

**PART II**

**Novels and short stories**

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## 8

# FROM “CHANGELINGS” TO “LIBTARDS”

## Intellectual disability in the eighteenth century and beyond

*D. Christopher Gabbard*

The word “idiot” serves a powerful rhetorical function. This is the term we must use when speaking about a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the long eighteenth century, although it is an imperfect fit. It circulates today as a ubiquitous slur, one that is considered socially acceptable in many quarters. Calling someone an “idiot” (or a synonym) frequently serves the triple purposes of silencing, delegitimizing, and dehumanizing. To insult someone’s intelligence in this way is “to go for the jugular” because most of us think of ourselves as being smart. Ridicule regarding a lack of cognitive fitness is particularly potent in the political sphere. In the United States, some conservatives refer to progressives as “libtards” – a portmanteau word obviously combining “liberal” and “retard.” On the other side, the left-leaning and widely syndicated cartoonist Rall followed the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush with a strip lampooning him and his conservative supporters as delayed learners. Polemical invective of this sort implicitly calls upon opponents to return to private life and shut up because their poor mental function disqualifies them from participating in public affairs.

Ad hominem political attack citing low intelligence, while certainly an old practice, is one that gained traction at a particular point in history, and that point is roughly the time of the philosopher John Locke. During the final decades of the seventeenth century, “changeling” was a term carrying connotations roughly akin to “idiot,”<sup>1</sup> and, according to social historian C. F. Goodey, Locke himself partook in this rhetorical practice, often leaving “his reader to infer [that his] conservative [Tory] opponents too are changelings” (324). Prior to Locke, the term “idiot” was not as intensely pejorative as it would become. Calling someone an idiot carried less sting; condemning someone for cowardice, dishonor, or damnation wounded more deeply. This was so because, in matters of early modern identity, possessing intelligence mattered less than having honor or a prospect of an afterlife in heaven. To trace how “idiot” developed into a harshly uncomplimentary expression, this chapter will explore two interrelated developments, the rise of the intelligence society and the progression of secular demonization as a socially acceptable response to the cognitively “other.” A number of literary texts in the long eighteenth century both fashioned and reflected these developments, and in this regard the current chapter will examine aspects of William Wycherley’s comedy *The Country Wife* (1675); Daniel Defoe’s treatise on Peter the Wild Boy, *Mere Nature Delineated* (1726); and Frances Burney’s novel *Camilla* (1796). This chapter also will look at two texts that called these interrelated developments into

question, Anne Finch's poem "The Introduction" (1713) and Jonathan Swift's satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726/35).

### Status idiocy and functional idiocy

Critical disability studies challenges us to uncover what was at stake with regard to the concept of idiocy and to identify the purposes it served in the cultural imagination. At one time the words "idiocy" and "idiot" together were associated with two distinct categories of meaning, both of which entered the English language at the beginning of the fifteenth century, although each had a separate prehistory going back to ancient times.

Looking in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find that the first sense of "idiocy" has to do with status and is one no longer in use, having fallen out of circulation by the nineteenth century. This signification involves social status: an idiot according to this definition was determined to be so by his or her place in society. An idiot according to this meaning would be a private person who was unskilled, uneducated, and/or unsophisticated and whose mental shortcoming would be understood as ignorance ("Idiot" n.1., a, b, & c). This understanding of the term had its roots in ancient Greek, with the original term designating a private citizen as opposed to a public official. In Latin, "idiota" took on the meanings of "uneducated," "ignorant," and "common" ("idiota"). A vestige of this first sense of "idiot" remains in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606): the titular character speaks of "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.29–31). The "idiot" here refers to a person lacking professional training or skill, perhaps an apprentice actor (Jarrett and Goodey 123). When Samuel Johnson in his 1755 *Dictionary* defined "idiocy" simply as a "want of understanding," he was invoking this first denotation. "Idiot" and "idiocy" were often used to speak about unskilled workers, landless laborers, laymen, and servants. Status idiocy carried with it the late medieval idea that the broad population of illiterate and poor constituted an idiotic mass (Jarrett and Goodey 127). The laboring poor of the countryside were often described in this way, a meaning that Marx and Engels perpetuate in their phrase "the idiocy of rural life" (Tucker 477).

The second sense of "idiocy" is functional idiocy, and the word still circulates with this meaning, although it is not considered acceptable. This has to do with a hopeless and profound inability to navigate the world due to mental processing flaws, an inherent constitutional inability to carry out basic life-supporting activities ("Idiot" n.2., a & b). This sense has roots in the jurisprudence of the Middle Ages: G. E. Berrios writes that, in medieval court records, this sort of idiocy was "associated with qualifiers such as congenital and irreversible" and concerned fitness to inherit property (226).<sup>2</sup> While it is true that this sense conveyed an abject air, confusion swirled around the condition for which it stood. At the start of the long eighteenth century, functional idiocy was not infrequently attributed to individuals living with impairments that today would not be associated with congenital or acquired poor intellectual processing. For example, Simon Jarrett and C. F. Goodey write that the "most extreme and enduring image of the [functional] idiot body and its incontinence was the gaping, driveling mouth" (128). A "driveling mouth" actually indicates something different: it has to do with the spasticity brought about by cerebral palsy, a condition not always accompanied by cognitive impairment. However, because cerebral palsy itself would not be named and studied until the early 1800s, it was conflated in earlier times with functional idiocy. Similarly, those who were born blind or deaf were generally thought to be functional idiots, although with the spread of Enlightenment ideas these stereotypes underwent reexamination (Tunstall 79–80; Lindgren 98–102).

A striking example of lumping an unrelated impairment together with functional idiocy is the case of Samuel Johnson, who apparently lived with Tourette syndrome, a condition not

identified during his lifetime (Davis 55). Johnson’s initial biographer, James Boswell, records that the first time the painter William Hogarth met Johnson, in 1739, he saw a man “shaking his head and rolling himself about in a strange, ridiculous manner,” and concluded that Johnson “was an idiot, whom his relations had put under the care of Mr. [Samuel] Richardson” (255). Hogarth’s opinion instantly changed, however; as soon as Johnson started speaking he “displayed such a power of eloquence, that Hogarth looked at him with astonishment, and actually imagined that this idiot had been at the moment inspired” (255). When Hogarth observed Johnson for the first time and took him to be an “idiot,” the former mistook the latter’s Tourette syndrome to be an abject form of idiocy. While Johnson – as well as the blind, deaf, and spastic – over time would be cleared of the automatic charge of functional idiocy, the charge itself would gain potency as an aspersion indicating extreme social worthlessness.

### The intelligence society

By the middle of the eighteenth century, idiocy in the sense of functionality was supplanting the meaning associated with status. It is one of the contentions of this chapter that Britain’s transformation from a feudal to an emerging capitalist economy promoted the currency of “idiot” and “idiocy” in the second sense. The impetus behind this though was more than just economic. The rise of the new economic order was interconnected with the advent of the public sphere, which itself was integral to a far reaching social and cultural development, the Enlightenment. A component of the Enlightenment was the ascendance of what Goodey calls the intelligence society. In *A History of Intelligence* (2011), Goodey maps out how, from the late medieval period to the late seventeenth century, the individual’s perceived possession of intelligence rose in social value vis-à-vis traditional status-bidding claims such as those linked with honor and lineage (aristocratic noble birth) and with one’s state of grace – the prospect of religious salvation (103–24, 151–78, 313–46). Along with the slow but steady transition into modernity, intelligence began to matter more and more with regard to how power was distributed. Goodey does not use the word “meritocracy,” but it could be argued that the origins of the intelligence society served as the basis of democratic meritocracy, which is grounded in the ideology that the “best and the brightest” should rise to the top of society and make the major political decisions. While this transformation spanned beyond economic concerns, it strongly manifested itself in the world of commerce. The late seventeenth century was the period of emerging capitalism, and the growing bourgeoisie – merchants, international traders, and stock jobbers – were increasingly pointing to their own wealth acquisition as a sign of their superior intelligence. This definition of intelligence in effect allowed a larger pool of European males access to cultural (and literal) capital, but it was strategically developed to deny other people access to power.

For the embryonic intelligence society to establish its *raison d’être*, it needed an “other” against which to define itself, and this “other” was the real or imagined cognitively deficient person: the idiot, changeling, simpleton, or natural fool. Goodey contends that our contemporary concept of intellectual and developmental disabilities began to take shape at precisely the same historical moment that intelligence as a mode of social status bidding was becoming evident; the two concepts – intelligence and intellectual disability – were “mutually reinforcing” (1). Intelligence, Goodey argues, cannot be accepted as an unequivocal social good without the existence of a presumed intellectually deficient other, with the latter serving as a foil illustrating the superior value of the former (1–2). This mutual reinforcement provided a platform for “cognitive ableism,” which Licia Carlson defines as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of individuals who possess certain cognitive abilities (or the potential for them) against those who are believed not to actually or potentially possess them” (140). With the

gradual restructuring of society in the direction of privileging intelligence, cognitive ableism became pervasive.

Accompanying the elevation of the intelligence society were two questions: who was human? and who or what was an enemy of the human? The first question had to do with human identity: what made humans human? As Felicity Nussbaum observes of the long eighteenth century, “the emerging standards of what it means to be human...are increasingly articulated” (2). The late seventeenth century in particular was a period in which the notion that “the cognitive ability of our minds [a]s a defining quality of our species” was just becoming dominant (Martensen 144). In an era consumed by questions of the human, the idiot was viewed as marking a boundary in the cultural imagination between human and animal. The figure of the idiot was mobilized to demarcate the separation between a human “us” and a bestial “them.”

The second sense of “idiot” – functional idiocy – as it developed and was utilized over time, additionally had to do with the repurposing of older methods of societal exclusion, of turning opponents and members of an outgroup into pariahs. Old demons were being switched for new ones. Belief in the devil was going out of fashion among the educated elite (Muchembled 4, 171; Goodey 268), and the target of scapegoating and demonizing began shifting, with a new victim replacing the old: the functional idiot. In pre-modern times, a person or group would mark someone as a pariah by literally “demonizing” the individual, accusing the person of not being fully human because he or she was possessed – the devil had inhabited his or her body. With the new order, those with diminished mental capacity were taken to be not fully human because intelligence was more and more being recognized as a defining feature of the human. Consequently, where once the accusation of devil possession had served religiously oriented people as cause for a person’s ostracism, a new form of expulsion started taking its place, which will be called here (for want of a better phrase) “secular demonizing.” With an emergent cognitive ableism informing this stigmatizing process, idiocy became “the master trope of human disqualification” (Mitchell and Snyder 3). In summary, as intelligence rose as a vehicle for social-status bidding, people who were considered to be mentally deficient found themselves relegated to the bottom of society. Such individuals were compared to brutes, “animals with human form” (La Mettrie 38). This has remained true into the present day: people with intellectual and developmental disabilities continue to be, in Martin Halliwell’s phrase, the “degree zero of humanity” (51), or, in Janet Lyon’s, “the lowest rung.”

An early surfacing of the secular demonizing trope can be glimpsed in William Wycherley’s 1675 Restoration comedy *The Country Wife*. At the beginning of Act Two, Alithea and Sparkish, who are engaged, take part in a dialogue in which the former relays what Harcourt, who is also present in the scene, has said about Sparkish. According to Alithea’s report, Harcourt had earlier slandered Sparkish as “a senseless, driveling idiot” (2.1; 21). Because the audience recognizes that Sparkish is at worst an intellectually shallow man, Harcourt’s characterization seems excessive. If Harcourt had impugned the character of Sparkish to Alithea solely on the basis of her fiancé being a status idiot, that is, a man who was out of his league with regard to pursuing her and so should withdraw his affections, his message would have been sufficiently clear. He would have been telling Sparkish (indirectly through Alithea) that he should retire to a private sphere appropriate for a shallow-minded man. His use of the word “idiot” would call to mind status idiocy. However, he chose not to stop at categorizing him as such, instead using the modifying adjective “driveling.” This overstates the case, placing Sparkish squarely in the class of functional idiots. Without doubt he employs the hyperbolic visual description of Sparkish as a drooling imbecile to besmirch his romantic rival, but this caricature raises an interesting question: why resort to such a heavy handed affront? Why must Sparkish’s idiocy be of the abject rather than the private kind? The answer has to do with the fact that *The Country Wife* is a comedy of

wit (intelligence), and in it we witness in microcosm an intelligence society establishing the standards for who is to be included and excluded. In such a setting, a mocking gibe about a rival not having any intelligence whatsoever is the most cutting remark that can possibly be made. Harcourt intends to drive Sparkish off the stage in this comedy of intelligence by reducing him to the cognitively “other.”

Harcourt’s choice of words illustrates the coming trend: as intelligence begins to vie with the traditional status-bidding claims of lineage and salvation, accusations of mental incompetence (such as that made by Harcourt against Sparkish) come to serve the objective of ejecting targeted individuals (the Sparkishes of the world) from public space (in this case, from Alithea’s affections). This brief exchange in Act Two forces us to speculate that the first sense of “idiocy” (status) may have dropped out of circulation over time because the second sense of “idiocy” (function) subsumed it. Slowly but surely the second sense may have started to signify both private status and mental deficiency, with the suggestion being that cognitively impaired people should hide themselves in the private sphere: they should not come out into the open and attempt to participate in public affairs. If this speculation has merit, we can read Harcourt’s vitriol as conveying the double-barreled insinuation that the addressee of such a slight was cognitively deficient and that he should withdraw from public view.

This implication of Harcourt’s word “driveling” comes fully into the open in John Locke’s 1689 *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Locke’s philosophy regarding how the mind works helped establish a normative standard of human mental ability, leaving anything falling below this standard to be construed as a diminishment of fully human status (Simplician 25–46). As such, it is a text in which the secular demonizing of the cognitively “other” is particularly pronounced. In fact, Locke is the philosopher who poured accelerant on the idea of functional idiocy: he greatly contributed to turning “idiot” into a vehicle for nasty verbal abuse, doing so by frequently and derogatorily referencing the idiot’s close linguistic kin – the changeling. The changeling in Locke’s writing is a humanoid entity with an abysmally slow cognitive process: the “drivelling,” unintelligent, intractable changeling exhibits “a defect in the mind” and so serves as the perfect illustration of functional idiocy at its nadir (4.4.16; 571–72; emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> In Locke’s view, the changeling is subhuman, and, as such, instantiates the cognitive “other,” an entity so low in standing that perhaps it ought to be obliterated (454–55). Paul de Man notes that the way Locke presents the changeling figure becomes “powerfully coercive since it generates...the ethical pressure of such questions as ‘to kill or not to kill’” (40). This is to say that Lockean rhetoric centering around changelings becomes so provocative that the question arises as to whether they should even be allowed to live. Locke himself implicitly recruits the changeling figure for his polemics, for he “leaves his reader to infer [that his] conservative opponents too are changelings” (Goodey 324).<sup>4</sup>

### **Daniel Defoe’s *Mere Nature Delineated* and Frances Burney’s *Camilla***

Locke’s *Essay* greatly influenced Daniel Defoe, who produced a detailed description of a functional idiot in the 1726 treatise *Mere Nature Delineated: Or, A Body without a Soul*, a text in which he takes Peter the Wild Boy for his subject. In 1725, an illiterate and non-speaking homeless boy found living in a German forest was brought on the king’s order to the London court. The incongruity of this supposedly wild youth in such a polite environment aroused curiosity, comment, speculation, and amusement. In fact, “Peter’s presence in England was, as one observer put it, ‘more remarkable than the discovery of Uranus’” (Candland 10–11). Peter created a sensation because he was thought to be an exemplar of a wild child living in a “state of nature” – a “natural man” found not overseas but in the heart of Europe. Seventy years later, Dr. Jean-Marc

Itard would become famous for his efforts to train Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, a process that later came to be understood as a founding moment in the history of exceptional Peter, though, was an important precursor. His education was entrusted to the queen's physician, Dr. John Arbuthnot (a member of the Scriblerus Club), who, in contrast to Itard, kept no notes. A half-dozen tracts, mainly satires, soon appeared, and in the middle of 1726 Defoe published a book-length assessment. Defoe "was unusual in taking the case seriously – his contemporaries plainly regarded Peter as, first and foremost, a joke" (Newton 42–43). Defoe spends most of the piece satirizing not Peter but various sectors of society, particularly the learned, who believed they saw in the boy an instance of a human being living in a state of nature. Defoe begins his examination by stating his doubt that a naked adolescent could survive a week in the bitterly cold German forests, and he ultimately determines that Peter was a functional idiot abandoned by his family. The boy's failure to notice when he soiled his breeches indicated he was not the exemplar many believed him to be. Swift was particularly skeptical; after meeting Peter himself, he dryly observed, "I can hardly think him wild in the Sense they report him" (qtd. in Novak 139).

After meeting with the boy on several occasions, Defoe came to believe that Peter would never be able to speak, and this factor made all the difference; in this he was following the spirit of the age. As James Berger observes, the "impulse in Locke, Condillac, and other Enlightenment thinkers – quite evident in most philosophical responses to wild children and what today is known as IDD – was to regard language and socialization as the primary, or even the sole, determinants in subjectivity" (33). Speaking coherent language was the surest sign in eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture of full human status, and Peter, being nonverbal, fell short in this regard. Unlike Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* (1611), Peter could not so much as learn to curse. In Defoe's estimation, he was at best a failed Friday, the native islander in the novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), who is taught to speak English (Calder 150–52, 167). The title and subtitle Defoe selected for his 1726 treatise therefore are telling: Peter was "A Body without a Soul." At best, he was "Mere Nature," and these choices indicate an alteration from Defoe's earlier thinking, for in his 1697 *Essay on Projects* he had rejected "the notion that 'fools' have no soul" (Stainton 24). But by 1726, his views had changed, perhaps under the influence of Locke's *Essay*: while he pities the boy and argues that he should be treated humanely, he seems to have embraced a secular-demonizing view of mental deficiency, concluding that Peter was a quasi-human figure, not a full member of the human race.

Locke's influence as well as the tendency to engage in secular demonizing can also be detected in Frances Burney's 1796 novel *Camilla*. The titular hero's sister, Eugenia, is beloved by her family for her intelligence and sweetness. Through accident and illness her face and body have been disfigured and deformed, but because the family has concealed the extent of this aesthetic damage, she has remained unaware of this. When Eugenia eventually finds out, she falls into a depression. Attempting to see what "reason could urge" (310), her father takes her, in what amounts to a freak-show presentation, to view the spectacle of a young woman, the Beautiful Idiot. Among other things, the Beautiful Idiot drools: "The slaver driveled unrestrained from her mouth, rendering utterly disgusting a chin that a statuary might have wished to model" (309). Eugenia quickly discerns that the young woman is miserable, one minute throwing herself to the ground and sobbing, the next rising and bursting "into a fit of loud, shrill, and discordant laughter" (307). She subsequently strikes "her head with both her hands, making a noise that resembled nothing human" (310). Afterward Eugenia says, "O, my father!... Did you lead me thither purposely to display to me her shocking imbecility?" (310).

This scene featuring the Beautiful Idiot should be read in light of the work of the moral philosopher Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper). Writing many decades earlier, he

contended that appealing exterior physical qualities may make an individual attractive but that appearance was not enough: intelligence also had to be present. Just when we think we are appreciating a person’s beauty, he argued, we are really admiring “a mysterious expression and a kind of shadow of something *inward* in the temper” (qtd. in Joshua 56). Following this understanding, people with intellectual impairments thus could never be beautiful. Their exclusion from the realm of the aesthetically pleasing, according to Shaftesbury, had to do with their lack of a moral sense. Being able to practice virtue requires “a knowledge of right and wrong” and “a use of reason sufficient to secure a right application of the affections” (qtd. in Kelleher 79). Paul Kelleher sums up Shaftesbury’s thinking as follows: “[w]ithout enough reason, there is no access to the experience of moral beauty; without the ability to perceive the moral beauty of another’s (or one’s own) thoughts, affections, or actions, no virtue is possible” (79). Shaftesbury’s conclusion was that, no matter how appealing his or her looks, an idiot must be considered hideous: “All which is void of mind is horrid” (qtd. in Joshua 56). The Beautiful Idiot to whom Eugenia is exposed epitomizes just this sort of “horrid” mental deformity, and Kelleher argues that such deformed figures as this young woman served an ideological purpose: the rhetoric of deformity “makes possible the articulation of moral systems as such” (72). The deformed – whether in body or mind – provided a foundation for an ableist understanding of what living a moral life entailed. The Beautiful Idiot would be incapable of living a moral life and, therefore, was shut out from membership in the human race. Eugenia grasps the point of the lesson: after viewing the freak spectacle she acquiesces, and her father praises her for seeing “that beauty, without mind, is more dreadful than any deformity” (311). We as readers can infer from the scene that Burney shared the father’s and Eugenia’s antipathy toward the Beautiful Idiot and people like her. When this character strikes herself and makes “a noise that resembled nothing human” (310), a reader gains the sense that she is not human.

### Functional idiocy: gender and race

Locke’s changeling designation captures a broad spectrum of people, sweeping in various subaltern populations and all those with human shape who were presumed to lack the ability to think abstractly. In short, “an assortment of marginalized groups...are stigmatized because of their [supposedly] diminished human faculties” (Simplican 28). As a result, even as the intelligence society was gradually changing the groups of people in power (from clerics and aristocrats to members of the bourgeoisie), it was, in terms of race and gender, reinscribing the older power dynamics.

Anne Finch’s “The Introduction” (composed probably in the late 1690s but not published until 1713) contains a set of lines railing against the widespread assumption of female mental incapacity. Since the time of Aristotle, females had been deemed to be intellectually deficient due to their sex’s physiological constraints (Smith 467–78), and this view carried forward into the eighteenth century (McDonagh 102–12). Finch directly refers to this supposition in these lines:

How are we fall’n, fall’n by mistaken rules?  
And education’s, more than nature’s fools,  
Debarred from all improvements of the mind,  
And to be dull, expected and designed. (51–54)

Finch’s phrase “nature’s fools” is key because it goes directly to the issue of functional idiocy. The common assumption was that women were born with a dispositional intellectual inadequacy (nature’s fools), one that rendered them cognitively impaired, making all women

functional idiots as a matter of the ordinary course of things. Finch counters that this supposed innate mental inferiority stemmed rather from the structural inequality inherent in patriarchy. She protests that females are, if idiots at all, status idiots (“education’s...fools”) because social structures have forced them to be so. Finch’s point here is that educational opportunities should be opened to women so that they would no longer be idiots in either sense of the word. In her view, women had not yet benefited from the newly emerging intelligence society because they were not being allowed to join it. Finch’s protest poem indicates that, instead of casting aside the Aristotelian notion of women’s native intellectual inferiority, the new intelligence-driven regime was merely reinscribing existing hierarchies in order to maintain status-quo power dynamics.

In a similar way, people of color were also presumed to be functional idiots. In Defoe’s 1723 novel *Colonel Jack*, an exchange takes place between Colonel Jack and a slave master in which the former advises the latter to moderate his harsh management of African slaves (185). When the slave master responds that kindness is lost on “Negroes” (185), Jack replies:

“It may be true, sir, that there may be found here and there a *Negro* of a senceless, stupid, sordid Disposition, perfectly Untractable, undocible, and incapable of due Impressions; especially incapable of the Generosity of Principle which I am speaking of...if such a Refractory, undocible Fellow comes in our way, he must be dealt with first by the smooth ways, to Try him [kindness], then by the Violent way to Break his Temper, as they Break a Horse...” (185–86)

The racialized category of “savage” inherent in the passage’s language follows closely Locke’s description of changelings, indicating that Locke and Defoe were tapping into a common discursive thread. The slave master lumps all “Negroes” into Locke’s classification of changeling, while Jack, who, apprehending that Africans are “less than fully human,” is not nearly as dogmatic as his interlocutor. Neither character, however, entertains the possibility that Africans’ incorrigibility may stem not from any supposed innate mental inferiority but from the structural inequality inherent in the condition of slavery. Thus, while the emergence of intelligence society facilitated dramatic social change, the construct of intelligence was strategically defined to exclude nonwhite people.

### Lemuel Gulliver, cognitive ableist par excellence

In a 1725 letter to Pope, Swift protests against the “falsity of that definition *animal rationale*,” redefining the human as “*rationis capax*,” an animal capable of reason (“To Alexander Pope” 3.103). Rationality occurs in humans only from time to time and, even then, only for brief bursts. His formulation implicitly challenges Lockean epistemology, the emerging Enlightenment discourse of the perfectibility of “Man,” and the *raison d’être* of the intelligence society. Expanding upon this line of thinking is Part Four of his *Gulliver’s Travels*. As has been argued elsewhere, one would think that the secular demonizing of idiots that begins in earnest with the rise of the intelligence society would find its most scathing expression in the portrayal of the Yahoos – humanoids lacking the ability to reason. However, Swift, in a surprising move, turns the tables by demonizing the demonizer, making the book’s self-proclaimed intelligent protagonist and aspirant to the intelligence society, Lemuel Gulliver, the butt of the satire.

Gulliver reveals himself to be a cognitive ableist par excellence in his dealings with the Yahoos. His secular demonization of them could not be more intense, and the heatedness of his rejection of the Yahoos raises the question of whether they should be considered less than fully

human in the same manner that Locke categorized changelings as not being fully human. Part Four resists definitively answering the question of whether the Yahoos are animal or human; it is constructed rather to force readers to confront the cognitive “other” in the Yahoo and then ask themselves what they would do if they found themselves in such an ethically charged but uncertain situation. The fully grown Yahoos exist – at least in a Lockean view – at the interstices of animal and human. And yet, this very subject – the Lockean view – is what comes into question in Part Four.

Throughout the text Gulliver presents himself as one of the new, enlightened men, a proponent of empirical science, and someone who prides himself on his intellect. However, he cannot be taken at face value: Dennis Todd describes him as “[l]iteral-minded and superficial,” someone who “travels through the world like the stereotypical tourist, staring at everything and seeing nothing” (150). As such, Gulliver becomes the satire’s principal butt: for the duration he manifests an intellectual narcissism that epitomizes cognitive ableism. As a character whose hubris involves intelligence, he sees in the Yahoos everything he wishes to define himself against. This is possible because the Yahoos differ just enough from the typical human form for Gulliver to not be able to recognize their humanity. Later, however, under the coaxing of his Houyhnhnm “master,” Gulliver is forced to acknowledge that he himself possesses the same shape as the typical Yahoo (4.3, 200). He thus finds himself trapped in a Yahoo body but yearning to join the Houyhnhnms – the cognitively developed, reasonable, and sophisticated beings of the island. The Houyhnhnm community he wishes to join is, in fact, an intelligence society: the Houyhnhnms could be said to epitomize the intelligence society Goodey describes. In order to be admitted, Gulliver learns to speak Houyhnhnm and mimic both their virtues and even their gait. But if he is to become a full member, he too must bid for social status on the basis of intelligence, and this he cannot do. Smart in some respects, such as those involving imitation, Gulliver is not so in others. Paradoxically, then, the more that Gulliver attempts to emulate the Houyhnhnms, the more he thinks like a Yahoo. Having no way to join them, he finds himself relegated to occupying the fringe of this elite society. Even so, he persists in his attempts, and the only way he can succeed in joining is in the worst possible way, by becoming an oxymoronic “wonderful Yahoo” – a self-admitted freak (4.3, 199; 4.9, 229).

Tolerating none of Gulliver’s ridiculous mimicry, the Houyhnhnms vote to expel him from the island, and so he must build a boat. It is in construction of it that the killing of Yahoos can be inferred because he employs their skins to make the sails. His tone is so casual about the acquisition of skins that it becomes evident that he neither thinks about what he is doing, nor knows *how* to think about the ethical issues that using the skins raises. This failure to grasp what is at stake brings into the foreground a central irony of Part Four, namely, that of the individual who aspires to join the intelligence society but who does not know how to think, at least when it comes to thinking about ethics. This falls into line with Swift’s overall critique in the *Travels*: figures like Locke and Isaac Newton had established and popularized ideas that moved society toward privileging factual knowledge and scientific progression but not toward achieving greater moral understanding (Kiernan 711). As the butt of the satire, Gulliver is rendered by Swift in such a way as to epitomize this lack.

There is much more evidence to examine with regard to the way that Gulliver’s thinking process falls short. Gulliver is quick to engage in the secular demonization of the changeling Yahoos yet is inept at either making connections or understanding the meaning of what he does. Swift’s characterization of him draws attention to a fundamental weakness inherent in the intelligence society’s method of bidding for status. If its *raison d’être* was confidence that human intelligence was the highest social value, and yet this intelligence was value-free, that is, oblivious of ethics – ignorant regarding what to value – then what capacity could it possess for sorting

through thorny moral challenges such as the one Gulliver confronts when he meets the Yahoos? In *Gulliver's Travels*, members of the intelligence society do not have a mechanism for thinking ethically about how to treat people who do not like look or think like them. Most importantly, by presenting the protagonist as a cognitive ableist who himself turns out to be a less-than-able thinker, the text calls attention to a flaw in intelligence-society ideology: the radical divergence between a person's assessment of his or her own mental powers and the actual acuity of those powers as others perceive them. Ultimately, *Gulliver's Travels* calls upon readers to stop short of making sweeping generalizations of the kind the protagonist makes and instead exercise, in Ralph Savarese's phrase, "an interpretive humility in the face of the cognitively 'other'" (424).

### Notes

- 1 *Idiots, natural fools, changelings*, and related terms have little to do with our contemporary understandings of IDD because, for the most part, the medical gaze was only beginning to form in the long eighteenth century. To go searching in the archive for figures and characters instantiating states of cognitive difference would be, to employ a telling pun, a *fool's errand* (McDonagh, Goodey, and Stainton 1–5).
- 2 See Neugebauer about idiots in medieval law.
- 3 Simplician maintains that Locke "exploits the indeterminacy between changelings and idiots, as their ignorance exemplifies the universal limits of human understanding *and* the outer limits of what is recognizably human" (36). For more regarding the intricacies of Locke's use of *changeling* as opposed to *idiot*, *natural fool*, and related terms, see McDonagh, Goodey, and Stainton 3.
- 4 For more on Locke, changelings, and idiocy, see Goodey 313–46; Simplician 25–46; and Gabbard 108–11.

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