



# Mary Gulliver: an emblem of sexual rebirth?

Ruth Menzies

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Ruth Menzies, Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

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While *Gulliver's Travels* is one of the most widely read and frequently reprinted literary texts, Mary Gulliver, née Burton, the traveller's wife, is a shadowy figure who remains far less well-known than her husband. Of course, *Gulliver's Travels* is not a novel, and none of the characters in it is endowed with any real psychological depth, but the presentation of Mary Gulliver is quite remarkable in its sketchiness. Mary is introduced in prosaic terms, with Gulliver referring above all to the "four Hundred Pounds"<sup>1</sup> dowry she brings him and thereafter she is really only mentioned in the opening and closing chapters of each voyage. Her narrative function is clearly to reflect Gulliver's growing alienation, from a husband who wishes to "stay at home with [his] Wife and Family" (4) to one who, upon his return from Brobdingnag, has difficulty adjusting to the normal scale of things and accuses his wife of having "starved herself and her Daughter to nothing" (124). Mary has little control over events in her life: despite her protests that Gulliver "should never go to Sea any more", he notes that "she had not Power to hinder [him]" (124) and indeed he soon sets off again – and again,<sup>2</sup> even leaving Mary "big with Child" (191) at the start of his fourth voyage, a detail which heightens the cruelty of his actions on his return, when he spurns his wife, swooning at her touch and expressing horror that, as he puts it, "by copulating with one of the Yahoo-Species, I had become a Parent of more." (253)

Gulliver's misanthropy is starkly illustrated by his treatment of Mary, whose very presence he refuses for a year and who, five years after his return, is permitted to "sit at Dinner with [him], at the farthest End of a long Table; and to answer (but with the utmost Brevity) the few Questions [he] ask[s] her." (259). Even when allowances are made for historical context, these lines are extreme in their depiction of a husband's tyranny over his submissive wife: presumably this is what struck the writers who, over the centuries, have offered the silent, suffering Mary Gulliver a chance to tell her side of the tale. The texts I wish to consider here were published over a period of almost 275 years, and in their efforts to uncover the muted narrative concealed within Swift's text, they reflect changing and varied attitudes to women, both in literary and in social terms.

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The circumstances surrounding the composition of Alexander Pope's poem, *Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver. An Epistle*, are vague, though it seems likely that it was written in 1726 and intended for Jonathan Swift, as a joke between friends rather than for publication."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726, The Writings of Jonathan Swift, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973) 3.

<sup>2</sup> The description of Gulliver's return from this third voyage seems to confirm the general impression that this part of the *Travels* was not necessarily intended to be inserted at this point in the text, as the narrator merely states that he found his "Wife and Family in good Health" (187), which does not fit with the overall progression found in the text, where Gulliver's homecomings are increasingly problematic.

<sup>3</sup> This would seem to be confirmed by the fact that Arbuthnot apparently saw the verses as early as 16th November 1726, scarcely two weeks after the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* and by the way Pope refers to them in a letter to Swift dated 17<sup>th</sup> February 1726-1727: You received, I hope, some commendatory verses from a Horse and a Lilliputian to Gulliver, and an heroic Epistle of Mrs Gulliver. The bookseller would fain have printed 'em before

The poem, however, was prefixed, along with three other of Pope's "Gulliver" poems (*To Quinbus Flestrin, the man-mountain*; *To Mr. Lemuel Gulliver, the grateful address of the unhappy Houyhnhnms, now in slavery and bondage in England*; *Words of the King of Brobdingnag, as he held Captain Gulliver between his finger and thumb for the inspection of the sages and learned men of the court*) to a "second edition" of Swift's imaginary voyage which appeared that same year.<sup>4</sup> Unlike modern readers, contemporary readers of that edition of the *Travels* were thus alerted to Mary Gulliver's existence and woes before beginning Swift's text.

*Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver. An Epistle* parodies not only elements of *Gulliver's Travels* but also another of Pope's poems, *Eloisa to Abelard*,<sup>5</sup> a heroic epistle relating the abandoned Eloisa's suffering. In the "Gulliver" poem, Lemuel's wife describes not sentimental but primarily sexual longing, in a form of burlesque heroic epistle. The heading to the poem indicates that, as befits an 18<sup>th</sup>-century wife, Mary reacts to her husband's absences and final tyranny in duly "expostulating, soothing, and tenderly-complaining" terms. She laments his rejection of her ("What touch me not? What shun a Wife's Embrace?"<sup>6</sup>), contrasting his unkindness, which she views as symptomatic of infidelity, with her own unwavering constancy:

In five long Years I took no second Spouse;  
What *Redriff* Wife so long hath kept her Vows?  
Your Eyes, your Nose, Inconstancy betray;  
Your Nose you stop, your Eyes you turn away.

Mary also reminds Gulliver that she has fulfilled her wifely duties by providing him with children, repeating twice "Be kind at least to these, they are thy own" and inviting her errant husband to "Behold and count them all; secure to find/The honest Number that you left behind."

Pope's heroine enumerates her qualities and her ongoing efforts to reconquer Gulliver's affections, often reflecting very stereotypical views of women and their relationships with men, as well as with other women. Mary complains that although she is younger and more attractive than the wives of other sea captains, they are better treated than she, as if women were engaged in a continual beauty contest for men's attentions:

Biddel, like thee, might farthest India rove;  
He changed his country, but retain'd his love.  
There's Captain Pannel, absent half his life,  
Comes back, and is the kinder to his wife;  
Yet Pannel's wife is brown compared to me,  
And Mrs Biddel sure is fifty-three.<sup>7</sup>

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the second Edition of the Book, but I would not permit it without your approbation; nor do I much like them (*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. D. Woolley, 4 vols. [Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003] 3: 76). The poems were also printed separately in 1727, by and for John Hyde, in a little volume entitled *Poems Occasioned by Reading the Travels of Lemuel Gulliver, Explanatory and Commendatory*. It is, however, unlikely that Pope sent his poems to the publisher. For more details, see *The Complete Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. W.C. Armstrong (Hartford, CN: S. Andrus, 1848). The text is available online at: <https://archive.org/details/completopoetical00inpopo> [last consulted 27/06/11].

<sup>4</sup> See Raymond Bentman, "Satiric Structure and Tone in the Conclusion of *Gulliver's Travels*" *Studies in English Literature* 11.3, (1971): 542.

<sup>5</sup> This is the poem referred to in the 2004 film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, written by Charlie Kaufman.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Pope, "Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver", *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 603.

<sup>7</sup> Pope 603.

She also emphasises the pain she feels at being rejected when other females, such as the Lilliputian treasurer's wife and even a horse, have allegedly enjoyed Gulliver's attentions. Mary's feelings are depicted in terms that parody the tropes of heroic epistles, as she recounts her alarm at finding herself alone in the marital bed:

"I stretch my hand; no Gulliver is there!  
I wake, I rise, and, shivering with the frost,  
Search all the house; my Gulliver is lost!  
Forth in the street I rush with frantic cries;  
The windows open, all the neighbours rise:  
'Where sleeps my Gulliver? Oh tell me where!'  
The neighbours answer, 'With the sorrel mare!'"<sup>8</sup>

Thus Gulliver's aversion to his fellow human beings and to Mary, which in Swift's text is expressed initially in intellectual terms, and only subsequently in physical ones, becomes sexualised in Pope's poem, with Gulliver's preference for horses depicted as what Michael J. Franklin has dubbed "an interspecial special relationship"<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with the other clichés characterising Mary's attempts to woo back her husband, she buys him asparagus and other tasty treats, which she compares bitterly with the only gift Gulliver ever brought her back from afar, "a cup-like horn/That's made of nothing but a lady's corn." In a passage with unmistakable links to Swift's text, Mary also describes her feelings at learning of the dangers faced by Gulliver: she trembles as he is bound by Lilliputians, congratulates herself that the spectacles she gave him protect his eyes from their tiny arrows, and mourns at the death sentence handed down by Skyresh Bolgolam. The vicarious way in which Mary experiences events is striking; she declares melodramatically that "when he sign'd thy death, he sentenced me" and relates how "when the giant babe that head of thine/Got in his mouth, my heart was up in mine!" She also expresses fear that Glumdalclitch may have been harshly punished for neglectfully allowing Gulliver to escape Brobdingnag; when she cries out to the giant girl, "My life, alas! I fear proved death to thee", Mary suggests that her own existence is inextricably dependent upon that of her husband.

The final stanza of Pope's epistle confirms Mary's submissive position, as she begs Lemuel Gulliver to teach her

"new words to speak my flame!/Teach me to woo thee by thy best loved name", and longs to be granted the ability "To hymn harmonious Houyhnhnm through the nose." Again, it is insinuated that Gulliver's preference for horses arises not out of respect for their superior powers of reason, but from sexual inclination. In Swift's text sexuality is an issue that Gulliver deliberately ignores, because it raises the question of the species (Yahoo/Houyhnhnm) to which he is most akin, whereas in Pope's poem it takes centre stage. But this change in focus is not synonymous with greater freedom for Mary – on the contrary. The final stanza of the poem expresses her desire to find her "loving Spouse (...) Endu'd with all the *Virtues of a Horse*," lines which clearly refer to Gulliver's genital rather than intellectual endowments, imprisoning Mary within what Franklin refers to as "the traditional misogyny of the insatiable female".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pope 605.

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Franklin, "Lemuel Self-Translated; or, Being an ass in Houyhnhnm-land", *Modern Language Review* 100:1 (Jan 2005) 14.

<sup>10</sup> Franklin, 14.

Although Pope's poem draws this hitherto silent figure out of the shadows, the freedom it offers her is thus at best limited. With the exception of the sexualisation of Gulliver's admiration for all things equine, the epistle remains closely tied to *Gulliver's Travels*, doubtless because it was probably written to be read by Swift himself. As a result, Mary's voice is conditioned by the role she plays in the hypotext – that of a passive, submissive wife. While her lack of power is obviously due to the status of women in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, it is also determined by the place she is ascribed in *Gulliver's Travels* and in the epistle. Just as Gilbert and Gubar demonstrated that Victorian women were inevitably depicted as one of two “paradigmatic polarities”, either as angels or as monsters,<sup>11</sup> here it appears that Mary Gulliver can only play the role either of the dutiful spouse or of the risibly voracious woman. Just as the poem seems rather confined by its intertextual relationships both with Pope's own earlier poem and with his friend's travel tale, so too does Mary appear ensnared, her whole being ultimately defined by her relationship with Gulliver and by sexual stereotyping.

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Published in 1978, Davy King's short story, “The Woman Gulliver Left Behind,”<sup>12</sup> inevitably reflects a change in the way Mary is portrayed. Like Pope's epistle, it retains close links to Swift's text, as Mary retells events chronologically from her point of view. However, the tone is very different, as she does not address her husband but rather a fictional reader/listener. Gone is the soothing, tender disposition, replaced by the indignant outrage of a woman determined “to set the record straight.” This is apparent from the series of contrasting images used: “While Gulliver travelled, I stayed at home – in gullible travails”; “Gulliver gallivanted round the globe, while I was house-bound looking after the children; “I went on journeys, too: to market. Someone had to do the shopping”. Mary's words spill over into explicit bitterness at a husband who was never there, and then “suddenly without warning [...] would turn up, expecting a meal ready.” Where Pope's Mary Gulliver stresses her charms, her dutifulness and her sorrow, Davy King's heroine implicitly expects a degree of equality within her marriage and emphasises her frustration at the “struggle [of] raising the children single-handedly”, of “perpetually waiting: waiting on the children and waiting for him.” Like Pope's heroine, she insists upon her fidelity (“gull my Gulliver I couldn't”); unlike her she even defends her husband against accusations of sexual impropriety in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, but is also painfully aware that her freedom of choice is extremely limited because of her status as a woman. “‘Mary,’ I told myself, ‘Mary, you're a martyr to that man. Why do you put up with his waywardness?’ We get used to the unacceptable, learn to live with what is so obviously not right. What alternative did I have?”

King's heroine also reacts in a very different way to Gulliver's harsh treatment. Rather than trying to entice him back with tasty morsels, she expresses open anger and resentment at his unjust cruelty. She rails at the restricted, vicarious experiences available to women, notes the misogyny underlying many passages in *Gulliver's Travels*, and finally states that Gulliver's disgust at having procreated with her is the “heartless last straw.” In its conclusion, King's text differs radically from Pope's, as Mary declares that, “after so long hoping against hope he would settle down, finally *I* have to leave.

So goodbye Mrs Gulliver! Godspeed Mary Burton! This female Yahoo intends to do some travelling of her own.”

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<sup>11</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (Newhaven: Yale UP, 1979) 76.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.davyking.com/The%20Woman%20Gulliver%20Left%20Behind.pdf> [last consulted 27/06/11 ]

Mary Gulliver also takes another decisive step in King's short story: that of taking up the pen and making what she calls a "little excursion into the world of letters." The act of writing symbolises almost as clearly as that of travelling her claims to independence of mind and means, as she sets herself on an equal footing with her husband. The fact that Mary sees herself as an author, her words intended for an audience beyond that of her husband, is an indication of the changing social and literary realities between the composition of Pope's poem and that of King's story.

However, although Mary announces her decision to travel, she does not describe any actual departure. Yet she regularly resorts to maritime and travel metaphors, most strikingly in her description of marriage to Gulliver both in the early days and later on:

In the initial matrimonial euphoria, this blushing bride dared to suppose that we'd set course for an idyllic future. Life would be one long honeymoon cruise. I didn't give a thought about hidden reefs, storms & perils of the deep. Scylla & Charibdis weren't on my mind

[...]

I could never hold him long, but, to give him his due, he always came home to me. However wide he ranged, I was the centre of his circle, his fixed point of reference, his trusty sheet-anchor. But such metaphors, though complimentary, hardly make one feel any better. I could just as well say that I was little more to him than a port of call – here he could lie at anchor for a while waiting for a favourable wind or tide."

While these metaphors can be read as an indication of Mary's early interest in travel, it could also be argued that they reveal the extent to which she remains inherently subservient to her husband. If her narrative reflects her desire to find her own voice, as a woman and as an author, then one might conclude she still has a long way to go: for in King's text it is still Lemuel, and not Mary, who is the visible seafarer, the actual traveller. Her repeated use of such imagery seems to confirm the predominance of the man over his wife and her account of events: it is *Gulliver's* profession, *his* travels, *his* choices that define his wife's life, voice and mode of expression. Until Mary actually undertakes her own travels, she appears to remain firmly under the influence of her famous husband.

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It is tempting to view Karen Joy Fowler's short story *The Travails* (1998)<sup>13</sup> as something of a landmark, the first revisiting of *Gulliver's Travels* from Mary Gulliver's point of view to have been written by a woman. It comprises a series of eight letters from Mary to her husband, purporting to reveal her thoughts and feelings during his absence. It does not refer to Gulliver's final return from Houyhnhnmland, since the last letter is dated November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1715, three weeks previously to that point. Gulliver's cruel behaviour towards his wife, which so informs Pope's and King's texts, is thus absent from Fowler's text, though there is dramatic irony in the reader's awareness of it. However, Fowler's text does not really provide Mary with the freedom of expression and action that she lacks, for the tone is rather a return to Pope's soothing expostulations than a confirmation of King's more irate, independent Mary. The impression given is one of a lonely woman trying to remain cheerful, and although Mary does refer to her "melancholy", and to "Quarrels" (87) during Gulliver's short stay at home, her tone always remains equable: after her youngest son's recovery from a serious illness, for instance, she

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<sup>13</sup> Karen J. Fowler, "The Travails", *Black Glass. Short Fictions*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998) 84-95.

writes, "I am too Joyous to scold, but I wonder at your Willingness to be so much away. There is something unnatural and inhuman about such Detachment, as if you cared no more for us than for the Sheep or the Horses." (92)

However, there is a subtlety to Fowler's text that sets it apart slightly from the previous two. There is perhaps a hint that although Mary is by no means planning a feminist revolt, nor is she a perfect angel of the hearth. When the house is overrun with rats, she informs her husband, noting "but I have engaged a Man to deal with them. Money can buy Men for many but perhaps not all Purposes" (88), and in her following letter mentions "Rats on the Roofs again, but I know just the Man to engage for it." (91) Are we to infer from these incidental allusions that Mary has finally gulled her Gulliver, and found a man for all her purposes? Nothing confirms it, and when her son-in-law turns out to be a wife-beater, Mary says that this puts her own suffering into perspective: "There are far worse things to be endured than an absent Husband." (95) Her final letter to Gulliver, rather poignant in view of the events that are to follow, reads as a compromise: Mary urges Gulliver to return home and to stay as long as he will, "a valued Guest", but then to leave again. "We have no Wish to hold you. (...) We will rejoice at your Coming; your Going will cause us no Moment of Suffering. More than this, I think, no Man can ask of his Family." (95) Rather than taking her destiny into her own hands, Mary thus sets Gulliver free; the question that remains is whether in doing so she also frees herself, and it is one that Fowler's text does not really answer.

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Alison Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput; or, The Pursuit* (1999),<sup>14</sup> the first full-length novel devoted to Mary Gulliver, approaches its hypotext from a new angle; rather than retelling events chronologically from Mary's perspective, it returns to an earlier point and begins "in the proper manner, with a genealogy of our heroine" (11) and swiftly moves to continue the tale where Swift left off, following Gulliver's return from Houyhnhnmland. The previous texts reveal a desire to recover Mary's muted narrative, but Fell goes much further, undertaking a full-scale project of what Adrienne Rich has called re-vision, "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction."<sup>15</sup> Rich sees re-vision as an "act of survival"<sup>16</sup> for women: "We need to know the writing of the past," she asserts, "and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on that tradition but to break its hold over us."<sup>17</sup>

One of the ways in which *The Mistress of Lilliput* breaks with tradition is in the choice of narrative voice, as it is not Mary who tells her tale, but her doll, Lady Mary. Although Mary Gulliver keeps a log book, only certain excerpts of it appear in Fell's text, interspersed with Lady Mary's tale. This is a radical departure from the first-person narrative central to *Gulliver's Travels*, a text that claims to be the eye-witness account of Lemuel Gulliver's experiences. Here, the fictional nature of the text is foregrounded and the use of the doll emphasises the obstacles which have long stood in the way of women's autonomy and authorship. Lady Mary, who says her "place is to stand like a humble servant in the shadows of the narrative, there to hold the lamp that shines its light on Mary," (13) echoes the subservient position Mary Gulliver

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<sup>14</sup> Alison Fell, *The Mistress of Lilliput; or, The Pursuit* (London: Doubleday, 1999)

<sup>15</sup> Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision", *College English* 35.1 (1972) 18. Rpt in Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: W.W. Norton, 1979) 33. Quotations taken from the original article.

<sup>16</sup> Rich 18.

<sup>17</sup> Rich 19.

holds in relation to her husband in Swift's text. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Mary would never have thought of taking up the pen – nor indeed would Swift have dreamed of handing it over to her – and the passive exasperation expressed by Lady Mary in Fell's text reminds us of the silence often imposed upon women throughout the ages. Lady Mary pointedly comments that the reader should not "think for a moment (...) that a doll is a mere mannikin without eyes to see or ears to hear, nor that her humble status dooms her to dimwittedness. On the contrary, her very lowliness, as you will see, assures her of a privileged understanding" (14), remarks which can, of course, equally apply to women.

If, as Gilbert and Gubar maintain, the woman writer suffers from an "anxiety of authorship", because she "must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her" and who both "incarnate patriarchal authority (...and...) attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her sense of self--that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity",<sup>18</sup> then Alison Fell's text can be read as an example of the "revisionary process" that the female author must undertake "not against her male predecessor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*."<sup>19</sup> Where the other texts studied here maintain tight intertextual links to *Gulliver's Travels*, Fell's rewriting takes Swift's work as a starting point and then commences what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has termed "writing beyond the ending", that is to say "the transgressive invention of narrative strategies ... that express critical dissent from dominant narrative."<sup>20</sup> As the title of her text indicates, Fell is engaged upon a "pursuit", not so much following after Swift, but pursuing her own individual literary aims.

In Fell's text, Mary Gulliver is also in pursuit – of her husband. The re-emplotting of *Gulliver's Travels* portrays Lemuel as so disturbed after his experiences in Houyhnhnmland that his doctor determines to shut him away in Bedlam, provoking Gulliver's flight and Mary's decision to follow him, "to the South Seas if necessary." (57) Setting sail on the aptly-named *Aphrodite*, shipwrecked and washed ashore in Lilliput, Mary does follow in Gulliver's footsteps, but in so doing she discovers the destruction her husband has wreaked upon the countries he visited. The Lilliputian economy is still recovering from his visit and from the costs of feeding and clothing him, so the inhabitants bind Mary as they had done her husband, before sentencing her to death, a form of punishment "by proxy" (102) for their straightened circumstances. The effects of Gulliver's stay are palpable and potentially lethal: the Lilliputians threaten Mary not with tiny, inoffensive arrows, but with a firing squad whose muskets are modelled on "Mr Gulliver's pocket-pistols." (98) Mary is reprieved but whereas Lemuel took great (typically masculine?) pride in his size, Mary experiences culpable concern at her potential for destruction. She sets her mind to "the reparations she might propose to the wronged citizens of Lilliput. If the husband had eaten the country out of house and home, then the wife would employ her strength and ingenuity to restore the economy." (105) Mary devises elaborate plans for planting, harvesting, damming, irrigation, fishing, milling, manufacturing, mining and ship-building: "Thus Poverty would be replaced by Plenty, and starvation by satisfaction, and the debt her husband had incurred would be discharged with interest." (105). The tale thus shows Mary as embarking on a veritable re-visiting of the locations explored by Gulliver and Swift, allowing Fell to raise questions that were minor, or missing, in the earlier text.

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<sup>18</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Blau duPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending : Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 5.



These issues include love and sex, which come to occupy a key position in Fell's text. The Lilliputians exploit their uninvited guest, although not in the practical way she hopes. In fact, they decide to generate revenue by displaying her in a Popular Pleasure-Palace. Mary is bathed, primed and put on show in diaphanous garb, but she sees her humiliation as penance for the sexual appetites and desires she felt during her marriage to Gulliver, which her husband condemned as wickedly immodest and unladylike. In the suitably-named Pleasure-Palace, Mary becomes the focus of attention for the young roués of the Queen Bee Club, who set themselves the challenge of moving the giant woman to sexual ecstasy. They succeed, and Mary thus experiences both the gratification that her repressive husband denied her and a form of rebirth, for she is "restored to herself, knit newly, as it were, by Cupid's skilful hand, all formed and framed and fully fashioned." (162) Why pursue a husband who forbids such enjoyable realities, wonders Mary: "What am I seeking that I have not found?" (162)

The subheading to the following chapter includes the words "Mary's Liberation": these apply not only to her escape from the Pleasure Palace but also to her newfound freedom from the hypocritical constraints of her marriage to Lemuel. Mary is finally reunited with her husband on the hospital island of Ogé: in his folly, Gulliver believes he is the director and tries to cure his fellow patients of their delusions by means of purified water. Mary rejects his proposal to carry out this 'research' together in a platonic working relationship, preferring the love and happiness offered by the French naturalist Antoine Duchesne. Fell's tale mingles fact and fiction here, for it was Duchesne (1747-1827), a brilliant botanist and precursor of Darwin, who made the crucial discovery that strawberry plants can be unisexual as well as bisexual. In Fell's text, his fictional quest to find male partner plants in order to breed strawberries runs parallel to Mary's efforts to find her husband, which then evolve into a voyage of self-discovery and sexual liberation and culminate in her happy union with the Frenchman. Mary's growing realisation, that she had "rather be a foolish fleshly woman than a perfect paragon" (334) leads her to the freedom that she was hitherto denied: "In freedom try, and lose or win, in freedom love or hate! Oh thrilling thought which, alchemistic, might transform her!" (337) Indeed, unlike the passive figure of earlier texts, Fell's heroine plays a decisive part in the narrative and therefore, we are to believe, in natural history: when Duchesne is put on trial for having taken water from a neighbour's well to irrigate his seedlings, Mary swiftly acts to save his plants, hiding one precious strawberry in her doll's nether regions and thereby allowing her lover to realise his plans for extensive breeding of the plants in France.

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From Pope's clichéd burlesque epistle through to Fell's ebullient account of woman's rebirth and emancipation, the presentation and representation of Mary Gulliver offer a glimpse of changing attitudes towards women and literature. Re-visiting a canonic text like *Gulliver's Travels*, in which the female protagonist does not even have a voice, provides an opportunity for authors – and especially women writers – to take matters into their own hands, addressing the issues that remain ignored in the hypotext. It is surely significant that the most successful of these works is that of a female writer. Over the centuries, Mary Gulliver progressively liberates herself from the constraints imposed by society, and so, too, does Alison Fell free herself from the shadow of Jonathan Swift, thereby accomplishing a true re-vision of his text and simultaneously offering her heroine a chance to be born anew.