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‘Englishmen in the Contact Zone: A Close Reading of Gulliver’s Travels and The Rover’ : Examining the ways in which, and the ends to which, the texts engage with the world beyond England’s borders.

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“as he … defines it, not as [they] experience it” (Boebel, 65)

Introduction

Aphra Behn and Jonathan Swift are both pioneers of English literature, the former widely acknowledged as the first English novelist, and the latter one of the most prominent satirists of the literary canon. I will be examining Behn's play, *The Rover* (1677), and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), with a focus on how, and to what ends, the texts engage with the world beyond England's borders. Scholars such as Simon Malpas have established that both texts engage with their respective authors' political views, chiefly concerning domestic or internal affairs ("Aphra Behn: *The* Rover"). This essay will argue that the texts display a way of engaging with cultural and geographical 'others' that speaks to an English exploitation of asymmetries of power. In this essay, asymmetries of power will be defined as the explicitly coercive and forceful influence the characters in focus are able to demonstrate over the people they encounter due to their social and spatial circumstances. Focusing on the characters of Gulliver and Willmore, I will explore their use of coercive power when encountering cultural 'others' in the texts. This will be used to trace patterns of attitudes towards 'others', and the essay will conclude by examining whether or not the texts allow for intercultural reconciliation.

Primary Materials and Methodology

Gulliver's Travels is a satirical novel playing with the emerging genre of travel writing, presenting itself as if it were a factual narrative, while bringing the reader along on an entirely fictitious journey. Gulliver encounters various fantastical lands, and a core pillar of Swift's satire and commentary is the ways in which Gulliver's immediate position in relation to the encountered cultures keeps changing. Swift plays with perspective, perhaps most explicitly in the first two parts, in which Gulliver finds himself among the tiny Lilliputians, and then

subsequently among the giant inhabitants of Brobdingnag. I will be working with excerpts from parts I, III, and IV, focusing on Gulliver's first encounters with the Lilliputians, the observances he makes in Laputa, and his concluding thoughts as he returns to England.

The Rover takes place in Naples, Italy. The majority of the cast is native to the city, with the exception of the four English cavaliers. While the play in its entirety is technically already set in a land beyond England's borders, the specific space I will be dealing with is the Carnival which all the characters attend. In a lecture at the University of Edinburgh, Professor Simon Malpas argues that the Carnival functions as a suspension of social rules and order ("Aphra Behn: *The* Rover"). For this essay, I will expand upon this argument by treating the Carnival as a cultural no-man's-land which allowed Behn to play around with culture and convention in a way similar to Swift's use of fantastical realms. Having identified the Carnival as an extraordinary space, I will trace how this setting allows Willmore to hold power over others and analyse the ways in which he enthusiastically exerts said power.

This reading takes inspiration from Professor Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone." In the article, Pratt points to cultural 'contact zones', described as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (34). In the chosen excerpts from the texts, the English characters hold a position of asymmetrical power. In *Gulliver's Travels*, the asymmetry of power is immediately recognisable in Gulliver's encounter with the Lilliputians. Gulliver can easily swat away their fiercest soldiers, their weapons little more than sewing needles (24). He is stranded in a strange land, with no familiar faces to judge his actions, and the fiercest of the native soldiers have just shown him his actions will bear little consequence to himself. Thus, he finds himself in an environment ripe for exertion of power with minimal

personal risk. In *The Rover*, power comes in the form of the anonymity of Carnival, and the ways in which it allows the English characters to avoid personal consequences for their actions.

Highs of Power

Starting with Gulliver, the panic described at the realisation of his capture is soon dispelled once he realises the limitations of his captors. Despite shows of hospitality from the Lilliputians, Gulliver confesses to the reader: "… I was often tempted, while they were passing backwards and forwards on my Body, to seize Forty or Fifty of the first that came in my reach, and dash them against the Ground" (26). While this urge to exert immense violence on the Lilliputians is partially brought on by Gulliver himself being threatened, it has already been established that the Lilliputians will be able to do him minimal harm. In this new cultural space, a contact zone, Gulliver has realised his potential to exert physical power upon his others. Stepping into a position of dominance without personal consequence is tempting, and his immediate urge is to exert his newfound power. The characterisation of Gulliver here stands in stark contrast to the mellow and meticulous, even homesick, surgeon introduced to us in the publisher's introduction and the early pages of Gulliver's own narrative.

Similarly, Willmore and the rest of the English cavaliers find themselves granted power, being masked at Carnival. Their power is perhaps not as clearly physical as Gulliver's. Instead, it lies in anonymity, and knowing they can exert their power, including physical power, without fear of personal consequence. In a moment of gleeful realisation, Willmore declares "…whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer 'em" (2.1, ll.2-3). Willmore finds himself in a space that not only belongs to a different culture, but one in which hierarchy is removed from the equation, hidden behind masks and costumes. There is a

presupposition that anyone present is also intending to commit extravagances, and as such, the English cavaliers have, high on their newfound invincibility, defined the function and discourse of the contact zone they find themselves in.

There is this sense of committing extravagances in *Gulliver's Travels* as well; He gets his chance to exert sanctioned violence upon six Lilliputian officers. He tells the reader: "I … put five of them into my Coat-Pocket, and as to the sixth, I made a Countenance as if I would eat him alive" (32). Gulliver is playing the role of the barbarian, threatening cannibalism. In the end, he does not act on this threat, and his mercy earns him favour with the Emperor of Lilliput. However, the upheaval of social order as he knows it, and his newfound power, has egged him on to explore and entertain taboo acts of horrific violence. Gulliver is testing and manipulating the asymmetry of power, and the lack of peers might be offering up the same freedom from judgement the English cavaliers experience at Carnival. Where their anonymity comes in the form of masks, Gulliver's simply lies in being alone in his power, with no fellow Englishmen to observe or judge his actions.

Attitudes of Entitlement

Beyond the ways in which the characters of Willmore and Gulliver act on their power, curtesy of the contact zone, I will inspect the underlying attitudes and lenses through which they see the world. These, I will argue, support their interpretation of the world which allows them to justify acting on the power they hold over others.

In a chapter on women and feminism in Restoration drama, Dagny Boebel provides some insight into Willmore's experience of his attempted rape of Florinda in Act 3, Scene 5. Citing lines 51-54, in which Willmore accuses his victim of being a cunning spider out to catch flies,

Boebel says that "rape is as he – and the discourse of dominance – defines it, not as she experiences it" (65). Boebel is identifying something akin to naïve realism in the character of Willmore, a tendency to refuse the validity of any worldview that does not align with one's own. Willmore sees himself as entitled to frame his actions through his own experience, with no regard for the experiences of the 'others' on the opposite end of the power distribution of the contact zone. In more explicit examples of 'gaze,' as it were, we see Willmore comparing the Carnival to the Garden of Eden, a vision of "a gardener of Adam's own breeding" (1.2, ll.110-111). He is painting himself, and his fellow cavaliers, a picture of abundance, fruit ripe for picking, and roses he surely is meant to smell. Upon entering the Carnival, he eggs on his friends: "May a stranger have leave to look and love?" (1.2, l.79). Willmore is indulging himself in voyeurism. He is not merely allowing himself to unabashedly enjoy the exoticisms of the Carnival, but to allow the impressions this staged setting has made upon him to translate into the ways in which he interacts with real, autonomous people, as seen in his attempt to rape Florinda.

In terms of Gulliver's gaze, most telling is perhaps his habit of continually searching for convention, doing his best to define the 'others' he encounters by their proximity to English society. What might be an example of a naïve realism similar to Willmore's is the way in which Gulliver readily generalises women. Among the Laputians, who are chiefly concerned with reason and scientific inquiry, Gulliver encounters a tale of a local woman who leaves her husband, the Prime Minister, twice over, to be with another man of significantly lower rank. Gulliver snorts at her idiocy and ungratefulness. He tells the reader that "the Caprices of Womankind are not limited by any Climate or Nation, and that they are much more uniform than can be easily imagined" (154). Despite there not being any direct parallels of women's faults in the preceding parts of the book, Gulliver is not prepared to alter the lens through which he sees

women. In writing of his travels, he is in a position in which he holds power over the narratives of the 'others' he has encountered, and their cultures, here gendered traits, are "as he … defines it, not as [they] experience it" (Boebel, 65). Willmore and Gulliver are both entering the contact zone in positions of power, which we have seen them eager to take advantage of. Moreover, they engage with the contact zone in a manner where they make it clear to their audiences that they are unwilling to engage in meaningful revision of their world views.

Intercultural Reconciliation?

Looking beyond the encounters analysed thus far, both texts appear to be working towards some type of eventual reconciliation. *The Rover* makes its way towards its final scene with its main characters happily engaged, looking towards a bright future, and similarly, Gulliver is filled with reverence of the distinguished Houyhnhnms as he heads back towards England. There has been a redistribution of power, in which rapists and rape victims alike find themselves in consensual engagements, and Gulliver has experienced power exerted over him by beings he considers his superiors. In both cases, the characters engage in social contracts, in which they, to some extent, agree to be subjected to the will of their cultural 'others'. However, this does not necessarily carry over all the way to the end of the works.

In a second lecture on *The Rover*, Malpas reminds his students that the marriages are provisional; the patriarchal figure of Hellena and Florinda's father has not been present for any of the play's events, and his blessing is not to be taken for granted ("*The Rover* Part 2"). The social contracts and exchanges of power are provisional, and subject to potential dismantling. Additionally, there is little sense of change in Willmore. He is still flitting between paramours, not showing any impactful levels of regret for the ways in which he treated Angellica, or

Florinda for that matter, except for regretting the accidental attempt to seize the property of his dear friend (5.1, ll. 152-158). Behn has given her audience little reason to expect any lasting impact on Willmore's character, or his penchant for exerting power over the women he encounters. Confronted with the hopes of union he had given Angellica, he says: "By heaven tho'rt brave, and I admire thee strangely. I wish I were that dull, that constant thing; Which thou wouldst have, and nature never meant me" (5.1, ll.298-300). Commitment is not in his nature, and Willmore tries to convince her that he is sparing her the pain of an unfaithful husband by refusing her. In the very same scene, he agrees to marry Hellena, and his wedding vows do little to counter the promise of infidelity made moments before, painting a picture of incoming "storms o'th' marriage bed" (5.1, ll.573). Carnival is over, and all the characters have been unmasked. However, Willmore is unwilling to give up the power he found in the Carnival as well as his freedom to exert it. The personhood of his 'others' have been revealed, and yet this does little to deter him from wanting to uphold the asymmetry of power.

The ending of Swift's satirical travel writing does not see Gulliver immediately reverting to his previous desire to exert power, demonstrated when we first encountered the Lilliputians. While he does concede that the law binds him to declare the lands he encountered to be property of the British Crown, Gulliver does so with the afterthought that he does not see the point in colonising people that have no need for guidance or external rule (270). Upon closer scrutiny though, this does imply that the asymmetrical power of the contact zone will sometimes be justified. Beyond this, Gulliver described the British Empire as exempt from the criticisms he applies to other European colonialist states. The goal of its colonial project is thought by Gulliver merely to be "…the Happiness of the People over whom they preside" (270). In being so willing to praise his homestead, he is forgetting the criticisms he so readily brought upon it in his stay

with the Houyhnhnms (237). Additionally, he is also forgetting how readily he accepted his potential for violence in the face of the asymmetrical power of the contact zone (237). Thus, it can be said that Gulliver is, to some extent, reverting to the naïve realism with which he first encountered this series of 'others.' Neither Gulliver nor Willmore engage with the people they meet in the contact zone in a way that has any lasting impact on how they perceive the power they hold over others.

Conclusion

Describing the meetings between the characters of Gulliver and Willmore and the 'others' they encounter as contact zones allows a closer examination of the ways they engage with asymmetry of power. It has been shown that when the contact zone, as a space in which they cannot be persecuted, allows for it, both characters readily seize their power, immediately intrigued at the prospect of overpowering others. Gulliver and Willmore fail to realise the experiences of the people they exert this power over, a naïve realism leading them to generalisation as well as disregard of others' objections. This is seen most explicitly in Gulliver's colonialist attitudes and Willmore's penchant for sexual violence. Lastly, while some character development occurs, and the asymmetry of power is revised, both Willmore and Gulliver show a reluctance to change their ways. For them, engaging with lands beyond England's borders, specifically ones in which cultures meet and clash, has meant accessing a power they feel entitled to wield as they see fit. The contact zone has benefited them both, and, as it is in their interest, they exit the narrative showing some desire to uphold the asymmetry of power.

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