



*From “Temple” to “Temple”,
or a pun on one avatar of Gulliver’s lodgings*

Lapraz-Severino Françoise

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From "Temple" to "Temple", or a pun on one avatar of
Gulliver's lodgings

Françoise Lapraz-Severino

Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis

The passage I wish to comment upon is the last paragraph of Part I, Chapter I of *Gulliver's Travels*. From the point of view of an overall interpretation of *Gulliver's Travels* as a cryptobiography,¹ it seems to me that such a passage offers interesting and relevant information about the Temple-Swift relationship or, at least, as to Swift's version of what that relationship amounted to.²

One remembers that the voyage on which Gulliver had launched on May 4, 1699 had dramatically come to a halt on November 5, 1699 when his ship, the *Antelope*, had been wrecked on some rock. Now, 1699 came to be a meaningful date in the life of Swift as it was the date of Sir William Temple's death, of Swift's own return to Ireland, and of the real beginning of his ecclesiastical career (a previous attempt had been a fiasco).

Part I, Chapter I then retails how Gulliver wakes up nine hours after the wreckage to find that he is fastened to the ground. He is nourished, later carried, still tied up and lying on his back, to the capital city at some distance from which the carriage stops.

The last paragraph of the Chapter opens in the following manner:

At the Place where the Carriage stopt, there stood an ancient Temple, esteemed to be the largest in the whole Kingdom, which having been polluted some Years before by an unnatural Murder, was, according to the Zeal of those People, looked on as Prophane, and therefore had been applied to common Uses, and all the Ornaments and Furniture carried away. In this Edifice it was determined I should lodge.³

The "Temple" here described is characterized by its age and size, a possible reflection on both Sir William's noble ancestry and old age — he was seventy-one in 1699 —, as well as his high reputation as a devoted and successful servant to the Crown.⁴ The "pollution" referred to in *Gulliver's Travels* had been caused by "an unnatural Murder". There had been no murder in the Temple household but in 1689 Swift's mentor had lost his only son, then, in February 1695, his beloved wife. These two deaths, especially the untimely — and somehow "unnatural" — one of his son, who, by his suicide at the age of thirty-two, left a widow and two little girls, was a terrible blow to the old aristocrat as his sister reported.⁵ It was to this despondent, ailing and aged man that Swift returned for good as a secretary in 1696. The desecration and desolation of the temple highlighted in *Gulliver's Travels* may be a transposition of reality: Sir William was by then almost forgotten as a royal advisor and almost solitary in his residence at Moor Park.

What sustains such an interpretation is the general décor of the passage. In *Gulliver's Travels*, the temple is faced "on t'other side of the great Highway, at twenty Foot distance" by a turret on which the Emperor and many members of his Court climb to get a better view of the giant. It is not difficult to read these elements as Ireland and England facing each other on either side of St George's Channel, the turret standing for the English capital city inhabited by the monarch and his Court, and the temple, defiled, disaffected, as Ireland. Swift's estimation

¹ See my book, *Relativité et communication dans les Voyages de Gulliver*, Paris: Didier Erudition, 1988, Chapter VIII, pp.543-593.

² Without entering into detail, let us remind the reader that Sir William Temple (1628-1699) had been a diplomat and a politician, instrumental in the realization of the Triple Alliance (1667-1671), the talks at Nimeguen, and the Dutch marriage (1674-1679).

³ References to *Gulliver's Travels* are taken in Angus Ross's edition, published by Longman, 1972, p.25.

⁴ For a pertinent evaluation of Sir William as a diplomat, see P. Marambaud, *Sir William Temple, sa vie, son oeuvre*, Paris: Minard, 1968.

⁵ See I. Ehrenpreis, *Swift, the Man, his Works, and the Age*, London: Methuen, 1964, vol.I, p. 101.

of Ireland's collective unhappy lot is thus in tune with the private mishaps of the Temple family.

In the passage excerpted from *Gulliver's Travels*, the fate of Gulliver is also worth studying closely. One should note Gulliver's passivity and alienation: "it (is) determined" by others that he should lodge in the temple; first, he is held by strings, then chains are locked to his left (?) leg as if he was — but he is indeed — a prisoner; the Emperor and the Lords come to "view" him as one went, in the XVIIIth century, to the zoo to see rare animals and to bedlam to watch lunatics. As a matter of fact, Gulliver confesses to have been then in a "melancholy" disposition.

The end of the paragraph realizes the identification of Gulliver with an animal held in leash:

But the noise and astonishment of the People at seeing me rise and walk are not to be expressed. The Chains that held my left Leg were about two Yards long, and gave me not only the Liberty of walking backwards and forwards in a Semicircle; but being fixed within four Inches of the Gate, allowed me to creep in, and lie at my full length in the Temple.⁶

The deep irony of the description lies on the Biblical reference conveyed with the words "rise and walk". That the reaction of the spectators at this Lazarus-like apparition bears the mark of genuine admiration or is tainted with burlesque is debatable, for Gulliver at the end of his chains pacing to and fro in a semicircle or creeping into his temple/kennel, strongly, unmistakably, evokes the image of a dog. This instance, incidentally, is one of the very first examples of the animalization of Gulliver, of which there are so many in the rest of the book. The reader cannot miss the derision underlined by the balanced structure "not only/but" and the lexical field of permission ("liberty", "allowed").

Bracketed by the word "temple" at the opening and the closing, this paragraph confirms what we know from other sources about the situation at Moor Park between the years 1696 and 1699 when Swift made up his mind to stay with Temple despite his own commitment to the Church and his prebends in Ireland, that is to say a gloomy, portentous atmosphere, partly explained by age, dramatic events, and estrangement from the English Court.

Moreover, this paragraph betrays the feelings of Sir William's employee, alias Swift, who obviously felt he had been fettered and tethered all those secretarial years, even though he had been able, thanks to Temple's celebrity, to cut a figure once or twice with the King or his entourage.⁷ Whether Swift is being ungrateful to Temple is another question. It may be suggested, however, that the former had overambitious hopes in view of the social standards of the times and the latter knew those standards too well to infringe upon them. No doubt creeping through the gate and lying down full length in the temple, whatever that stood for — pleasing Sir William or obtaining preferment of some sort from the English Government, for example — seemed too high a price to pay in the eyes of proud Swift.

I cannot conclude on this elaborate pun on the word "temple" without mentioning the intriguing second paragraph of the following Chapter in the same Part of *Gulliver's Travels*. That passage, which tells how Gulliver discharges his bowels in the very temple, lends itself to various interpretations. Its *raison d'être* can be related to concern for verisimilitude throughout the book, and therefore to the satiric trend of the voyage form; also to the theme of relativity that positively "makes" the book.⁸ Yet, in the light of what we have discussed above, that passage may also be presented as a kind of vengeance on the father-employer-mentor figure embodied for the still young Swift by Temple. The defilement of this once sacred place may thus be read as retaliation of some sort on what seemed to Swift as Temple's general authoritarianism and lack of enthusiasm to promote him in the world, to help him "rise and walk" as Gulliver would have said.

⁶ *Gulliver's Travels*, A. Ross ed., op. cit., p.25.

⁷ See I. Ehrenpreis, op. cit., p.173.

⁸ See *Relativité et communication*, op. cit., passim.