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An Irish Reaction to English Domination: Swift's *The Story of an Injured Lady*

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Swift has been rightly praised and often as a champion of liberty. His friend Dr Delany admired 'his fortitude in resisting oppression and arbitrary power'¹. Yeats, paraphrasing the inscription on Swift's tomb wrote, 'he served human liberty'². Works like *The Drapier's Letters* bear ample testimony to his fearless defence of Ireland against the machinations of Englishmen to impose on Ireland whatever schemes they liked, and the familiar allegory of Laputa, the flying island, in *Gulliver's Travels* looming over its dominions below is a satirical reminder of how Swift saw England's domination in Ireland.

It has been suggested however that this facility for protest among Irish writers is itself a sign of the very repression they protested about. Seamus Deane writes,

Irish writing has concentrated on the freedom available within language because, for much of the time, it has been telling us, there is no freedom in any other zone. The eloquence we have been branded with is perhaps no more than a symptom of the repression we undergo in areas other than that of speech and writing³.

In the light of this, *Gulliver's Travels* demonstrates the imagination of a writer exercising his freedom to fight repression in other areas of his experience. It is a fanciful text about confinement and repression. From the opening scene where Gulliver is tied to the ground in Lilliput through to images of him being shut in a little box in Brobdingnag, from the domineering image of the King of Laputa to the exclusion and subjugation of the Yahoos by the Houyhnhnms, who are themselves haunted by fears of violence, the book points up the frightening and often degrading possibilities of being denied freedom.

It could be argued then that when Gulliver says in Brobdingnag, 'I had a strong hope which never left me, that I should one day recover my liberty'⁴, he expresses Swift's sentiments for the Irish people. But liberty for whom and from what, we have to ask. Swift is referring primarily to the stock of English invaders, the Anglo-Irish, not the Catholics. English Protestants in Ireland were not in Swift's view subservient to England. He tells in the *Drapier's Letters* how English visitors to Ireland,

shake their heads and tell us, that Ireland is a "depending kingdom", as if they would seem, by this phrase, to intend that the people of Ireland is in some state of slavery and dependence different from those of England⁵.

Swift's argument is that Ireland shares the liberties of the British constitution. In that respect Ireland values the connection with England. Accordingly she wants to be free, not from England, much less its constitution, but from the stupidity, stubbornness and exploitation of English administrators, from what one critic calls 'diminution and interference from

¹ Cited by Johnson, 'Jonathan Swift,' *Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1925), II, p. 272.

² W.B. Yeats, 'Swift's Epitaph,' *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 277.

³ Seamus Deane, 'Remembering the Irish Future,' *Ireland: Dependence and Independence* (Dublin: Crane Bag, 1984), p. 87.

⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Dent, 1940), p. 100. For a discussion about what Swift meant by 'liberty' see Irwin Ehrenpreis, 'Swift on Liberty' (1952), in *Swift: Modern Judgements*, ed. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 59-73.

⁵ Swift, 'Drapier's Letter,' IV, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Temple Scott, 12 vols (London: Bell, 1903), VI, p. 113 (hereafter *Works*); Swift returns to the point in 'Drapier's Letter,' VI, *Works*, VI, pp. 165-67.

England’⁶. He beats the British with their own stick. However in doing so he admits a central paradox – is it possible to be dependent in one respect and free in another?

Swift’s protest about English violence to Ireland stems ironically from a desire to be at one with England, to share the same status. The desired relation has been called ‘colonial nationalism;’ that is a political context in which Ireland demands ‘domestic self-government within an imperial framework’⁷. Unlike nationalists later in the century, for example Wolfe Tone, Swift did not envisage Ireland independent from England. In the seventy-five pamphlets he wrote in Ireland he never considered complete separation from the English masters. The British empire was the necessary context for Ireland’s liberties. As an Anglican clergyman of the minority ruling class Swift’s notion of liberty had an obvious flaw. It measured Ireland’s legitimate expectations, for example in terms of trade and standards of living, by achievements in England. But England from at least the time of the Woollen Act of 1699 – ‘an Act,’ wrote Swift, ‘fuller of greediness than good policy’⁸ – demonstrated that she wanted no competition let alone equality from Ireland. As J.C. Beckett puts it, ‘it is because England is itself a free country that its tyranny towards Ireland can arouse such bitterness’⁹.

Part of the reason for the complexity of Swift’s protest is that he did not see the flaw and refused to regard Ireland as a colony. In a recent criticism Deane argues that Swift, like his predecessor Molyneux – not having the benefit of our hindsight – did not yet fully comprehend the notion of colonialism. They had, ‘in their unwitting ways, begun to identify what was later to be understood as colonialism’¹⁰. But Swift had no problem identifying colonialism. Gulliver in the latter part of his voyage to the Houyhnhnms makes as direct an attack on the ills of colonialism as will be found in eighteenth-century literature. When a new land has been discovered and ‘pirates’ have given it a name and claimed it for the king,

Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives driven out or destroyed, their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free licence given to all acts of inhumanity and lust; the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants; and this execrable crew of butchers employed in so pious an expedition, is a *modern colony* sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous people¹¹.

Swift’s problem was to recognize colonialism in Ireland for what it was, even though such violent characteristics of colonialism as mentioned in the passage above have been noted in Swift’s work, but without the label. Consider for example this description of numerous invasions of Ireland by the English:

The first invaders had almost the whole kingdom divided among them. New invaders succeeded, and drove out their predecessors as native Irish. These were expelled by others who came after, and upon the same pretension. Thus it went on for several hundred years, and in some degree even to our own memories. And thus it will probably go on, although not in a martial way, to the end of the world¹².

It is a particularly bleak expression of English appropriation. The point can be extended. Carole Fabricant rightly remarks that Swift ‘repeatedly described the inherently exploitative relationship between England and Ireland, not only through references to starvation, but also through images suggesting perverted acts of eating, including cannibalism.’¹³ Yet Swift does

⁶ Nicholas Canny, ‘Identity Formation in Ireland: the Emergence of the Anglo-Irish,’ *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, eds. Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 205.

⁷ J.G. Sims, *Colonial Nationalism, 1698-1800* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1976) p. 9; also Canny, pp. 206-207.

⁸ Swift, ‘The Present Miserable State of Ireland,’ *Works*, VII, p. 157.

⁹ J.C. Beckett, ‘Literature in English, 1691-1800,’ *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, ed. T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughan, vol. IV (1986) of *A New History of Ireland*, 10 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976 -), p. 435.

¹⁰ Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), pp. 47-48.

¹¹ *Gulliver’s Travels*, p. 315.

¹² Swift, ‘On the Bill for the Clergy’s Residing on their Livings,’ *Works*, III, p. 253.

¹³ Carole Fabricant, *Swift’s Landscape* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 78.

not accept that Ireland is in any sense a colony¹⁴. The very idea he said was absurd¹⁵. Colonies are established across oceans, not across the channel. Swift held onto the principle that Ireland was not a 'depending' country. Its Protestant gentry were entitled to the liberties of Magna Carta just as Englishmen were.

Furthermore Gulliver notes with striking blandness that his earlier description of colonialism does not apply in any way to the British, 'who may be an example to the whole world for their wisdom, care and justice in planting colonies.' In particular they supply 'the most vigilant and virtuous governors, who have no other views than the happiness of the people...' ¹⁶ Coming as this does two years after the *Drapier's Letters* (1724), it seems both a peculiarly naive statement, befitting Gulliver, and an acerbically ironic statement befitting Swift.

My point is that Swift protests at the violence and oppression England brings to Ireland not as policy but as some kind of perversity of human nature in people who should know better. Others however admitted a deliberate policy. Swift's contemporary Philip Yorke, a lawyer, later Lord Hardwicke, put the matter plainly. He alludes to both the Anglo-Irish settlers and to the Catholic Gaelic Irish:

the subjects of Ireland were to be considered in two respects, as English and Irish, that the Irish were a conquered people, and the English a colony transplanted hither and as a colony subject to the law of the mother country¹⁷.

Ireland's subservience was reinforced in 1720, no longer a matter of dispute which Swift could disregard. It was written into the Declaratory Act (1720) which stated *inter alia*, 'the said kingdom of Ireland hath been, is and of right ought to be, subordinate unto and dependent upon the imperial crown of Great Britain' ¹⁸.

As Ehrenpreis remarks the Act 'annihilated any Irish pretensions to genuine self-government.' ¹⁹ Swift realised as much when he started work immediately on a pamphlet calling for a boycott of English imports, 'A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture.' This was taken as seditious of the Act and the printer Esward Waters was arrested²⁰. The incident epitomises the plight of the Protestant Irish protestor. Swift had become victim of, and indeed a prisoner of that ideology he refused to acknowledge. It was in the nature of that ideology to expect loyalty and to give short rations. It is impossible to be both coloniser and colonised. To complain without considering rejection of the entire ideology is but crying in the wilderness.

An interesting example of the effect of this plight on Swift's writing is an early allegorical piece about Ireland's relations with England, 'The Story of the Injured Lady' ²¹. J.C. Beckett says it 'contains in embryo, almost all that Swift was later to say' on Anglo-Irish relations²². However critics have given it scant attention dismissing it, in one critic's words, as 'a poor allegorical representation of the plight of Ireland' ²³. Although not published until after his

¹⁴ Deane, *Short History of Irish Literature*, p. 48.

¹⁵ Swift, 'On the Bill for the Clergy's Residing on their Livings,' *Works*, III, p. 253.

¹⁶ *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 316.

¹⁷ R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), III, p. 131.

¹⁸ 'An Act for the better securing the dependency of the kingdom of Ireland on the crown of Great-Britain,' often referred to as 6. Geo. I, 65.

¹⁹ Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift, the Man, his Works and the Age* 3 vols. (London: Methuen, 1962-83), III, p. 121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29; see also Swift's poem on the incident, 'An Excellent new song on a seditious Pamphlet' (1720) in *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), I, pp. 236-38.

²¹ Swift, 'The Story of the Injured Lady,' *Works*, VII, pp. 97-103. The full title of the first edition (1746) was 'The Story of the Injured Lady, being a true Picture of Scottish Perfidy, Irish Poverty and English Partiality' (*A Bibliography of the Writings of Jonathan Swift*, 2nd edn., eds. H. Teerink and Arthur H. Scouten (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), p. 150.

²² J.C. Beckett, in *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, p. 433.

²³ J.A. Downie, *Jonathan Swift, Political Writer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 116.

death Swift writes the pamphlet at about the time of Scotland's union with England (1707). The Irish House of Lords had applied for such a union in 1703 but without success. The pamphlet is in the guise of a letter from a well-to-do lady (Ireland) who has been seduced and ill-used by a gentleman (England) and then rejected in favour of a tempestuous and unfaithful rival (Scotland). It starts,

Sir,
Being ruined by the inconstancy and unkindness of a lover, I hope, a true and plain relation of my misfortunes may be of use and warning to credulous maids, never to put too much trust in deceitful men²⁴.

The ruined lady, now deserted by her lover, sits down to recount her fall in a spirit of remorse hoping that her story will be for the improvement and instruction of her readers. The passage reads like the opening to an eighteenth-century romantic novel. The villain of the piece is the harsh and unscrupulous gentleman. In terms of the allegory England's violence to Ireland is the violence of the seducer: his deceit is matched only by his cruelty. The persona details 'this gentleman's hard usage of me'²⁵: once she had succumbed he took every opportunity 'to shew his authority, and to act like a conqueror'²⁶; he found fault, substituted his servants for hers. Alluding to England's Privy Council she complains, 'he expected his word should be a law to me in all things'²⁷. In her patience she 'yielded to all his usurpations'²⁸. He resented the favour she kept among the new servants and heaped 'a hundred other hardships' upon her²⁹, so that her estate became indigent – 'my poor tenants are so sunk and impoverished, that, instead of maintaining me suitable to my quality, they can hardly find me clothes to keep me warm, or provide the common necessities of life for themselves'³⁰. The lover has turned tyrant.

By use of allegory Swift meets political and institutional violence with a mirror image of itself. This is crafted in such a way that the violence of the male oppressor appears through the eyes of and in the moral context of the oppressed woman. What the allegory does is to make an imaginative appropriation of the violence of the master (England) in order to reproduce it as an indictment of him and to rouse sympathy for her. He is given no say. It is not in the nature of the letter to give him a voice. What we have instead is a woman's moral denunciation framed by the opening and closing remarks about his, and by analogy England's, 'inconstancy and unkindness.'

These characteristics are compounded by the first major point of her letter, his senseless attraction to Scotland. A vituperative attack on her 'stinking breath', her 'natural sluttishness', her 'common conversation', her association with 'rogues, and thieves, and pickpockets', comes to a climax with the slur that she is 'a Presbyterian of the most rank and virulent kind'³¹. This is the woman who has been preferred to a faithful and good-looking Anglican. Her jealous anger is not assuaged by the qualities she tries to project of herself in the remainder of the letter – patient, long suffering, gentle, loyal, still ready to show generosity and love to the gentleman 'while I had a penny in my purse, or a petticoat to pawn'³². Clearly she sees herself as a much more worthy choice. In the heat of her anger at both her rival and

²⁴ 'Story of the Injured Lady,' p. 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98. This attack is matched by equally derogatory remarks about the Scots in Swift's 'Remarks on Clarendon's History of the Rebellion,' for example 'rebellious dogs,' 'cursed Scots,' 'Damnable rebel Scots,' 'Scots hell-hounds' (*Works*, X, pp. 291-322).

³² 'Story of the Injured Lad,' p. 101.

the gentleman there is an aggrieved longing for him to choose her. Whatever violence he does to her she cannot extricate herself from some kind of bond between them.

This is one of the striking ambiguities in the story: in spite of the mounting suffering she clings to her desire for the gentleman, and secondly even after he is married he continues to haunt and confuse her by his power. This is Ireland's quandary: she is inextricably bound to the whims of a harsh master.

It is interesting to note that the allegory starts with the familiar plot of male domination over female weakness and male guile over female innocence. The lady blames herself as much as the gentleman for her seduction: 'I was undone by the common arts practised upon all easy credulous virgins, half by force, and half by consent, after solemn vows and protestations of marriage'³³. Ireland has beauty and innocence but England has the power, and in the eighteenth century context the woman has precious few options but to see her future in terms of adjusting to and pleasing male dominance. Swift's imagination works at the abuse that flows from this domination, not at the domination itself.

A further clue to how Swift images the relation between the two countries lies in the very image of seduction. The gentleman's conquest was achieved, says the lady, 'half by force, and half by consent,' and that view places Swift much nearer the placid version of Molyneux than more violent nationalist versions of how England came to rule Ireland in the first place³⁴. Edmund Burke by contrast describes Henry II's attempt on Ireland in 1172 as deliberate conquest and it took over 400 years to subdue the people³⁵. A similar difference can be seen in their respective attitudes to Clarendon's version of the 1641 rebellion in Ireland. Burke complained about partisan English versions of the rebellion like Clarendon's, whereas Swift thought Clarendon not severe enough on the Irish³⁶. The point is that the image of seduction is, from an Irish viewpoint, a decidedly mild description of how England conquered Ireland. The thrust of the letter emphasises the consequent deprivation of Ireland, her loss of freedom, her role as helpless victim. The brunt of the protest falls not on the seduction but on the behaviour of England thereafter.

Not surprisingly the answer she receives blames her for remaining loyal to the gentleman, for tactical errors and for her passionate hatred towards her rival. Her response should be not, as might be expected, to take her liberty by breaking away or rebelling, but to negotiate. There should be no dependence on the gentleman, free trade, no absenteeism of landlords, agreements and laws must be honoured³⁷. Agreement on these issues, which were in fact to occupy the Irish parliament later in the century, would restore amicable relationships.

Much as Swift railed at particular instances of the loss of Ireland's freedom he saw no solution outside the framework of empire. Whatever violence England does to Ireland she has no option but to appeal to the greater power. The lady's catalogue of English wrongs illustrates intolerable presumption and domination – he found fault with her management, sent his own steward, replaced her old servants with his own, demanded a contribution to expenses, curtailed her trade; even so she must negotiate and seek his agreement. More than

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁴ Molyneux wrote, 'here we have an Intire and Voluntary Submission of all the Ecclesiastical and Civil States of Ireland, to King Henry II. Without the least Hostile Stroke on any side' (*The Case of Ireland Stated*, ed. J.G. Sims, Irish Writings from the Age of Swift, vol. V (1698: Cadenus Press, 1977) p. 30.

³⁵ Burke, 'Abridgement of English History,' *The Works of Edmund Burke*, 6 vols. (London: Bell, 1894), VI, pp. 365-71.

³⁶ Burke thought the Irish rebellion 'has been extremely and most absurdly misrepresented' (*Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. T.W. Copeland, 10 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1958-1978), II, p. 285; Swift on the other hand thinks Clarendon has underestimated the number killed by the Irish. Where Clarendon says forty or fifty thousand English Protestants were murdered Swift adds the note, 'At least' ('Remarks on Clarendon's History of the Rebellion,' *Works*, X, p. 297).

³⁷ 'The Answer to the Injured Lady,' *Works*, VII, pp. 104-106.

this she was not advised to do. If the gentleman agreed she should contribute her dues. Ironically she will find liberty in compliance. But in Swift's view, as Ehrenpreis puts it, 'obedience to the law was the soundest expression of a subject's liberty' ³⁸.

From a twentieth century post-imperial point of view Swift's cry for Irish liberty is flawed. England did to Ireland what she seldom matched in her later colonial history. It amounted to much more than the image of seduction implies. To argue that Ireland showed the patience and fortitude of a woman is in eighteenth century terms, not to mention modern thought, to cast her in a role where such virtues are the last resort of the inferior sex. She has no hope that gentlemen will behave with the wisdom and justice Gulliver attributed to the British colonisers rather than the violence he attributes to other colonising butchers. But all she can do is hope. Whatever damage is done to her her loyalty is her vindication. In these terms, as the allegory of the *Story* demonstrates, the question arises as to whether attention to Swift's celebrated rhetoric for liberty for Ireland does not turn a blind eye to his decidedly masculine if not sexist reading of Ireland's place in relation to England.

It is beyond the scope of this paper, though not of enquiry, to ask whether the images of the gentleman and the lady in the *Story* do not direct us back to the critical battleground of Swift's personality and his views and treatment of women. For example, Johnson's remark about Swift and Stella – though the roles are reversed with Stella coming from England to Swift in Ireland – offer tantalising echoes of the *Story*. As noted above of the lady in the *Story* Johnson writes, 'Beauty and the power of pleasing, the greatest external advantages that woman can desire or possess, were fatal to the unfortunate Stella.' Swift seems 'resolved to keep her in his power;' he made 'unreasonable demands' and laid down impossible conditions. Stella 'never was treated as a wife, and to the world she had the appearance of a mistress;' 'she lived sullenly on, in hope that in time he would own and receive her.' The final paradox of their relation was she died 'under the tyranny of him by whom she was in the highest degree loved and honoured' ³⁹. Such remarks suggest striking similarities between the lady's complaints about the gentleman in the *Story* and what Stella might well have complained about in Swift.

³⁸ Ehrenpreis, 'Swift on Liberty', p. 63.

³⁹ Johnson, 'Jonathan Swift,' p. 262. For a contrary view of Swift's attitude to Stella, especially in his poems, see for example Nora Crow Jaffe, *The Poet Swift* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1977), pp. 90-91.