

From the Fable of the Bees to the Invisible Hand

A Study in Eighteenth Century Political Satire

What is Enlightenment?

'The Enlightenment' is one of those terms that is often used, about which theorists—be they historians, political theorists, sociologists, philosophers, or otherwise—hold very strong opinions, yet its meaning is difficult to pin down. The stereotype of eighteenth century social and political thinkers—exemplified in

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! "Have courage to use your own reason!"—that is the motto of enlightenment.

— Immanuel Kant, 1784

this short excerpt of Kant's, as expressing an almost blind faith in the power of reason, and grounding this faith in developments in the natural sciences—presents the modern reader with a surface tension: 'Enlightenment' conjures both images of the triumph of reason, and its ultimate demise, as failing to prevail over ignorance and diversity. This research sought to problematize this characterization, and proposes that we look at political satires and travel literature as laying the intellectual foreground for the emergence of liberalism. More than 60 years separated the publication of Locke's *Second Treatise* and Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, and these years were filled with strong intellectual development and political commentary. The salon conversations and subsequent intellectual movements sparked by this literature served as important precursors to arguments for religious toleration, the rule of law, moderate government, and commercial prosperity still influential today.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POLITICAL SATIRE AND TRAVEL LITERATURE

1714 Bernard Mandeville *Fable of the Bees* (1714-1723)

It can be said that Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* perhaps most obviously contributed to the economic thought of Adam Smith, insofar as the latter rejected its main argument while tempering some of the former's claims about human nature and motivation. It advances the thesis that every individual's pursuit of their own self-interest may contribute to that society's good. The work's motto—"private vices, public benefits"—seeks to show that commercial society is fully compatible with moral corruption and leads to the degradation of further; and, further, that those wishing to harmonize the individual good with the well-being of the collective whole were fundamentally misguided in their pursuit.

1719 Daniel Defoe *Robinson Crusoe*

Robinson Crusoe is a commentary on Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, insofar as Defoe also treats the topics of property accumulation, private ownership, with connection to the notions of individual and political freedom. The novel has been interpreted as an allegory for the development of civilisation, as a manifesto of economic individualism and as an expression of European colonial desire but it also shows the importance of repentance and illustrates the strength of Defoe's religious convictions.

1721 Baron de Montesquieu *Persian Letters*

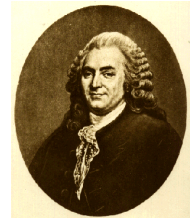
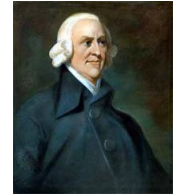
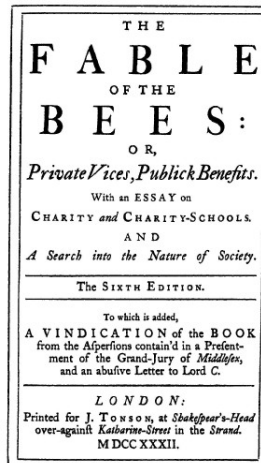
In political theory, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* is best known for the Myth of the Troglodytes. Importantly, this story advances—far before his magnum opus *Spirit of the Laws* did—an alternate account to the foundational stories told by the social contract tradition. Instead of emerging from any idealized foundational moment or horizontal pact of association, the Troglodytes find their origins in tyranny, anarchy, and perpetual rebirth caused by tides of historical change. Neither virtue nor human nature is innate on this account; nor does morality progress teleologically towards absolute perfection. The Myth of the Troglodytes foreshadows Montesquieu's famous claim that the ideas underlying the English and French constitutions were taken from the Germans, and "found in the forests."

1726 Jonathan Swift *Gulliver's Travels*

As the book's title suggests, *Gulliver's Travels* is another benchmark in the travelogue genre. In common with *Persian Letters*, Swift's classic presents Gulliver as a narrator that is altogether unreliable during his recounting of travels abroad to different, fantastic lands and islands, and even during his more solemn moments of reflection and moral judgement—despite being a Cambridge-trained surgeon and avid reader of the Ancients and Moderns. Importantly, this novel presents a view that directly opposes Mandeville's: one that—rather than viewing vice through a positive lens—celebrates the virtues of acknowledging our viciousness in both political and social life, and this acknowledgement as laying the foreground for effective and meaningful political action.

1759 Voltaire *Candide* (1759)

Candide, or, *The Optimist*, represents perhaps one of the most scathing caricatures of philosophical trends in French intellectual life, and philosophers generally. Professor Pangloss, a tutor to Candide trained in Leibnizian philosophy, is consistently portrayed as an individual that 'likes to hear himself talk', so to speak, and over sees the slow, painful disillusionment of his student as he travels and experiences the realities of social life. Voltaire's prescriptions are practical: as the last lines of *Candide* famously state, "that is all we said, Pangloss, but now we must cultivate our garden."



The Grumbling Hive

[...]
*THEN leave Complaints: Fools only strive
 To make a Great an honest Hive. [410]
 To enjoy the World's Conveniences,
 Be fam'd in War, yet live in Ease
 Without great Vices, is a vain
 Eutopia seated in the Brain.
 Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live; [415]
 Whilst we the Benefits receive.
 Hunger's a dreadful Plague no doubt,
 Yet who digests or thrives without?
 Do we not owe the Growth of Wine
 To the dry, crooked, shabby Vine? [420]
 Which, whilst its shutes neglected stood,
 Chok'd other Plants, and ran to Wood;
 But blest us with his Noble Fruit;
 As soon as it was tied, and cut:
 So Vice is beneficial found, [425]
 When it's by Justice lopt and bound;
 Nay, where the People would be great,
 As necessary to the State,
 At Hunger is to make 'em eat.
 Bare Virtue can't make Nations live [430]
 In Splendour; they, that would revive
 A Golden Age, must be as free,
 For Acorns, as for Honesty.*

