

ARTICLES

THE ISLAND OF IMMORTALS, JAPAN AND JONATHAN SWIFT*

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In his paper V. Krupa speculates on the likely sources of the motif of the island of immortals in Part III of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and finds them in the writings of the Portuguese missionary João Rodrigues.

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift ranks among the most valuable works in world literature. According to George Orwell it is one of the six finest literary achievements of all time (Orwell 1967) and the jurors of the German periodical *Die Zeit* have included it in the list of 100 best books of all countries and eras (Zeit 1980).

Swift furnished his remarkable novel with the subtitle *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* as if to intimate that it deals with distant countries and is not without interest to scholars, namely those dealing with what would nowadays be defined as the comparative study of various cultures. But he has selected remote countries as the stage mainly for somewhat different reasons. His preference for the periphery of oikouménē had its advantages. It is a realm where conventional and widely accepted standards or rules do not hold, it is a realm of non-trivial phenomena and even if we might be familiar with some of them it is upon the periphery that they are brought ad absurdum, which gives us the opportunity to assess their usefulness – the vices described so to say in full bloom and in unique circumstances are easier to condemn than in our familiar milieu where they seem virtually imperceptible. Thus the periphery offers a variety of new prospects. Swift obviously sought to criticize the political situation in England but he felt it would be safer to situate the target of his disapproval

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somewhere far away, which would render the recognition of the picture of England in it at least difficult if not impossible.

In Part III: *A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Glubbdubdrib, Luggnagg and Japan* of his opus maior Jonathan Swift takes Gulliver to the scarcely known seas of Southeast Asia. During a horrible storm Gulliver's sloop is attacked by two pirate ships. One of them is commanded by a Dutchman and the other by a Japanese. Their attitude to the captured Englishmen is very different. The Japanese captain turns out to be more humane than his Dutch partner. This might sound surprising but only to those readers who are not familiar with the history of early contacts between the Japanese and Europeans (Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch, and English). Before the end of the 16th century the Europeans (especially the Portuguese) could freely preach Christianity and trade in Japan. However, after the country was closed to all foreigners and effectively isolated from the rest of the world for more than two centuries (from 1639 to 1854), only a handful Dutch merchants were permitted to carry out business in Japan, even if under humiliating circumstances. The policy of *sakoku* (seclusion) and hostility to foreigners was portended by Toyotomi Hideyoshi's prohibition of Christianity in 1557. The reputation of the Dutch in the eyes of other Europeans was tarnished by their avarice and willingness with which they submitted to the humiliating ritual of *fumie* or *ebumi* (trampling the pictures), which, however, is doubted by some scholars. Since the Japanese were prepared to trade only with non-Christians, all suspect applicants were exhorted to trample crosses or holy pictures underfoot and thus prove that they had recanted their Christian religion and given preference to trading with the Japanese. But in addition to this, the English also had other complaints against the Dutch, namely the infamous massacre of English merchants on the island of Amboina.

Let us return now to the Gulliver's fate. When his sloop was captured by the pirates, he asked them "to set him adrift, in a small canoe, with paddles and sail, and four days' provisions, which last the Japanese captain was so kind to double out of his own stores, and would permit no man to search me. I got down into the canoe, while the Dutchman, standing upon the deck, loaded me with all the curses and injurious terms his language could afford" (Swift 1967 edition, p. 197).

Soon after the skirmish with the pirates, Gulliver reached with his canoe a group of islands to the southeast. After landing, he observed the flying island of Laputa and was received by the inhabitants of the island of Balnibarbi. It is not my intention to repeat or paraphrase what is readily available to the readers of Swift's novel. Instead, I would like to pay some attention to the author's fancied report of the existence of immortal persons in the country of Luggnagg (Swift edition 1967, Chapter 10, pp. 251–260) called Struldbruggs. In the first lines of the following chapter Swift observes that "this account of the Struldbruggs might be some entertainment to the reader, because it seems to be a little out of the common way, at least I do not remember to have met the like in any book of travels that hath come to my hands" (Swift 1967, p. 260). This declared ignorance of the matter is, of course, simply a poetic licence and the key to the ori-

gin of the episode with the Struldbruggs is offered by the author himself in the subsequent lines: “There is indeed a perpetual commerce between this kingdom and the great Empire of Japan, and it is very probable that the Japanese authors may have given some account of the Struldbruggs” (Swift 1967 edition, p. 260). Swift describes the immortal Struldbruggs of Luggnagg, especially their looks, in very displeasing terms: “They were the most mortifying sight I ever beheld, and the women more horrible than the men. Besides the usual deformities in extreme old age, they acquired an additional ghastliness in proportion to their number of years...” (Swift 1967, p. 259). However, he elaborates more on the negative aspects of their character.

Islands represent a congenial setting for fantastic or legendary stories as we know them both from Europe and overseas. The specific appeal of an insular topos obviously lies in its seclusion from the familiar rest of the world and in the relative inaccessibility of the former. These attributes explain why the islands may be shrouded in mysteries and populated by strange creatures. Legends of men’s or women’s islands occur in various parts of the world. Erberto Petola briefly discusses the motif of people living on an island close to the coast of Ireland (Munster) who cannot die natural deaths, and not far from it is an island without women (Petola 1997, pp. 181–182). Bran, a hero of Irish legends reached an island of women where time flows in a very different manner from the rest of the world. This island is situated somewhere in the west. Marquesans inhabiting a group of islands at the northwestern margin of Polynesia have a legend of Kae who visited a peculiar island of women who used to conceive children without men and die when the children were born (Handy 1930, pp. 56–63). Islands coincide with a realm at the periphery of the *oikouménē*, a realm that is threatening or at least strange, where rules different from ours may hold and those who want to reach these parts may undergo unexpected dangers or even succumb to them. And thus, islands in this sense are not so much geographical as cultural islands.

It is no chance that Jonathan Swift has located his island of Luggnagg where the immortal Struldbruggs were said to live in the vicinity of Japan. At that time the Pacific was largely *mare incognitum*, the shores of Japan had not yet been mapped, the Hawaiian archipelago had not yet been discovered, Tasmania (at that time Van Diemen’s Land) was thought to be part of the Australian continent and European geographers were dreaming of the legendary *João da Gama’s land* or of *Terra Australis incognita* hidden somewhere in the South Seas.

Japan was from the very beginning reputed to be a healthy country where people live to an unusually high age. This was due, in the opinion of the first Europeans visiting Japan, to a favourable climate and healthy food. Besides, the Japanese were said to be fond of medicines that prolong human life. But as Rodrigues remarked, rich and noble people living in abundance, died younger than modest commoners.

We should bear in mind that the author of Gulliver was a diligent reader of various books of travels (cf. Real – Vienken 1984, p. 15) and he made use of the knowledge he acquired from them. Data that might shed light on the presence

of the episode of the immortal Struldbruggs in the Gulliver's Travels are obviously available in a historical work by the Portuguese missionary João Rodrigues. He was born around 1561 in Portugal and arrived in Japan in 1557 as a sixteen years old boy, completed his education there and acquired remarkable fluency in Japanese. He published the first grammar of Japanese and obviously took part in the compilation of a Japanese–Portuguese dictionary. However, after many years spent in Japan, he had to leave the country because Ieyasu Tokugawa, the military ruler of Japan, issued a decree expelling all missionaries from the country. Afterwards Rodrigues moved to Macao and in this Portuguese settlement in South China he wrote his voluminous history of the Catholic Church in Japan. This work contains a wealth of valuable information not only concerning the Church itself but also on the Japanese way of life, culture, religion, and history, especially in Part I that was meant as its introduction. The whole book seems to have been completed in 1620–1621 but later additions are not excluded. Rodrigues' History or rather parts of it were translated into English as late as 1969 and published in 1973 (Cooper, S. J. 1973, p. 50). Interestingly enough, Rodrigues himself became object of a longevity legend while visiting Peking in 1630. He was reputed to be 250 years old (Cooper 1973, p. 21). In truth, he died in 1633 in Macao at the age of seventy-two years. In addition to writing about the high age of many Japanese, Rodrigues included in his work a story of a certain Wasabioe who found old men unable to die and tired of life after his shipwreck on the Island of Immortals (Chamberlain 1879, pp. 285–308). It cannot be excluded that the motif of the island of immortals is of Chinese origin. The story of the islands of the blessed is present in the Chinese literature of the first century B. C. The literary sources situate these islands called *Penglai* (*Hōraizan* in Japanese), *Fangzhang* and *Yingzhou* in the Eastern sea. They were said to be inhabited by the immortals who drank an elixir of immortality and lived in palaces of gold and jade. By the way, the island of Hōraizan was painted in 1900 by Shimomura Kanzan and Yokoyama Taikan and in 1913 by Shimomura Kanzan (Japan und Europa: 1543–1929 1993, p. 512–513).

Swift's discussion of Japan is not exhausted with the motif of longevity or immortality. Gulliver returns to England via Japan. Three Japanese cities are explicitly mentioned in the novel – Yedo, Nangasac and Xamoschi. Yedo is Edo, present-day Tokyo and Nangasac is Nagasaki (*g* is usually pronounced as *ng* in the medial position and final *i* is strongly reduced). Somewhat problematic is the identification of Xamoschi. The ship from Luggnagg brought Gulliver to this small port on the south-east part of Japan across the bay, opposite Yedo. Despite the misleading transcription (*x* points out to Portuguese mediation while *sch* betrays German filter) it might be the town of Samōshi in the Chiba prefecture east of Tokyo, at the western shore of a long promontory barring the bay of Tokyo from the Pacific.

While in Japan, Gulliver was again better treated by the Japanese than by the Dutch, just as before his arrival in Laputa, Balnibarbi and Luggnagg when his vessel had been captured by the pirates. To sum up, Swift's positive attitude to the inhabitants of Japan coincides with that expressed by the early Portuguese

missionaries who sincerely admired the Japanese without being uncritical to their faults and weaknesses. This seems to indicate that Swift has drawn his information on Japan from studying some of the writings of the missionaries or perhaps from works by other authors who made use of the information collected by the Portuguese.

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