

## ON TALKING-HORSES; Barefoot and bit-free

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*"It were happy if we studied Nature more in natural things, and acted according to Nature, whose rules are few, plain, and most reasonable."*

- William Penn

Professor Leo Damrosch in his illuminating introduction to the 1999, Signet Classic edition of Swift's satire on human nature, now known as 'Gulliver's Travels', wrote:

*"In 1726, a book was published in London entitled 'Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World', ostensibly written 'by Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of several Ships.' Only a few intimate friends knew that the real author was Dr. Jonathan Swift, the distinguished Dean of the Anglican St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin."*

Many articles have been written about 'Gulliver's Travels' but I doubt whether anyone has previously focused attention on the two references in 'Gulliver's Travels' to the disease of founder in the horse. Nevertheless, supporters of the natural horse movement will probably agree that Jonathan Swift's comments on founder, horseshoes and related matters of horse and human welfare are even more relevant now than they were in the eighteenth century.

During his voyage to Laputa, the Flying or Floating Island (an early concept of a space ship) Gulliver visited the Grand Academy of Lagado. This is the research institute best known in literature for the research project of one of its 'projectors' to extract sunbeams from cucumbers. As part of his tour, Gulliver was introduced to *'the universal artist'*. This rather sorry creature *"had been 30 years employing his thoughts for the improvement of human life. He had two large rooms full of wonderful curiosities, and fifty men at work. Some were condensing air into a dry tangible substance, ... others softening marble for pillows and pin-cushions; others petrifying the hoofs of a living horse to preserve them from foundering."* Swift was here poking fun at members of the newly formed Royal Society in London but his serious purpose was to question the uses to which science was being put and to question the value of some of the early experiments in science.

Curiously, the 'universal artist's' third experiment has been shown, with the passage of time, to be less bizarre than Jonathan Swift intended. Because only 75 years after the publication of Gulliver's Travels, Bracy Clark, one of the first graduates of the Royal Veterinary College in London, was to start publishing the

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results of his research on the horse's hoof. Clark demonstrated that by removing a horse's shoes, nature is enabled – given time - to harden the hoof capsule so that it is more rock-like (petrous) yet at the same time to retain for the hoof as a whole its natural and necessary elasticity. The same results were arrived at more recently, and quite independently, by Dr. Hiltrud Strasser of Germany, whose work both supports and significantly extends that of Bracy Clark. Strasser has shown that a natural process with features not so far removed from petrification does indeed preserve the hoof from founder.

In a later voyage, Captain Lemuel Gulliver found himself in the country of the Houyhnhnms (pronounced 'whinnims' as in whinnying); a country governed by "*those excellent quadrupeds*" the talking horses. The Houyhnhnm's slaves were the beastly Yahoos, a disgusting animal that - Gulliver was obliged to admit - bore an embarrassingly close resemblance to the human animal. In explaining to the Master Houyhnhnm what he, Gulliver, thought was a different relationship between horses and humans in his country, Jonathan Swift gave a tongue-in-cheek account of horse husbandry in his homeland. Gulliver owned "*that the Houyhnhnms among us, whom we called horses, were the most generous and comely animals we had, that they excelled in strength and swiftness; and when they belonged to persons of quality, employed in travelling, racing or drawing chariots, they were treated with much kindness and care, till (emphasis added) they fell into diseases or became foundered in the feet; and then they were sold, and used to all kinds of drudgery until they died; after which their skins were stripped and sold for what they were worth, and their bodies left to be devoured by dogs and birds of prey. But the common race of horses had not so good fortune, being kept by farmers and carriers, and other mean people, who put them to great labour, and fed them worse. I described, as well as I could, our way of riding, the shape and use of a bridle, a saddle, a spur, and a whip, of harness and wheels. I added that we fastened plates of a certain hard substance called iron at the bottom of their feet, to preserve their hoofs from being broken by the stony ways on which we often travelled.*"

By contrast, the Master Houyhnhnm described for Gulliver how the "*Houyhnhnms train up their youth to strength, speed and hardiness, by exercising them (barefoot) in running races up and down steep hills, and over hard stony grounds; and when they (are) all in a sweat they are ordered to leap head over ears into a pond or river.*" Students of Swift's classic may wonder on what grounds I have had the temerity to insert the word 'barefoot' in parenthesis. The text does not state this in so many words but it is implied by the story. When Gulliver first met and was inspected by the Houyhnhnms he reported that "*The gray steed rubbed my hat all round with his right-fore hoof, and discomposed it so much that I was forced to adjust it better, by taking it off, and settling it again.*" Had the steed been shod, such a gesture would surely have caused Gulliver grievous bodily harm, rather than mere sartorial discomfort.

Gulliver recorded that the Houyhnhnms *“are subject to no diseases, and can therefore have no need of physicians. However, they have excellent medicines composed of herbs, to cure accidental bruises and cuts in the pastern or frog of the foot by sharp stones, as well as other maims and hurts in several parts of the body.”*

In this last passage Swift was implying that most diseases of the domestic horse were the fruits of man’s domestication of the horse, and that if only horses were permitted to live more natural lives, there would be precious little need for veterinarians. This is an opinion with which I am in full agreement, and would only add that the same applies to all domestic animals, particularly all pedigreed (inbred) domestic animals. Back home from his years of travels, Gulliver resolved to lament the brutality to Houyhnhnms in his own country and to always treat the whole Houyhnhnm race with respect. Rather than live with his Yahoo family, he chose to live in the stable with his two horses.

Had he been living today, someone as perceptive and iconoclastic as Jonathan Swift would surely have questioned Gulliver’s wisdom in imprisoning his horses in a stable. Swift was obviously as powerful an advocate for the correct treatment of horses by man as he was for the more general ‘*amendment*’ of humanity. However, in a sorrowful letter to his publisher, Captain Gulliver laments that he undertook such an ambitious task, knowing as he did that *“the Yahoos were a species of animals utterly incapable of amendment by precepts or examples: and so it hath proved; ... (for) behold, after above six months warning, I cannot learn that my book has produced one single effect according to my intentions.”*

It is of interest that, when Swift invented a species of talking horse, it did not speak any language known to man. When Gulliver first arrived in the country of the Houyhnhnms he wisely decided to learn their language, after which he was able to discover a great deal about them and to communicate successfully with them, much to his advantage and greatly to his education. In recent years we have become increasingly aware of our need to do the same with our own excellent quadrupeds. Horses do not speak our verbal language but speak they most certainly do, with a body language that is, for them, quite as eloquent as anything we Yahoos produce with our voices. It is undoubtedly our duty to learn their language and to listen carefully. For example, they are telling us that not only do they not need iron clamps on their hoofs or steel rods in their mouths but that they can perform much better for us if these impediments are removed. The reasons for this are explained in some of our present day ‘floating islands’ such as, [www.thehorseshoof.com](http://www.thehorseshoof.com) and [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com). The reasons should not astonish, for - as Aristotle remarked - “If one way be better than another, that you may be sure is Nature’s way.