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Eighteenth Century Literature

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Explore the concept of “surface” in the texts you have studied.

A “surface” is defined as “the outside part or uppermost layer of something” (OED); therefore, virtually anything can be considered as a “surface” within eighteenth century literature. Surfaces can be physical, for example the description of a dressing table, or figurative, like the satirical surface layer of an underlying political or social commentary. Furthermore, “layer” suggests the potential for comparative, illusory and reflective readings of the surfaces within texts because it implies depth. In light of these potential readings, this essay will explore skin as a multi-functional surface predominantly in Book IV of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), with reference to Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729), and in relation to J. Douglas Canfield’s suggestion that: “we [the reader] pass through Swift’s bizarre […] funhouse of satiric mirrors on the way to greater self-knowledge” (18). The idea of “self-knowledge” parallels Gulliver’s “voyages of self-discovery [towards] ‘thoroughly understanding Human Nature’” (Canfield 15), and “Human Nature” is significant because this essay argues the human as the object, and skin as the surface (or “satiric mirror”) which enables a greater understanding of human nature across both texts.

In *Gulliver’s Travels* (*GT*)*,* skin frequently functions as a comparative surface and Gulliver assesses the colour, texture and complexion of the people he meets in relation to the people he knows. For Gulliver: “the fair skins of […] *English* Ladies” (*GT* 83), are indicative of human nature; clarity of complexion is positively correlated with civility in the text. The ‘smoother,’ ‘fairer,’ and ‘whiter’ the skin is, the closer “Human Nature” appears to be; however, *appear* is significant as Swift’s “funhouse satiric mirrors” warp this comparative measure in Book IV when Gulliver sees his own image reflected in the skin of the Yahoos. Therefore, this essay will be structured to mirror the progression of Gulliver’s understanding of human nature as it is shown to develop in relation to skin as a multi-functional surface. Firstly skin will be considered as a projective surface (clothes as a skin), followed by skin as an industrial surface (skin as clothes) and finally skin as a reflective surface (Swift’s “satiric mirrors”). I will conclude with the suggestion that skin is “the glass of the satirist” (Canfield 18), a facilitating surface through which human nature can be accessed.

As this essay considers the textual human as the object, clothes function as the outermost surface. Clothing can be interpreted as a projective skin, presenting an image of human design, which covers the literal surface of the human body. Clothes feature in this figurative capacity in Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels,* as is evidenced by Gulliver’s Houyhnhnm master who is “most perplexed about [Gulliver’s] Cloathes, reasoning sometimes with himself, whether they were a Part of [Gulliver’s] Body” (*GT* 218). This cognitive disjunction is understandable because clothing is an alien concept amongst the Houyhnhnms, who are accustomed to the exposed surface of bodies; therefore, it is unsurprising that Gulliver’s figurative and literal skin are assimilated as composite parts of his physical body. Clearly, the Houyhnhnms also utilise skin as a comparative surface to identify the Yahoo in Gulliver through the resemblance of his exposed skin and the Yahoos’. Gulliver’s clothes clearly problematize the Houyhnhnms’ straightforward categorisation of Gulliver as a Yahoo; however, Gulliver eventually understands the Houyhnhnms’ confusion, admitting that: “without my Covering, I was an exact *Yahoo* in every Part, only of a whiter Colour [and] less hairy” (*GT* 254). The realisation “I was an exact *Yahoo*” corresponds to Kathleen M. Williams’ assertion that: “Men are creatures “pretending to reason” (199), because it poses the proverbial idea that ‘clothes make the man’. The similarities between the skins of man and Yahoo suggest that the pretence at reason materialises through the adoption of clothing as a distinguishing outer-skin, projective of human identity. Gulliver’s ‘covering’ functions in this manner as the projective surface which protects his image as a man whilst concealing the skin that condemns him as a creature/Yahoo.

The concept of clothing as a projective outer-skin, conveying the image of ‘reasoning man’ and distinguishing humans from animals, also features in *A Modest Proposal* (*MP*). However, it is the lack of clothing which is significant and prompts the question: “as things now stand, how [will they] be able to find […] raiment for a hundred thousand useless […] backs” (*MP* 25). The language “useless backs” is dehumanising because it breaks down a hundred thousand *human* bodies into redundant parts. Furthermore, the want of clothing reduces these bodies to ‘creatures’ who cannot claim to reason as men do because they lack the material outer-skin required to position themselves above animals. Robert Phiddian supports this argument, similarly focusing on the reductionist tone of the text, he suggests: “there is something of *King Lear’s* savage vision of “unaccommodated man” as no more than “a poor, bare, forked animal” about the anatomical minimalism of […] “a round Million of Creatures in human Figure” (615). Williams’ idea that “men are creatures ‘pretending to reason,’” is reinforced by the depiction of a “million creatures in human figure,” because the concept of clothes fabricating reason unites both texts; however, the pretences of these “creatures in human figure” are subsidiary because they lack the outer-skin which affords other men a claim to reason. Therefore, the “creatures’” attempts to become man, not *reasoning* man, materialise simply in the emulation of the human figure. The poor, in need of raiment, are effectively cast as the “bare” Yahoos of *A Modest Proposal*.

Continuing the theme of clothes as a surface which conceals man’s “bare” animal nature, Michael Alexander supports the argument for man as an animal first and a reasoning creature second, stating that: “Swift defined Man not as a rational animal but as an animal *capable* of reason” (188). Man and animal are interchangeable depending on circumstance and, in this context, the covering surface. For example, clothing as an outer-skin exemplifies the human animal’s ability to reason but cannot prevent its animal nature from surfacing. Indeed, in *A Modest Proposal* the narrator’s extreme “pretending to reason”[[1]](#footnote-1) is significant because it exposes how skin, as a comparative surface, can be exploited to establish a hierarchy which literally parallels nature’s food chain. The hierarchy is established through the dehumanisation of the poor and the propagation of cannibalism as a solution to societal issues. Similarly, *Gulliver’s Travels* poses genocide as a solution for the problems posed by the animalistic Yahoos; however, ironically this is proposed by the Houyhnhnms (horses) and is therefore a literal illustration of creatures pretending to reason. The Houyhnhnms’ reject their shared animal nature and project ‘creature’ status onto the Yahoos they enslave. The critical commentary underlying both texts is that hierarchies are established, and radical solutions proposed, when the inextricable link between human and animal nature is unacknowledged.

Nowhere is this hierarchical establishment more noticeable than through the utilisation of skin in industry across both texts. The concept of clothes as a figurative skin evolves and literal skin is transformed into the clothes that constitute the surface skin (projective of the image of reasoning man). The textual skin industry conveys the wearer’s dominion over the creature, or human, whose skin he wears. For example Gulliver’s body is “covered with an artificial Composure of the Skins and Hairs of other Animals” (*GT* 254), which is a material expression of man’s dominion over animals because their skins are treated as a utility. In an attempt to be recognised as a reasoning creature in the Land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver translates this logic of dominance into the desire to commodify the skins of the Yahoos: “[Gulliver’s clothes] must be supplied by some Contrivance from the Hides of the Yahoos” (*GT* 220). It is not sufficient for Gulliver simply to dress to indicate superior reasoning, it must be displayed physically through wearing the Yahoos’ skin. Gulliver’s ambitions are realised and the Yahoos’ hairs and “the Skins of Yahoos, dried in the Sun” (*GT* 258), are used to cover his room and repair his shoes.

Skin features similarly as a commodity in the lucrative industry suggested by *A Modest Proposal,* apparently hinged on the warped utilitarian principles of ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’. The principles are warped because the narrator dehumanises the hundred thousand bodies (the greatest number), that it proposes undergo commodification in order to “contribute […] to the cloathing of many thousands” (*MP* 7); however, the “many thousands” are significantly affluent in contrast to the “useless” hundred thousand the text recognises as lacking raiment. Alexander addresses this commodification of skin as an “[exposure of] the inhumanity of emerging forms of rational simplification” (187), an idea that is elaborated in Patrick Kelly’s essay *“Swift on Money and Economics”* which evaluates the proposed utility of skin in socio-economic terms: “the projector’s research into potential markets [including] profitable side-products such as fine leather for ladies’ gloves and gentleman’s boots” (139). Kelly’s language ‘potential,’ ‘profitable,’ and ‘products’ – is economic rather than emotive and matches the reductionist style of *A Modest Proposal,* which inhumanely “solves a human problem by an economic calculus which ignores human love and treats the poor as cattle” (Alexander 187). In many respects this parallels the disjuncture between the physical body and reason in the text, akin to Swift’s understanding of Man as an animal who is *capable* of reason, because the proposal is animalistic; perhaps modelling an animal’s attempt at reason – “human love” is disregarded and the poor are commodified “cattle”. Furthermore, the “profitable side-products” are hypothetically fashioned from human skin: “flea the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentleman” (*MP* 14). The proposal is sound of reason yet, when the reader translates the idea onto a bodily surface, it is intuitively rejected. Indeed, the reduction of human to skin and carcass, in conjunction with the prospective wealthy consumers, is significant because it establishes a corresponding economic hierarchy which correlates money and bodily value. Indeed, money affords the clothes which fabricate ‘reason’, and ultimately humanity, as an outer-most skin. In contrast, those who cannot afford the outer-skin of ‘reason/man’ only have the ‘animal’ surface skin of the physical body to trade and contradict “reason” with.

Furthermore, the performativity of clothing as a projective outer-surface further complicates the relationship between man and animal. Whilst Phiddian points out that the “flaying of the carcass and the leather-work are Swiftian” (611), the deeper implications of skin in industry, the literal skin becoming the figurative skin, are not explored. It would seem that wearing clothes made from skin represents dominance at surface level over the skinned creature; however, does this always mean dominion? For example, the material skin Gulliver furnishes to indicate his superiority over the Yahoos, and to cover the skin which affiliates him with them, could be read as a further distortion of the boundaries between Gulliver and the creatures he wants to distinguish himself from. In conjunction with the fact that Gulliver “had […] concealed the secret of [his] dress, in order to distinguish [himself], as much as possible, from that cursed race of Yahoos” (*GT* 220), it can be suggested that Gulliver inadvertently accepts the similarities between man and animal by assuming the skin of the Yahoos which, contrary to projecting reason, reflects his animal nature.

Further reinforcing this argument, Atticus Finch’s figurative suggestion in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), is directly applicable: “you never really understand a person until […] you climb into his skin and walk around in it,” (Lee 31), because Gulliver literally enacts the suggestion by walking in shoes made of Yahoo skin. It is of critical significance that this precedes Gulliver’s realisation that he is a Yahoo. Similarly, the concept of the wealthy wearing clothes literally made of the poor, specifically the gloves which facilitate skin-to-skin contact, can be read as signifying no physical difference between the classes. Indeed, it is only the artificial decoration on the gloves which signifies the dominion of the wealthy over the commodified poor. The close fitting nature of a glove made from skin suggests an assimilation of human flesh, which can be read as the “most complete identification,” between two bodies (Frye 213).

However, just as assuming the skin of another, as a projective surface, problematizes the distinction, or lack thereof, between the wearer and the worn, the desire to conceal skin (reflective of true nature) poses the question of why skin is so discomfiting a surface. Canfield argues that in “part IV Gulliver seems to be travelling into the remote regions of the inner self” (17); however, it is how this “inner self” is accessed that is interesting in terms of understanding “Human Nature”. This leads on to the suggestion that skin functions in the text as a “satiric mirror” by reflecting human nature, and helping to enable Gulliver’s understanding of the “inner self,” or his “gradual identification with the Yahoos” (Canfield 18). This reinforces the earlier idea of skin as a comparative surface being reflective of intrinsic nature and is reaffirmed by Roland M. Frye who argues that “the most definite and most complete identification of the Yahoo and Gulliver is in terms of the flesh” (213). Nowhere is this flesh recognition, which implies skin as a reflective surface, more clearly illustrated than when the female Yahoo recognises Gulliver as a potential mate (*GT* 248-49).

The female Yahoo’s identification is based on the similarity between the Yahoos’ and Gulliver’s exposed skin and, gradually, this understanding becomes reciprocal. However, Gulliver’s realisation has greater significance in terms of understanding “Human Nature” because in recognising the similarities between his “inner self” and the Yahoos, they become “an evolutionary possibility for the degenerate nature of man” (Canfield 18). The idea of ‘evolutionary possibility’ and the ‘degenerate man’ is interesting because evolution traditionally implies progress and the Yahoos would be a regression – a devolutionary prospect; however, if skin is the satiric mirror through which Gulliver sees “Human Nature” reflected then it can be argued the Yahoos reflect his own ‘degenerate nature’. Indeed, this argument is supported by Michael Seidel in “Strange Dispositions: Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels”*:

As a traveller who has made proximity to nature’s creatures a perfectible ideal, [Gulliver] is spoiled by his proximate status as a degenerate Yahoo […] Seeing extensive imperfection and degeneration in the world is discomfiting enough for Gulliver, but seeing how his own body shapes his nature as a Yahoo renders him mindless. (77).

This passage is of significant critical importance in relation to the idea of skin as a reflective surface. Seidel’s labelling of the “degenerate Yahoo” parallels Canfield’s description of the “degenerate nature of man,” and reinforces the argument that “if there is any direction in which mankind is evolving, it is not up but down into “perfect” Yahoos” (Canfield 19). Furthermore, Frye’s assertion that the most distinctive assimilation of Gulliver and the Yahoos is through the flesh/skin, is reinforced by the fact that it is Gulliver’s physical body that “shapes his nature as a Yahoo”. This suggests that a creature’s nature can emanate from its physical body (skin surface) and this resonates in the text: “The *Yahoos* were known to hate one another more than they did any different Species of Animals, and the Reason usually assigned was the odiousness of their own Shapes, which all could see in the rest but not in themselves” (*GT* 242). The idea that skin is a reflective surface is evidenced by the ability to “see in the rest” the physical attributes which signify the nature of the Yahoos. It is at skin surface level that Gulliver initially tries to distance himself from the Yahoos: “It was plain I must be a perfect *Yahoo*; but that I differed very much from the rest of my Species, in the Whiteness, and Smoothness of Skin” (*GT* 221). *A Modest Proposal* is paralleled here because in the same way there is an understanding that the bodies proposed for consumption belong to the same species as the narrator, Gulliver accepts he belongs to the same species as the Yahoos but consciously attempts to position himself above them as superior. This disassociation is attempted by, once again, using skin as a comparative surface, the “Whiteness, and Smoothness of [Gulliver’s] skin,” distinguishes him; however, simultaneously problematizes what it means to be a “perfect” Yahoo.

If a “perfect” Yahoo is how Gulliver comes to understand “Human Nature” and his “inner self,” then a “perfect Yahoo” must be a man. However, if Swift’s definition of ‘Man’ is as an animal *capable* of reason then by logical extension the Yahoos also meet this criteria. Again, this is evidenced by the episode with the female Yahoo (an animal) who assaults Gulliver only after recognising herself reflected in Gulliver’s exposed skin; a recognition that requires a level of reasoning. However, the reverse can also be argued that a “perfect Yahoo” is a creature without reason. Seidel’s suggestion that Gulliver is rendered “mindless” when he recognises how he physically resembles a Yahoo, in conjunction with Williams’ idea of “men [being] creatures “pretending to reason””, has significant implications. To pretend to reason requires a mind; therefore a ‘mindless’ man is a creature and creatures who do not ‘pretend to reason’ are not men; the human/creature distinction is dissolved. This is conveyed through Gulliver’s inadvertent imitation of Yahoo behaviour: “When I happened to behold the Reflection of my own Form in a Lake or Fountain, I turned away my Face in Horror and detestation of my self, and could better endure the Sight of a Common *Yahoo*, than of my own Person” (*GT* 260). Just as the Yahoos are unable to endure the sight of one another, Gulliver is unable to accept the sight of his own skin. The lake and fountain function as “satiric mirrors” which facilitate Gulliver’s hatred of his own skin, prompting the conclusion that whether men are truly Yahoos, or Yahoos are truly men, as the “glass of the satirist” skin is a surface reflective of the “inner self” that allows Gulliver to recognise the degenerate nature of both.

In conclusion, Swift’s textual “satiric mirrors” (skin as a reflective and comparative surface) facilitate Gulliver’s understanding of “Human Nature” as a fluctuation between base animal and an ability to reason that distinguishes mankind. The argument presented in this essay, that human nature can be accessed through the multi-functional surface of skin, is surmised by Gulliver’s final resolution: “to behold [his] Figure often in a Glass, and thus if possible habituate [himself] by Time to tolerate the Sight of a human Creature” (*GT* 276), because it suggests that literal glass mirrors afford a distancing comfort, and an intermediary reflective surface between Gulliver and reality. In contrast, the skin-to-skin ‘sight’ of other humans, which is facilitated by the more powerful “satiric mirror” of skin as a reflective surface, does not afford Gulliver this distancing luxury. Furthermore, this essay has explored how material surfaces; clothes as an outer-skin and skin as clothes, contribute to warping skin’s standardised use as a comparative surface. The illusory and condemning qualities of skin as a surface have also been explored in relation to the projection of illusory status/nature, and how this can propagate the establishment of hierarchies at the expense of the skin covering the bodies of Phiddian’s “anatomically minimalized”.

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1. *A Modest Proposal* satirises Enlightenment ideals by manipulating the principles of reason and empiricism to the extreme to demonstrate how any proposal can be logically justified. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)