

# Swift's Attack On Pedantry

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It may seem to the modern reader that Jonathan Swift fell short in his attempt to ridicule pedantry, for Swift's most sarcastic illustrations of the follies of learned men might well find their parallel as commonplace news items in the magazines or newspapers of today. Swift must have felt that he was exaggerating to absurdity the follies of the learned of his time in the fields of science and the arts; and in order to accord him the proper credit, we must look at his works in the light of historical perspective.

Swift's best efforts to ridicule the learned of his time are to be found in "A Voyage to Laputa," part III of *Gulliver's Travels*. The Laputians were a strange-looking people whose heads were all reclined either to the right or the left and one of their eyes turned inward and the other upward. These intellectuals, unable to look out or down, went about so deeply engrossed in speculative thought that they were forced to employ servants to accompany them and rouse them whenever they approached steps or obstacles in their path or whenever they were to speak or to listen.

Everything in Laputa was done in the most scientific manner possible. The musicians were so advanced that they were able to play the music of the spheres, and Laputian mathematicians had only contempt for such simple things as practical geometry. This scorn for the mundane had its disadvantages. For instance, in the construction of houses the Laputians were quite unsuccessful, Gulliver reported. "Their houses are very ill built, the walls bevil without one right angle in any apartment, and this defect ariseth from the contempt they bear to practical geometry, which they despise as vulgar and mechanic, those

instructions they give being too refined for the intellectuals of their workmen, which occasions perpetual mistakes." The modern reader may have observed, at first hand or through his newspaper articles, that the Laputian type of construction is quite prevalent today, particularly with respect to the veterans' housing projects in the United States. It remains uncertain, however, whether these modern defects arise from the designers' superior geometry or from their inferior arithmetic.

Swift's most outstanding vituperation of pedantry is found in that section of "A Voyage to Laputa" which is devoted to a description of the Grand Academy of Lagado. In this academy there were a number of professors whose duties were to "contrive new rules and methods of agriculture and building, and new instruments and tools for all trades and manufactures, whereby, as they undertake, one man shall do the work of ten, a palace may be built in a week, of materials so durable as to last forever without repairing. All the fruits of the earth shall come to maturity at whatever season we think fit to choose, and increase an hundred fold more than they do at present, with innumerable other happy proposals."

Swift doubtless considered this statement to be the height of ridicule; and, for his time, it probably was, but let the same statement be examined in today's light and the academy and its objectives seem to be more factual than fictional. The academy itself can be compared to a modern research laboratory where determined scientists perpetually carry on a series of seemingly meaningless experiments by strange methods and by utilizing mysterious instruments.

The follies of the professors of the academy of Lagado are not so readily apparent today as they were in Swift's time. Modern hot-houses have brought the fruits of the earth to maturity in any chosen season; and cross-pollenization, crop rotation and insect control have increased them many fold. Today, one man using a power crane, a bulldozer or a ditch-digging machine can indeed do the work of ten and many more. While our modern scientists have not yet found an everlasting material, they have many which are much more durable than the adamant which made up the bottom of the Laputians' floating island. It isn't likely that modern builders could construct a palace in a week, but modern machines can stamp out a pre-fabricated house in less than twenty minutes and it can be erected in three and a half hours. It must be admitted, however, that these modern builders are comparatively slow in their work, for there are other men who have devised effective means of removing these buildings and their inhabitants from the face of the earth in a matter of seconds.

A little further on, Swift described fifty Laputians at work attempting to condense air into a dry tangible substance; modern science recently utilized a good many more than fifty men in condensing it into a wet liquid substance called rain. Because of certain difficulties and resultant inconveniences, however, it is not considered feasible at the present time to change all of our air into a liquid. Yet another Laputian projector attempted to produce colored threads by feeding spiders on colored insects; the modern scientist has succeeded in producing pearls by feeding sand to oysters and colored honey from bees.

In the field of learning, as well as of science, Swift's outbursts against pedantry amused or provoked, as the case may be, his eighteenth century readers without,

however, necessarily having the same effect on the modern reader who may feel that what Swift conjured up as the height of folly may in our time be regarded as a perfectly normal situation. For instance, Swift had one of the Academy's professors devise a word frame containing all of the words of the Laputian language. The words in this frame could be shaken about until a phrase or two resulted. These, in turn, were carefully copied down in the fond hope that by such means books in philosophy, poetry and other fields might be compiled. Of course, modern writers guard their professional secrets very carefully, but a device such as the Laputian word frame must not seem to preposterous to any reader of modernist writing; in fact, it seems quite logical to assume that a similar machine has been employed in the creation of literature by such contemporary writers as James Joyce or Gertrude Stein.

It is in the field of politics that conditions have changed least in the past three hundred years and that Swift's creation of eighteenth century fiction has its closest parallel in twentieth century fact; therefore the modern reader should not hesitate to render him full credit for his not undeserved attack on the political pedantry of his time and ours. In a particularly bitter paragraph, Gulliver, visiting in the school of political projectors, opined that the professors in charge were "wholly out of their senses." These professors, "these unhappy people," as Gulliver called them, were engaged in such "wild impossible chimeras" as proposing schemes whereby rulers might choose favorites upon a basis of "wisdom, capacity and virtue" or "of teaching ministers to consult the public good, or rewarding merit, great abilities, eminent services" and "of choosing for employments persons qualified to exercise them." Such preposterous principles as these are, of course, equally unthinkable among modern poli-

tical pedants. However, some modern political philosophers in an attempt to outdo the Laputian professors have proposed, probably in jest, that the public should be told the truth in political and economic matters.

A physician in the Laputian political school proposed a very ingenious method of achieving political unity. It consisted in slicing in two the brains of rival political leaders and reassembling them by joining together one half brain from each of the rival parties in the individual skulls. It is evident that this procedure must have been attempted recently on many modern politicians, for an appraisal of the modern politician and his work, whether his scope be local or international, plainly indicates the half successful results of such a brain operation. The present difficulty seems to lie in the inability to find skulls powerful enough to contain together such violently opposed

ideas as the public good and the personal gain—or the national gain and the international good.

All things considered, if Jonathan Swift were alive today, he would find vast new fields of pedantry to ridicule. He might be aroused to describe allegorically the theory and theorists behind some labor unions which result in such activities as painters being paid to simulate painting by going over with dry brushes objects which have already been painted or musicians standing by with idle instruments and at full pay while a recording is being played. These and a thousand other modern follies would surely provoke a modern Swift to take up his pen against the pedants responsible for them and, in all probability, he, too, would fall short in his attempt to render present fiction stranger than tomorrow's truth.

## VOYAGER

A lonely voyager leaned against the rail  
And scanned the sea and sky.  
He faced the flippant wind and watched the foam dance passionately slow pirouettes  
A flash of cloud-based lightning traced an arc  
Against the blackness of the night.  
A somber roll of thunder sounded  
And furious waves beat the decks,  
A threat to iron bubble hopes of men.  
The voyager drew closer his wind-whipped coat  
And wondered why he sailed a wrathful sea.  
He felt what he sought so near, so thinly veiled  
That he strained to hear a whispered word.  
He heard then: "Insecurity."  
As quickly as it came, the intelligible word returned to cacophonous mystery.  
He studied the word and guessed the truth  
And then he reinterpreted the sound;  
That which he sailed to seek and find, he found.

—GEORGE FULLEN