintain old practices in the face of industrialization and innovation. Pazu, one of the main characters, works in a coal mine and it is clear the industry is failing. When the military and government agents arrive in the town searching for Sheeta, the other main character who holds the key to Laputa, their technology is far more advanced. Miyazaki created this town after his visit to Wales in 1984 during the Welsh miner strikes against pit closures. As he explained in an interview, he admired the men and "the way they battled to save their way of life, just as the coal miners in Japan did. Many people of my generation see the miners as a symbol; a dying breed of fighting men" ("A God Among Animators"). Although the people in Balnibarbi suffered from such poverty as the result of failed innovations that were forced on them, rather than their old methods simply becoming obsolete, the apprehension both lands face regarding scientific advancements remains. Both versions explore the ways in which new technology can disrupt traditional methods and ways of life in such a way that causes unemployment and poverty during the transition. Thus, Miyazaki successfully adapts Balnibarbi's trials in *Castle in the Sky* to reflect contemporary growing pains in the face of technological advancements.

As Sheeta and Pazu ascend to Laputa, so too does *Castle in the Sky* shift to a wider vantage point to express broader concerns about how governments exploited scientific advancements during the Cold War. Gulliver emphasizes that the Laputians superior scientific

and technological knowledge did not always translate into greater benevolence to their people. Often, they used it to maintain their absolute sovereignty over their subjects below. As Gulliver recounts, the Laputians would first hover over the rebelling town to block the sun and cause disease and famine, and then pelt them with rocks from above (100). If that failed, then as a last resort, the king would order Laputa to crush the town below (100). In *Castle in the Sky*, such power of destruction is demonstrated when Muska, the government agent, finds Laputa's repository of scientific knowledge and uses it to deploy its weapon of mass destruction. Rather than simply crushing the land below, it releases an atomic bomb. Through modernizing Laputa to have such destructive nuclear technology in his film, Miyazaki demonstrates to his audience the danger of governments having the power to deploy such technology to destroy their adversaries. Instead of simplifying or removing Swift's political warnings in *Gulliver's Travels*, Miyazaki modernizes them to introduce children to the current challenges facing the world in that era.

Conclusion

By delving into the context in which Swift wrote the third part of *Gulliver's Travels* in, one can see that he sought to warn about scientific research in the hands of absolute sovereignty. Swift often wrote against this political theory, which was revived after the Interregnum period. Through Laputa, he criticizes the oversimplified political system Hobbes proposes and justifies through his scientific advancements. In a similar vein, Swift examines how when a monarch funds or shields scientific advancements from objection, they can lead to waste and ecological damage. Gedde and Grew's innovations demonstrate such concerns, with the former revealing how advancements were valued based on how they served the monarch's narrow interest. Miyazaki's film adapts these concerns to the modern era, reflecting worries about rapid industrial changes, the nuclear age, and their impacts on the environment. Thus, in contrast to other

adaptations of *Gulliver's Travels* for children, Miyazaki's preserves and highlights the concerns Swift grappled with.

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List of Archives and Databases Used

Eighteenth Century Collections Online

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MLA International Bibliography

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