

HORSING AROUND WITH SWIFT

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Humor in satire can be a ticklish business and indeed in more ways than one. In the case of Jonathan Swift, why did he have to make the horses in Part IV of *Gulliver's Travels* superior to the yahoos (or human beings)? The reader is expected to take the contrast somewhat lightly, even as the very name of horse country, Houyhnhnm-land, obviously echoes the whinny of the beast of burden. Yet here are certain other connotative meanings now worth considering:

- Swift's own surname may hint at "horseness" inasmuch as it can connote well enough here being swift-footed. Hence we have omen-nomen.
- In a similar onomastic manner, let us even posit that the previous adventure of Gulliver to the land of the Brobdingnagians incidentally anticipates the horse as itself a nag.
- Famous horses may then come to the forefront as well: Pegasus, in particular, and then the centaur. Was he not inspired at all mythologically?
- The "Trojan horse" solving the Trojan War would come next to mind pointing ahead, as it were, to the essential irony of the later tale (i.e., a gift that represents finally not a gift at all).
- Horses have traditionally been called noble creatures (hence Expressionist paintings have then blue in color). May this not have been related to Swift's finding horses symbolic of Nature before the Fall? He could have had in the back of his mind Milton's familiar reference to the whole of Nature itself falling as a result of Adam and Eve's eating of the Forbidden Fruit: "Earth felt the wound" (*Paradise Lost* IX.782).
- Related to this conception is the idea of the "work-horse"; in a word, a horse can be noble especially because it actually "likes" to work. This attitude might thereby be categorized as "horse sense" (that is, literally so in this case).
- The final possibility is that Swift's presumed inclination toward mental and emotional derangement may also be involved. His totalitarian nightmare here is somewhat akin to that in Orwell's much later *Animal Farm*. In this respect Part IV might be thought of in terms of a veritable "mare's nest," which in itself suggests incongruity, controversy, and even madness (for which, see the OED).

Or was not Swift's broad sense of humor finally the dominating creative factor after all? We recall he was of Irish descent.