Jonathan Swift, Misanthropy, and “The Voyage to The Land of The Houyhnhnms”

Since *Gulliver’s Travels* was first published, readers and critics have disagreed over whether it showed that its author, Jonathan Swift, hated humanity or not. Gulliver himself ends the book with an extreme hatred of and disgust for mankind, but it is unclear whether he reflects Swift’s thoughts or not. In his letters, Swift continuously flaunts his disdain for humanity, but also undermines it at every turn. By closely reading his correspondence as a whole, an understanding of his motives for writing and his feelings about humanity can be reached which can in turn inform a reading of his texts which seem to defy interpretation. Swift’s constant contradictions and qualifications of his disdain for humanity serve as evidence of the fact that Swift was not a misanthrope, though he was an occasionally hateful man and one who wished to appear as a misanthrope.

While it is not clear that he hated everyone, he was considerably vitriolic against some groups. For example, some of the most common victims of Swift’s attacks were the people Ireland. He said of his countrymen: “We are all Slaves and Knaves and
Fools, and all but the Bishop and People in Employments, Beggars” (v. III, 731). He calls them “lazy” and “vulgar” and says their business ventures are bound to fail because of their knavishness (v. III, 731). Swift seems to have a genuine hatred of Irishmen, but hatred of one nationality does not a misanthrope make. This hatred also could be pointed indirectly at a different cause: Swift writes that “Oppressed Beggars are always Knaves” (v. III, 731). This quality which Swift vilifies again and again, knavishness, is not the fault of the people who have it, it was inevitable based on their environment, so it would seem to be this environment which is the actual source of Swift’s hatred. Indeed, he wrote that any work he did for the betterment of Ireland was done “from perfect Hatred of Tyranny and Oppression” (v. III, 730). Even the Irishmen didn’t arouse his “perfect hatred”. Swift never writes of his “perfect hatred” for mankind, and this would have been in keeping with his style of writing because he often attacks all of mankind, but never with “hate”. If this is an example of Swift actually talking about something he genuinely hates, then it makes other examples pale in comparison. Even the way he speaks about Irishmen is much harsher than most of his attacks on humanity in general. He calls Irishmen “vulgar”, but for the most part he views humanity as “ridiculous”.

Much of Swift’s disdain for humanity stems from his disdain for human weakness, particularly poor health. His judgements against mankind are often paired
with a complaint about his own health or the poor health of someone he knows: “I am just but recovered of my Deafness which put me out of all Temper with my self and the rest of Mankind” (v. II, 404); “The poor Dean dyed Tuesday… What a ridiculous thing is Man…” (v. II, 404). Note that it is not the Dean which Swift calls ridiculous. One would think that if it were mankind which Swift disliked, it would have been the Dean himself which aroused this attack; instead it is the weakness experienced by all mankind. Hating car crashes doesn’t imply a hatred of people who have been in car crashes. It is not the Dean’s humanity which Swift attacks, it is the weaknesses of mankind.

Swift and his good friend Alexander Pope wrote to each other a lot about their motives and intentions for their writing. During the time when Swift was writing *Gulliver’s Travels*, Pope wrote to him proposing they meet up to discuss their writing saying that their purpose in writing was “not to plot, not to contrive silly schemes of ambition or to vex our own or others hearts with busy vanities… but to divert ourselves, and the world too if it pleases; or at worst, to laugh at others as innocently and unhurtfully as at ourselves” (v. II, 597). It seems that Pope was directly refuting the idea that Swift wrote simply to torment his readers; however, Swift did not agree: “the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world rather then divert it” (v. II, 606). Yet, there are several details in this quote which undermine its being used as proof of Swift’s misanthropy. First, to vex someone is not to hate them. Certainly, this in itself is not
proof against misanthropy, but it shows that the vexation caused by *The Fourth Voyage* is not evidence of Swift’s misanthropy because, as he says here, his purpose wasn’t to tell the world his thoughts on why they were all worth hating, but to vex them. Later, Pope addressed this writing

> I find you would rather be employ’d as an Avenging Angel of wrath, to break your Vial of Indignation over the heads or the wretched pityful creatures of this World, nay would make them Eat your Book, which you made as bitter a pill for them as possible. (v. II, 612)

First of all, Pope says Swift would rather be *employed* as an avenging angel, not that he *is* one. Beyond that, his tone is hyperbolic throughout showing even more strongly that this is not Swift’s actual feeling about humanity. Also, a “vial of indignation” is not a vial of hate but merely one of anger or annoyance. People can be angered or annoyed even by people they love. There is also the terms which Pope uses to describe humanity: “wretched and pityful”. Pity is certainly not the equivalent of hate or even dislike. Of course, this is Pope’s characterization of Swift, but it is one which Swift does not refute and which seems to fit with his own descriptions of his intentions in writing. And even those intentions seem to be at odds with the actual tone and content of most of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Much of the *Travels* is enjoyable and even silly. When Swift wrote that his main purpose was to vex rather than divert, maybe that was exactly what he
meant: that his main purpose was to vex. If this is so, then parts of the Travels may have been written as entertainment. They certainly seem to have been. And as Swift himself wrote to a friend, “when you are melancholy, read diverting or amusing books; it is my Receit, and seldom fails” (v. II, 429). Swift wrote diverting books which means that to some extent he intended to help sad people. This motive doesn’t seem in character for someone who hates humanity.

He addresses his motives for writing the Travels less directly by comparing himself with Gulliver:

For I am not... Gulliver, whose chief Study is to extenuate the Vices, and magnify the Virtues of Mankind, and perpetually dins our Ears with the Praises of his Country, in the midst of Corruptions: and for that Reason alone, hath found so many Readers, and probably will have a Pension which I suppose was his chief Design in writing. (v. III, 54)

If Gulliver’s purpose was to make humanity sound better, as Swift is saying here, and this is being juxtaposed with Swift’s own purpose, then it is clear that Swift’s purpose in writing is to make humanity seem as bad as possible, to vex humanity. Even if Gulliver didn’t speak glowingly of humanity, and indeed by the end of The Fourth Voyage he definitely wasn’t, the point is that it is a veneration for humanity which Swift is comparing his own feelings to. However, the fact that Gulliver didn’t speak well of
humanity seems to make this entire quote more satire than straightforward. If it is read in that way, then Swift did mean to speak well of humanity. While this doesn’t exactly fit with other examples of Swift’s explaining his reasons for writing, it does open up the possibility that Swift’s other explanations were written in as playful a tone as this one.

There is further proof of Swift’s conflicted feelings toward humanity in the way Swift speaks to those he writes. He is caring, kind, and humorous. He wrote “I have ever hated all Nations and Professions and Communities and all my love is towards individuals… I hate and detest that animal called man, although i hartily love John, Peter, Thomas and so forth” (v. II, 607). It seems as though Swift despises the society and factors which made men the way they are, the oppression in Ireland, the weaknesses of the body, but he does not hate men themselves. Of course, it is worth noting that none of the names Swift listed were female or of nationalities other than his own, but sexism and racism do not prove misanthropy, and this isn’t definitive proof of either. It seems that those who he appreciates most are others who aren’t fond of mankind. One such man was Arbuthot, of whom Swift wrote: “O, but if the World had but a dozen Arbuthnotts in it I would burn my Travels…” (v. II, 607). Later, Pope writes to Swift about Arbuthnot’s miraculous return to health from a serious illness: “Here is Arbuthnot, yet living, recover’d from the jaws of death, and more pleas’d with the hope of seeing you again, than of reviving a world he has lang despis’d every part of, but
what is made up of a few men like yourself” (v. II, 611). In those who Swift admires most we see evidence against misanthropy. According to Pope, this man hated almost everyone. If Swift and Arbuthnot found evidence of admirable qualities in some men, then it can’t all of mankind itself which they disliked. Since they couldn’t possibly know everyone, there would have to be some characteristic or group of characteristics that they ascribed to everyone they disliked. Because they had friends, and Swift did seem to have plenty of friends desirous of his company around the time that he was writing *Gulliver’s Travels*, then it can’t be humanity which they hate.

Perhaps the strongest evidence against misanthropy in Swift’s letters is found in another letter to Pope in which Swift is responding to the news that Arbuthnot has returned to health from his deathbed: “Tis enough that I know he is in health and loves me, —Drown the World, I am not content with despising it, but I would anger it if I could with safety” (v. II, 623). This is yet another example of Swift’s inconsistency in his feelings about mankind. First, we see evidence of his love for his friends, meaning there are some people who he values. Next, he expresses a strong hatred for mankind in the violence of the phrase “Drown the world”, but he again immediately weakens that statement by saying that he wants to “anger” the world and from safety. He continues:

I desire you and all my Friends will take a special care that my

[Dis]affection to the World may not be imputed to my Age, for I have
Credible witnesses ready to depose that it hath never varied from the
Twenty First to the f-ty eighth year of my life. (v. II, 623)

This portion of the letter isn’t as straightforward. It seems as though Swift is trying to protect his reputation as a misanthrope, but that is still not actually proof that he was one. The likelihood of that is weakened by this excerpt because it seems to imply that there is general belief that Swift was not a misanthrope. If he were, it would seem that witnesses would not be hard to find. Also, it seems unlikely that he would have to prove it to his friends, those who know him, using witnesses, as though they need convinced, if he was actually a misanthrope. He seems to be creating a sort of mystique for himself, and by all accounts he succeeded, considering critics do not agree to this day.

And finally he writes:

I tell you after all that I do not hate Mankind, it is vous autr[e]s who hate them because you would have them reasonable Animals, and are Angry for being disappointed. I have always rejected that Definition and made another of my own. (v. II, 623)

This seems to be conclusive evidence that Swift was not a misanthrope. Of course, one could examine this quote for the same sort of affectation as the one above, but there doesn’t appear to be any evidence that Swift isn’t being genuine here. He isn’t offering proof or trying to convince Pope of his own feeling; he’s simply stating them. However,
he does seem to contradict himself by saying that being angered is the reason for the “vous autr[e]s[‘s]” hate, but his own anger isn’t proof of his hatred because he says here that he does not hate mankind. Finally, by creating his own definition of humanity, Swift has found a way to address humanity on its own terms, so far as he understands them. While he writes about his hatred of humanity extensively, it is almost always qualified. With this final mention of his hate, he shows that his indignation and anger has been replaced with acceptance.

As Merrel D. Clubb wrote, “The longer one studies Swift, the more obvious it becomes that ‘Voyage to the Houynhnhms’ is, after all, the central problem of Swift criticism” (207). Swift’s Fourth Voyage presents several problems to the reader the most challenging of which might be how the Houyhnhnms are meant to be read. The debate centers around whether these creatures are a depiction of perfectection or a satiric barb against some other group or concept. Critics are divided not only on the actual answer to this question but also on how best to prove their points, where to get their evidence from. Critics must walk a line between readings based of the text alone and readings which attempt to make sense of Swift’s own believes and persona. With the characterization made of Swift above in mind, we can examine Swift’s often satirical and inscrutable writing in order to determine the answer to this, and other questions raised about *The Fourth Voyage*. 
Some critics take issue with this idea of reading Swift’s writing, that is of reading his writing with a preconceived notion of what Swift’s text “ought to be” and ought to be saying (Rosenheim 105). Edward Rosenheim argues that this kind of thinking, that which focuses on Swift’s other writings as a key to *The Fourth Voyage*, leads critics to read the text in ways contrary to “the common understanding of a magnificently intelligible work”, namely that they will not view the Houyhnhnms as ideal (106). One of Rosenheim’s key points seems to be related to an idea of utility or productivity of new criticism: he argues that readings which cast the Houyhnhnms in a negative light are forcing a deeper or hidden meaning on the text at the expense of the clarity and skill of Swift’s writing and that those who explain the text in this way are reading *Travels* in a way which had never occurred to other readers. However, this last defense seems rather tautological and insupportable; it’s simply and trivially true that no other readers had thought to read the text in this way until some reader did. There is also no way to conclusively say that all, or even a vast majority of readers read the text without sensing a hidden meaning, even if no critic had written about it up to this point. Also, Rosenheim never satisfactorily explains why the reading “which has delighted generations of Swift’s admirers” is more valuable or worthy of critical exploration than a reading which can be reconciled with Swift’s stated beliefs (110).
There is also the question of motive. It is possible that Swift’s message in The Fourth Voyage was misanthropic while he, in fact, was not. This aligns with Swift’s own depiction of himself, his desired reputation, and also his description of why he wrote the Travels in the first place. It isn’t necessary to change the reading of The Fourth Voyage in order to reconcile it with Swift’s persona; it is only necessary to account for his reasons in writing the way he did. According to Rosenheim, the conclusion of the Fourth Voyage would “presumably [be] held by Swift himself”, but this seems like an oversimplification of a complex man. As Charles Peak said “this tendency to attribute to the satirist extreme or exaggerated views is reinforced by the predisposition of many readers to think of satirists as extremists or eccentric” (169). Thus, like Swift himself approached humanity, we may attempt to approach Swift’s texts without any expectations for them to be something they’re not by keeping in mind that Swift may have intended his text to convey a message which he did not believe.

We may begin by returning to some of Swift’s explanations of his motives in writing the Travels. First, the fact that he says that Gulliver does not represent his opinions, that he is not Gulliver. This doesn’t necessarily mean that Swift and Gulliver are in direct opposition, but it does prove that Gulliver doesn’t represent Swift’s own opinions. This certainly lends weight to the possibility that the message of The Fourth Voyage does not align with Swift’s views, that is that it has a misanthropic message, but
more importantly it allows us to read Gulliver’s words without expecting them to agree
with Swift’s. Now that we are no longer constrained by common restraints placed upon
Swift’s meaning, we may begin our examination of the “Fourth Voyage” in earnest.

Most broadly, the genre of *Travels* in general cannot be ignored. As Jefferson
Chase puts it in his examination of Swift and Heine, satire “designates the content as
hostility against a specific piece of reality, a perspective widespread and current enough
that the audience will “get” the joke” (332). This leads us to question who is being
attacked in the “Fourth Voyage”. According to critics like Kathleen Williams, the Fourth
Voyage is a condemnation of man’s pride in his own self-sufficiency and rationality
(275-286). She argues that the Houyhnhnms, far from being an ideal, are rather a
representation of “the inadequacy of a life of reason” (277). She situates the use of the
Houyhnhnms as a negative representation of a life of pure reason within other Swift
texts arguing that Swift held a positive view of passions and the fear of death, both
things she claims the Houyhnhnms lack. George Sherburn argues against this view, the
view that Houyhnhnms, rather than representing perfection, represent some other
negatively perceived group or concept and are purely rational beings to the exception of
all else. Sherburn, drawing upon the text and quotes such as “Houyhnhnms… live
under the government of reason”, argues that if reason is governing rational beings,
then those beings must be *more* than just reasoning and rational in order for there to be
a thing to govern (106). He claims that critics are often too quick to judge the Houyhnhnms as emotionless: their emotions, such as their “fondness” for their children, which he casts in a negative light, must be governed by reason in order for them to better live and raise their young. Sherburn also sites the Houyhnhnms’ hatred of the Yahoos and their friendship and benevolence towards each other and Gulliver to prove the fact that they are not at all emotionless. Williams didn’t address quotes such as these, and thus her argument is incomplete.

If we follow Sherburn’s argument, then it seems as though “The Fourth Voyage” has a misanthropic message, a conclusion which Sherburn himself reached. The Houyhnhnms are drawn in stark contrast to Gulliver’s descriptions of humanity, and they themselves find humans lacking. Even if we withhold judgement on whether or not Yahoos are meant to represent humanity, this is still evident in their treatment of Gulliver. This would also account for Gulliver’s nauseating obsequiousness to the Houyhnhnms, behavior which seems to almost make a joke, not only of Gulliver, but of the Houyhnhnms: whether or not the Houyhnhnms deserve such adoration, Gulliver’s expression of it may be flawed because he is flawed. Of course, here we reach another tangle because we have assumed that Gulliver can act as a representative of humanity. While it’s certainly possible that upon leaving the Houyhnhnms he can no longer serve as a stand in for humanity (or at least not any member of humanity untouched by the
perfection of the Houyhnhnms), it seems unlikely that upon arriving at the Land of the Houyhnhnms he could be said to be anything else, so the Houyhnhnms’ judgement upon humanity via Gulliver seems reliable, at least so far as the Houyhnhnms themselves are reliable. Again, if the Houyhnhnms do represent perfection, then humanity is condemned by the comparison leading to a misanthropic reading of “The Fourth Voyage”.

However, this is not the only conclusion to be drawn from a reading that is favorable to the Houyhnhnms. If the Houyhnhnms represent perfection, it is likely that Yahoos represent the opposite, placing a Gulliver-esque man somewhere in the middle. But this is not necessarily a hopeless situation for man. Both Houyhnhnms and Yahoos represent what man can be, whether he follows a path of vice or one of morality. Men are not Houyhnhnms, and so they have work to do. Swift’s own preferred reputation as a misanthrope aligns with this idea in that he serves as a stern judge declaring man unworthy, but we know this is a assumed role because the Houyhnhnms give us an alternate path, one proving Swift’s hopefulness. If the overt message of “The Fourth Voyage” were one of acceptance or even veneration of mankind—critics such as Williams believe it falls somewhere between the two—then there would be no reason for Swift’s readers to better themselves. This paints Swift as a hopeful teacher to mankind. He represents a misanthropic face and encourages his friends to perpetuate this notion in order to spur us on. As Clubb wrote of “The Fourth Voyage”,

was due ultimately neither to the retaliation of personal
disappointment nor the ravings of... madness, but that it contained
the core of Swift's deepest and ripest thought about human nature.

(Clubb 207)

There is plenty of evidence in support of not reading “The Fourth Voyage” as
misanthropic which don’t depend upon the perfection of the Houyhnhnms. The points in
support of misanthropy are, in some ways, more noticeable to us than those against it.
The harshness of Gulliver’s judgement of humanity is shocking and confusing; it clashes
with our idea of what ‘ought to be’. This is the same reason, whether true or not, why we
are tempted to read it as satire. However, the problem arises when we are confronted
by characters or expressions which do not sound “so antipathetical to our values that
we instinctively assume the speaker’s position is ‘ye contrary!’” (Neman 38). In these
instances, either we don’t make any particular note of what we’re reading because it
wouldn’t be noteworthy in a “normal” or non-satirical text, or it strikes us as not in
keeping with the tone of the text in general. Neil Chudgar explores this idea in his essay
“Swift’s Gentleness”. As his title implies, Chudgar argues that Swift, rather than being a
simply violent and angry author, was instead a man capable of great kindness and
tenderness. He argues that readers expect great violence in the Travels, but the Swift
seldom delivers:

proper handling, in Brobdingnag as in Lilliput, is gentle handling.

Indeed, the violence of Gullivers journey is everywhere mollified by
an insistence, a constant and explicit insistence, on the importance of
Gentleness... gentleness as a mode of action, action performed by hand in the tangible world on fragile and sensitive creature. (140)

Gentleness is not the antithesis of misanthropy, but it does function as evidence against it. One would think that if Swift hated mankind, he wouldn’t write so much about gentleness. In this way, I believe Swift betrays his true feelings.

Swift’s gentleness is not the only evidence, either. So far in this paper, I have drawn on excerpts from Swift’s letters to create an image of his true feelings, but there are other sources to draw on in this pursuit. I have avoided drawing conclusions about Swift based on *Gulliver’s Travels* because it is so contested and his own position with regards to it is so unclear, but there are other texts which aren’t so contested. As Beth Neman put it in her essay comparing the tone and words of *A Modest Proposal* with the characteristics of the Houyhnhnms, “many of the Proposer’s attitudes are identical to those of the Houyhnhnms... Swift’s far less ambiguous use of dramatic irony... provides persuasive support for adopting a skeptical view of Houyhnhnm perfection” (38).

Neman goes on to draw a comparison between the *Proposal*’s plans for population control—remember the *Proposal* begins with a description of different ways to cook and eat babies, a list of cooking styles clearly meant to as a cutting joke—with those of the Houyhnhnms, their limiting the number of children that each mare may have. As Neman notes, even the wording and tone is similar: “To prevent the Country from being overburthened with Numbers”, “That the Number of People will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom” (*Travels* 90, *Proposal* 238). Another of the quotes Neman cites from *Proposal* involves the employ of Irish children. In context, the language is
very similar to that which Swift uses in his *letters* to describe Irishmen: “They can very seldom pick up a Livelyhood by Stealing until they arrive at six Years old;... I have been informed... that [there have been] above one or two Instances under the Age of six” (*Proposal*, 232). One is reminded of the “lazy and “vulgar” knaves Swift described (*Correspondence*, v. III, 731). The tone between the two is similar: hyperbolic and cutting. Within Swift’s letters, these words come across as probably genuine, but within *A Proposal* they are clearly satirical. It stands to reason that Swift may have been satirical in his letters more often than we realize. While Merel Clubb was talking about Swift’s texts in this quote, it is easy to fit a face value reading of Swift’s letters into his list.

For one reader who has fancied that Swift modestly, but withal seriously, proposed the consumption of the surplus of Irish infants for food, there have been thousands who have accepted... the almost equally naive notions that the sagacious Houyhnhnms are are animals, that the Yahoos are men, and that Gulliver is always Swift. (Clubb 207)

To return, finally, to the central problem of the paper, Swift’s own beliefs, we can once again address his motives. If we assume that Swift was successful in reaching his own goals for his work, then we can see some evidence of this in the reception of the *Travels*. For instance, to Chase, Swift isn’t attacking pure reason, but rather his readers themselves. He says the Houyhnhnms function as critics of humanity and also that “The Fourth Voyage” is an example of “Jouvenalian Satire” or satire which uses a fool to
express the “repugnance [of]... the status quo” of a society (334). However, because, according to Chase, “The Fourth Voyage” is actually full of uncertainty concerning who Swift is vilifying—uncertainty which is underpinned by Swift’s subterfuge regarding the publication of the text, a distancing of himself from the message held within the text—he claims that “only misanthropes, sadists, and charlatans devote themselves to satire” (331-332). While Chase’s argument that Houyhnhnms criticize humanity seems to stem directly from a literal interpretation of their and Gulliver’s words by the end of “The Fourth Voyage”, he doesn’t satisfactorily justify the claim that satirists are misanthropes. A lack of clarity on Swift’s part certainly isn’t sufficient to support it, and yet it is this visceral aggravation which leads to his conclusion. However, despite the fact that this is an unconvincing argument on Chase’s part, this seems to be in line with what Swift himself intended. Chase definitely seems to have been “vexed” by Swift. Perhaps, Swift’s purpose wasn’t to be particularly misanthropic or not, but rather to be confusing. It’s a bit of a silly theory, but it bears examining. It would seem as thought there wouldn’t be anything for him to gain from this, but considering the fact that the argument is still raging nearly 300 years later, that isn’t true. Of course, if this is true, it would seem to support the conclusion that Swift was a misanthrope in the way Chase felt, but then we are reminded of Swift’s words: “when you are melancholy, read
diverting or amusing books; it is my Receit, and seldom fails” (420). Swift has undoubtedly provided diversion for many many people by being as vexing as he is.
Works Cited


Williams, Kathleen M. “Gulliver’s Voyage to the Houyhnhnms.” *ELH* 18 (1951): 275-86.