

Devouring Posterity: *A Modest Proposal*, Empire, and Ireland's "Debt of the Nation"

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[O]ur modern expedient . . . is to mortgage the public revenues, and to trust that posterity will pay off the incumbrances contracted by their ancestors.

—David Hume, *Of Public Credit* (167)

I GRANT this Food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords; who, as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children.

—Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal* (*Prose Works* 12: 112)

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JONATHAN SWIFT'S *A MODEST PROPOSAL* TRADITIONALLY HAS BEEN regarded as an indictment of colonial landlordism in Ireland, one asserted subtly through the play between the narrator's rational overt tone and the author's covert critique of it (Smith 136–37). This design, it has been argued, forces the reader to play the roles of three audiences, the hailing of which he or she anticipates in the process of exegeses. These are an "ideal narrative audience" who finds "the narrator's argument cogent and compelling," another who takes the argument as a "serious proposal" that reflects the "skewed" values of the first audience, and a third who feels privileged to recognize the creativity the author showed in crafting the work's irony (Culler 34–35). Swift's correspondence and references to the satire in contemporary works document multiple receptions, but few studies have positioned "the reader among the eaters" (Phiddian 618) by locating the "actual audience" Swift addressed when he chose to publish it first in Dublin in October 1729 (Culler 34). Newly discovered external evidence, I argue, intimates that the parliament convening in Dublin that month may have been the satire's intended target.¹ This body was composed exclusively of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, a landed caste who secured its dominance by legally forbidding non-Anglicans from

owning property or serving in government. Its members had lent money to a national security fund in 1716 when the Jacobites, Catholic exiles who had lost their property to the Anglo-Irish in seventeenth-century wars, were preparing to invade. Many members of Parliament received interest on this investment in Ireland's first "debt of the nation" from the taxes that they had the political power to levy on the native poor, but the famine of the late 1720s had decimated the usual revenues, forcing them to consider additional ones. Like the North American colonists in the decades following the Seven Years' War, the Anglo-Irish members of Parliament were threatened by the British Crown's and Parliament's efforts to appropriate these potential new funds for the empire's operations elsewhere. Ireland already was financing British and American expansion into French, Spanish, and Native American territory to the extent that its sovereignty over its resources, as James Joyce wryly put it centuries later, was attenuated in the pull "[b]etween the Saxon smile and yankee yawp. The devil and the deep sea" (187). The *Proposal*, accordingly, can be taken to be an intervention in the budgetary debates of the 1729 legislative session by promoting a new means of fiscal control. I argue that its calculated calendar for baby slaughter allegorically recommended a schedule for temporal restraint in consumption—a diet in the stream of revenue—that would make the empire respect the Irish parliament's feeding hand. By declaring such a fast, the Anglo-Irish could guarantee that they, and not the British, would devour native posterity. This article does not foreclose the satire's many other interpretive possibilities—analysis of its discourses on imperialism, poverty, or child molestation, for example—but contends that approaching its actuarial logic in relation to the debt of the nation opens a new context in which those readings can be further explored.²

A Modest Proposal could be regarded as a response to the English financial revolution

of the early eighteenth century, the "synthesis of sovereignty and capital" envisioned by the bourgeois intellectuals who deposed the monarchy in 1688 (Hardt and Negri 87). The founding of the Bank of England in 1694, its circulation of paper currency, and its management of a national debt by which a permanent standing army could be financed had made Britain the first modern "fiscal-military state" (Brewer xvii). Swift was among the first to articulate how currency and credit, as John Brewer notes in *The Sinews of Power*, fueled this imperial war machine. The new paper money became his "favourite topic" for political polemic, especially after the South Sea Bubble had proved that the worth of banknotes, stock certificates, and government bonds, given their lack of intrinsic value, was based solely on confidence generated by publicity (Ehrenpreis 3: 616). In Swift's view, the creditors funding the empire—major companies like the bank—would manipulate the value of their stock for profit, suggesting that the state could no longer regulate the economy. This loss of political control occurred because companies, in exchange for their loans to the state, owned large portions of the taxes levied on the English people. This form of debt bondage enabled company directors to coerce the agrarian gentry who were operating the government to support wars necessary to secure profits (Colley 64). This manifest eclipse of the authority of the "landed interest" by a "moneyed interest" (Kramnick 61) of financiers reified the concept of the "nation" as a substitute for authentic political agency: "Nation-states are invented through a process of fetishistic misrecognition whereby debt, absence, and powerlessness are transubstantiated, mainly through class exploitation at home and war abroad, into their opposites" (Brantlinger 20). "Britishness," the product of such misrecognition, was compensation for those subjected to what had become a "sovereignty machine": an apparatus subsuming personalities to the point of total mimetic identification with the

transcendent nation (Hardt and Negri 87–88). Women’s bodies, as Charlotte Sussman has explained, ensured this mechanism by reproducing armies of loyal subjects whose taxed consumption would pay interest and principal on investment in the nation (104–06).

These developments may suggest that national debts are “even more fundamental to the fictional or ideological creation and maintenance of the imagined communities of modern nation-states than . . . literary canons,” but it is not likely that this new form of government could have achieved hegemony without the simultaneous rise of a national aesthetic (Brantlinger 20). New economic critics of the professionalization of authorship and the textuality of money have argued that the novel, a genre inventing the domestic space of the home as the interior conscience of the nation, performed this function. The print trade, in their view, was similar to the exchange of commodities in that the velocity of transfers of provenance over both books and currency governed how they were appraised (Lynch 81). The purely fictional worth of the new paper money created a crisis of judgment resolved by the novel’s capacity to serve “as an ideological regrouping of intrinsic value” in its depiction of “the home and companionate marriage” as instantiations of the “real” (Thompson 21–22). Authority over assessing “undifferentiated tokens of epistemological opacity” like currency and books devolved to readers (Sherman 1–2). Book buyers’ embrace of “Britishness” as a participatory, democratic identity was figured in the “distinct authorial persona” of the novelist, a synecdoche for a liberal bourgeois self capable of acquiring domestic propriety through the performance of politeness (Ingrassia 81).

This article intervenes in these studies by extending their critique to the problem of empire, asking how this British cultural production was underwritten by colonials’ resources and ability to appropriate those resources for their own nationalist projects. By doing so, it

models the new economic criticism’s potential to step beyond postcolonial and Marxist criticism and imagines how political and cultural concerns may be linked to economic analysis. It makes this claim on the basis of early modern political philosophy, which had established that language and money were considered homologous representations of state authority (Hawkes 19). The sign, in the sphere of the media, censorship, and publicity, secured the value of the currency by promoting the reputation of the state and the legitimacy of its constitutional functions, a necessity if government were to guarantee the transparency of all contracts, public and private, with a sound legal tender. The indivisibility of these aspects of sovereignty was highly rarefied in the eyes of dispossessed colonials, who saw how the British fiscal-military state substituted an abstract commodity—national identity circulated in literature—for the material resources it alienated to reproduce itself.

Ireland’s debt, like England’s, was the ideological foundation of the Anglo-Irish Protestant nation. This colonial caste, a hybrid entity caught between the natives it governed and the metropolis to which it was subject, soon learned to appropriate the empire’s homologies of finance, language, and law to protect its investment and claim its parliament’s right to regulate Ireland’s economy. Members of this caste mobilized the Dublin press for the production of domestic cultural capital that would sow the seeds for regional fiscal independence. I argue that the *Proposal’s* dietary motif may have persuaded them to resist the Crown’s demands that it enact perpetual revenues earmarked to pay the debt. The luxury taxes and budgetary procedures that they adopted, I contend, could have been responses to those in Swift’s text. I make the case for these possibilities by examining three contexts: the pamphlet’s intertextual relation to contemporary anglophone satire, the immediate exigencies for its production in Dublin, and its reception by British and Anglo-Irish readers.

[I]

My claim that the new economic criticism has the potential to fuse political, cultural, and economic analyses is based on Swift's literal and metonymic uses of motherhood in *A Modest Proposal*. When his narrator opens by calling attention to "Beggars of the Female Sex, followed by three, four, or six children," he seems to be describing the very real famine conditions of the late 1720s (*Prose Works* 12: 109). As he starts to discuss "a Child, just dropt from its dam" and the prevention of "voluntary Abortions," however, he shifts to a figural register familiar to book-trade professionals, especially those who had read Bernard Mandeville's *A Modest Defence of Public Stews* of 1724. Mandeville's defense satirized ideas for converting vice into new revenues by proposing a prostitution tax, arguing that £10,000 could be raised by a single public brothel (14). The "lewdness" of this project of sexual exchange, however, is explained not as a female sin but as one indulged by prostitute male writers who "want a Dinner" and hope for the "Adoption" of their writings by "bright Noblemen" (pref.). The narrator nakedly refers to the manuscript before the reader as a "Foundling" who was "dropt" at the reader's door because a legitimate press—"the Midwife of a Printer"—"was unwilling to help bring it into the World, but upon that Condition . . . of my openly Fathering it" (pref.). This series of double entendres intimates that the printing press is the mother of the book and the writer its father, invoking the platonic concepts of the "death of the author" and the "orphaned text" that Swift himself had explored in *A Tale of a Tub* (Barthes 147; Derrida 76; Plato 523; Swift, *Tale* 34). *A Modest Proposal* closely mimics *A Modest Defence*'s style to the extent that it could be interpreted as a response to Mandeville's request that the "Hibernian Stallion" should "Speak" (pref.). It appears to appropriate his notion that, even in an era when the South Sea Company "has been

demolish'd," coffeehouses supply a "sufficient Stock" of writing to sustain the economy and government. *A Modest Defence*'s reproductive theme, in short, dissolves the "distinction between sexual pleasure and business" (Mandell 112), suggesting that both biological mothers and maternal printers provide the income-generating progeny necessary to maintain material and political investment in the fiscal-military state. The Dublin print industry seems to have found this idea appealing in its efforts to forge Anglo-Irish sovereignty.

Accordingly, Swift's dialogue with the British book trade is of central importance when reading *A Modest Proposal*'s discourse on public finance. Swift was a member of the Scriblerus Club, an informal group of Tory opposition writers whose satire targeted the Whig ruling regime. The Scriblerians despised Robert Walpole, the Whig prime minister, because they thought his machinations in public finance—his establishment of a sinking fund to pay off the national debt, his involvement with the South Sea Bubble, and his taxpayer bailout of major shareholders in the South Sea Company—were signs of corruption incompatible with virtuous government (Nicholson 103). By the late 1720s, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, and Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* had combined to expose Walpole's perversion of the constitution. A letter from Swift to Gay in March 1728 discusses the success of their coordinated attack: "The Beggars Opera hath knockt down Gulliver, I hope to see Popes Dullness knock down the Beggars Opera, but not till it hath fully done its Jobb . . . writing two or three Such trifles every year to expose vice and make people laugh with innocency does more publick Service than all the Ministers of State from Adam to Walpol" (Swift, *Correspondence* 278). These satires served as both partisan political critiques and literary commodities in the highly profitable culture wars of those years. It has been argued that as a collective partisan effort, this circle's writings were not so much damning modern

public finance in general as claiming that their faction possessed writers more capable of manufacturing a virtuous national image than those employed by the Whigs (Nicholson 3). Such aesthetic work was necessary because “[p]atriotism and nationalism underwrite public credit (and vice-versa) but also the nation-state’s own facilitation of . . . the economy” (Brantlinger 35). The Scriblerians knew that the press was not an autonomous third estate but an organ of government; despite Jürgen Habermas’s claims that an independent public sphere of “rational-critical arguments” arose in eighteenth-century Britain, “no theory of liberty of the press was articulated” in this period (Downie 59). Consequently, the Scriblerian mission was to prove that Tories were better at statecraft: the production of the fictions of state necessary to breed political and financial confidence. It is likely that *A Modest Proposal* was another text in this series, rivaling the productions of the author’s friends yet publicizing their style and agenda. It partook of this coterie’s endeavor, forging Anglo-Irish Protestant nationalism as an ideological support for Ireland’s own fiscal system.

The text appears linked to the Scriblerian themes of finance in the character of its cannibal, the period’s conventional symbol for financiers (Flynn 150–51). At least since *The Merchant of Venice*’s scene of Shylock demanding a “pound of flesh,” private loan transactions had been represented as the eating of the debtor’s body. Francis Bacon appropriated this metonymy to shame Jacobean royal creditors, condemning them as man-eating “*Cyclops*, or Ministers of Terror” (20). Giovanni Marana’s *Turkish Spy* later displayed the promiscuous relations between moneylenders and the defense industry in the same figure, saying that both were “employ’d by *Jupiter* in making Thunderbolts” and other weapons (130). This understanding of the consumption of a nation by its financial obligations was encapsulated by Swift early in his career in *The Examiner*, a Tory periodical. He described how at least half

of England’s taxes already had been mortgaged into perpetuity to pay the interest on the debt alone, impoverishing posterity: “the Country Gentleman is in the Condition of a young Heir, out of whose Estate a Scrivener receives half the Rents for Interest, and hath a Mortgage on the Whole” (Swift, *Prose Works* 3: 5). *A Modest Proposal*’s allegory of children devoured by parental debts, accordingly, was drawn from Swift’s own canon and influenced gothic adaptations in succeeding years. In 1733, Charles Forman translated the term *vampire* into English to suggest that collectors of interest on the national debt were the undead. Comparing the virtues of governments, he writes, “When a *Dutchman* is paying his *Taxes* . . . it is of some Satisfaction to him to know that he is not giving from his Family what he has earned . . . to gratify the Rapine of a fat-gutted *Vampire*” (38). A year later, Swift’s ally Henry Bolingbroke seized on this image of a bloodsucking monster in an allegory describing Walpole as the leader of the nation’s creditors (2395).

The cannibal, however, was not the only figure for finance that Swift borrowed from the Scriblerian lexicon; he also appropriated *prostitute*, *beggar*, and *thief*. These terms signified the moneyed interest, the Whig government, and its publicists under a single pejorative zeugma. Swift, Pope, and Gay denigrated Whig publicists as inferior mercenary pens fighting a culture war by disseminating smutty pulp fiction, work legitimating the desires and ethics of the new credit culture (Ingrassia 3). They revived John Dryden’s Grub Street metonymy to compare the relation of this popular literary market to prostitution (Swift, *Journal* 177–78). Accordingly, they gendered literature, elevating their work as high art by dismissing Whig rivals as writers of an emasculated literature associated with the “feminized” world of finance (Ingrassia 41). Deploying the publishing industry’s cant, Pope’s *Dunciad* portrayed such “dunces” as the progeny of “Dulness,” a “Mighty Mother” symbolizing both Edmund Curl’s “chaste

press" and his leading author, Eliza Haywood (lines 1–44). This goddess of printing continuously gave birth to bastard offspring: "Dulness's procreative abilities symbolically give her the power of physical and cultural reproduction and illustrate the ease with which texts are conceived and materially reproduced in the Grub Street environment . . . she spawns dunces, genres, and texts that she can mold in her image" (Ingrassia 50). This press, however, was anything but chaste; the soft pornography produced by it, in Pope's view, encouraged licentiousness and caused men to "neglect their real duties to govern" (Ingrassia 53). The poem's argument is most evident in the line, "The Goddess bade Britannia sleep" (Pope, line 7), which implies that Whig cultural production was distracting the citizenry from its obligation to oversee public policy.

Pope's modeling of the press's role in the reproduction of the regime and of capital partakes of an ancient discourse binding what Jean-Joseph Goux has described as the "isomorphic" unity of currency, language, and law in the image of the state (45). By the eighteenth century, the most influential early modern theory of these homologies had been asserted by Jean Bodin (1530–96), who "established as an educated opinion that a ruler should insist on a uniform monetary system for his own benefit and for the benefit of his subjects" (Latouche 127–50). The development and maintenance of this process of standardizing value required censorship, the hiring of pens to produce favorable public opinion, and the suppression of counterfeiters—prerogatives of sovereignty to which all political theorists subscribed. Without these powers, Thomas Hobbes asserted, the rule of law would collapse, destroying the transparency and growth of economic and linguistic exchange: "In such a condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture . . . no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society" (186).

Though Swift did not agree with these absolutist theories (Higgins 8), he felt that the Whig regime's attempts to disregard the prerogatives of the Irish legislature were tantamount to tyranny (Lock 152n33). Indeed, Swift understood the importance of cultural production to the state because he had served as what Victoria Glendinning has called a "spin doctor" for the previous Tory administration (101).

Swift's *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture*, published in 1720 after the Declaratory Act threatened to grant the British Crown the right to appropriate Ireland's revenues without the consent of Ireland's parliament, began to mobilize the Anglo-Irish appropriation of these homologies in a bid for colonial sovereignty. This work exploited both that "the press was introduced into Ireland specifically as an instrument of propaganda to win the natives over to Protestantism" and that monopoly licensing was practiced, which made the king's printer "responsible to the government for preventing the publication of seditious matter" (Pollard 9–11, 31). The lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 and Ireland's failure to enact the 1709 Copyright Act, however, created the less regulated conditions for production in which writers like Swift could begin to reverse this "cultural imperialism" (Said xxi). The pamphlet's call for a boycott of imports constructs Anglo-Irish patriotism through a strategy of Atlantic triangulation, complaining that the British "look down upon this Kingdom, as if it had been one of their Colonies of Out-casts in America" (*Prose Works* 9: 21). Swift champions economic patriotism, lauding Irish textiles and insisting that "Ireland would never be happy 'till a Law were made for burning every Thing that came from England, except their People and their Coals" (9: 17). As Helen Burke has observed, however, his insistence that the Anglo-Irish should "improve the *Cloaths and Stuffs of the Nation*" (9: 17) was a textile metaphor advocating domestic literary production and the burning of books published in London (57). This motive is evident

in his attacks on English writers, “the *Author of a Play called, Love in a Hollow-Tree,*” a “*Corrector of a Hedge Press,*” and a “*Translator of a lower Rate*” (9: 20). These hacks, after moving to Ireland to publish propaganda targeting the Anglo-Irish, had been rewarded by the British government with noble titles. Swift was calling attention to the indivisibility of the press, the economy, and the government as parts of a machine alienating “Irish Revenues to English Favourites” (9: 19). His *Drapier’s Letters* supplemented this claim by condemning the Crown’s attempt to impose base coinage on Ireland, reasserting how these imperialist homologies were undermining Anglo-Ireland’s right to steer its economy. He confronts the British view that the colony was a “*Depending Kingdom,*” writing, “they would seem, by this phrase, to intend that the People of *Ireland* is in some State of Slavery or Dependance different from those of *England*: Whereas a *Depending Kingdom* is a *Modern Term of Art,* unknown, as I have heard, to all antient *Civilians,* and *Writers upon Government*” (10: 62). The arrest of the printers of *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* and the *Letters* meant that the Crown considered Swift’s discourse on political thought a seditious attempt to institute an Irish monetary, linguistic, and legal isomorphism of power (Woolley, “Sarah Harding” 165–66).

A *Modest Proposal* incorporates these Irish patriotic themes into the strategies of Scriblerian financial satire. It appropriates the *Dunciad*’s metaphors for textual production to critique Dublin’s print culture, suggesting that the Anglo-Irish economic pamphlet, a genre that dominated Ireland’s publishing industry and public debate, was a form of political pornography entertaining to everybody but the starving poor for whom it claimed to be advocating. These pamphlets diverted attention away from the domestic and foreign politics of the national debt. Though he parodies their formal strategies in a manner that might be taken to unmask their conventions and reduce

their persuasiveness, he actually succeeds in making the *Proposal* the masterpiece of the genre. It seems tailored for a leisured Anglo-Irish political caste desiring scenes of suffering and their subsequent anaesthetizing economic resolutions. While the author certainly follows convention by framing such plots, his inferences make readers cognizant that their pleasure is derived from their participation in the camps of both perpetrator and reformer. Because the text outlines the authoritative presence of a faceless speaker (the proposer), readers initially are hailed as members of a universal public for whom the proposer is the spokesman. But this anonymous vox populi soon becomes apparent as a figure of loathing, and readers realize too late that they have been snared by their straight reading and implicated in the speaker’s vice. The *Proposal*’s effect, as a parody of earnest appeals for the end of actual suffering, was to dismiss the reality of the material economic problems discussed by pamphleteers, making the genre appear to be an exercise in apologetics bearing little relation to conditions on the ground.

Accordingly, the cannibal voice of the proposer signals that the schemes for development circulating in Dublin are thinly veiled attempts to fleece the population. By opening his speech with the enduring symbol of Ireland’s poverty, “*Beggars of the Female Sex,*” he confronts Anglo-Irish readers with the “melancholy” symptom of economic disaster most visible to them in the streets (*Prose Works* 12: 109).³ Dublin, because of depression and famine, was indeed rife with panhandlers, about which Swift had complained in a sermon of 1726 and a pamphlet of 1737 (Rawson 240). When regarded as a device and not an empirical reality, however, this symbol of the beggar registers the pathos that, in this genre, conventionally precedes the remedying proposition (Nokes 348). By mimicking the *argumentum ad misericordiam* of Ireland’s economic projectors, this paragraph progressively stretches the limits of credulity and rapidly

descends into bathos. The author italicizes the hackneyed tropes of liberal Whig political economy, announcing the text's performative stance and implying that these terms are freighted with supplemental signification. "Beggars" and "thieves," given this aporia, can be taken to stand for not merely the poor in the streets but also writers of pamphlets pursuing patronage and the creditors backing them. By means of these metaphors for the printing industry, the impoverished Irish mother of the *Proposal* is transmuted from a baby machine into Dublin's "Dulness": the endlessly procreative Irish press that spawned tract after tract on economic improvement. In this allegory, her "three, four, or six Children, *all in Rags*" personify texts, given that "rags" stands for both clothes recycled for papermaking and pulp fiction (*Prose Works* 12: 109).

If the offspring of the poor are figures for texts, their status as orphans is triply inscribed, connoting progeny with absent biological fathers, defenseless future taxpayers, and books with no clear author. The device of the invisible, anonymous narrator invents the Anglo-Irish public as godfather of the infant in all three of its manifestations and, by doing so, grants readers the custody of the infant's body and wealth, as well as authority over its proper interpretation. The babies' economic personas, however, take primacy as the cannibal calculus reaches its more detailed scheduling. They "will not bear Exportation" to Britain because they stand for the proceeds of Swift's nationalist scheme for their retention, short-term duties renewable by Parliament every two years (12: 117). This approach, by restricting the supply of Ireland's revenues, would guarantee that Anglo-Irish creditors, not the British Crown, would be receiving duties on a sustainable basis. The "young healthy Child . . . at a Year old" is the figure for this alternative plan because it represents such incremental, rather than perpetual, appropriation of the income of future generations (12: 111). The text pushes the limits of this figuration by

saying that the payment schedule in the narrator's scheme would be every 25 March, the end of Ireland's fiscal year: "INFANTS Flesh . . . will be more plentiful in March and a little before and after," or during accounting's "fore and hind Quarter" (12: 112). This plenty exists because "there are more Children born in *Roman Catholick Countries* about Nine Months after *Lent*, than at any other Season" (12: 112). The "*prolifick Dyet*" of fish to which he refers seems to signify not only the literal consumption of infants but also the ritual of Lenten fasting, which thematizes the very kind of restraint in the collection of taxes necessary to protect Anglo-Irish interests (12: 112). A close reading of this passage's anachronistic spelling of "*dyet*" under another of its denotations, "an allowance or provision of food . . . a constant Table or dyet in the Court" ("Diet"), suggests that the word refers to how courtiers in London might be fed the revenues derived from these babies if the Irish parliament is not prudent. Swift was intimating that Ireland's Catholic infants could be compared to the Christ child, born at Christmas to be a sacrifice at Easter in payment of man's debt. Because the parody is mocking the pathos of its target genre, however, any sincere concern for those children is dissolved into bathos, and the genre of the economic pamphlet is dismissed as cathartic theater.

The Scriblerians preferred this bathetic mode when critiquing Whig hypocrisy because its realist effect countered the sublime associated with imperial transcendentalism (Gerrard 203). *Peri Bathos; or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, a jointly written work published under the name Martin Scriblerus at nearly the same time as *The Dunciad*, linked the poetics of the moderns to contemporary government finance. Its subtitle appropriated the signification of the term *sinking fund*, which referred to a treasury measure enacted by Walpole. The purpose of the fund was to pay down Britain's national debt by progressively "sinking" the amount of its interest and principle with taxes

perpetually earmarked for this purpose. The authors used this phrase to imply that the moderns' embrace of the "*altitudo*" associated with Longinus's doctrine of the sublime was valued because it helped maintain the investment bubble supporting the ruling party (Scriblerus 345). The Whig ideology of the sublime, as Peter De Bolla has argued, linked the age's proliferation of printed information and incalculable debt. It arose to explain how the "feeling of boundlessness" generated by these excesses produced a crisis, reducing comprehension to the limits of the self and the boundaries of the state of which it was a part (65). The sublime both explained and invented British national identity as the product of anxieties about debt and knowledge, cultivating a transcendental aesthetic of transport as a means of escape from responsibility for these problems. The Tory critique of this aesthetic was based in the sublime's ability to potentially paralyze the political agency required for the reform of empire.

What stabilizes the subject in this episteme is "inflationary rhetoric": an equally excessive literature of pathos, exactly the device Swift satirizes in the *Proposal's* first paragraphs (Furniss 235). Paper money, an invention of the financial revolution, had consistently been a target of the Scriblerians because it was a medium that reified Britain's national debt into wealth. In the Tory imagination, both popular literature and currency inflation were linked in the ideology of the sublime. *Peri Bathos* explains that Whig writers, by valuing the sublime, were increasing the gap between rich and poor on "Parnassus," the work's metonym for the British state and republic of letters. It remarks that it is "surprising," given the "populous of our lowlands," that "all dignities and honours should be bestowed upon the exceeding few meager inhabitants on the top of the mountain" (Scriblerus 345–46). *Peri Bathos* may consist of "bathetic images of the futile attempt to hold onto wealth" in the modern economy

(Bell 53), but it also denigrates payments to public creditors by showing how the support of the few at the top of the mountain requires ever-increasing levies on those at its foot. Yet its narrator also suggests that, given the connection between popular literature and inflation, bathos might be a mode of realism that could finally sink the debt, providing a bottom to the market: "I have undertaken . . . to lead them as it were by the hand, and step by step, the gentle down-hill way to the bathos; the bottom, the end, the central point, the *non plus ultra*, of true modern poesy" (Scriblerus 345). His repeated use of the term "Profund" for *bathos* connects the signification of depth associated with *profound* with the "pro-fund" process of pouring forth wealth toward Britain's sinking fund (Scriblerus 348). The narrator is suggesting that bathos's ironic effect is reconstructive—an attempt to rebuild a deep foundation to support "an appalling destabilisation of the national economy and its moral basis" (Bell 54). The market, the Scriblerians argued, may be underwritten more effectively by laughter than sensibility.

In this context, *A Modest Proposal* may have evinced consciousness about overpopulation, but it unconsciously reveals a concern with national debt and that debt's relation to financial and rhetorical bubbles. It had become clear to Swift that population growth and inflation were linked by the practical requirements of the fiscal-military state: revenue produced by an ever-increasing supply of taxpayers. The proliferation of children, whether they were regarded literally as bodies whose alienated labor would pay debts or metaphorically as inflationary pulp fictions keeping the public preoccupied, was necessary for the continuation of Whig hegemony. Given Swift's use of these pregnancy metaphors, postcolonial assessments of his critique of empire may be informed by a historicization of the period's organic unification of publishing, capitalism, and legal agency under the aegis of sexual reproduction. Laura Brown's contention that Swift is a misogynist

who blames women's consumption of foreign textiles for Ireland's trade deficit now can be amplified; his metonymy seems to incorporate not only women's bodies and clothing but also the English instead of Anglo-Irish books that Dublin publishers reprint (429). In addition, Clement Hawes's view that the dietary motif censures "England's devastating exploitation of the Irish poor" can be supplemented by an understanding of how this motif also stands for the Irish parliament's simultaneous appropriation of economic, textual, and political space (198). Similarly, Srinivas Aravamudan's interpretation of these homologies—his awareness that some of Swift's Irish work "exploits a coinage crisis to generate anticolonial intellectual coin"—might be further substantiated by examining the immediate Dublin circumstances for the composition of particular texts (18). These compelling readings, in short, may be fortified by a new economic methodology that brings analysis of colonial discourse together with a historical assessment of the importance of writers to the state's legal and financial missions.

[II]

The crisis in Ireland's economy in 1729 constituted Swift's most immediate exigency for *A Modest Proposal's* composition. Generations of Swift scholars have recognized that it was written in the wake of the bursting of the South Sea and Mississippi investment bubbles in 1720, in which the Anglo-Irish political class had invested heavily (Ehrenpreis 3: 155). They also have documented that the subsequent depression was rendered worse by the famine of the late 1720s (J. Kelly, "Harvests" 72–89). Almost all commentators, however, have neglected to consider the significance of the parliamentary controversy over Ireland's revenue to the pamphlet's publication. Oliver Ferguson's long-standing contention that the satire was circulated "in the midst of superfluous reports and useless debates" in Parlia-

ment, accordingly, can be revised to emphasize the centrality of this context (170). If the cannibal motif had been put into circulation in the *Intelligencer* newspaper in the late 1720s, as James Woolley has documented, it is likely that it was because of concerns about the debt of the nation (Jonathan 198). What Claude Rawson has termed this motif's "ironic reversal" of blame for Ireland's barbarism from the natives to the Anglo-Irish can now be seen as condemning the Anglo-Irish class's predatory loans and schemes for taxpayer financing, not its exorbitant rents (242). If landlords had "devoured most of the Parents" and had "best Title to the Children," as the *Proposal* asserted (*Prose Works* 12: 112), it was probably because they had exhausted the resources of their tenant farmers and were tempted to perpetually tax Irish progeny, to whom they had more of a right than the Crown. They were experiencing difficulty in collecting rents, so those with loan payments due from the treasury and the power to obtain them through taxation were tempted to do so (Barnard 323; J. Kelly, "Harvests" 102). They had become dependent on the debt of the nation for life, liberty, and property; there would be no dominant Protestant state in Ireland without this autonomous mechanism for alienating native labor. Given that Swift had invested £1,200 with the deputy vice treasurer, he had every motivation to support that machine by propagating ideas of Anglo-Irish constitutional autonomy (Legg 75–76; Johnston-Liik 6: 114).

The *Proposal* has long been recognized as a satire of the "political arithmetick" of William Petty (Wittkowsky 82; Landa), but it has only recently been argued that this statistical methodology had been invented to legitimate huge confiscations of land from Irish Catholics in the seventeenth century (Poovey 92–143). Those confiscations inaugurated the first pillar of Anglican domination in Ireland: monopolization of land (the Anglo-Irish's economic base). The second pillar was the ideology that secured the legality of this proprietorship: reli-

gious conformity in the form of the penal laws and test acts designed to prevent Catholic or Dissenter land ownership, service in government or education, and practice of religion. These two engines of the “gigantic experiment in primitive accumulation,” as one historian has called it (Roncaglia 5), brought about the surplus value necessary to raise the third pillar: finance capitalism by the state itself in the form of the debt of the nation. This deficit had been established in 1716 as a “funded” debt, meaning Parliament promised to repay the creditors from general tax funds (Kiernan 144–48). Paradoxically, however, those voting for such measures, for the most part, were the lenders themselves, who were using their positions to appropriate the tax payments of ordinary people: “the people who lent the money—the public creditors—were protestant peers, judges, bishops, members of Parliament, clergymen, merchants and the like, who, as part of the Irish protestant community, already depended for their survival upon the maintenance of the Revolution settlement in ‘church and state’” (McGrath, “Public Wealth” 178). The members of the leadership were investing in their own security at eight percent interest, protecting their existing property and earning more profit from it (McGrath, “Central Aspects” 15–16). As a long-term mortgage on the future of the state, the debt established the temporal basis for the national identity of Anglo-Irish Protestants; the literally circular logic of their status as both creditors and debtors to Ireland bound them together into the small clique that would continue to dominate the province. That they excluded Catholics from this circle of investors reflects their fear that “papists” would reassert Jacobite control over the country not only by profiting from public revenue but also by influencing policy to enable them to become landed gentry and members of Parliament again (Rowley 40; Johnston-Liik 1: 395).

The Irish parliament had been appropriating revenue for the debt on a two-year instead

of permanent basis since the Glorious Revolution, copying the means of fiscal control asserted by the English parliament under the Declaration of Right in 1689. The debt of the nation and the Declaratory Act of 1720, however, had heightened the risk that the Crown would bypass legislative approval and directly debit the treasury accounts holding the money of Irish parliamentarians. *Reflections on the National Debt*, a Dublin pamphlet of 1731, commented on how this problem of fiscal control potentially could compromise the Irish parliament’s political agency: “Pray what is all this, but laying the Nation under the severest Bonds, to do whatever the Prime Minister directs?” (12). Anglo-Irish proprietorship of any fund to pay the debt would be in doubt unless a new budgetary system was instituted.

Many felt that there was a pro-Walpole “English interest” among the Irish Whigs that was working to undermine Parliament’s fiscal autonomy. Swift had been aware of this problem for quite some time, and his *Intelligencer* periodical of 1728 indicates that he knew that this conflict was coming to a head. His dialogical poem “Mad Mullinix and Timothy,” published in the eighth number of that periodical (18 June 1728), revived the Scriblerian critique of credit financing in defense of a Tory earl who was accused of sedition for merely asking for transparency in public accounting. It is possible that these verses were stirring the opinion of the “Irish interest” against the Walpole government, given that the Timothy of the poem, Richard Tighe, served the English interest in the executive as a privy counselor (Swift, *Poems* 773). Though Tighe may not have been involved directly in financial impropriety, his ties with the prime minister made him a convenient figure around whom to mobilize opposition to the Whig’s efforts to appropriate Ireland’s revenues without consent. Since the author proceeded to spend the summer of 1728 at Market Hill in the country with Arthur Acheson and Anne Acheson, the son-in-law and daughter of a former Tory

chancellor of the Irish exchequer, it is likely that he was at the very least informed about the financial crisis. Arthur Acheson himself had been considered for the exchequer post earlier in his career but had been denied it because he was not a Whig, which suggests that he was skilled in financial matters and may have espoused alternative approaches to public finance that Swift may have found appealing (Swift, *Poems* 847, 851; Woolley, *Jonathan* 206; Johnston-Liik 6: 250, 3: 53).

The author's concern about the growing economic problem was ethical, though self-interested. Ireland's debt of the nation constituted a system similar to that he complained about in England, and, though he partook of it himself, he felt that it could be managed more artfully. As a high-church clergyman, Swift did not object to the defense of Anglican property and profit from investment in it, but he believed that "[t]he security of Protestant Ireland hardly demanded the utter impoverishment of the Catholic natives, and was indeed ultimately endangered by it" (Mahony 94). Revenue was the goal of the methodology he was parodying in his cannibal calculus, and, if that income serviced the national debt, then his message was that any further attempts to tax the natives would backfire. The mechanism for funding Anglo-Irish creditors from the public purse would grind to a halt. Indeed, fears of Jacobite recruitment were rife during the famine years of the late 1720s, and the appearance of French recruiting officers in Dublin in 1730 made that risk patently visible to the public in a way that no writing could (Davis xxx).

Swift seemed to be aware that some financial measures involving taxation would be proposed for the approaching legislative session of 1729. He visited the Achesons again the summer before it convened, a long stay described in his frivolous poem of 1730 called "Lady A-S-N Weary of the Dean" (*Poems* 859). His letter from the Acheson residence in Market Hill to Alexander Pope of 11 August 1729 subtly ironizes Ireland's financial situation, suggesting that

it may have been a topic of conversation with his hosts in those months: "One reason why I would have you in Ireland when you shall be at your own disposal, is that you may be master of two or three years revenues, *provisae frugis in annos copia*, so as not to be pinched in the least when years increase, and perhaps your health impairs: And when this kingdom is utterly at an end, you may support me for the few years I shall happen to live" (Swift, *Correspondence* 341–42). Apparently aware of the leading structural cause of the country's poverty, Swift jokes that the debt of the nation makes it possible for one to own future funds indefinitely, as long as the people are still able to yield them. Swift's reference to times "when years increase" may have been advising Pope that his income would go further in Ireland as both men aged. In the context of the debt crisis, however, it is difficult to miss seeing that this passage also could be read as a statement about how the native young would finance their colonial elders, an implication tantamount to the cannibal motif of the pamphlet to follow.

A Modest Proposal, therefore, was probably composed with these concerns in mind. Herbert Davis speculated that it was begun with the Achesons "in those last weeks in the country" and printed at the end of October, given that it was advertised in an 8 November edition of the *Dublin Intelligence* (Davis xix). Publishing it at that time could have been nothing other than a political act, since the new session of Parliament had convened in September and was reaching its peak of activity. The lord lieutenant of Ireland, John Carteret, the representative of the Crown and executive authority in the colony, opened the session with a speech complaining of the revenue falling short of expectations, and he hoped that Parliament would "grant such supplies as will be necessary to answer the exigencies of the Government" (*Journals* 86–87). Carteret made it clear that he desired "that the imposition of the appropriated duties should be open-ended, to cease only when the debt was

cleared" (McGrath, *Public Wealth* 190). I modestly submit that Swift published the *Proposal* at this time to raise opposition to this request.

[III]

Little is known of how the *Proposal* was received during these weeks of controversy, though there is enough evidence to suggest that contemporaries understood that its covert message concerned the new taxation that most members of Parliament knew would be inevitable (McGrath, "Public Wealth" 191). At the time of the text's publication, no decisions had been made regarding these matters, though Swift warned of "a perpetual scene of misfortunes" for the native Irish and "the most inevitable prospect of intailing the like, or greater miseries, upon their breed forever" if Parliament enacted the permanent taxes the viceroy wanted (*Prose Works* 12: 117–18). I argue that patriotic advocacy of this kind helped shape the resolution that emerged from the Parliament in December: the introduction of a second biennial supply act to temporarily finance a sinking fund. With this strategy, the legislative branch preserved its check on the executive branch, which was given only two years' worth of debt servicing at a time rather than a permanent appropriation (McGrath, "Central Aspects" 18).

Swift's correspondence indicates that the *Proposal* was read by some as an allegory for the general problem of European national debts. Allen Bathurst, an old Tory friend of Swift's who helped manage publishing and financial matters for him in London, wrote to Swift that winter, expanding on the cannibal motif for taxation. Bathurst develops an elaborate metaphor of siblings and twins to describe not only the national debts of England and Ireland but also the predatory behavior of England toward Ireland. He says, referring to the *Proposal*'s lines that the Anglo-Irish "have the best Title to the Children," that funds for the debt have made possible the notion that the "youngest shou'd raise fortunes for the Eldest" in his or

her taxes. His phrasing doubles as Scriblerian terminology for printing; it is possible that Bathurst is also implying that this young text would sell more copies of *Gulliver's Travels*, which was the "eldest," or first, publication in the coordinated attack of Swift, Pope, and Gay. Bathurst's references to Ireland as a "twin," a child of a "second woman," and "the fattest of the two" signal that he was interpreting the *Proposal* to be saying that England was preying on Ireland (Swift, *Correspondence* 372–73).

Newly discovered evidence of the satire's reception, however, indicates that the crisis in the debt of the nation may have been one of its subtexts, if not the primary reason for its composition, suggesting that the *Proposal*'s advocacy was targeting the Anglo-Irish parliamentarians, not the English. A letter from a high-ranking official, Marmaduke Coghill, written in November 1729, a few days after the *Proposal*'s publication, discussed the satire in relation to these fiscal concerns. Given that this letter ends with the note "the enclosed is a book of Swift's" (Coghill), and that David Hayton has speculated that this note refers to a copy of *A Modest Proposal* (78n260), it is likely that Coghill was linking the pamphlet to Parliament's budgetary debates. Coghill was made first commissioner of the revenue of Ireland a week later, suggesting that the *Proposal* was significant to him at the moment he wrote the letter because of the questions of revenue for which he would be responsible under any new plan for servicing the debt (Johnston-Liik 3: 444).

Additional evidence that Swift was thinking about the national debt during this period is the unpublished pamphlet *A Proposal that All the Ladies Should Appear Constantly in Irish Manufactures*, written in December 1729, a revision of *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* of nine years before. Hoping to intervene in the parliamentary debates over raising taxes to support payments to the country's creditors, Swift announces his awareness of the public debates: "I am informed that our national debt (and God knows how

we wretches came by that fashionable thing a national debt) is about 250,000*l.*; which is, at least, one third of the whole kingdom's rents, after our absentees and other foreign drains are paid, and about 50,000*l.* more than all the cash" (*Prose Works* 12: 123). He recommends alternative luxury taxes on silks and rent payments remitted to absentee landlords overseas—measures that would target the wealthy exclusively. Because the Irish parliament had voted "larger Supplies than ever granted in any previous Session," however, "it was too late for him to protest," and he decided not to print this piece (Davis xxii). Also, that the pamphlet explicitly mentioned the debt may have worked against Swift's strategy, making its existence too apparent to the public. If his objective was to prove that Scriblerian writing produced superior fictions of state, publishing this manuscript would have undermined his previous pamphlet's more subtle approach.

Perhaps in response to *A Modest Proposal's* advocacy, the Irish parliament created a sinking fund financed by more-progressive taxation, yet this fund preserved Parliament's sovereignty by only levying enough money for two years' worth of payments. These new duties on luxury items affected the Anglo-Irish wealthy more than the native poor and can be interpreted as a tribute to the success of Swift's pamphlet (Johnston-Liik 1: 423). His work may have begun to alter the context for policymaking decisions (J. Kelly, "Jonathan" 34). Though the irony of the *Proposal* has been taken to reflect Swift's final personal despair about the possibilities of reform (P. Kelly 140), it is nonetheless evident that Swift persuaded the landed men of the Parliament to behave more responsibly. In the legislative session of 1731, the secondary budget bill to fund repayments on Anglo-Irishmen's loans to their government targeted, paradoxically, their consumption habits more than those of any other demographic group, taxing such imported luxuries as silk, Chinese porcelain, and "Jappaned or Lacquered Ware" (Johnston-Liik 1: 425).

[IV]

By the late 1720s, the Scriblerians did not believe that they could actually reverse the financial revolution. The Scriblerian critique of Walpole and the Whigs, rather, was directed at the visibility of their corruption, inadequately covered by Whig writers. The Scriblerians were claiming that their own art, and the policies of Tory politicians, would put a better face on the state and help secure the class positions of the elite of both parties: "what most Whigs and Tories were arguing about was in fact how they might best protect and preserve their own—shared—privileged position in society" (Nicholson 22). Swift's work was no exception, but the particularly rarefied politics of immediate postrevolution Ireland raised the stakes of his rhetoric; he did not have to speak merely to multiple classes, but to both the colonizer and the colonized. By covertly addressing the revenue problem in the cannibal metaphor, he may not have been simply masking it—everyone in Dublin knew the economy was in trouble and that Parliament was meeting to discuss it—but proving how talented he was at disseminating a compelling fiction of Anglo-Irish independence in the face of that problem.

This contextualization of *A Modest Proposal's* discourse on cannibalism has the potential to transform the critical ideology of the work's "stable" irony because, though the *Proposal* reads as a parody of the dry economic pamphlet, it was not entirely dismissing the potential of that genre (Booth 105). If the *Proposal's* end was the reform of budgetary planning, its main effects might have been taken not as the "double irony" that "Swift means what the Proposer says" (Real 185) but rather as allegory; for a parliamentary audience, it seems to have been taken as an economic proposal, and a serious one at that. Its strategy of migrating the narrator's persona from master of the accounting desk to host at the dinner table brings the questions of the

genres and media of Anglophile social performance to the fore in unexpected ways. The *Proposal's* culinary metaphors for the dieting of revenue, for example, seem also to mock the kinds of table manners and tastes that the Anglo-Irish were mimicking from the English, suggesting that Swift was indeed slicing through the bourgeois propriety fashioned in imported novels. Such novels, by pulling the Anglo-Irish toward British cultural capital, undermined the Anglo-Irish claim for sovereignty. Value, from Swift's provincial point of view, had to be modeled in Ireland's arts before it could be lived as political agency and economic prosperity, and encouraging Dublin's publishers to cultivate local talent was fundamental to this process. An alternative Irish republic of letters and decorum was necessary to produce domestic control of law and the flow of capital.

Swift's pragmatic advocacy of the importance of a domestic press to the construction of a national sense of value was given a theoretical justification by Anglo-Irish philosophers. His colleague George Berkeley, for example, asked whether "it should not seem worthwhile to erect a Mart of Literature in this Kingdom, under wiser Regulations and better Discipline than in any other Part of *Europe*? And whether this would not be an infallible Means of drawing Men and Money into the Kingdom?" (21–22). Berkeley's question may have been answered by the fact that the patriot discourse that Swift had first seeded mobilized domestic printers for the production of the distinct Irish identity necessary for securing a provincial symbolic order of value (Kiberd 85). But Ireland continued to lose some of its best authors—Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Sheridan, Laurence Sterne, and Edmund Burke, among others—to England because there was no copyright law, and therefore no profit for authors, in Ireland in this period (Pollard 31). After Irish independence was gained in the 1920s, however, more complete executive and leg-

islative control over the country's revenues and fiscal system enabled the state to cultivate an essential Irishness in its arts. Yet Ireland continued to lose writers to the London market, and the Irish economy reflected this brain drain. In the 1960s there was a change in policy; the Irish government abolished income taxes on artists, which brought native talent back and kept it. Further, it made tuition and fees for all domestic universities free and built new ones, effectively creating a more universal literacy and market for these artists' work. The relation of these developments to the rise of the Celtic-tiger economy that sprang into being in the 1990s—when Ireland was the fastest-growing economy in the European Union—has not yet been thoroughly investigated. Nonetheless, the health of Ireland's book trade, manifest in the proliferation of presses and book prizes like the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, appears to be traceable to Swift's contribution to eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish intellectual endeavor.

NOTES

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2. The text's discourse on child molestation is located in the narrator's implication that Irish children might be "disposed of by their Parents" in prostitution: "Gentlemen of the Kingdom" could purchase "[t]he Bodies of young Lads and Maidens, not exceeding fourteen Years of Age, nor under Twelve" (*Prose Works* 12: 113). In the eighteenth century, the age at which a minor legally could engage in sexual activity was indexed to that for marriage, which was twelve for females and fourteen for males (Cosgrove 26–27; Blackstone 424–26).

3. For a comparison between *A Modest Proposal's* and *Cato's Letters's* use of melancholy and the cannibal theme, see Higgins 190–92.

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