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Perceiving 18th Century England

An Analysis of Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* and Swift's
Gulliver's Travels

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Abstract

Voltaire and Jonathan Swift are often discussed in light of their admiration for and impact on each other. Therefore, it is commonly believed that they share similar convictions with respect to science, religion, freedom of expression, and the manner in which these are manifested in society. This thesis, however, argues against such an interpretation, as it critically re-examines Voltaire and Swift's views on 18th century English society in order to observe whether their convictions are truly compatible. The argumentation focuses on Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as its primary source material. The fundamental premise of this research lies in determining whether Voltaire's *Letters* provides a compatible perception of English society in comparison with Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The findings show that Voltaire and Swift's convictions are fundamentally different. While Voltaire supports Newtonian science for providing society with moral and religious guidance; Swift holds it to be inherently immoral, blasphemous and utterly trivial. Though they agree on the necessity of freedom of expression in society, they nonetheless vary in opinions as to why that is. A reason for this stems from Voltaire and Swift's different nationalities and respective backgrounds. Voltaire was a Frenchman who was banned from France for assuming his right to freedom of expression, whereas Swift was Anglo-Irish and therefore witnessed England's transition into a more liberal society that did allow such freedom.

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Introduction

In 1726, French philosopher and scientist Voltaire goes into exile in England after being indicted for insulting a Parisian nobleman. Upon arrival in London, Voltaire is positively overwhelmed by the progressive cultural and social values that are manifested within English society. During his stay, Voltaire learns about many of England's great intellectuals, one of which being Jonathan Swift. Voltaire's veneration of England is largely shaped by this individual and the respective social climate in which Swift's intellectuality is allowed to flourish. After spending three years in England, Voltaire returns to France where he writes *Letters Concerning the English Nation (Letters 1733)*: a book in which he shares his deep veneration of the English nation – a country of liberty where “Reason alone was cultivated, and Mankind cou'd only be his Pupil, not his Enemy” (Voltaire 64).

It is the primary objective of this thesis to analyse Voltaire and Swift's views on 18th century English society in order to determine whether Voltaire's account is compatible with Swift's. Swift is included in this thesis to provide a natively English counter-perception to Voltaire through which one is able to scrutinise Swift's critique on society. Central to this analysis are the notions science, religion and freedom of expression. These concepts are used as the framework from which to extract Voltaire and Swift's convictions and opinions, as they are elaborately discussed in their corresponding literature. Perhaps more importantly, their respective views on these notions form the basis of Voltaire's veneration of English society, whilst for Swift they establish his criticism.

Voltaire's *Letters* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) are used as primary sources. These two literary works are chosen because *Gulliver's Travels*, as a satire, focuses primarily on the flaws of English society as a means to critique it, whereas *Letters* is exclusively written to express Voltaire's veneration of the English nation. Thereby, *Gulliver's Travels* provides a satirical counter-perception to Voltaire's reverence of English society. Kreuz defines satire as

“the ridicule of a subject to point out its faults” (100). *Gulliver’s Travels* confirms this definition by deridingly attending to the notions of science, religion and freedom of expression in order to convey their problematic manifestations in English society.

Popular belief holds that, due to Voltaire’s admiration for Swift’s literary accomplishments and general intellectuality, their fundamental ideas on English society are the same (Thacker 51; Adam et al. 41). More specifically, Swift’s influence on Voltaire is described as “a vital, even a central, part of [Voltaire’s] admiration for people and things British” (Thacker 51). This thesis, however, takes a stance against this generally perceived belief, since an analysis of their convictions on the respective concepts shows that their views on 18th century English society differ significantly.

The first chapter solely discusses Voltaire and establishes a general overview which contains his views on the notions science, religion and freedom of expression in English society. The second chapter is structurally identical, but focuses exclusively on Swift. The third chapter offers a discussion of Voltaire and Swift’s convictions that concentrates on determining where their views differ. Furthermore, it also examines to what extent Voltaire’s French nationality affected his experience of English society, especially considering he departed France on negative terms. As a consequence of their differing views and societal backgrounds, the extent to which Voltaire’s *Letters* reflects a compatible experience with Swift’s is questioned, since their convictions on the respective notions are fundamentally different.

Chapter 1: Voltaire and the English Society

This chapter focuses on providing a general overview of Voltaire's views on 18th century English society. *Letters Concerning the English Nation* is the focus point of this analysis. Science, religion and freedom of expression are particularly applicable in relation to this inquiry as these three notions offer a comprehensive framework from which to identify Voltaire's genuine outlook on England's social climate. In *Letters*, Voltaire problematises the intention with which science is practiced, as it focuses on the obtainment of wealth instead of the pursuit of relevant scientific discovery. His support for science therefore logically extends to admiration for Sir Isaac Newton, as Voltaire holds Newton to be the ultimate embodiment of genuine science. Voltaire's observations however pertain also to other areas of English society, one being religion. More specifically, Voltaire critiques the parliamentary rule of the Whig party for oppressing the Church of England. As a response, he nevertheless celebrates England's liberal attitude towards freedom of expression for allowing the public to criticise such oppressive authority. Altogether, the notions of science, religion and freedom of expression, thus form a fitting framework from which to observe Voltaire's views on 18th century English society, especially since it provides a strong foundation for a later comparison with Swift.

Voltaire problematises the position of science in English society for its focus on the accumulation of wealth instead of relevant scientific discovery. In *Letters*, Voltaire presents this critique by explaining that "a Man who understands the four Fundamental Rules of Arithmetic ... shall amass prodigious Wealth," whereas "a poor Algebraist who spends his whole Life in searching for astonishing Properties ... will not acquaint him with the Nature of Exchanges" (120). Hereby, Voltaire problematises the idea that a man who only shallowly understands the basic premises of a sophisticated branch of mathematics is likely to become wealthy; whilst a man who dedicates his life studying the intricate principles of algebra

remains impoverished. His criticism therefore lies in the notion that, even though science is substantially represented in English society by institutions such as the Royal Society and the Academy of Sciences (Voltaire 116), the ultimate goal for which science is practiced is flawed. For this reason, Voltaire argues that the practice of science should always intend to “produce something that may prove of Advantage to the Universe” (119-20), rather than to acquire individual wealth or comfort. This consequently forms a reason for Voltaire’s strong admiration for Newton, since Newton’s incentive for practicing science is aimed at conducting sophisticated and extensive scientific research, instead of pursuing richness.

Voltaire justifies his admiration for Newton by comparing him to the French scientist Descartes. In this comparison, Voltaire argues that a Cartesian “declares that Light exists in the Air,” whereas “a Newtonian asserts that it comes from the Sun in Six minutes and a half” (61). By canvassing the difference in scientific complexity between Cartesianism and Newtonianism, Voltaire showcases Newton’s sophistication in order to show that Newton’s devotion to science is a product of his personal passion and enthusiasm. Voltaire argues that Newton would not have examined the natural world as extensively if his primary motive had exclusively been financial profitability; after all, wealth could easily have been acquired through basic knowledge of arithmetic. It is therefore Newton’s desire “to know everything there is to know about the behavior of matter, from the smallest particle to the grandest star” (Christanson 56), rather than financial comfort, that establishes Voltaire’s admiration for Newton’s role in English society. Voltaire’s primary critique thus stems from his observation that the authenticity of science has become partially corrupted. By extension, Voltaire notes that there is another manifestation of such corruption in English society in his scrutiny of religion and the hardship inflicted upon it by the English government.

Voltaire criticises the parliamentary rule of the Whig party for its oppressive regime against the Church of England. This oppression is manifested in the manner in which the

episcopacy – particularly bishops – are treated within the 18th century English parliamentary system. In *Letters*, Voltaire's critique lies in his observations on the enforcement of legislative restrictions upon bishops and other high-ranking members of the Church of England. He explains that the Whigs lawfully prohibit the clergy from assembling, consequently reducing their profession "to the melancholy occupation of praying for the prosperity of the government, whose tranquillity they would willingly disturb" (27). To Voltaire, inhibiting the clergy from convening is immoral, for it undermines the position of God within English society by depriving the Church of England from its agency.

The Whigs also use their parliamentary rule to inflict humiliation upon high-ranking members of the Church. Voltaire explains that an official clause – aimed at insulting the episcopacy – obliged "bishops, deans, or other dignitaries ... to confess" (27). The Church of England considered this a grave slight as it meant that the top members now had to adhere to the laws crafted by "a sett of profane laymen" (27). Perhaps more importantly, bishops were anointed by "jure divino" (27) – meaning divine law – but, due to the respective clause, bishops and other prestigious members were lawfully equalised with the rest of the population, effectively invalidating the Church hierarchy in the process. Therefore, under the rule of the Whigs, the Church derives its agency not from God, but from the ruling power in parliament.

According to Voltaire, the Church of England is therefore corrupted and provides no significant values or morals to English society. The reason for this belief stems from his conviction that a benevolent religion offers its followers "much instruction in morality and very little in dogma" (Arkush 228). Essentially, the Church is demoralised because of the perversions inflicted upon it by the oppressive regime of the Whig party. As a result of this perversion, the fundamental premise of the church changes, as it shifts from an institution devoted to the practice of the "purity of worship" (Taylor 332), to an instrument of

parliament aimed at spreading the “purity of doctrine” (332). While Voltaire expresses concern on the matter of oppressive governance; he rejoices in the idea that English society and its people are appropriately resilient to critique and dissent such institutional authority. For this reason, when the governmental body becomes immorally dysfunctional, its citizens have the power, by means of freedom of expression, to articulate and expose its malpractice. It is therefore the manifestation of freedom of expression in society that forms the foundation of Voltaire’s reverence of the English nation.

Voltaire’s appreciation for freedom of expression is exemplified in the manner in which he expresses his veneration for England’s liberal attitude towards controversy and dissent. In *Letters*, this becomes evident by means of an analogy involving English playwright Joseph Addison and his 1712 play *Cato* – a tragedy in which the protagonist heavily reflects on the principles of personal liberty and freedom of expression. Despite the play’s arguably dissentient nature – as it challenges the morality of governmental power over the individual – Addison is nonetheless rewarded for his resoluteness in asserting his right to expression by being appointed, by King George I, as the new secretary of state in 1717 (Voltaire 112). According to Voltaire, if Addison were to have published *Cato* in France, it would have been highly plausible for Addison to “have been imprison’d in the Bastille” as the result of censorship (112). This analogy shows an example in which the English nation substantially rewards a citizen for expressing personal opinions and ideas. Voltaire explains it is not “the Mausoleums of the English Kings but the Monuments . . . of those Illustrious Men who contributed to [England’s] Glory” that are expressly admired and revered by the population (113). Therefore, to a large degree, instead of rewarding blind adherence to dogmas with social prestige, it is candour and courageous expression that serve as the criteria for gaining respect and esteem in English society.

It can thus be said that Voltaire doubly admires English society, namely for allowing “liberty of expression” (Thacker 57), as well as for enabling intellectuals to flourish in such a “permissive and stimulating climate” (57). As a result of these liberties, English society is structured in a manner that cyclically and continuously rewards itself. As long as the social climate continues to encourage freedom of expression, the growth of intellectuality is stimulated, which ultimately results in highly competent citizens who contribute to society. As a Frenchman entirely unfamiliar to such societal structures, it is no wonder that the manifestation of freedom of expression forms the foundation of Voltaire’s veneration of 18th century English society.

Having discussed Voltaire’s views on 18th century English society in terms of science, religion and freedom of expression, it is now important to entertain the same notions, but from the perspective of Jonathan Swift.

Chapter 2: Swift and the English Society

This chapter focuses on Jonathan Swift's views on 18th century English society with regard to science, religion and freedom of expression. *Gulliver's Travels* is at the centre of this analysis as it functions as the source from which to extract Swift's perspective on English society.

Science will be the core focus of this examination, because it is through the notion of science that Swift later introduces his convictions on religion and freedom of expression. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift problematises Newtonian science by critiquing its uselessness and immorality.

His critique of science extends to religion since the increasing societal interest in

Newtonianism induces a shift away from religion and towards blasphemous practices.

Additionally, it is precisely this direct criticism of Sir Isaac Newton that reveals Swift's appreciation of freedom of expression. An analysis of these three respective notions attempts to compellingly capture Swift's views on 18th century English society.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift critiques the aim of Newtonian science for its sole focus on useless experimentation and the production of trivial inventions. He believes that the incorporation of Newtonianism in society merely results in inconvenience, impracticality and is ultimately detrimental to living conditions. The uselessness of Newtonian science is a recurrent theme in book 3 of *Gulliver's Travels*, and it is Swift's way to ridicule the position of Newtonianism in English society. Swift first establishes his critique in chapter 2 (209), when Gulliver arrives at the island of Laputa and discovers that the Laputians' entire existence is based on the practice of futile scientific experiments. As a result, their world consists of abnormal habits and customs, as their submergence in Newtonianism results in a rejection of anything that is not scientifically complicated. This becomes clear when Gulliver is invited to dine with some respected Laputians and observes that they detest standard metrical figures and therefore serve "a shoulder of mutton cut into an equilateral triangle, a piece of beef into a rhomboids, and a pudding into a cycloid" (Swift 201). In this passage,

Swift principally ridicules the use of science rather than science in general, for it is evident that these Laputians possess the knowledge and capacity to practice science efficiently; however, that same knowledge becomes utterly trivial when they merely utilise it to cut food into complicated mathematical forms. Thus, Swift criticises the scientific focus on trivialities, since it reveals the misdirected trajectory of Newtonian experimentation.

As a consequence, Swift critiques, not the general premise, but the current aim of Newtonian science. This becomes evident during Gulliver's visit to the academy of Lagado – an institution dedicated to the discovery of new scientific inventions. In this passage, it becomes clear that Swift problematises the focus of Newtonian experiments, as the students of the academy merely apply their skills to conduct fruitless experiments such as extracting sunbeams from a cucumber, reducing ice into gunpowder, and turning human excrement back into its original food (225). By arguing that the aim of the experimentation is wrong, Swift implies that Newtonianism needs a different focus in its moral trajectory; for it is clear that the Laputians are sufficiently intelligent to engage with Newtonian science, yet they fail to practice it usefully.

Swift exhibits the potentially harmful effect on society of Newtonianism by presenting the problem of house-building in Laputa. As Gulliver observes his surroundings, he notes that the Laputians' "houses are very ill built, the walls bevil, without one right angle in any apartment; and this defect arises from the contempt they bear to practical geometry" (204). This observation presents a clear example of a useless idea, brought forth by Newtonian science, that has made its way into society and ultimately has negatively impacted the lives of the Laputian population. Hereby, Swift expresses his concern of the potential danger that Newtonianism poses, since Newtonianism has the potential to manifest itself permanently within the culture, like the misshapen houses in Laputa. Swift therefore argues that Newtonian science is "essentially immoral in its consequences" (Kiernan 710), for its focus on trivial

inventions eventually leads to a detrimental living situation for the entire Laputian society.

For this reason, the immorality of science extends further than oddly built houses and impracticalities, since the depraved utilisation of science could have a more dangerous outcome, such as adversity and hardship.

Swift extends his view on the immorality of Newtonian science by arguing that its practice is potentially dangerous as it could incite human suffering and oppression. In *Gulliver's Travels*, this is presented by depicting England's oppression over scientifically inferior Ireland. Swift allegorically alludes to these countries using the Kingdom of Laputa, its tyrannical king, and the small town of Balnibarbi, which represent England and Ireland respectively. In chapter 3 of book 3 (209), upon Gulliver's arrival in the kingdom of Laputa, it is revealed that the island is levitating over the lands of Balnibarbi. The Laputian king later explains that the island is floating in order to prevent rebellions from inferior realms – such as Balnibarbi – and clarifies that there are two methods to use the island's levitation to suppress an enemy uprising. The first is “to deprive [the Balnibarbi] of the benefit of the sun and the rain, and consequently afflict the inhabitants with dearth” (Swift 214), and the second by “letting the island drop directly upon their heads” (214). Swift hereby exhibits the ruthlessness with which England treats Ireland, but more specifically, it affirms the aforementioned comparison between these two countries and the role of the immorality of science. This is particularly evident since depicting a scientifically advanced society levitating over a poorer civilisation, and threatening to annihilate those who disagree with the superior's culture or convictions, is a clear example of oppression. The inferior Balnibarbi, over which Laputa levitates, hereby represents poor Ireland as it is similarly overshadowed by its scientifically advanced neighbour. It is thus through showing a contrast between these respective countries that Swift expresses his contempt for England's attempt “to catapult Ireland into an abyss of even more barbaric conditions” (Lein 432). This is a principal

illustration of Swift's argument on the immorality of science; for, while the Laputians are "examining the stars" (Kiernan 712), they are at the same time neglecting the poor civilisation below by depriving it from sunlight.

The explicit immorality of science is a major part of Swift's criticism, as, in his mind, the practice of Newtonian science ultimately focuses on immoral purposes instead of concentrating on decreasing human suffering, as suggested by the analogy of England's relationship with Ireland. More importantly, Swift's criticism on the immorality of science extends further than the suffering of people. According to Swift, scientific preoccupation also poses a religious problem, because the devotion and fixation on the practice of science distracts one from directing its talents and devotion to God.

Swift problematises science in relation with religion as it poses a threat to the omnipotence of God. He believes that scrutinising Newtonianism results in a cultural shift away from the devotion to God and towards the exploration of the natural world. As a member of the Anglican Church and Dean of the St. Patrick Cathedral, Swift undeniably believes in the virtue of the Church. This becomes clear when he criticises Newton for his blasphemously arrogant terminology; since, according to Swift, arrogance was the worst vice to embody and it is this sin that is principally "exemplified in the attitude of Newton" (Kiernan 720). One example of Newton's terminology that Swift deems highly inappropriate, is Newton's use of absolutes such as "space" and "time" (720); for, the use of such terms undermines God's absolute power, since the only place where absolute omnipotence exists is "in religion, in God, and Revelation" (720). The arrogance of applying terminology, that is only appropriate and accurate when in reference to God's omnipotence, for the purposes of referring to science, is therefore deemed unacceptable. Swift finds that by practicing Newtonian science one bypasses God's intelligence, and instead ascribes that same intelligence to oneself. Therefore, the scientist discards God, as the competence to explore

and examine the universe is obtainable through Newtonian methods and theories without God's guidance or presence.

Swift's critique of such arrogance is supported by his "belief in the limitedness of human capacity" (Patey 812). Meaning, he fundamentally rejects the idea that human competence stretches sufficiently to grasp a sense of the reality of the natural world in the first place; for the complexity of God's creation is beyond human comprehension. Therefore, his critique of Newton is not only based on Newton's arrogance, but also on his conceit in assuming that he is sufficiently competent to unveil the expanse of God's creation.

Furthermore, Swift considers it is mankind's duty to serve and obey "the absolutes" that God placed within the conscience of each individual (Kiernan 721). Therefore Swift's criticism is also aimed at Newton for creating his own "false absolutes" (721); since Newton, by using terms such as "time" and "space" (720), attempts to surpass divinity by diverting from the reality that God initially created. As a reaction to this criticism, Swift holds a strong appreciation for freedom of expression; for, even though Swift does not agree with Newton, he is nonetheless permitted to voice such disagreement due to one's liberty to articulate discontent.

Swift's appreciation of freedom of expression is therefore exemplified by his public criticism of Newton. As discussed in previous paragraphs, his right to express his discontent with Newtonian science is paramount in order to understand Swift's attempt to problematise the implementation of Newtonianism in English society. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift exhibits the potentially harmful outcome when Newtonian science is fully incorporated within society without the concept of freedom of expression to critique it. The Laputian kingdom, once again, provides the setting that illustrates Swift's argument. He explains that "the minds of [the Laputians] are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others," (Swift 199). The inability to speak or listen, due to their

submergence in Newtonianism, conveys Swift's worries with regard to freedom of expression, as it is because of science that it has been dismissed.

The potential danger that science poses to the manifestation of freedom of expression in English society is shown in *Gulliver's Travels* by the Laputians' use of the "flappers" (199) – a tool used to strike those who have become oblivious to the world due to intense speculations in their minds. This happens constantly throughout Gulliver's stay in Laputa, and when it does, the flapper is used by striking "the mouth of him who is to speak, and the right ear of him or them to whom the speaker addresses himself" (199). Swift hereby argues that the concept of expression and critical debate is endangered by the postulation of science in society, since the Laputians have to be physically struck in order to realise that they have voices and ears that they can use to debate or listen respectively. Freedom of expression is paramount to understanding Swift's views on 18th century England, since in its absence, society is incapable of criticising new disciplines, such as science, in order to prevent undesirable outcomes. For this reason, Swift calls freedom of expression "that great bulwark of our nation" (Swift 2), meaning that the freedom to express one's convictions serves to obstruct, as well as debate, new ideas, and to examine their potentially harmful effect on society.

Having discussed Swift's views on 18th century English society in terms of science, religion and freedom of expression, it is now important to review his views in conjunction with those of Voltaire, in order to compare their views and observe where they overlap, or more importantly, where they differ.

Chapter 3: Discussion of Voltaire and Swift

Having separately discussed Voltaire and Swift's views on 18th century English society in terms of science, religion and freedom of expression, it is the premise of this chapter to engage in a discussion in order to determine where the views of Voltaire and Swift differ or overlap. It is particularly important to consider why their perspectives differ, as it allows a reflection on the nature of their insights. Akin to previous chapters, the notion of science is central to this discussion as it surmises the essence of Voltaire and Swift's respective praise and criticism of English society. A comparison of their respective views will reveal whether their views resemble one another.

Voltaire and Swift's disagreement on the manifestation of science in England stems fundamentally from their differing perceptions of the relevance of Newtonianism. The fact that they both aim their respective praise and criticism at Newton exposes an interesting contrast; for the convictions upon which Voltaire bases his appreciation are oppositely the concepts on which Swift bases his criticism. It can thus be said that Voltaire and Swift's views on science form a strong contrast since the science that Voltaire regards as "sublime ideas" (Voltaire 67), are mere trivialities to Swift. Moreover, Voltaire's admiration of Newtonian science dilates to a veneration of the man instead of only his theories, regarding Newton as "the voice of the prophet" (Epstein 27). In contrast, Swift considers Newton to be arrogant and blasphemous for aiming his scientific agenda at subverting God. For this reason, Voltaire and Swift's respective praise and criticism is not limited to science, since it also dilates to a dispute on the manner in which Newtonianism undermines God's omnipotence.

As an extension to their disagreement on the relevance of Newtonianism, Voltaire and Swift's views are similarly polarised on the idea that Newtonian science attempts to subvert God's supremacy. Despite Swift's critique – accusing Newton of using science to undermine God – in *Letters*, Voltaire fails to expose the subversive attitude of science that Swift claims it

embodies. More specifically, Voltaire actively proposes a more prominent manifestation of science in English society precisely in order to come to a deeper understanding of God. Swift, on the other hand, argues against using science for such purposes. Though these views seem fundamentally contradictory, they nonetheless share a mutual motivation. Voltaire and Swift's respective praise and critique of Newton both originate from a religious incentive to profoundly understand the presence of God.

Voltaire's reason for admiring Newton's theories derives from a religious desire to disentangle the complexity of God's creation. A central component to this argument is the knowledge that Voltaire is a deist. Deism is often defined as a metaphysical theory in which God is "the Creator of the world, but now as withdrawn and separate from it" (Hefelbower 217), essentially stating that after creation, God left the world untouched. One thus needs to observe the natural world in order to discover and explore God's presence in the universe. Deism strongly holds the conviction that religious beliefs and institutions are "adequately grounded only when they could be explained in terms of nature and reason" (217-18). So, despite not conforming to traditional Christian beliefs, Voltaire nonetheless holds religious convictions. These convictions form the basis of his desire for scientific discovery, as they satisfy his religious beliefs by means of pursuing a deeper understanding of the intricacies of God's creation. Therefore, Newton – as a leading figure in promoting "a deistic understanding of God's relation to the cosmos" (Harrison 430) – serves as the prophet to Voltaire's deism; since it is Newtonian science that seeks to disentangle the scientific *modus operandi* "of God's presence in the natural world" (Epstein 31). For this reason, science provides Voltaire with religious revelation, as an increasing understanding of the natural world – through scientific discovery – accommodates his faith.

The reason for Swift's critique of Newtonian science originates from a critique of deism. He specifically argues against the idea that one can only comprehend God's creation

by means of studying unexplained natural phenomena, or “mysteries” (Landa 243). While, in 18th century English society, nature was studied through the practice of Newtonian science, Swift argues that it is “unwarranted to attempt an explanation of a mystery” (247); since he questions whether it is even possible to solve such a natural obscurity in the first place. It is for this reason that Swift specifically critiques Newton, whose vanity undermines God’s omnipotence by arrogantly assuming that his intelligence extends sufficiently to solve natural mysteries that were never meant to be solved. According to Swift, Newton’s arrogance deludes him into equating himself with the powers of the divine. As a result, Swift believes in “antirationalism” (248), which dictates that relying on human reason to explain divine mysteries is inherently ineffective, since “the reason of every particular man is weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his interests, his passions, and his vices” (248). By extension, the practice of Newtonian science is similarly irrelevant as it dismisses antirationalism and instead relies entirely on human reason. It is therefore crucial to understand that by practicing Newtonianism one undermines God, as it is used to deistically elucidate the mysteries of God’s creation. This contrasts Voltaire and Swift’s respective views on science in relation to religion. Although their views differ significantly with regard to these two notions, for varying reasons, they share a strong support for the right to express such disagreement.

A reason for Voltaire’s justification for freedom of expression stems from a quarrel that directly led to his exile from France. This entails a minor altercation with a member of the noble Rohan family, in which Voltaire innocently insulted Chevalier de Rohan-Sabot, which caused him to be “arrested on a lettre de cachet and put in the Bastille” (Gabb 2). As a result, the contrasting English social climate – in which freedom of expression was allowed – fuelled Voltaire’s veneration of 18 century English society, as it was dramatically different from France’s.

Partial reason for England's more permissive social climate is due to the instalment of the English Bill of Rights in 1689, 35 years prior to Voltaire's stay. This act formally "protects the freedom of speech of Members of Parliament" (Lock 542), which allowed members to express dissent towards the government and the Royal family. Although it exclusively granted freedom of speech to members of parliament and therefore did not include the ordinary individual's right to such freedom; it nonetheless offered an improvement from France's "repressive absolute monarchy" – during which the country was torn apart by constant conflict between the monarch and the French "parlements" (Bell 919). In 1695, the freedom of the English press was significantly increased as a result of parliament's failure to renew the 1662 Licensing Act. Henceforth, it was prohibited to enforce "censorship prior to publication" (Griffin 878), thereby removing "the continued monopoly of the London printers and booksellers through the Stationers' Company" (878). As a result, one's freedom of expression significantly improved as it allowed authors to freely distribute their opinions without fear of censorship. Therefore, due to France's "intolerance of a free press or representative institutions" (Bell 919), the English were significantly more liberal in terms of freedom of expression.

In order to assert his freedom of expression, Swift took advantage of the failure to renew the Licensing Act by publishing *Gulliver's Travels*. Arguably, its publication, due to its satirical nature, would not have been possible were it not for this failure of parliament. While it is commonly believed that *Gulliver's Travels* was censored and banned shortly after publication in 1726 – principally incited by William Thackeray's fierce critique in which he denounces it for being "shameful, blasphemous [and] unmanly" (Rodino 1055)– no evidence suggests that this claim holds sufficient truth (McClure 23). Swift therefore embodies the freed spirit of intellectual England as he optimally utilises the permissive social climate by sharing his ideas and reflections on society without external control over the publication of his

opinions. It is for this reason that the manifestation of freedom of expression is represented in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* by the sheer premise of it being a satire that takes on the fundamental components of society such as monarchy and government.

Voltaire and Swift's different experiences of the manifestation of freedom of expression in a society consequently reveals the reason for their disparate experiences of English society as a whole. Voltaire came to England, in exile, fleeing from imprisonment as punishment for dissentient utterances; whilst Swift, who was born in Ireland to English parents, personally experienced England's more permissive and liberal society. Therefore, as a result of Voltaire's bitterness towards France, his subsequent experience of English society is inherently biased as he continuously compares it to France's. In the process, Voltaire deprecates France by proclaiming England as intellectually and socially superior (Voltaire 62). This biased reverence of English society consequently forms a reason for Voltaire's incompatibility with Swift's views, even though Swift was a man he so admired.

A possible reason for Voltaire's conflicting views in comparison to Swift's are explained by the fact that he was a Frenchman in a foreign country and, therefore inherently drawn to England's permissive social climate. Norma Perry argues that Voltaire suffers from "expatriate distortion syndrome" (77), which refers to a type of behaviour often perpetrated by foreigners when in their non-native country. Whilst a visitor ideally ought to submerge in the culture of the country, all too frequently foreigners "spend the greater part of their stay in the capital city, have restricted social contacts, are incompetent linguistically, and spend far too much time with other expatriates" (77-78). This syndrome, together with his affinity towards England, could have meaningfully affected Voltaire's involvement with English society. It can thus be suggested that, to a large degree, Voltaire's experience is distorted by his expatriate syndrome combined with a personal contempt of France, which has inadvertently romanticised his observations during his stay in England. Therefore, despite

popular belief and despite the fact that they both held each other in high regard, they evidently disagree on meaningful aspects of English society. For this reason, one ought to consider whether their mutual admiration for each other is potentially misguided, as it is not substantiated with sufficient evidence (Thacker 51, Torrey 791, Gunny 94).

Conclusion

The fundamental premise of this thesis has been to analyse Voltaire and Swift's views on 18th century English society in terms of science, religion and freedom of expression in order to determine whether their convictions are compatible. This examination has been conducted by analysing Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Despite popular belief, implied by the idea that Voltaire and Swift held each other in high regard, their views on the respective notions are widely different, leading their ideas on the manifestations of these concepts in society to be overwhelmingly incompatible. Therefore, the most crucial finding of this thesis consists of the observation that Voltaire's views on the respective notions in 18th century English society are fundamentally different from Swift's.

It has been found that Voltaire's reverence of English society principally stems from an admiration for England's permissive social climate. According to Voltaire, it is through the expression of new ideas that a society enables itself to thrive on the flourishing of intellectuality. The primary notion through which such intellectuality can be achieved is science, which subsequently causes Voltaire to be a strong supporter of Newtonianism. This support also pertains to religion, since the practice of science also provides Voltaire with religious revelation as it unveils God's creation through the exploration of the natural world. Swift holds entirely different views, as *Gulliver's Travels* reveals Swift's critique and rejection of Newtonian science for its triviality, ineffectiveness and the potential danger it poses to society. Additionally, Swift believes Newtonianism undermines God as science attempts to explain phenomena that are not meant to be explained in the first place.

This thesis has also discussed the degree to which Voltaire's French nationality has potentially affected his experience of English society, particularly since he left France on negative terms. Therefore, as a result of his personal contempt for France, Voltaire is naturally drawn to England and its values. It is therefore highly probable that Voltaire's account on

English society, as portrayed in *Letters*, offers a biased representation of 18th century English society as it is principally fuelled by his aversion to France.

With respect to future research, in order to establish a more compelling examination as to why Voltaire and Swift's experience and views are disparate, a deeper analysis of Voltaire's life in France is recommended, since his experience of English society is largely shaped by the history that directly preceded his exile.

Furthermore, this thesis has exclusively focused on Voltaire and Swift in order to provide a sophisticated examination of these individuals; however, for future research, a wider scope is recommended as a means to establish a more substantial selection of various views on social and cultural manifestations in English society. One could do so by incorporating other 18th century English intellectuals such as Alexander Pope or Francis Bacon, as they too are greatly admired by Voltaire (Voltaire 50, 109, 118; MacNalty 601).

This research is also limited by its exclusive focus on the notions science, religion and freedom of expression as its fundamental framework from which Voltaire and Swift's views are extracted. Other 18th century social or cultural aspects of English society such as slavery or women's rights – on which there is sufficient secondary source material available (Honigsheim 107; Wootton 144) – can also be incorporated in future research as these would substantialise Voltaire and Swift's respective views.

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Faculty of Humanities
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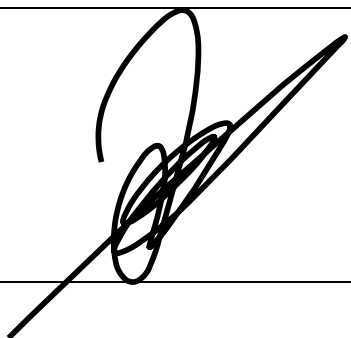
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