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Aristophanic Echoes in Swift in Twisted Laughter and Thoughts: Reading *Clouds* and *Gulliver's Travels*

Md. Wasiuzzaman*

Abstract

This article aims at juxtaposing Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds* and Jonathan Swift's travelogue *Gulliver's Travels* to find out similarities in the ways the authors present characters, scenes, and activities whereby they create satirical effects that make the reader or audience laugh and think wryly. The comparison shows that both the works share some common techniques of presentation of argumentation, misguided and misdirected pursuits of science, witty styles of naming, peculiar modes of education, amusing ways of breaking the taboo around human physical processes, and the gullibility of the protagonists. In the unavailability of any other comparison between these two works of this type and the absence of documentation on whether Swift received inspiration from Aristophanes, it is suggested that these two satirical minds thought alike in styles, techniques, and content.

***Keywords*:** Satire, Humour, Misguided science, Human folly, Philosophical absurdity

Introduction

Aristophanes' play *Clouds* and Jonathan Swift's travelogue *Gulliver's Travels* are satirical pieces set apart by around two thousand years, the former targeting Socrates and his practices, the latter the whole mankind. Similar in spirit, both works share an energy that makes the audience or readers see characters and events with smiling eyes and a thought-absorbed brain. This energy is sometimes wit, sometimes sheer humour. The reason why they do so has perhaps been explained aptly in Hewitt's words:

> If a satirist has a moral aim and desires to exercise a beneficial effect upon the object of his satire, he must be something more than a wit. If his satire has no humor it will be ineffective, for it will stimulate pique rather than introspection or self-examination. A Juvenal, witty enough, but perhaps the least humorous of men, delivers his attack on the vices of his time in a severe and defiant spirit that breathes, not sympathy, but scorn. And without sympathy there can be no humor. Happy he who can at once lash the vices and foibles of a society or an individual and soothe the sting of the blows by the play of a genial humor.[1]

Aristophanes and Swift have been successful in the production of this mode of satire through wit and humour in their respective works. It is not certain what influence Aristophanes had on Swift in the style of the creation of satire, but a close analysis of both the works lets the reader feel that what Aristophanes did in his piece has found unbelievably similar expressions on just different settings in Swift's piece. What follows is a presentation of these amusing similarities between the two works preceded by a section of the story lines.

* Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi 6205, Bangladesh; E-mail: wzn@ru.ac.bd

Story lines

Clouds depicts its protagonist Strepsiades restless and sleepless, burdened by debts resulting from his son Pheidippides' extravagant spending on horses and other luxuries beyond his father's modest means. Desperate, Strepsiades tries to devise ways to evade his debts and finally sees a ray of hope: he will send his son to learn sophistic rhetoric from Socrates, who runs a school called the Thinkery. Pheidippides rejects the plan. Frustrated, Strepsiades decides to go there himself. During his attempt to become a student, he thinks he learns a lot of new things before being dismissed as a misfit for the Thinkery due to his lackluster intellectual abilities. He forces his son to go and learn there under threats of banishment from home. Helpless, his son joins the Thinkery, becomes a sophist, brings his father close to evading debts, and then beats his father because his new style of reasoning demands it. Disillusioned, Strepsiades, along with his slaves, burns down the Thinkery while Socrates and the other students flee the scene.

Gulliver's Travels portrays its main character, Gulliver, as a seafarer who, due to various accidents *en route*, finds himself in completely unknown lands, where he undergoes a multitude of strange experiences. In his first voyage, ending at Lilliput, he finds himself among people around six inches tall, with a national character totally unmatched by their physical abilities. His second voyage takes him to Brobdingnag, where people are twelve times taller than Gulliver, offering him, through a lot of events, totally new perspectives on mankind in a mostly positive manner. His third voyage takes him to a highly fantastic country where the capital floats in the air and hovers around. Most of the people here lead abnormal lives and are busy with useless pursuits of different branches of science in absurd ways. The fourth voyage takes him to a country where horses, much like sober and rational human beings, are in control of everything, while human beings are like animals moving in the wild, kept in horses' houses as Europeans would keep animals at home.

Ludicrous practices in different forms of science in both the works

Both Aristophanes and Swift transform what they consider to be a misnomer of useful science or education into belly-bursting jokes. Much of the third voyage of *Gulliver's Travels* appears as an extension of Aristophanes' Thinkery. Gulliver sees a floating island populated by odd-looking humans. Similarly in *Clouds*, Strepsiades sees a suspended basket with Socrates sitting on it inside his Thinkery. The motive of this levitation is almost similar: Socrates is up on a basket so that he can better observe celestial bodies from a closer distance, undisturbed by earthly distractions, though he is only a few feet above from the ground, while Swift's men on the floating island are preoccupied, among other things, mostly with astronomical concerns like the sun, comets, meteors etc. Swift, however, carries the whole thing to an extreme point for the vast compass of his satire.

The bizarreness of speculation of the people at Thinkery matches that of the royal people on the floating island. Hard bangs on the door of Thinkery lead these thinkers' emerging thoughts to "miscarry"[2]: so much tender or vulnerable is their labour! And the minds of the people on Swift's floating island "are so taken up with intense speculations"[3] that they can neither talk nor hear normally: they need flappers whose

task is to flap the thought-lost dignitaries with one side of a stick which has a balloon filled with pebbles so that they are roused back from their speculation and take part in conversations. Thinkers from these two books think in eccentric ways.

Absurd ways of taking measurements are found in both works. A flea jumps from Chaerephon to Socrates. They feel curious to know how many flea footsteps a flea needs to travel the distance of its one jump. They come up with what they think an ingenious way to measure it. The flea is caught and its legs are dipped in melted wax. When the wax hardens, they use the flea-feet-measured tiny shoes to measure the distance as if the flea is walking. The sheer banality of the concept is unmistakable here. The same intellectual absurdity is found when the Laputans on the floating island proceed to make clothes for Gulliver.

> Those to whom the king had entrusted me, observing how ill I was clad, ordered a tailor to come next morning, and take measure for a suit of clothes. This operator did his office after a different manner from those of his trade in Europe. He first took my altitude by a quadrant, and then, with a rule and compasses, described the dimensions and outlines of my whole body, all which he entered upon paper; and in six days brought my clothes very ill made, and quite out of shape, by happening to mistake a figure in the calculation.[4]

The process of measuring a suit, which ultimately turns out poorly made, using altitudes, quadrants, and compasses, is absurdly pedantic, perfectly mirroring Socrates' meticulous but ridiculous method of measuring flea feet.

Pushing common sense and logic to the boundary of illogic brings much of the two works on the same line. Both works use entomology to poke fun at their target of satire. Simply observing a gnat reveals it unquestionably that it makes sounds with its wings. But Socrates, in *Clouds*, theorizes that a gnat makes sounds with its anus because it is connected with a narrow pipe through the gut in which air vibrates and produces sounds. Swift's projectors in the third voyage are busy with efforts to make spiders – that "understood how to weave as well as spin"[5] – produce cobwebs in such a manner that may become useful for human beings' clothing. They give the spiders beautifully coloured and gum-oil-fed flies to eat. Such flies as food would give the spiders organic materials to produce densely woven colourful cloth. These projectors come close to Socrates in their misguided understanding about insect anatomy and internal processes. They simply prove themselves as charlatans.

Styles of study

How the students study at Thinkery of *Clouds* is unmistakably ludicrous. Strepsiades finds students in a posture with their head down and the bottom up. Upon inquiry, he learns that they are studying geology (with their eyes) and astronomy (with their bottom) simultaneously:

> Strepsiades: By Hercules, who are all these
> creatures! What country are they from?
> Student: You look surprised. What do they look like to you?
> Strepsiades: Like prisoners—… Why do these ones keep staring at the earth?
> Student: They' researching out what lies beneath the ground.
> Strepsiades Ah, …What about them? What are they doing like that, all doubled up?...
> Why are their arseholes gazing up to heaven?
> Student: Directed studies in astronomy.[6]

Similarly, the third voyage of *Gulliver's Travels* presents students doing ridiculous activities in the name of study. In the following extract, it is seen that some blind students are learning from a blind teacher how to mix, by feeling and smelling, colours for painters.

> There was a man born blind, who had several apprentices in his own condition: their employment was to mix colours for painters, which their master taught them to distinguish by feeling and smelling. It was indeed my misfortune to find them at that time not very perfect in their lessons, and the professor himself happened to be generally mistaken.[7]

In another example, forty students are busy "improving speculative knowledge, by practical and mechanical operations"[8] with a frame and a little bodily labour to produce "books in philosophy, poetry, politics, laws, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study."[9] The frame is made of bits of wood linked together by slender wires and covered by paper on which all the words of their language are written. The students have to spend hours turning the iron handles of this frame structure with the target to make a new combination of random words surface upon each turn. Students take notes of these words for a later time to rearrange them into meaningful discourse, which, Gulliver observes, is totally impossible and absurd.

Again students with another teacher are found to try learning mathematics eating a thin light biscuit on which mathematical propositions and demonstrations are written "with ink composed of a cephalic tincture."[10] Students have to swallow this on an empty stomach, consuming only bread and water for the next three days. As the wafer gets digested, the tincture, the teacher believes, is expected to travel to students' brain, carrying the proposition with it. But no success is visible yet "partly by some error in the quantum or composition, and partly by the perverseness of lads, to whom this bolus is so nauseous, that they generally steal aside, and discharge it upwards, before it can operate; neither have they been yet persuaded to use so long an abstinence, as the prescription requires."[11] The extra details about how to eat the wafer, how to fast, and why this mode of teaching fails add to the effects of satirical amusement.

Sophistic styles of argumentation

When Gulliver, referring to lawyers, says there is "a society of men among us, bred up from their youth in the art of proving, by words multiplied for the purpose, that white is black, and black is white, according as they are paid",[12] he is talking about the main subject matter of Aristophenes' *Clouds*. In *Clouds*, the debt-burdened Strepsiades wants to achieve an argumentative power whereby he can prove that his debtors cannot claim their money back legally. In real terms, he wants to learn sophistry that he believes he can get at Socrates' Thinkery. Swift's following description of the practices in the court perfectly matches those Strepsiades is in search of.

If Gulliver's neighbour whimsically wants Gulliver's cow, the neighbor can hire a lawyer to argue that the neighbour is the real owner of the cow. Gulliver must then hire another lawyer to defend his right to keep it. Judges, appointed to resolve property disputes and criminal trials, are "biased all their lives against truth and equity, [they] lie under such a fatal necessity of favouring fraud, perjury, and oppression, that … some of them refuse a large bribe from the side where justice lay, rather than injure the

faculty"[13] to favour the unjust. In court, lawyers avoid the main issue and focus on irrelevant details. Instead of examining the legitimate claim or title to the cow, they delve into whether the cow is red or black, the length of its horns, the shape of the field it grazes in, and whether it was milked at home or abroad. This approach wholly, Gulliver observes, confounds the very essence of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong, by fixating on trivialities rather than addressing the real matter.

Rejected as an unsuitable learner, Strepsiades virtually forces his son to be equipped with the art of quibbling. His son Pheidippides successfully becomes one, and just like Swift's lawyer, fresh from his education at Thinkery, launches himself into sophistic reasoning when his father expressing his anxiety reminds him of the looming danger from the creditors. He says that on the *old-new day* his creditors would initiate litigations against him if he does not pay back their debts. Pheidippides then speaks like a true sophist. He argues that those charging him will lose money since a single day cannot be both old and new. Strepsiades is confused, so Pheidippides explains that Strepsiades and his creditors conventionally believe that the *old-new day* is a single day—the last day of the month—on which litigation begins. They think this single day serves as the cut-off for legal actions. However, Pheidippides has his own sophistically justifiable way to find a loophole in the concept. He says that it can be claimed that the *old-new day* actually refers to two distinct days—the last day of the previous month (the Old Day) and the first day of the new month (the New Day) because a single day cannot be both old and new as a woman cannot be both young and old at the same time. His new interpretation would involve a reference to their past lawmaker Solon.

> Pheidippides: Well, Solon set up two days for summonses—the Old Day and the New, so deposits could be made with the New Moon.
> Strepsiades: Then why did he include Old Day as well?
> Pheidippides: So the defendants, my dear fellow, could show up one day early, to settle by mutual agreement, and, if not, they should be very worried the next day was the start of a New Moon.[14]

Solon, as Pheidippides would claim, set up two different days in the term *old-new day* so that the plaintiffs and defendants would get a day (the last day of the month) to settle their disputes mutually; and only if there is no settlement, the actual legal processes would begin on the first day of the next month when the judges would collect legal deposits. Strepsiades asks what can be said about the judges who start the process on a legally wrong day then. Pheidippides replies that it can be claimed that judges remain too eager for money or deposits; so, even if they know the actual significance of the *old-new day*, they take advantage of the longstanding general confusion about the exact day to get the money one day earlier. By highlighting their eagerness and the breach of law in the faulty timing of the legal process, Pheidippides can argue that the lawsuit against his father is biased, improperly handled, invalid, and should, therefore, be dismissed. Strepsiades finds this reasoning delightful.

Fanciful naming

Fanciful hybridity in naming is another common aspect in both texts. Here is the history of the strange name Pheidippides, "Son of Cheap-horse, or more elegantly thrifty Knightson,"[15] as told by his father:

After that, when this son was born to us—
I'm talking about me and my good wife—we argued
over what his name should be. She was keen to add -
hippos to his name, like Xanthippos, Callipedes, or
Chaerippos. I wanted
the name Pheidonides, his grandpa's
name. Well, we fought about it, and then,
after a while, at last agreed.
AndsowecalledtheboyPheidippides.[16]

Clearly, the name is a concoction of the naming desires of both the parents. The same is true in the terms like "fowlette"[17] and "bassinette"[18] which Socrates coins to mean the feminine gender of a fowl and a toilet basin respectively and to demonstrate to Strepsiades the range of his linguistic knowledge required for sophistry, no matter however fallacious it is. For the sake of verisimilitude, Jonathan Swift also coins words (mostly through anagrams) that aspire to have some connections with already known expressions. He uses *Lilliput* to mean little people,*manikin*[19] to mean mankind, *Grildrig*[20] to mean girl-thing, *tolgo phonac*[21] to mean let go flying off, *Laputa* to mean all up at, *Maldonada*[22] to mean mad or mal-London, *Houyhnhnm*[23] to mean horses' whinnying and therefore horses, *Flanflasnic*[24] to mean fantastic, *Balnibarbi*[25] to mean barbary, to mention only a few.[26]

Breaking the taboo around physical processes

Both the works seem to tear down the taboo concerning human post-digestive processes and waste. The stage direction prior to the beginning scene of *Clouds* shows Pheidippides farting: "*Pheidippides lets a very loud fart in his sleep*."[27]He farts again in line number 9. When Strepsiades tosses and turns a few lines later, he farts once more. Hearing the thunderous approach of Clouds, Strepsiades farts: "O you most honoured sacred goddesses,/in answer to your thunder-call I'd like to fart— /it's made me so afraid—if that's all right . . ."[28] He pulls down his pants and passes wind loudly in the direction of the offstage Chorus. Then immediately he feels "Oh, oh, whether right or not, I need to shit."[29]In explaining how Clouds make thunderous sounds, Socrates uses the analogy of an upset stomach for Strepsiades'easier understanding which is successful as Strepsiades himself attests:

Strepsiades:
Yes, by Apollo! It does weird things—
I feel unsettled. That small bit of stew
rumbles around and makes strange noises,
just like thunder. At first it's quite quiet—
"pappaxpappax"—then it starts getting louder—
"papapappax"—and when I take a shit,
it really thunders "papapappax"—
just like these Clouds.

Socrates:
So think about it—
if your small gut can make a fart like that,

> why can't the air, which goes on for ever,
> produce tremendous thunder. Then there's this—
> consider how alike these phrases sound,
> "thunder clap" and "fart and crap."[30]

After being beaten by his son, Strepsiades complains and laments that he took care of the child Pheidippides when he needed to *poo*, but now he himself feels like pooing because of being beaten and his son does not help him:

> And if you said "poo poo"
> I'd pick you up and carry you outside,
> and hold you up. But when you strangled me
> just now, I screamed and yelled I had to shit—
> but you didn't dare to carry me outside,
> you nasty brute, you kept on throttling me,
> until I crapped myself right where I was.[31]

Beaten, Strepsiades *craps* or has a bowel movement on the spot. Not only do humans *crap* in *Clouds*, "A lizard crapped on Socrates!"[32] right on his face as well during his act of observing the sun with his mouth open. To add more to the examples, Strepsiades categorically declares his theory of rainfall to Socretes, "I used to think rain was really Zeus pissing through a sieve."[33] The play takes talk of body waste to the supreme God, Zeus.

Swift is also preoccupied with presenting digestive waste noticeably repetitively. Gulliver makes water in torrent, surprising all onlookers, at one point of remaining tied on the soil in Lilliput upon his first arrival there; he urinates on the burning palace of the queen of Lilliput to extinguish fire; he does a bowel movement after he is tied inside his first Lilliputian prisonlike shelter:

> I had been for some hours extremely pressed by the necessities of nature; which was no wonder, it being almost two days since I had last disburdened myself. … I went as far as the length of my chain would suffer, and discharged my body of that uneasy load. … From this time my constant practice was, as soon as I rose, to perform that business in open air, at the full extent of my chain; and due care was taken every morning … that the offensive matter should be carried off in wheel-barrows, by two servants appointed for that purpose.[34]

While in Brobdingnag, Gulliver has to be a puppet at the hand of court maids who take pleasure in taking him inside the bathroom, playing with him, and using the toilet in front of him who watches with utter disgust. In the third voyage, a scientist daubed with human stool all over his body, is busy with a huge supply of human stool trying, unsuccessfully, to convert it to original food. And, in the final voyage, the Yahoos (human beings) are depicted as indiscriminately defecating in various locations. The whole book contains human beings' post-digestive waste so much that a research orientation has founded itself in the name of "excremental vision"[35] in Swift. It is, however, to be noted that Swift's purpose, unlike Aristophanes', is to reduce the self-declared sublime human beings to commonplace animals by using excrement as a symbol of crude human/animal reality. In other words, Swift challenges human vanity by portraying mankind as merely another animal producing waste, thereby critiquing the notion of human superiority.

Gullibility and naivety of the protagonists

Both Strepsiades and Gulliver share qualities of gullibility and naivety up to a certain mark. Most of the time they do and say things that they believe are reasonable and sound enough without leaving any trace that they are being manipulated by the author so that they serve a special purpose of proving themselves foolish or victims of irony. There are many examples in this regard. Strepsiades is "never anything other than foolish"[36]and that is why, when asked to offer a way whereby he can evade paying debts, he comes up with a bizarre idea of getting the moon stolen by a witch so that the deadline for payment never arrives:

> Strepsiades: What if I purchased a Thessalian witch
> and in the night had her haul down the moon—
> then shut it up in a circular box,
> just like a mirror, and kept watch on it.
> Socrates: How would that provide you any help?
> Strepsiades: Well, if no moon ever rose up anywhere, I'd pay no interest.
> Socrates: And why is that?
> Strepsiades: Because they lend out money by the month.[37]

He offers another idea to get discharged from a lawsuit where he may be involved. He would use special glass through which the sun would melt the ink of the judge's pen.

> What if I took that glass,
> and when the scribe was writing out the charge,
> I stood between him and the sun—like this—
> some distance off, and made his writing melt,
> just the part about my case?[38]

The way he delivers these ideas shows that his intent is serious and that he is not joking. All through the play he talks and behaves as a naïve and gullible person, and in the end while bringing down Thinkery, he "appears to triumph not from any superiority of intelligence or of virtue but in spite of his foolishness."[39]Given his nature, it is easy to understand why he believes almost everything Socrates tells him. Not only that, he acts upon what he hears. For example, in convincing his son to take his place at Thinkery, "he continuously parrots Socrates' language."[40]He learns, without questioning anything, how the Clouds assume different shapes of animals based on what dominating animal quality the clouds see in particular human beings: if the clouds take the shape of a hyena, it has to be understood that a looter of public funds has been spotted by the clouds. Strepsiades eagerly embraces Socrates' teachings with the unquestioning enthusiasm of a child.

Gulliver, whose name originates from gullibility, is true to his name and thereby shares much in common with Strepsiades. He tends to believe almost everything he is told, unable to see through the real implications of what is presented to him. He sincerely feels about Lilliput and its royal members to be in line with the verbosity and bombast used to describe them. He is blind to the mismatch these people have between their physical capability and high-esteemed arrogance. He is easily lured into looking upon the king just as other Lilliputians do. Although the king of Lilliput is only six inches tall and

has a character vain, ungrateful, and greedy, Gulliver literally accepts the "mighty Emperor of Lilliput"[41] as

> "delight and terror of the universe, whose dominions extend five thousand blustrugs (about twelve miles in circumference) to the extremities of the globe; monarch of all monarchs, taller than the sons of men; whose feet press down to the centre, and whose head strikes against the sun; at whose nod the princes of the earth shake their knees; pleasant as the spring, comfortable as the summer, fruitful as autumn, dreadful as winter."[42]

In Brobdingnag, Gulliver gives the king an elated description about all the vices and barbarity of his nation without ever realizing that these present a negative picture of his country. As Strepsiades does from Socrates, Gulliver without a questioning attitude has internalized what Europe taught him. Escalating his foolhardy, he offers to give the king bomb making formulas so that the king can subdue any potential uprising. The proposal enrages the king who threatens to hang Gulliver if he ever repeats the idea. In the royal academy of the third voyage, Gulliver, just like Strepsiades at Thinkery, attaches much worth to what he describes: all the absurd projects going on. He cannot make any instant dismissal and rather to a great degree accepts the researchers naively. Both Strepsiades and Gulliver are their authors' instruments whereby the authors present the targeted absurdity of their respective settings while allowing the readers or audience to laugh at these characters' words and actions.

Conclusion

Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* are satires both straddling similar shaping beams. As Swift does in his piece, Aristophanes has "filled *Clouds* with jokes designed to provoke laughter"[43] as well as thoughts sombre as the reader or audience tries to find why they are laughing. If Swift has not copied from or got inspired by Aristophanes, it can be said that both of them perhaps have thought alike. It is true that their purpose of writing these pieces was different and that they tailored facts to suit their own mission. For example, writing amidst all the Athenian hostility against Socrates, Aristophanes has created a caricature of Socrates as a sophist to be criticized by his audience. But historically, Socrates is celebrated as a philosopher and true educator. In the same way, what Swift wrote may receive different explanations incorporating historical insights. The style, however, in which they present the object of their target, is rewardingly much similar. In the absence of such a comparison as this article has made between these two authors, it is pertinent to wish that further comparative studies be undertaken for the sake of startling revelation of how minds situated differently spatially and temporally think alike.

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