

THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN HOUYHNHNM AND YAHOO

Following the clue provided by Swift himself concerning the "Anagrammatick Method" (*Gulliver's Travels*, III, vi) and common sense, we can most plausibly derive the names *Houyhnhnm* and *Yahoo* from the word *human*. Several studies have sought to establish the derivation of *Yahoo* from ancient and primitive tribal sources, and every annotated edition ascribes *Houyhnhnm* to the "whinny" of the horse. Despite the likelihood of a connection of the name with the sound of the horse, my claim will still be advanced in favor of *human* as chiefly providing the source for two of Swift's most fascinating word plays. There is no doubt about his extraordinarily sharp ear and love of those verbal games which depend upon perfect and imperfect anagrams and substitute letters, as in the "little language" of the *Journal to Stella*.¹ We know that Swift often dealt with the unsystematized letters, digraphs, and syllables of English orthography in an assumedly naive manner for the sake of wit and of heightened meaning. The readiest proof lies in the very name *Gulliver* with its obvious play upon the word *gullible*, so suitable for designating an explorer in fantastic realms. Let us, then, respell the word *human* according to a simple phonic method, used often by Swift himself in his transformations of other words: *human* is to be visualized or sounded as *hyooman* or *hyouman* or *hyoom'n* or *hyoumn* or any variations of these that will preserve or convey the sound of the word. *Houyhnhnm* can therefore be easily considered as a close phonetic anagram for *human* with the *y* shifting to succeed the vowel or digraph *ou* and with the *n* and *m* exchanging their positions of medial and final consonants. The reduplication of the *h* and *n* is unimportant since only one *n* can be pronounced or sounded in any event.² As for the problem of making the word resemble the whinnying of a horse — to be discussed later — there is no need to deny Swift the very good joke of spelling the word as a reasonably close anagram of *human* and then requiring a pronunciation shift to "horse language." Traditional concern over the pronunciation of the name seems to have deflected attention from its derivation in Swift's associative mind; otherwise, the obvious pun on *human* would have been detected and discussed.

One item of validation for this interpretation should here be cited, in Swift's words: Gulliver tells us, "The word *Houyhnhnm*, in their Tongue, signifies a Horse; and in its Etymology, *the Perfection of Nature*" (IV, iii). Significant also is his tolerating Captain Pedro de Mendez for his "very good *human* Understanding" (IV, xi; Swift's italics). May we not assume Swift to be humorously implying here a "*houyhnhnm* Understanding"? The "perfection of nature" is a phrase clear to Swift's contemporaries; it is man's self-conception, i. e., self-conceit, so to designate himself when he forgets his middle state in the great chain of being.³ If he were the passionless, rational, peaceful creature that he is represented to be in Part IV in the guise of the philosopher-horse, he would indeed war-

¹ For the most exhaustive study of Swift's playful coding of words, see Paul Odell Clark, "A 'Gulliver' Dictionary," *Studies in Philology*, LX (October, 1953), 592-624, hereafter referred to in my text through page number alone.

² Clark cites Irvin Ehrenpreis' list of equivalentents, from *Studies in Philology*, VI (1948), 82-83, which show *n* as substituting for *m* in the *Journal to Stella*; but in this instance Swift is using no code at all.

³ One of many discussions of pride in Swift's moral view is Samuel Holt Monk's fine essay, "The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver," *The Sewanee Review*, LXIII (1955), 48-71.

rant this characterizing phrase. The mordant quality of Swift's satire on the whole human race, as it now functions, is a little more tolerable if we consider the equine to be, in an ideal sense only, the human. It is, after all, neither clothes nor form which makes the rational man.⁴

As for his direct opposite, the *yahoo* who looks human but acts like the sensual beast, we must again resort to ordinary phonetic spelling or respelling of *human*: *hyooman* is a form which readily yields *yahoo* with two letters left over. If one wishes to consider the *m* and *n* as being the orthographic essential of *man* considered as rational or at least *capax rationis*, then why not leave out the two delimiting or phonetically defining letters from the name of a creature so defective as the *yahoo*? Actually, there is no need to strain the anagram this way; just as the *houyhnhnm* in his fullness picks up a few extra or reduplicated letters in his anagram of *human* the *yahoo* can still substantially suggest the same word, devoid of two letters, and that is all that Swift is concerned about. The species in its middle state can run a very wide gamut, from top to bottom of the scale of humanity. *Yahoo* is still, may one notice, a two-syllabled word, vocally if not consonantly similar to *human*. (Dictionaries still differ about the nature of the *a* syllable and the position of the accent.⁵) And thereby Swift can establish the underlying humanity of both the philosopher and the lout. The purpose of the fantasy requires a climactic and shocking conclusion to his book of wonders — therefore, a new role or *persona* for the wise man, different from the noble monarch of Brobdingnag, who is broad in size and in views. (Has anyone commented on the playful use of *nag* or *horse* in the name of the second most admirable creature encountered by Gulliver?⁶) Therefore the happy device of two different species, representing the greatest possible difference of behavior and intellectual level but, as hinted through the name, partaking of the same essential human quality by contrast with the rest of creation.

Perhaps my thesis should be given further support despite its self-evidencing nature. First, Swift presents two perfect one-word anagrams in the preceding section of *Gulliver's Travels*: *Tribnia* for Britain and *Langden* for England, in the very passage in which he is discussing the method of concealing meaning through "Acrosticks" and "Anagrams."⁷ Here too he presents the long anagrammatic message ending in *The Tour* for Bolingbroke's pseudonym *La Tour*. In addition, as Paul Odell Clark contends, over a dozen words in *Gulliver's Travels* are "impure anagrams," such as *Brundrecal* for *Alcoran*. He is correct in adducing Swift's knowledge of the grammarians who were concerned with English orthographical peculiarity, his interest in anagrams and verbal games, and his phonic gymnastics in the "little language" (p. 594). From another source there is evidence of Swift's threefold type of phonic, visual, and letter play which deserves citation: in the *Account*

⁴ George Sherburn suitably maintains that Swift genuinely admires the Houyhnhnms as superior beings, in "Errors Concerning the Houyhnhnm," *Modern Philology*, LVI (November, 1958), 92–97.

⁵ For example, the 1926 *Webster's New International Dictionary* gives both *yā* and *yā* and optional stress on either syllable. Both vowel quantities are given in the 1964 *Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary*. Why should not Swift have conceived it as *Yā'hoo*? Yet the original vowel, if derived from *hu' mān* when pronounced very deliberately, is really irrelevant to the final quantity given it in the book.

⁶ If we change *r* to *l* according to the Ehrenpreis list (n. 2 above) and regard *p* and *b* as voiced and voiceless identities, *Brobdingnag* becomes something close to "plodding nag."

⁷ These two anagrams appear first in the 1735 Dublin edition (III, vi), first eliminated through caution, no doubt; for the changes in this section see the collations in Herbert Davis, ed., *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford, 1950), XI, 191–192 and 311. See also Arthur Case, *Four Essays on Gulliver's Travels* (Princeton, 1945), "The Text of *Gulliver's Travels*," pp. 1–49.

of the Court and Empire of Japan, Swift anagrammatizes *Whigs* (or *Whiges*) into *Husiges*.⁸ The curious aspect of the word is that although *wh* has become *hw* and then *hu* (one must remember that to us *w* is still "double *u*") the digraph is used in the coined name *Husiges* for both the semi-consonant *h* and, simultaneously, for the vowel *u* before the letter *s*; only as a scrambled or pied visual "gestalt" is it *Whiges*. Otherwise it is *hoosiges*. To be sure, this anagram points the way to the pronunciation "whinnym" for the horse-creature, but it also shows clearly its origin in *human* with the two letters that can be considered as a digraph for *wh*. Swift seems willing to shift the vocalic quality of *y* for the sake of his anagram in *Yortes* for Tories, another name used in "An Account of the Court and Empire of Japan." This short satire is rich in examples of his "Anagrammatick Method." The first word that we read is *Regoge* for George, and he is successor to *Nena* or Anne. The prince was advised by *Nomtoc* or Sir Spencer Compton and by *Ramneh* or Sir Thomas Hanmer. The "mortal enemy to the Yortes" is, of course, *Lelop-Aw* or Sir Robert Walpole.

Since no derivation for the name *Houyhnhnm* has ever been suggested, to my knowledge, save in Swift's mind and book, there is no need to consider rival theories. *Yahoo* is another matter. It must be conceded, first, that ideas about Swift's deriving the word from primitive tribes need not be entirely discounted, since he could have tossed several etymological balls in the air at the same time. It may be, as Morley suggested, that "Yah! Ugh!" as expressions of disgust led to the coinage.⁹ Two points militate against this particular derivation: the fact that it is almost inconceivable that *ugh* was ever pronounced as *oo* to serve as an interjection of distaste and the fact that *yah* or any variant thereof, such as *ya*, did not manage to reach any glossary until 1812.¹⁰ This does not mean that no one was expressing disgust in Swift's day with an interjected *ya*, but since even interjections are picked up by glossaries if objectively fixed in their form, the case against this origin is strong. In 1934 there appears, apparently for the first time, a dictionary inference that Swift was using the name of a primitive tribe of South America called *Yahos* or *Yaos*. In 1950, John Robert Moore traces the name to a book by Snelgrave, of 1734, and infers that Swift read some other earlier account of the tribe, while J. F. Kermode traces the name to an account by Robert Harcourt, of 1613. Neither discussion offers any proof that Swift had read the name anywhere, and Kermode's account even concedes major differences between the tribal *Yahos* and the Swiftian *Yahoos*, such as their being rational, domesticated, and capable of conversation and modesty.¹¹ No more convincing is Moore's theory that the word comes from a corruption of *Yahweh* for *Jehovah*, a religious term borne by Judaized or Hebrew migrants from North Africa into the Niger River area; in these and other Moselem regions, he suggests, it may be linked with the contemptuous name *Yahudi*. No proof of Swift's knowledge of any of this is given.

Finally, the phonetic if not etymological origin of the words should be examined via their appearance in dictionaries. Since my theory requires an awareness of the naive or ordinary reader's first response to the printed word in *Gulliver's Travels*, a survey of lexical views of the pronunciation may help to support my *human* interpretation of its origin. It appears that by 1884 the distinguished editors and the sophisticated readers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* had decided in favor of the *whinny* view, and this is the sole pronunciation sanctioned. At the same time, the reputable *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* (1889) was sanctioning only *hōō'in'm* or *hō'inm*. Its article implies a controversy behind the scenes in the statement: a fantastic combination of letters not necessarily

⁸ Harold Williams, ed., *Gulliver's Travels* (London, 1926), p. 485, mentions this in a note which is derived from Henry Morley's 1890 edition, as Clark, p. 621, n. 56, indicates.

⁹ Cited by Williams, p. 485.

¹⁰ *OED*, citing James and Horace Smith's *Rejected Addresses*.

¹¹ John Robert Moore, *Notes and Queries*, CCV (April 29, 1950), 182–185, and J. F. Kermode, *Notes and Queries*, CCV (July 22, 1950), 317–318.

intended to imitate the sound of neighing; the pronunciation assigned is arbitrary. The career of the word in the *Webster's* unabridged dictionaries is revealing. In the first edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* (various editions from 1909 to 1927), the first pronunciation given is *hoo'in'm* with *hwin'm* as second, always explained by the sentence: "The name suggests the whinny of a horse." The second edition of the *Webster's New International* gives both *hoo'in um* and *hwin'um*. Other modern dictionaries tend to accord status to both versions; for example, the 1964 *Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary*, which has four variants, and the *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*. Wyld's 1952 reprint of the *Universal Dictionary of the English Language* persists in sanctioning only the *hoo'inm* or *hu'num* pronunciation. On the other hand, the Random House *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1967 shows the triumph of propaganda in asserting only that the name is "apparently an alteration of whinny."

So it may be, but to insist that it is to be derived *only* from the sound of a horse and not at all from the name of the *houmynhn* animal is to attribute to Swift a very limited sense of the suggestiveness of sounds and the variations of English orthography and orthoëpy. Elsewhere in *Gulliver's Travels* and in other writings Swift demonstrates his nimble tongue, keen imagination and wit, and delight in *jeux de mot*. Certainly it seems ungracious to fail to acknowledge Swift's confrontation of the two extremes of human kind, similar both in their stark nudity and in the source of their anagrammatic names, despite their polar differences in other respects.

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THE NAME IS *NOT* THE THING

The general contention that a disproportionate number of superior achievers have surnames beginning with letters in the first half of the alphabet has been promulgated for more than 30 years. We think that available data, presented herein, invalidate that contention. This note should, therefore, serve to cut short the period of "perpetuation of [this] . . . scientific fiction."¹

The first encounter that either of us had with an assertion of this type dates back to a lecture delivered to a freshman social science survey course at Colgate University in 1941. During the course of the lecture, the instructor stated the just mentioned contention and expressed his delight that the class was made up chiefly of persons with their surnames beginning with letters in the "right" part of the alphabet. Since that time, we have heard several similar claims and, yes, even postulated reasons — for example, the explanation that the alphabetic seating commonly used in classrooms probably enables those whose names are near the beginning of the alphabet to see and hear better and consequently to become better students and ultimately better achievers.

Recently, we have asked persons whom we have heard voice the contention to refer us to the basic statement in some publication, to the source data or, lacking those, to tell us what led them to such a conclusion. No one has been able to cite a source, although some seem to recall having seen such. In our literature search, all that we have been able to locate is less than definitive: Autry and Barker² have stated "most of the correlations . . . were of such a direction as to suggest a tendency toward higher achievement by students

¹ L. T. Reynolds, "A Note on the Perpetuation of a 'Scientific' Fiction," *Sociometry* (March, 1966), 85–88.

² J. W. Autry and D. G. Barker, "Academic Correlates of Alphabetical Order of Surname," *Journal of School Psychology*, 8 (1970), 22–23.

whose names begin nearer the beginning of the alphabet . . ." and Weston³ has hypothesized that negative characteristics, "alphabetic neurosis," may be imposed on persons whose surnames begin with letters in the latter part of the alphabet (especially S through Z). He noted, for example, that those persons frequently have to wait longer to hear their names called, to have their exams returned, etc.

The "data" which have been mentioned as possibly having led to the conclusions have all been strikingly similar. Briefly, we have been told that there are "nearly twice as many persons" with surnames beginning with the letters A through L as with surnames beginning with the letters N through Z on some particular listing of authors, of members in some honorary organization, or of some academically and (or) professionally prominent persons. A spot check of such sources does indeed reveal that those whose surnames begin with letters in the first half of the alphabet do hold the larger number of memberships in honorary organizations, constitute a larger percentage of the listings of published authors, etc. But, amazingly, no one seems to have asked the really fundamental question — how are the surnames of the general population distributed alphabetically? Obviously, if the unequal alphabetical distribution of surnames on lists reflecting high-level performance were to correlate more or less directly with the unequal alphabetical distribution of surnames within the general population, the contention that a disproportionate number of superior achievers have surnames beginning with letters in the first half of the alphabet would appear to be fallacious.

Because of this, we tabulated and compared the distribution of surnames in the general population as indicated by the nearly 166 million names on the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Social Security Account Number File⁴, with the distribution of surnames on (1) the membership role of the national honorary society of Phi Kappa Phi, (2) Eleventh edition listing of *American Men of Science*,⁵ (3) the most recent listing of *Who's Who In America*,⁶ and (4) the author's list in the *National Union Catalog*.⁷ A summary of our tabulation is presented on the table.

Assuming the listings to be correct, probably the only major factor that could nullify their general pertinence to our study would be the existence of some large disparity between the alphabetic distribution of females' maiden surnames and their married surnames. With this condition in mind, the following may be said:

On the basis of the measures used, the distribution of surnames among achievers very closely parallels the distribution of surnames in the general population. (And, even the authors' list in the *National Union Catalog* shows a similar distribution, although that list is on a somewhat different base in that it includes each individual's name for each of his/her publications.)

³ T. E. T. Weston, "The Alphabet Disorder," *Medical News*, (December 24, 1965), p. 5.

⁴ *Report of Distribution of Surnames in the Social Security Account Number File* (Washington, D.C.: Social Security Administration — Bureau of Data Processing and Accounts, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1964).

⁵ *American Men of Science: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, eleventh edition (New York: Bowker, 1966).

American Men of Science: Physical and Biological Sciences, eleventh edition (New York: Bowker, 1966).

⁶ *Who's Who in America*, 1972–73 edition (Chicago: Marquis Who's Who, Inc., 1973).

⁷ *National Union Catalog* (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1948–1952). *National Union Catalog* (Ann Arbor: J. W. Edwards, 1953–1957).

National Union Catalog (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1953–1962).

DISTRIBUTION OF SURNAMES BY INITIAL LETTER (by percent of total)

	1. Social Security 1964 File (165,986,723)*	2. $\Phi K \Phi$ mbshp. (62,891)	3. Amer. Men. Sci. 1965, 11th Ed. (~160,000)	4. Who's Who In Amer., 1972-73 Ed. (~80,000)	5. Weighted Avg. of 2, 3, & 4. (~302,900)	6. Nat'l. Union Cat., 1948-62# (~1,880,000)
A	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.2	3.1	4.3
B	9.3	9.3	7.7	9.7	8.6	9.4
C	7.3	6.8	6.3	7.1	6.6	6.1
D	4.8	4.4	4.2	4.6	4.3	4.2
E	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.2
F	3.6	3.8	4.0	3.9	3.9	3.8
G	5.1	4.9	5.2	4.9	5.1	5.5
H	7.4	8.0	7.9	7.7	7.9	6.0
I	.4	.5	.5	.4	.5	1.1
J	2.9	2.6	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.0
K	3.9	4.3	5.0	4.3	4.7	5.4
L	4.7	5.0	5.4	4.7	5.1	5.4
M	9.4	9.0	9.1	9.1	9.1	8.2
Sub-total	<u>63.8</u>	<u>63.8</u>	<u>62.7</u>	<u>63.9</u>	<u>63.3</u>	<u>63.6</u>
N	1.8	1.7	2.0	1.8	1.9	2.3
O	1.4	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.6
P	4.9	4.7	4.5	4.3	4.5	5.2
Q	.2	1.2	.1	.1	.3	.2
R	5.3	4.9	5.2	5.0	5.1	4.8
S	10.2	10.3	11.3	10.2	10.8	10.2
T	3.5	3.2	3.5	3.1	3.3	3.6
U	.2	.3	.3	.3	.3	.5
V	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.3	2.4
W	6.2	6.3	6.5	7.5	6.7	4.1
X	<.05	<.05	<.05	<.05	<.05	<.05
Y	.6	.7	.6	.5	.6	.5
Z	.6	.4	.7	.5	.6	1.1
Subtotal	<u>36.2</u>	<u>36.3</u>	<u>37.5</u>	<u>36.2</u>	<u>36.8</u>	<u>36.5</u>
TOTAL	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.1</u>	<u>100.2</u>	<u>100.1</u>	<u>100.1</u>	<u>100.1</u>

* Numbers in parentheses indicate number of names included.

Includes only person listings, i.e., organizational listings are not included.

There are variations, but only J differs by more than about ten percent *in a negative sense* when the weighted averages of the achievement measures (column 4) are compared to the social security file percentage (column 1). (The other most noteworthy percentagewise deviations involve the letters I, K, Q, and U.)

Thus, we conclude that, on the basis of the overall correlation of the tabulated data, there is no good basis for any statement to the effect that a discordant relationship exists between the initial letter of a person's surname and his or her characteristics or achievements.

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