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SWIFT'S MODEST PROPOSAL AND THE RHETORIC OF IRISH COLONIAL CONSUMPTION

Robert Mahoney

The satire of Swift's *Modest Proposal* turns on the theme of consumption, with cannibalism as its governing trope. The specifically Irish orientation of that trope however, has not been well accommodated in the emphasis laid on its forensic values or psychological import by longstanding and more recent conventions for reading the work. Yet the cannibalism trope evokes images of consumption with strong historical resonances for the Irish Protestant colonial readership to which the *Modest Proposal* was originally addressed. These resonances, often literally mordant and bound to traditional fears that Ireland's Catholics might "consume" the Protestant colony, amplify Swift's satire and sharpen our sense of his own colonial ambivalence as a "patriotic" Irish Protestant.

Any colonial enterprise is a project in consumption, often rationalized as impelled by security concerns. Thus the English and Scottish Protestant plantations in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, initiated to buttress Britain's defenses against Catholic Spain and France, displaced from Irish

governance an "Old English" elite, suspected of potential disloyalty because of its Catholicism.¹ Ireland was consumed, that is, to forestall England's consumption. Such defensive aggression was also justified as progress, for their adoption of Protestantism would both ensure the loyalty of Irish subjects, and civilize them according to British standards. Left to their own devices, the Irish were "wild," barbarous; their style of government seemed to the colonizers bullying and brutality, for which the remedy was rule by English law. As Nicholas Canny has noted, Elizabethan colonizers often "came to Ireland with a preconception of what a barbaric society was like, and they found features in Gaelic life to fit this model. The ultimate hall-mark of barbarism was the practice of cannibalism."² Hence Sir John Davies, James I's Attorney General for Ireland, described the Gaelic Irish as "little better than *Canniballes*, who do hunt one another, and he that hath most strength and swiftnes, doth eate and devoure all his fellowes."³ Cannibalism, that is, was no more than could be expected of the savage Irish. From the early stages of the Protestant colony, therefore, the consumption of Ireland could be justified as restraining the temptation to consume among England's enemies, Spanish Catholics or Irish barbarians alike.

Among the colonists themselves, of course, any satisfaction gained from imposing such restraint was tempered by fears of Irish savagery, which widespread atrocities at the beginning of

¹ The "Old English" were descended from the Norman invaders of Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While in many respects well assimilated into the majority Gaelic population, they generally preferred a more fervent loyalty to the English crown and often insisted upon their cultural distinctiveness from the "native" Irish. Cooperating with the civil aspects of the Reformation, most of the "Old English" resisted its religious features, and by the early seventeenth century had been effectively replaced as a governing elite by more recent, and Protestant, British "planters," the "New English."

² Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland* (London: Harvester Press, 1976), 126. Cannibalism had long before, however, been associated with the Celtic Britons by Diodorus, *Library* V, 32.3, and with the Irish by Strabo, *Geography* IV, 5.4.

³ Davies, *A Discoverie of the State of Ireland* (London: John Jaggard, 1613), 166-67.

the 1641 Rebellion proved well-founded. Refugees landing in Britain described tortures and massacres in terms that quite matched local stereotypes of the barbaric Irish,⁴ and prompted the London preacher, John Goodwin, just three weeks after the rebellion broke out, to ascribe it to a "Butcherly, and bloody faction of *Rome*" before which the Protestant colonists were "but as a flock of Kids, before an Host, or Army, of Lyons."⁵ Such a pattern of description was reinforced by depositions taken from witnesses and survivors in 1642: the variety of horrors visited upon the colonists included stabbing, throat-cutting, disembowelling, womb-ripping, hanging, mass burnings in dwellings or churches, and mass drownings. Many victims were reported to have been stripped naked and left to perish in the severe winter, while Catholics were warned by their clergy against clothing, sheltering, or feeding them.⁶ The concentration upon the sufferings of the most innocent Protestants—children, the elderly, the pregnant—together with recurrent images of sexual indignities, render the depositions, as R. F. Foster puts it, "a pornography of violence" that "may indicate more about contemporary mentality than actual massacres."⁷ They also gave rise to astonishing exaggeration of the numbers killed, which modern historians estimate as falling somewhere between two and four thousand, but contemporary Protestant commentators placed in the hundreds of thousands, even to the point of including a large majority of the colonists.⁸

⁴ See Keith J. Lindley, "The impact of the 1641 rebellion upon England and Wales, 1641-5," *Irish Historical Studies* 18 (September 1972), 143-76; and David Hayton, "From Barbarian to Burlesque: English Images of the Irish c. 1660-1750," *Irish Economic and Social History* 15 (1988), 5-31.

⁵ [Goodwin], *Ireland's Advocate: Or, A Sermon Preached upon Novem. 14, 1641* (London: Wm. Larnar, 1641), 26, 28.

⁶ The thirty-three volumes of depositions, now in Trinity College Library, Dublin, are summarized in Mary Hickson, *Ireland in the Seventeenth Century*, London: Longmans, 1884.

⁷ Foster, *Modern Ireland* (London: Penguin, 1988), 86.

⁸ The numbers of noncombatant deaths has been perhaps the longest-disputed aspect of the historiography of the 1641 Rising, first reviewed at length by Mathew

And by accounting for the massacres as inspired, even supervised, by Catholic priests, the depositions corroborated the popular belief that Catholic doctrine approved the killing of heretics; the innocent Protestants suffered this holocaust, that is, *because* they were Protestants.

As T. C. Barnard has pointed out, "whatever violence was offered to the Protestant newcomers in 1641 could hardly have surpassed the brutality, casual and calculated, meted out to the Irish in the preceding century and in the last stages" of the rebellion, yet "The 1641 massacres were distinguished from other episodes by the thorough and effective methods by which they were publicized," constructing a myth of "enduring and dismal impact for several generations."⁹ The totalizing character of the myth owes much to Sir John Temple's *Irish Rebellion*, first published in 1646 and frequently thereafter, which relentlessly contrasts Irish Catholic savagery with colonial Protestant virtue and agony. Temple refrained from exaggerating the evidence of the depositions, not even citing claims of outright cannibalism in a few of them;¹⁰ but his imagery of Protestants consumed by ravenous Irish Catholics enabled the massacres to be construed as a holocaust indeed, a sacrifice propitiating divine wrath and sanctifying the colonial remnant at the expense of the Catholic multitudes. This construction privileged Cromwell's zealous brutality in crushing the rebellion at the end of the 1640s, transplanting Catholic landlords to the western province of Connacht and distributing their lands to his soldiers and supporters: the Irish propensity to consume the

Carey, *Vindiciae Hibernicae* (Philadelphia: Carey, 1819) and most recently by two studies in *Ulster 1641: Aspects of the Rising*, ed. Brian MacCuarta (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1993): Hilary Simms, "Violence in Country Armagh, 1641," 123-38, and T.C. Barnard, "1641: A Bibliographical Essay," 172-86.

⁹ Barnard, "Crises of Identity among Irish Protestants, 1641-1685," *Past and Present*, 127 (May 1990), 50.

¹⁰ Hickson, *Ireland in the Seventeenth Century*, 134-35, notes that the depositions citing cannibalism are "unmistakably exaggerated and untruthful."

settlers could best be prevented by advancing the English consumption of Ireland.

In 1662, moreover, after the Restoration, the Irish Parliament declared October 23, the date the rebellion began in 1641, an annual statutory holiday to be marked in each Church of Ireland parish by attendance at divine service to commemorate the massacres and give thanks for the deliverance of the Protestant remnant they had left. The statute itself, echoing the claim that the rebellion was prompted by the Catholic clergy, described it as "so generally inhumane, barbarous and cruel, as the like was never before heard of in any age or kingdom," and was to be read out in full to conclude the service.¹¹ Together, the statute and the service rubric assembled a rhetoric of Irish Catholic consumption from the images of slaughter in the depositions, and perpetuated by Temple and others (e.g. "For it was thy goodness alone that we were not delivered over for a prey unto their teeth").¹² The ultimate source of that rhetoric is biblical, which confirmed the mordantly sacrificial context for remembering such consumption. Indeed, though Temple had refrained from mentioning instances of actual cannibalism claimed in some of the depositions, his images and the contemporary rhetoric of remembrance promoted Irish cannibalism as a metaphor for the massacres. Thus in 1682 Richard Lawrence, a commentator whose admonitory view of the Irish economy often anticipates Swift's own, depicted the rebels of the 1640s as

those *Irish Sabeans* or *Chaldeans*, or rather *Cannibals*, for the first did but spoil *Job* of his Goods, but these eat the Flesh and drink the Blood of the *English*, in a metaphorical sense; as Psalm 14:4 *Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread?* These,

¹¹ "An Act for Keeping and celebrating the Twenty-Third of October," *The Statutes at large Passed in the Parliaments held in Ireland* [13 vols, 1310–1786], (Dublin: George Grierson, 1786), 2:256.

¹² [Second Collect], *The Book of Common Prayer* (Dublin: Crooke, 1680), n.p.

as the Prophet complains, *devoured Israel with open mouth, and drunk their Blood as sweet wine.*¹³

As they were to Sir John Davies in 1613, the Irish might as well be cannibals.

It would have been blasphemous, of course, to press the metaphor to its New Testament formulation about the consumption of Christ's flesh and blood; and that was precisely the complaint about the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation pressed by Anglican controversialists in the 1860s. The Catholic insistence that Christ's injunction to consume his flesh and blood is *not* metaphorical invited charges of blasphemy, absurd literalism and abject superstition, even idolatry. Dating from the Reformation, such charges figured often in anti-Catholic diatribes. The London sermon of 1641 already cited, for instance, referred to the "breaden God" of the Catholic rebels, the "God and creature of theirs which they make of bread."¹⁴ Perhaps tangential to Irish circumstances, this pattern of Anglican thought recurs in theological controversy during the 1680s, when Bishop James Gordon raised the spectre of cannibalism directly:

If the *Cannibals* be abhorred as inhuman for eating the Flesh of their Enemies, must it not be great inhumanity to eat the Flesh of a friend, and the best in the World?...How much more horrible must it be to feed upon the Very Body of the Son of God (that was born of the Virgin) Knowingly.¹⁵

¹³ Lawrence, *The Interest of Ireland in its Trade and Wealth stated* (Dublin: North et al., 1682), 82 [second pagination].

¹⁴ Goodwin, 28, 29.

¹⁵ [Gordon] *A Request to Roman Catholics to Answer the Queries upon these their following Tenets...xi. Transubstantiation*, Fourth Edition (London: B. Aylmer, 1687), 17.

And while the Rev. Samuel Johnson agreed that Catholics were misguided in believing that they were eating Christ's body, the fact that they so believe renders their action cannibalistic.¹⁶ Fanatical Catholicism thereby made the Irish rebels of 1641 as much as cannibals in practice—an anonymous commentator in 1689 even called them cannibals outright¹⁷—but a central tenet of their faith makes all believing Catholics cannibals in *fact*.

Fears of Irish consumption gained new force after the Glorious Revolution, when a brief Jacobite regime in Ireland displaced Protestants from political and military office, and to a considerable extent from the lands they held under Cromwellian or earlier Stuart titles, restoring these to Catholic families. While this period saw no massacres on the scale of 1641, the anticipation of comparable outrages¹⁸ and the temporary actual threat to Protestant power justified even stronger, if less physically brutal, suppression of Irish Catholics than Cromwell had inflicted. The earlier rebellion, some thought, accounted for the comparative paucity of Protestants outside urban areas,¹⁹ and their numerical inferiority in its turn informed the colonial sense of being threatened in later years. The consumption feared, indeed, could take the form of absorption as well as extermination, as Lord Molesworth noted in a pamphlet of 1691; earlier generations of settlers had become Gaelicized, and this seemed to be happening again among the descendants of Cromwellian settlers.²⁰ In fact, the ostensible purpose of the

¹⁶ [Johnson], *The Absolute Impossibility of Transubstantiation Demonstrated*. (London: W. Rogers, 1688), 48–49.

¹⁷ Anonymous, *An Abstract of the Unnatural Rebellion and Barbarous Massacre of the Protestants...In the Year 1641* (London: Richard Janeway, 1689), 16.

¹⁸ To the Rev. Andrew Hamilton, among the Catholics “nothing wanted but the signal to perfect what had begun in *Forty one*,” *A True Relation of the Actions of the Inniskilling-Men* (London: Richard Burton, 1690), vii.

¹⁹ Bishop Ralph Lambert of Dromore noted in 1717, for instance, that so many were killed in 1641 that “not one fourth part of the whole Protestant Inhabitants of the Kingdom were left alive,” *A Sermon Preach'd in Christ's-Church,[sic] Dublin, on Wednesday October 23d, 1717* (Dublin: S. Fairbrother, 1717), 4.

²⁰ [Molesworth], *The True Way to Render Ireland Happy and Secure* (Dublin: A.

penal legislation enacted against Catholics by the Irish Parliament from 1692 through the 1720s was to encourage reverse assimilation by subjecting Irish Catholics to a variety of political, economic and religious disabilities they could escape by converting. And in sermons on the October 23 observances that began to be published from the later 1680s, the theme of humble gratitude for divine deliverance in 1641 slowly gives way to a triumphalist consciousness of being spared to rule over a lesser breed. Just as the Irish Catholics of the 1640s were demonized for an historical savagery inspired by an absurd faith, their descendants were described as still barbarous, and so deluded by Popery that they could not even recognize their self-interest, clarified for them by the Penal Laws. This became an argument for still more stringent legislation, and stricter enforcement, in the interest of Protestant self-protection.²¹ As late as 1731, Bishop Edward Synge of Clonfert made this argument: since Catholics still held to the bloodthirsty inclinations toward Protestants that their forefathers had exercised in 1641; and in fact had even more reason for them, since they were more severely penalized than their ancestors; therefore Protestant self-protection demanded maintaining those penalties.²²

Appeals to Protestant fears, then, were as always appeals to self-interest. Granting that sermons do not necessarily represent the minds of their congregations, and that the published October 23 sermons were often preached by bishops themselves English rather than colonial, it remains that these sermons comprise the most consistent arguments demanding and defending the Penal Laws. Notably, however, they dwell much less on the factor that actually guaranteed Protestant supremacy

Crooke, 1679), 17.

²¹ These sermons are discussed fruitfully by T.C. Barnard, "The Uses of 23 October 1641 and Irish Protestant Celebrations" *English Historical Review* 106 (Oct. 1991), 889-920.

²² Synge, *A Sermon Preach'd at Christ-Church, Dublin, on Saturday, the 23rd of October 1731* (Dublin: Robert Owen, 1731), 13.

in Ireland, the assurance of English military power to defend the colony from threat. Since that assurance brought with it a degree of English political and economic control that the colonists deeply resented, there were good reasons to refrain from invoking it overmuch. But in emphasizing instead the ideology of Protestant consumption of Ireland as justified by the barbaric condition of the native Irish (evidence of which was easy to find in rural areas, as Swift indicates in his 1727 *Short View of the State of Ireland*) and indeed by the religious and political implications of such barbarism, the October 23 sermons reflected and perpetuated that state of dependence, including a psychologically compensatory but politically ruinous economic irresponsibility. The ideology of Protestant consumption, in other words, actually eroded self-respect.

Swift himself concurred with the Penal Laws, in the misplaced confidence that they would at length vitiate not only the political power of Catholics (which they did) but their religion as well, enabling the masses ultimately to accept the established church. But for the interim he disdained to fear those Catholic masses; and as the Penal Laws checked any Catholic political resurgence, he sought to encourage Irish Protestant self-respect, to offset the corrosiveness of dependence upon England and irresponsible neglect of their own economy. These were the objectives of his "patriotic" messages in the 1720s—the *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures*, the *Drapier's Letters*, the *Short View*, and more. All avoid the rhetoric of anti-Catholic apprehension and Swift counters the appeal of short-term selfishness by fostering self-respect, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. Such qualities, in fact, are the goals of the measures mentioned in the *Modest Proposal*, too, which are listed only to be discarded, since they had, by the time of its publication in 1729, not been enacted by the colonial administration nor, indeed, adopted by most of the colonists. What the "modest proposer" suggests instead is to accelerate the consumption of Irish Catholic natives in the stark terms of cannibalism heretofore used rhetorically to characterize the

natives' own desires with regard to the Protestant colonists. By inverting this image of consumption embedded in the colonial consciousness, Swift is not only satirizing the rhetoric of consumption, but indeed mocking his own promotion of Irish economic self-sufficiency: cannibalism *would* enable Ireland to feed itself. In the *Modest Proposal*, then, we find Swift's advocacy of reforms in Irish habits of consumption intersecting with his despair of gaining their adoption. His inversion at once of his fellow-colonists' style of thinking, and of his own solution to the irresponsibility those habits foster, compares in bitterness to the inversion of human and equine relations in *Gulliver's Travels*; indeed, its brevity in the *Modest Proposal* gives that bitterness greater concentration. And accompanying it, perhaps even deepening it, is a monitory note: since Swift not only ridicules the rhetoric of Irish colonial consumption by inverting one of its significant emblems, but simultaneously evokes the fear that justified that rhetoric historically. For the unspoken, yet unmistakable, premise of the *Modest Proposal* is that the Catholic natives are already bestial, no more really human than other animals we might eat. But that same bestiality is inextricable from their historical construction, in colonial eyes, as the "wild Irish," who are even readier than the putatively civilized to consume those who would consume them. At the base of Swift's bitterness, then, is the old Catholic threat—long in check, but latent as the wages of Protestant political and economic irresponsibility.