Fate has decidedly not treated us equally

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1. **Fate has decidedly not treated us equally**

Monsieur,

You may be surprised at my writing to you, as no mention of my name is made in any of your works. Perhaps you will also be a little discomfited, for I am certain that it is nevertheless not unknown to you.

Fate has decidedly not treated us equally.

My name and one published work of literature were known to some, in France and in Switzerland, during my lifetime, before gradually fading into oblivion. I now garner attention here and there from a mere handful of scholars interested in imaginary voyages, Utopias, ideal languages, early fictions about Terra Australis and other such esoteric topics.

As for you, over the centuries, your name and works have met with extraordinary and enviable success. Although you would undoubtedly balk at the way he is depicted, Lemuel Gulliver has appeared in several Hollywood films; he features in endless children's books, caricatures and cartoons, as well as advertisements for products ranging from washing powder to sexual lubricant and down-filled jackets. Have you any idea how many toy shops bear the name of your imaginary traveller? Your preening, petty Lilliputians are a byword for all things tiny. Your *Modest Proposal*, with its bitterly satirical suggestion that the economic problems wrought in Ireland by English policies might be resolved if the impoverished populace simply sold their infants to the wealthy ("a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a Fricasee or a Ragout"), continues to be cited as a shining example of both *reductio ad absurdum* and anti-colonialism.

Your imprint extends farther than the merely terrestrial, reaching not only to the moon – where a crater bears your name – but beyond. In *Gulliver's Travels*, you made a fleeting allusion to Mars having two moons, a notion that was only confirmed in 1877, when Asaph Hall observed both Martian satellites and named them Phobos and Deimos. Given your penchant for borrowing other people's ideas (some call it "intertextuality" these days, I

believe), it seems likely that you filched that detail from Johannes Kepler, based on his misreading of a riddle by Galileo. Whatever its source, your reference in the *Voyage to Laputa* to "two lesser stars, or satellites, which revolve around Mars" led twentieth-century astronomers to give your name to a crater on Deimos. On Phobos, several craters have been called after Lilliputians, including Flimnap, Clustril and Dumno.

Craters, you might argue, are not terribly glorious items to have named after you; but these are not merely terrestrial craters and toponyms and I therefore beg to differ. No one has ever considered giving my name to a crater, on Earth or anywhere else.

Your decision to pen your own pre-emptive elegy, the *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift*, reflects a certain narcissistic anxiety over your posterity and legacy, perhaps exacerbated by a growing awareness of your diminishing mental faculties. You surely never imagined though, even in your wildest dreams, that such enduring and even extra-terrestrial fame would be yours.

My name, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned. No one has heard of my two reference books on Latin and French. For many years, authorship of my one work of fiction, *La Terre Australe connue*, an imaginary account of a journey to the then unknown Australian continent, was ascribed to its fictional narrator, Jacques Sadeur. Admittedly, I did write it anonymously, as the ideas it contained were likely to arouse the censor's ire. However, most of your works are also both controversial and anonymous – and yet your name reverberates as far off as the moons of Mars.

What do you know of me?

Like you, I was a man of the cloth: a monk of the Cordelier order, in the Lorraine region of France, where I had a fair reputation as a preacher. Some sources will tell you merely that I renounced Catholicism and sought refuge in Geneva in 1667 (the year of your birth), leaving that town after my imaginary travels were published in 1676 and my printer and I were in danger of being gaoled.

Others might pruriently recount more scurrilous details, noting that I was defrocked before leaving both the Catholic faith and France and moving to Switzerland. That, after settling in

Morges, I was renowned for my irregular conduct (drunkenness, the odd scandal here and there involving servant girls and indecent acts committed in the church…) and forced to move to Geneva, where I gave grammar and geography lessons. That I married a widow of poor reputation. That I was often called to account by the authorities. And that, after a servant girl was found to be with child, I left my wife and retired to a Catholic monastery in the French Alps, there to live out the rest of my days.

You may consider, Monsieur, that I am bitter.
I am.
Not because posterity has treated us unjustly – I am only too aware that there is little justice in this world. No, if I am bitter, it is because I am certain that, amongst your other literary borrowings, you helped yourself without so much as a by-your-leave to several details from my imaginary travel tale and used them in yours, increasing your success and fame while denying me so much as authorship. I am aware that you acted similarly towards Rabelais and others – but Rabelais can scarcely be said to have suffered from the same literary obscurity as I have done. After all, the French dubbed you (and Sterne…) *le Rabelais de l'Angleterre*, not *le Foigny de l'Angleterre.*

You know to what I am referring – of that I am certain.
Yes.
Your fourth volume of *Gulliver's Travels*, with its anti-Utopian description of a Houyhnhnmland peopled by rational horses and savage Yahoos. It is a clever construct, leaving Gulliver caught in the middle, neither one thing nor the other, so eager to deny any connection with the Yahoos and be accepted by the rational creatures that he is prepared to walk on all fours and whinny.

Scholars have noted that your use of horses may be a reference to the logic manuals still in use when you were a student, such as Porphyry's *Isagoge*, in which two contrasting definitions are opposed:

homo est animal rationale
equus est animal hinnibile

You turned that on its head, did you not?

Your horses are not only whinnying creatures, as their unpronounceable onomatopoeic name suggests, but also rational ones, their whinnies a mode of speech rather than the gibberish ascribed them by classical logicians.
Your Yahoos it is who are the babbling, irrational brutes.
Your character's strenuous efforts to conceal his own nature beneath his increasingly raggedy clothing and to avert his gaze from his own reflection, while he dreams of attaining equine "perfection," are but futile. When Gulliver undresses to bathe, a passing female Yahoo catches sight of him and is immediately attracted to him, thus demonstrating that they belong to one and the same species.

His admiration of the Houyhnhnms blinds him to the inconsistencies behind some of their "rational" thinking. They refuse, for instance, to believe that Gulliver sailed to their land, because they have never seen such a thing as a sailing vessel. Although they claim not to lie, nor to know how even to express such an idea, they do, in fact, have a term for it: "saying the thing which is not." They suspect Gulliver of fomenting rebellion amongst the Yahoos, an idea obviously belied by his desperate efforts to deny that he any way resembles them. In a society based on the simple division between Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, Gulliver's presence threatens the established order, highlighting its very precariousness. In the end, such disruption cannot be tolerated, and so he is expelled. On returning home and being reunited with his wife and two children, he cannot but admit that he once copulated with a Yahoo, no matter how much time he spends in his stables amongst those he deems more congenial and fragrant company than Mary Gulliver.
Why am I telling you your own story? Ah, I think you may know the answer to that, Monsieur Swift. However, as I have your attention, allow me to spell it out clearly.

In my travel account, the basic premise is the same as in Houyhnhnmland: the narrator finds himself in an unknown land, inhabited by a people whose lives are governed solely by reason. They know no passion, for I chose to make them hermaphrodites, capable of reproducing alone; it is a crime for them to mention this subject, conveniently sparing me the need to explain how such a feat might be achieved. They live in perfect harmony, necessarily acting of one accord in a purely rational manner, and face death with perfect stoicism, just as your horses do. However, although Sadeur, my traveller, presents Australian society as ideal, it is no more so than Houyhnhnmland.

Its inhabitants are engaged in a constant battle against their neighbours, the Fondins, who are not hermaphrodites but "half-men" and are therefore driven by passion rather than reason. The violence the Australians exert against them contradicts the rational, harmonious perfection suggested elsewhere and resembles your Houyhnhnms' equally irrational and vicious urge to exterminate the Yahoos. And, like your horses' lies that merely go by another name, the idea that it is a crime to explain how the hermaphrodite Australians might reproduce reveals that, despite the much-vaunted peace and harmony of their existence, they have nonetheless seen fit to codify crimes.

My narrator, like yours, endangers the fundamental yet untenable oppositions on which this society has been constructed, as he does not belong to either of the two dichotomous categories (rational Australian or brutish Fondin). His presence highlights the deep fault lines running through it. And it is sexual passion, as in your narrative, that reveals the traveller's true nature, for after caressing several Fondins, he finally yields to his attraction for a female Fondine and must therefore be expelled.

Oh, the scholars laud your clever anti-Utopia with its critique of deism and rationalism. Yet only a very few have noted that these characteristics are also those of my book and that the pessimism underlying your fourth volume clearly echoes the gloom of my imaginary voyage. My Australians are not, in fact, as stoical as they may appear; the realisation that an unjust divinity (whose nature it is also criminal to describe) has created them both perfect and yet mortal fills them with such sorrow that they long only for death. Not unlike the Struldbruggs in that rather piecemeal third volume of your *Travels*, who "lament and repine that others are gone to an Harbour of Rest."

What unites us, I believe, is our shared conviction that humankind is profoundly marked by sin. The Australians admit that Sadeur has some "little sparks of reason," but he is merely the more culpable for it, putting them to ill use as an "inventor of crimes" – just as Gulliver's "rudiments of reason" serve only to "aggravate his natural corruption." Utopian dreams of perfect societies are futile, we both know, because they are the fruit of the human imagination and are therefore tainted by the imperfection of human nature – by Original Sin, if you will. The overweening pride that leads men to believe that, rather than remedying existing flaws, including their own, they might simply leave their fellow men behind and construct a perfect

society elsewhere, with – why not? – a perfect language all its own, is the best possible indication of the vanity of such schemes.

The entire architecture of your fourth volume resembles my narrative so closely that it cannot be coincidence, though I am aware that my book seemingly did not grace your library shelves. But, like the bee in your *Battle of the Books* who "by a universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax," you gleaned inspiration from just such a variety of sources and then scattered it hither and thither throughout your work. The pigs which plough the soil in Lagado, for instance, were my invention, like so much in the fourth volume of your *Travels*.

You will undoubtedly argue that you were merely following a great Humanist tradition by seeking inspiration in, or even imitating, existing texts. Quoting Cicero, Horace or Pliny is, however, one thing; purloining ideas from little-known authors such as myself is quite another. Your attitude to this issue was always a little ambiguous, was it not? After all, in those *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift* of yours, you claimed that:

> "To steal a hint was never known,
> But what he writ was all his own."

Fine sentiments, indeed – but utter nonsense, of course. Those very lines are clearly and ironically borrowed from John Denham's poem, *On Mr. Abraham Crowley*:

> "To him no author was unknown,
> Yet what he wrote was all his own."

An unknown author I may well be to most, but not to you. It is too late now to redress the balance in our fortunes, between your extraordinary fame and my very paltry recognition. Yet I like to think that, as you penned that ironic couplet, you thought – even only for one fleeting moment – of the defrocked French monk whose carefully constructed anti-Utopian travel tale you so egregiously pillaged. The honey and wax are all for you, Monsieur Swift, while I stand unnoticed in the literary hinterland. Were I to take a leaf out of your book (or rather from your *Verses Occasioned by Whitshed's Motto on his Coach*, to be more accurate), and

twist it to my own ends as you did with my narrative, I might exclaim “Fine ideas! I wonder where you stole ’em.”

But I find that in writing to you I have vented my spleen. And, as you wrote so evocatively in your verse *On Poetry, A Rhapsody*:

> “So, naturalists observe, a flea
> Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;
> And these have smaller fleas to bite 'em,
> And so proceed ad infinitum.”

Following your own entomological illustration, as far as literary posterity and influence are concerned, you are, cher Monsieur, a smaller flea than those such as I who came before you and whose works you looted. And while my name will doubtless never adorn any craters, I shall content myself with the knowledge that *Gulliver’s Travels* owes much not only to my *Terre Australe connue*, but also to imaginary voyages by the likes of my countrymen Rabelais and Cyrano de Bergerac, as well as to Thomas More’s *Utopia*, placing me in illustrious company. For a defrocked monk who led a rather irregular life, that is quite a feat.

Yours truly,
Gabriel de Foigny